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**Vision and music: Poetic theory and conflict in the poetry of
Elizabeth Barrett Browning**

Newton, Jean Mandelbaum, Ph.D.

City University of New York, 1994

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VISION AND MUSIC: POETIC THEORY AND CONFLICT IN THE
POETRY OF ELIZABETH BARRETT BROWNING

by

JEAN M. NEWTON

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty in English
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy, The City University of New York

1994

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FOREWORD

I first conceived the idea for this dissertation in a Victorian Poetry seminar led by Professor Michael Timko. Having previously paid little heed to the work of Elizabeth Barrett Browning beyond her association with her husband, I found myself surprised to discover in her work a prodigious strength of intellect, a powerful imagination, and a significant contribution to the reigning aesthetic debate of the period. Barrett Browning's poetry rapidly engaged my undivided attention, revealing a major thematic concern common to the high Victorian poets: a conflict between the poet's desire to conform to an aesthetic ideal and his need to express individual emotions precluded by that ideal. The manner in which Barrett Browning resolves that conflict within a poetic context struck me as unique among her contemporaries and well worthy of close examination.

I wish to express my gratitude to Professor Timko, whose advise and support proved invaluable in the preparation of this manuscript. I also owe a debt of thanks to my husband, Michael, and my children, Matthew and Beth, for their infinite patience over the last three years.

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INTRODUCTION

The Seraphim and Other Poems, published in 1838 when Elizabeth Barrett Browning was 32 years old, was the first of her books to appear under her own name, an event that represented the realization of a life-long dream. The volume was generally well received by the critics and marked Barrett Browning's emergence as a serious contemporary poet. The dominant tone of the reviews indicates that the critics considered Barrett Browning to be a rising young star whose work, though far from perfect, showed great promise and would surely merit a place among the major poets of the day. In fact, although several critics expressed pleasurable surprise that a woman might be capable of such high standards of learning and of art, only one (John Wilson of Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine) placed her among the contemporary roster of such minor female poets as Laetitia Landon, Felicia Hemans and Caroline Bowles. One reviewer compared her imagery in "The Romaunt of Margret" to that of Tennyson (The Atlas). Another deemed her "an extremely fine writer" possessing "many of the highest qualities of the divine art" (The Examiner, quoted in Kelley & Hudson IV 374-5). This reviewer criticized her choice of religious subjects, yet in the same sentence criticizes Milton and

Dante on the same grounds (one can imagine Barrett Browning's pleasure at her inclusion in such exalted company). The reviewer for The Metropolitan Magazine was impressed by Barrett Browning's "originality, ideality, earnestness, and masterly power of expression and execution" (ibid 383), and compared her to both Shelley and Wordsworth. Edward Bulwer-Lytton, writing for The Monthly Review, found The Seraphim to be admirable but flawed, preferring the shorter poems, which, he thought, "though less ambitious in design, are more perfect in execution. The more simple of these are indeed gems equally pure and lustrous; and in them every lover of poetry must find delight, and every student of poetry a model" (ibid 385).

Helen Cooper, who makes unique and profitable use of Barrett Browning's reviews in her recent book, acknowledges that "the reviewers sensed in Barrett a poet who deserved mention with pillars of the male tradition" (22). However, she emphasizes those comments which reflect negatively on the poet's status as a woman: "To the reviewers Barrett's gender was a crucial issue, provoking both patronizing condescension and startled admiration" (25). In fact, such comments represent a small percentage of the material in the reviews, taken as a whole. Barrett Browning was the first female poet to be considered a peer of the great male poets, both past and present - no small accomplishment for a Victorian woman. The successful achievement of that goal, which The Seraphim and Other Poems embodies, was something

toward which Barrett Browning had striven from her youth. The stamp of Barrett Browning's personality is clearly apparent in the strange combination of passionate intensity and languid, even morbid melancholy that characterizes the collection.

Barrett Browning began writing poetry as a very young child, and prior to the 1838 poems had already published several other volumes, privately printed and not in her own name. Both Dorothy Mermin and Helen Cooper have thoroughly documented her early ambition, her intellectual thirst and independence of thought, her passionate nature which she found difficult to control and for which she seems to have found an outlet in poetry. The Battle of Marathon (1820), begun when she was barely twelve years old and completed by her fourteenth birthday, is an epic poem modeled after Homer. An Essay on Mind, with Other Poems (1826) consisted of the long, didactic title poem, modeled after Pope, and fourteen additional poems, mostly occasional pieces. In 1833, she published Prometheus Bound and Miscellaneous Poems, the title piece of which, a translation from Aeschylus, she later declared a botched effort, publishing an entirely new translation in 1850.

Clearly, Barrett Browning's youthful efforts largely reflect her desire to try her hand at the styles of those great poets she had most read and admired. In a series of adolescent autobiographical essays, she describes her passion for the ancient Greeks, their language and culture

as well as their poetry. She also reports her admiration for the writers of the Enlightenment, particularly Pope and Locke, as well as Shakespeare and Milton, to whose work her mother had introduced her. By age eight she had read histories of England, Rome and Greece, and at age twelve declared metaphysics to be her "highest delight," stating that "after having read a page from Locke my mind not only felt edified but exalted" (Kelley & Hudson I:351). At sixteen she had learned Latin and Greek, had read all the classics, and had discovered the Romantic poets, whose work she greatly admired. Ill suited to the usual pursuits of young women, like needle-work, music and drawing, which she hated and for which she had little ability, Barrett Browning indulged her precocious intellectual tastes with the wholehearted approval of her family. Each of her published volumes through the 1844 collection contains a long derivative work modeled after a great predecessor poet. At the same time as she imitated the classics, however, Barrett Browning also produced short poems in her own style and on subjects that proved important to her throughout her career. Her first public appearance as a poet (The Battle of Marathon had been privately printed) occurred in 1821 when The New Monthly Magazine published "Stanzas, Excited by Some Reflections on the Present State of Greece," a poem that clearly foreshadows the political themes of much of her later work.

In analyzing the work of this first major Victorian woman poet, it has become the fashion to emphasize her identity as woman poet rather than as Victorian poet. Barrett Browning undoubtedly created a place for women among the ranks of great poets, and her achievement in part resulted from her successful creation of a female voice that addressed, through poetry, issues both current and timeless. Nonetheless, there are crucial aspects of her work that cross gender lines and demonstrate that she has much in common with her male contemporaries, particularly Tennyson. All of the recent critical studies of Barrett Browning's work acknowledge her identity as a Victorian poet, pointing out similarities to Tennyson, Arnold and Browning. Dorothy Mermin pursues this line of thinking to a degree but never develops it in any real detail because she believes that Barrett Browning's "place at the wellhead of a new female tradition remains the single most important fact about her in terms of literary history" (3). Yet in her introduction, Mermin states that "although she has much in common with the other women poets of her era, she belongs even more clearly in the male Victorian line, with poets of comparable stature to her own" (2). She then provides a list of similarities between Barrett Browning and Tennyson, Arnold, Browning, Clough, Meredith, and D.G. Rossetti. Angela Leighton, too, in her introduction, points out that Barrett Browning was hailed during her own lifetime as a great poet, that she was compared to Shakespeare, Homer, Dante, Milton and Shelley,

and that in 1850 she was considered a serious candidate for the post of Poet Laureate.

Helen Cooper views Barrett Browning as a courageously successful poetic pioneer, a "woman poet working in a male tradition" whose "contribution reshapes our conception of Victorian poetics" (1). She sees the central issue in Barrett Browning's work as the establishment of a unified poetic voice which is both woman and poet. Beginning with the early poems, in which she interprets the female figures as viewed through the observing eyes of a male speaker, she shows how, through Sonnets from the Portuguese, the poet finds the courage to express her sexual passion, breaks away from her father's dominating and repressive environment, and ultimately establishes a female-dominant poetic voice in Aurora Leigh. "The central issue in Barrett Browning's work," Cooper writes, "is how a woman poet empowers herself to speak" (5). She compares the poet's situation to that of her contemporary women novelists (the Bronte sisters, Mary Ann Evans and Aurore Dupin), whose anxiety over their identities as female writers impelled them to adopt pseudonyms.

Cooper then identifies two additional problems faced by the female poet:

First, whereas the novel was essentially a middle-class form for which its writers did not need an Oxbridge education, the English poet was traditionally upper-middle-class and Oxbridge-educated, with a solid

grounding in Greek and Latin literature. This restrictive profile excluded women from the ranks of serious poets as surely as they were excluded from the ranks of university students. Second, whereas the nature of fiction allowed for a narrative voice of either sex, the nature of lyric and the authority of epic dictated that the poet conventionally spoke in a male voice. (5)

The fact that Barrett Browning managed to get for herself a classical education and then went on to adapt traditionally male forms to her female voice allows Cooper to view her as an artistic entrepreneur whose work alters our perspective on Victorian poetry:

Discussions of high Victorian poetry tend to see the work of Tennyson, Arnold, and Browning as responses to the fears rampant in their times, although recent critics recognize an energetic optimism informing Browning's poetry. However, the introduction of Barrett Browning's work to that of the three male high Victorian poets suggests an alternative reading of that poetic history. Thus, I would argue that Oxbridge educated Tennyson and Arnold represent the most deeply affected by the passing of the 'old world.' Browning, the urban, self-educated dissenter's son, and Barrett Browning, the socially, politically, and culturally disenfranchized woman poet, represent a poetic middle-class entrepreneurial spirit, and as poets had much to gain from the upheavals in nineteenth-century England. (8)

Deirdre David, on the other hand, views Barrett Browning as a politically and artistically conservative adherent of traditional values, acquiescing to a male-

dominated culture against which she ought to be rebelling. Barrett Browning, David states:

mythologized herself as a member of a privileged elite. Self-tutored in a conventionally male Classical education and feeling the absence of a sustaining female literary tradition, she affiliated herself with a corpus of male poets ministering to a secular, materialistic culture. Her entanglement in the ideological matrix of sex, gender, and intelligence that produces the Victorian woman intellectual seems to have determined a firm identification with male modes of political thought and aesthetic practice, and whatever feminist sympathies she may be said to possess are, in my view, thereby strongly compromised. (97-98)

David compares her rather unfavorably to Harriet Martineau, whose intellectual endeavor she perceives as far more aggressive and subversive than Barrett Browning's. She attributes to Martineau a middle-class entrepreneurial spirit quite similar to that defined by Cooper, and states that, in contrast, "Barrett Browning created a legend for her career that identifies her as a traditional intellectual, or, to be more precise, as an intellectual yearning for a world thought to have existed before the nineteenth-century emergence of the social class generating organic intellectuals like Harriet Martineau" (98-99).

David's description of Barrett Browning's artistic motivation would seem to associate her with Thomas Carlyle:

Consistently opposing her political and poetic values to what she perceived as the debased imperatives of English

middle-class life, Barrett Browning aligned herself with the tradition of poetic practice which gained new intensity during the Romantic period and acquired particular social significance for the early Victorians: the poet is an isolated figure, graced by his or her vocation as prophet/sage to witness an ideal order obscured by materialistic incoherence. (99)

Within this context, the poet becomes "a mediating poetic agent between a debased, fallen world and a harmonious transcendent order" (99). As such, Barrett Browning "ministers to a Victorian world lapsed into greed and disorder, and through the poet figures in her work, she discloses an ideology of ideal aesthetic practice" (99). On the other hand, David does acknowledge her achievement:

A poet associated in the popular imagination with the sickroom and romantic love, she is remarkably and paradoxically a vibrant participant in the energetic Victorian discourse attempting to locate and define the meaning of intellectual and aesthetic life in an increasingly secularized community. In her own strangely vital and sometimes even violent way, she is as much an active figure in this community as Harriet Martineau and George Eliot. Frail, reclusive, highly learned, inhabiting a world of texts by virtue of her seclusion, she was intellectually aggressive and strongly political - in many ways the most intellectual woman of her time. (100)

Barrett Browning did not consider herself a feminist in the Mary Wollstonecraft tradition. She had read Vindication of the Rights of Women as a young adolescent, and her adult comments on that early experience display a bemused irony:

I read Mary Wollstonecraft when I was thirteen: no, twelve!...and, through the whole course of my childhood, I had a steady indignation against Nature who made me a woman, and a determinate resolution to dress up in men's clothes as soon as ever I was free of the nursery, and go into the world 'to seek my fortune.' 'How,' was not decided; but I rather leant toward being poor Lord Byron's PAGE. (Raymond & Sullivan II:7)

Nonetheless, she felt far from satisfied with the conventional Victorian woman's role. On the one hand, she demanded for herself absolute intellectual equality and spurned those social conventions which she considered stupid and demeaning to her as a human being. On the other hand she remained adamant in her opinion that women are different from men and ought not to try to fill their social role. Take, for example, her attitude toward education, which she clearly valued, having obtained it for herself by virtue of a dogged stubbornness exhibited by few people, male or female: "The difference between men and women," she wrote to Mary Russell Mitford, "arose from the inferiority of the education of the latter" (Raymond & Sullivan III 38). She was acutely aware, furthermore, of the social difficulties faced by a woman who exhibited too much intelligence, writing to Mitford that it is "a hard and difficult process for a woman to get forgiven for her strength by her grace. You who have accomplished this, know it is hard - and every woman of letters knows it is hard. Sometimes there is too much strength in proportion to the grace - and then - O miserable woman!" (ibid). Nonetheless, Barrett Browning

attributes the plight of women largely to the complicity of her own sex in their domination by men:

For a woman to hang down her head like a lily through life, and die of a rose in aromatic pain at her death, - to sit or lounge as in a Book of Beauty, and be 'defended' by the strong and mighty thinkers on all sides of her, - this, he thinks, is her destiny and glory. It is not the pudding-making and stocking-darning theory - it is more graceful and picturesque. But the significance is precisely the same, - and the absurdity a hundred times over, greater. Who makes my pudding, is useful to me, - but who looks languishing in a Book of Beauty, is good for nothing so far. (ibid 81)

Barrett Browning clearly sets herself apart from the rest of her sex, as is evident from the manner in which she seems to identify herself with the man who has his pudding made for him by a useful wife. She directs much of her anger toward women:

Angry as all this makes me, I am not, as you are perhaps aware, a very strong partisan on the Rights-of-Women-side of the argument - at least I have not been, since I was twelve years old. I believe that, considering men and women in the mass, there IS an inequality of intellect, and that is proved by the very state of things of which gifted women complain, - and more than proved by the manner in which their complaint is received by their own sisterhood. At the same time, the argument used by men in this relation, should go no further than the fact, - and it is cruel and odious to see the yearning they have, not to meet the weakness of women with their male protection, but to exaggerate that weakness, in order to parade their protection. I know that women (many of

them) encourage this tendency by parading their weakness - and it is detestable to my eyes, in an equal degree, on both sides of sex. (ibid)

Again, Barrett Browning sets herself apart from the majority of women, to whom she refers as "they" and "them," reserving her sympathy for those who choose, as she did, to depart from conventional womanhood, thereby implying that those who do not are making an active choice to participate in that convention. Her later poetry displays sympathy as well for those women she considered to be truly oppressed - the poor, the enslaved, the victims of rape. But she retained her anger toward women whom she felt were perpetuating the status quo, as is apparent in her portrayal of Lady Waldemar in Aurora Leigh. Toward the conventional male view of women, she maintained for the most part an attitude of ironic condescension. Consider the following comments on Tennyson's "The Gardener's Daughter" and The Princess made to Mary Russell Mitford: "Do tell me your full thought of the Commonwealth of Women. I begin by agreeing with you as to his implied under-estimate of women: his women are too voluptuous, - however of the most refined voluptuousness - His gardener's daughter, for instance, is just a rose; and 'a Rose' one might beg all poets to observe, is as precisely sensual as fricasseed chicken, or even boiled beef and carrots" (ibid 216); and, "At last we have caught sight of Tennyson's Princess and I may or must profess to be a good deal disappointed. What woman will tell the great poet that Mary Wollstonecraft herself never dreamt of setting up

collegiate states, proctordoms and the rest, - which is a worn-out plaything in the hands of one sex already, and need not be transferred in order to be proved ridiculous" (ibid 240).

Although many aspects of her thinking clearly align themselves with modern feminist views, Barrett Browning cannot be labeled a feminist if only because she sets herself too much apart from the majority of her sex, even to the point of suggesting that, whereas it might be acceptable for her, and other educated intellectual women, to read sexually explicit or philosophically subversive literature (Sand, Balzac, Hume, Hobbes, Voltaire, etc), she would not wish her sisters to see such books! She places writers - both men and women - in a separate category, judging them according to a single standard without regard to gender. Among poets, she considers the best to be Tennyson and Browning, consigning her female contemporaries to a lesser place not so much because they limit themselves to a conventional portrayal of womanhood as because their poetry lacks the truth and passionate sincerity she believed necessary to great art. Helen Cooper writes that "Barrett never placed Hemans and Landon in the same class as Homer, Aeschylus, Milton, Pope, or Wordsworth - the class to which she aspired" (20). However, she did place George Sand in that class as, in her opinion, the only contemporary female writer of "true genius," as she liked to put it. Deirdre

David correctly points out how easily Barrett Browning assumed her position as a Victorian intellectual and artist:

Precociously learned, allowed access to everything in her father's well-stocked library, critically acclaimed for the scope of her intellectual compass, and, until she went off to Marleybone Church at the age of 40 to marry Robert Browning, lovingly supported in her secluded scholarly life by her family, Elizabeth Barrett Browning betrays no unease about her status as a famous intellectual poet. (97)

Yet she was unwilling to extend the privileges of that status to the majority of her sex, nor did she believe that the majority of men were putting that privilege to much good use. One can easily see how Helen Cooper and Dierdre David arrived at their opposing views of Barrett Browning's feminism. She was undeniably an intellectual elitist and a social conservative in many respects, yet she professed a variety of politically liberal opinions and made herself, in her poetry, a champion of the oppressed. One cannot adequately define Barrett Browning's feminism without encountering conflict. This remarkable woman, whose superior intellect and independent thinking made her a pioneer among nineteenth century poets, seems to defy categorization.

Yet in reading through Barrett Browning's work, from the juvenilia to Last Poems, one cannot help but notice the startling number of poems about poetry. Barrett Browning created perhaps more artist figures than any of her

contemporaries except her husband. One also inevitably notices her marked preference for dramatic forms. One can therefore trace her participation in the Victorian debate concerning the nature and function of poetry, worked out by the poets both in their poetry and in their theoretical prose. Like Thomas Carlyle, and partly under his influence, she evolved a theory of poetry as revelation, emphasizing its social function over the poet's need for personal expression: poetry contains truth - not scientific truth, but moral truth, theologically based or culturally shaped - and thereby provides spiritual sustenance and emotional solace to its audience. Yet, like her contemporaries Tennyson and Arnold, she displays in her early work a powerful sense of despair and loss, an almost suicidal melancholy and fascination with death. The inevitable conflict between her requirement that poetry be optimistic and uplifting and her persistently negative personal emotions manifests itself in her use of dramatic forms, in which multiple characters embody various aspects of the poetic persona. In general, the early Victorian poets moved away from direct lyric expression, preferring dramatic forms which allowed them to distance themselves from their emotions. Most of them chose a historical context in which to do this: Arnold's ancient Greece, Browning's Renaissance, Tennyson's Middle Ages. At first, Barrett Browning also wrote ballad-poems set in dreamy far-off places. Ultimately, however, she came to prefer a modern context,

thereby diverging from her contemporaries and taking her dramatic forms into new territory. In so doing, she developed a powerful voice, one which influenced those who came after her (both male and female) and which must earn her a place among the great poets of her own time.

Recent feminist studies of Barrett Browning (by Angela Leighton, Dorothy Mermin, Helen Cooper and Deirdre David) have largely succeeded in bringing her work back into the foreground of Victorian studies. Although she earned a prodigious literary reputation during her lifetime, twentieth century critics have largely ignored her work, focusing instead on her biography, which, although popularized as high romantic drama, fails to reflect her accomplishments as a poet. In her essay on Aurora Leigh, Virginia Woolf, lamenting Barrett Browning's fall from popularity as a writer, comments that "'Lady Geraldine's Courtship' is glanced at by perhaps two professors in American universities once a year; but we all know how Miss Barrett lay on her sofa; how she escaped from the dark house in Wimpole Street one September morning; how she met health and happiness, freedom, and Robert Browning in the church round the corner" (209). Woolf further comments:

Fate has not been kind to Mrs. Browning as a writer. Nobody reads her, nobody discusses her, nobody troubles to put her in her place. One has only to compare her reputation with Christina Rossetti's to trace her decline.

Christina Rossetti mounts irresistably to the first place among English women poets. Elizabeth, so much more loudly applauded during her lifetime, falls farther and farther behind. (209)

Christina Rossetti still enjoys a poetic reputation far superior to that of Barrett Browning. Nonetheless, Rossetti is persistently identified as a woman poet, a religious poet, and sometimes a Pre-Raphaelite poet, but never primarily as a high Victorian, in that her work does not deal with the thematic concerns that occupied Tennyson, Arnold and Browning. The scope, subject matter and contemporaneity of Barrett Browning's work far exceed that of Rossetti. Woolf, in her statement that "the only place in the mansion of literature that is assigned her is downstairs in the servant's quarters, where, in company with Mrs. Hemans, Eliza Cook, Jean Ingelow, Alexander Smith, Edwin Arnold, and Robert Montgomery, she bangs the crockery about and eats vast handfuls of peas on the point of her knife" (210), implies that, if Barrett Browning does not belong in the company of minor Victorian poets, either male or female, then she must be placed among her peers. Woolf seems to want to categorize writers according to the quality of their work rather than according to gender, but without abandoning an awareness of the influence of gender on a writer's work. Fortunately, renewed interest in Barrett Browning's work by feminist scholars has provided a thorough understanding of the manner in which she succeeded in finding her voice as a woman poet. Next, however, one must

ask, to what end did she struggle to find that voice? What vision did she wish to communicate? In the dedication to John Kenyon at the beginning of Aurora Leigh, she offers to him "the most mature of my works, and the one into which my highest convictions upon Life and Art have entered" (PW 254). The development of those convictions - concerning the nature of art and its relationship to Victorian life - follows a course typical of the period, one that echoes the concerns of Tennyson, Arnold and Browning.

In fact, Barrett Browning's and Tennyson's careers followed a strikingly similar course. Each poet grew up in a large, close family on an isolated country estate. Each had a loving and devoted mother and a difficult, overbearing father (Barrett Browning's father was not an alcoholic, as was Tennyson's, but he was secretive, autocratic and unpredictable). As children, both poets read voraciously (they particularly liked novels), enjoyed acting out dramatic scenes with their siblings, and expressed the ambition to write poetry from a very young age. Tennyson modeled his early efforts after Pope, and later, the Romantics; Barrett Browning modeled hers after the Greeks, as well as Pope and the Romantics. Their adolescent productions contain poems expressing deep melancholy, lost hope, and a sense of passing youth and innocence. Like Barrett Browning, Tennyson experienced emotional turmoil in adolescence, and his early poetry, like hers, reflects his sense of having lost the simplicity of childhood.

Adolescents must learn to cope with adult passions and responsibilities, and for a sensitive and highly intellectual youth - male or female - this can be very difficult.

Although Tennyson had access to the formal education denied to Barrett Browning by virtue of her sex, he could not take full advantage of it. When his father died in 1831, his uncle decreed that he could only return to Cambridge if he agreed to prepare for a career in the church. Similarly, when Barrett Browning's mother died in 1828, her family expected her to take over as lady of the house, a role which she dreaded and for which she truly lacked the requisite skills. Barrett Browning and Tennyson each faced social barriers to their artistic ambitions, manifest in their unwillingness to fill conventional gender roles. Tennyson's refusal to "earn a living" cost him not only his uncle's support, but his engagement to Emily Sellwood. Barrett Browning's refusal to "be a lady" forced her to seek social companionship outside the mainstream, and to go to great lengths to avoid the conventional society she dreaded. In some respects she had the advantage over Tennyson in that her father was something of a recluse himself, and did not discourage that tendency in his daughter. One must consider, in addition, the profound effect of her physical condition upon her lifestyle. The strong evidence suggesting that she suffered from a severe chronic asthma condition puts into perspective the

significance of her reclusiveness and suggests enormous courage and determination in pursuing both her career and her personal goals despite the limitations imposed by a debilitating illness. Barrett Browning was acutely aware of the social impediments to a career in poetry, for both men and women. Prior to her marriage, she had to defend Robert Browning against an accusation of "effeminacy" leveled against him by her dear friend and fellow writer, Mary Russell Mitford, because she viewed him as an adult male who chose to write poetry and remain financially dependent upon his parents rather than earning a living doing "real work." When Barrett Browning and Robert Browning finally did marry, they risked social ridicule because they planned to subsist on her independent income. In fact, Tennyson, Browning and Barrett Browning each defied social norms in order to pursue a career in art, and faced enormous obstacles to their respective marriages, which, once achieved, proved supremely happy.

Tennyson and Barrett Browning each published, in 1850 and 1856 respectively, a long work describing a personal crisis and its resolution (Sonnets from the Portuguese and In Memoriam), and they each culminated their careers with the publication of another long work, developed over many years, reflecting their most mature vision (Aurora Leigh and Idylls of the King). Tennyson's poetic voice developed in a manner similar to Barrett Browning's, displaying early conflict between personal inclination and poetic ideal

reflected in fragmented poetic personae, and ultimately giving way to a more coherent mature voice. Barrett Browning's later poetry reveals a fully developed sense of self as artist, intellect and woman. One must not ignore gender as a factor in the development of her poetic. Her identity as a woman greatly enriched her contribution to the Victorian debate concerning the nature and function of poetry, in that she incorporated her feminine perspective into an intellectual arena occupied mainly by men. However, she firmly believed that men and women should share the same intellectual forum on absolutely equal terms, and her career and reputation during her life remain a testament to her accomplishment of that goal. Nonetheless, the most important aspect of her work lies in her ultimately successful attempt to unite unconflicted self-expression with the expression of deeply held moral and spiritual ideals. Barrett Browning's mature voice represents a more complete resolution of conflict than Tennyson's. Her belief that poetry must be firmly grounded in contemporary life provides an earthy balance for her idealized theory of art, and her willingness, in her later poetry, to adopt a relativist stance on certain political and artistic issues makes her work accessible to a modern audience. Recognition of her role as a vital participant in the Victorian aesthetic debate can only broaden and enhance our appreciation of a poet already acknowledged as a pioneer among women writers.

I

TRANSCENDANT VISION: BARRETT BROWNING'S
POETIC THEORY

Elizabeth Barrett Browning came to maturity during a period in which literary theory and criticism had gained remarkable stature. Alba Warren, in defining the Victorian era as a "period of critical reassessment and reflection," points out that criticism came to be considered "second only to the creative activity itself, and its function was to provide intellectual situations in which the creative artist could work" (3). A full understanding of Barrett Browning's poetry requires that one first place it within the context of her literary theory. By her mid-thirties she had evolved a fully formed theory of poetic practice which provided a standard of excellence in her assessment both of herself and of other poets. Her theory organizes itself around three basic problems: defining the function of poetry in contemporary society; determining the ideal balance between poetry's intellectual and aesthetic components; determining the extent to which the poet ought to reveal himself in his work. Barrett Browning produced a fair amount of critical prose, both in essay form and, even more abundantly, in her voluminous correspondence, which provides the richest source of her ideas on literature and writers. Her isolated life,

and the resulting shyness that made personal interaction difficult for her, caused her to turn to correspondence as a vital mode of self-expression. She felt comfortable with a pen in her hand, and her letters, aside from providing a complete source for her interests and ideas, display her most engaging style and wit. They are, so to speak, publishable material, a fact of which Barrett Browning was probably aware, as she moved in literary circles and knew of the significance of authors' correspondence. Furthermore, she corresponded mainly with literary people of stature, and the letters therefore contain extensive discussions of literary matters. The letters to Mary Russell Mitford, with whom she had many differences of opinion and to whom she therefore expressed her most fully developed ideas, prove particularly useful in this regard.

Perhaps the most influential figure in the development of Barrett Browning's literary theory was Thomas Carlyle, whom she unquestionably admired and whose works she read avidly. "I am an adorer of Carlyle," she wrote to Mary Russell Mitford. "He has done more to raise poetry to the throne of its rightful inheritance than any writer of the day, - and is a noble-high-thinking man in all ways. He is one of the men to whom it would be a satisfaction to cry 'vivat' somewhere in his hearing" (Raymond & Sullivan I:378). Her ardent admiration shines through the comic self-deprecation she manifests in reporting to Mitford that she has sent a copy of Poems of 1844 to Carlyle:

I have taken a great grasp of courage, and sent a copy to Carlyle, as a 'tribute of admiration and respect.' I pray all the heroes that he may not devote the entrails of my votive sacrifice to make curlpapers for Mrs. Carlyle, - but can scarcely aspire to a higher destiny - He is a stern-mannered man, people tell me. Only I admire him so much, - that even if he maltreats me, I shall have satisfied a need of my nature by this offering, and shall scarcely repent it. (Raymond & Sullivan II:438)

Although she did not make his personal acquaintance until after her marriage (Carlyle and Robert Browning had long been friends), her interest in his writings predated her marriage by many years and remained entirely independent of her relationship with Browning.

Like Carlyle, Barrett Browning proposes a theory of art as revelation in which poetry serves to communicate moral and spiritual truth to its audience. She defines poetic truth as something other than scientific truth, at the same time asserting that it has equal if not greater value. Confronted with such statements as, "Indeed, between poetry and truth there is a natural opposition: false morals, fictitious nature" (Jeremy Bentham, "The Rationale of Reward," Houghton & Stange 841), or "We think that, as civilization advances, poetry almost necessarily declines" (Thomas Babington Macaulay, "Milton," *ibid* 845), this Victorian defender of poetry felt compelled to assert its function as something more than a source of pleasure equivalent only to a game of push-pin. Barrett Browning had

little use for pure scientific literature, having sampled Darwin and declared him unreadable in her opinion. However, she did read Bentham's work and considered his theories admirable within their own limitations but totally inadequate to provide a standard by which men might live their lives. The values embodied by science, and its first cousin industrialism, pertain only to physical reality, according to Barrett Browning's view, completely ignoring spiritual concerns. Poetry functions for Barrett Browning as the antithesis of science in that it concerns itself with the soul of man, nourishing his spiritual and moral growth in a way that science, she believed, could not.

In a letter to Mary Russell Mitford she wrote that contemporary society must not "look to science or to any means purely intellectual for national regeneration" (Raymond & Sullivan I:28). She consistently applies a tone of ironic condescension to her comments on the lack of "conception and ideality" in modern values: "But it is a defect of the age - is it not? It is terrible to be dragged captive, not by a King in purple and fine linen, not by a Warrior in the glittering of his arms, but by a poor paltry counting-house Utilitarianism - along a railroad instead of a Via Sacra" (ibid I:30). Similarly, she responded to Thomas Noon Talfourd's gift of a volume of his poetry by stating:

Surely English voices should thank you for not sitting in the seat of the Utilitarians, -for proving to your countrymen, by the Greek water in your chalice, how the Greek fountains, tho' hewn out of the natural rock by unclean hands, bore waters more like in taste and colour to the pure ones of the four Edenic rivers, than an English Benthamite can show in all his cisterns of lead; -for proving that poetry has one face with ideal virtue - the shadow and similitude of the virtue lost in Eden, which visits the souls of fallen men 'in thoughts from the visions of the night' (Kelley & Hudson IV:170).

W. David Shaw describes the division of Victorian philosophy into two branches based upon the embrace or rejection of science as the basis for ideas:

One branch, the Utilitarian, subordinates itself to scientific method. The other stream, the Idealist, condemns the Utilitarians to be arid and trivial, and seeks an ally in the poets. As the representational axioms of empirical philosophy and earlier descriptive genres give way to new axioms, poetry may even assume more and more of the philosopher's burden..... Outside of poetry, the ineffable heights and unplumbable depths the idealist tries to reach may not be strictly sayable. (156)

Poetry, then, expresses truth that verbal logic cannot encompass, a truth which lies in danger of destruction by a society that embraces a shallow materialism. Shaw points out that John Stuart Mill was "one of the few Victorian empirical philosophers to take art no less seriously than science and logic as a means of enlarging knowledge and of discovering repressed or forgotten truths" (13). What

exactly are these repressed and forgotten truths? Most Victorian intellectuals wished to believe in a ordered universe presided over by some form of supreme being, as well as an a priori set of moral axioms. In short, they represent time-honored spiritual and moral values, traditionally associated with religious institutions, but which Barrett Browning, like Carlyle, perceives as lost in a sea of empty ritual and rhetoric totally devoid of their original purpose and meaning.

Significantly, Barrett Browning provides a full explication of this idea in the chapter on Carlyle in Richard Hengist Horne's A New Spirit of the Age, most of which she wrote. She portrays Carlyle as a modern spiritual champion, designating Bentham and Carlyle the leaders of opposing philosophic camps:

And as from the beginning of the world,
the two great principles of matter and
spirit have combatted, - whether in
man's personality, between the flesh and
the soul; or in his speculativeness,
between the practical and the ideal; or
in his mental expression, between
science and poetry, - Bentham and
Carlyle assumed to lead the double van
on both sides. (Kelley & Hudson
VIII:354)

Barrett Browning cleverly turns the tables on Utilitarianism by declaring that Benthamite philosophy leads to stagnation while Carlylean philosophy leads to progress. She uses the image of a darkened room, its windows boarded up and crusted over, to represent the public mind whose spiritual awareness

lies stagnant in a society focused mainly on material concerns. The poet knocks open those windows, enabling ordinary individuals to share in his vision of spiritual reality:

'The great fire-heart,' as he {Carlyle} calls it, of human nature may burn too long without stirring; burn inwardly, cake outwardly, and sink deeply into its own ashes: and, to emancipate the flame clearly and brightly, it is necessary to stir it up strongly from the lowest bar. To do this, by whatever form of creation and illustration, is the aim and end of all poetry of a high order, - this, - to resume human nature from its beginning, and return to first principles of thought and first elements of feeling; this, - to dissolve from eye and ear the film of habit and convention, and open a free passage for beauty and truth, to gush in upon unencrusted perceptive faculties. (ibid:355)

In a letter to Mary Russel Mitford, she reiterates the same idea: "Yes - poetry is divine. It resembles grief in rending asunder our conventionalities - but does so singing instead of sighing. It transfigures the great humanity into the sense of its To-come" (Raymond & Sullivan II:119). Carlyle, she tells us, does not teach us anything new, but rather revives for us those elemental truths that we have come to take for granted, to which we have become blinded (hence the image of the darkened room). The poet (and Carlyle, she firmly believes, is a poet) reawakens our vision by enabling us to experience these truths on an emotional as well as an intellectual level:

Yet how deep and like a new sound, do the words 'soul,' 'work,' 'duty,' strike down upon the flashing anvils of the age, till the whole age vibrates! And again he tells us, 'Have faith.' Why, did we not know that we must have 'faith?' Is there a religious teacher in the land who does not repeat from God's revelation, year by year, day by day - 'Have faith?'And again - 'Truth is a good thing.' Is that new? Is it not written in the theories of the moralist, and of the child?Yet we thrill at the words, as if some new thunder of divine instruction ruffled the starry air, - as if an angel's foot sounded down it, step by step, coming with a message. (Kelley & Hudson VIII:355)

Barrett Browning implies here that poetry as a verbal medium possesses a unique ability to integrate feeling and idea, so that the reader experiences poetic truth both emotionally and intellectually, wherein lies its impact. Unlike Carlyle, she never once doubted the power of poetry to communicate spiritual truth, nor did she ever doubt the validity of that truth as she perceived it.

In general, Barrett Browning shared Carlyle's transcendentalist approach to the nature of reality, viewing the material and ideal worlds as separate but inextricably connected, the former providing access to the latter. Unlike Carlyle, she could accept this as the cosmic order created by God, whose existence remained for her beyond question. Carlyle's literary theory represents his attempt to reassert traditional moral and spiritual values, but outside the context of traditional religious institutions. "As poetry replaces God as the new sacred centre," Shaw

writes, "there is no longer any higher religious or moral authority by which poetry can be judged" (5). A theorist such as Carlyle, he goes on to tell us, sees the poet as "a prophet or seer, who is privileged to turn poetry into magic or liturgy, disclosing the secrets of a lucidly veiled absolute or God" (6). Having asserted the existence of two levels of reality, the empirical (finite and ephemeral) and the spiritual (transcendent and eternal), Carlyle goes on to attribute to the poet the ability to perceive spiritual reality, which exists as an objective state external to the individual. Carlyle called literature "a continuous revelation of the Godlike in the Terrestrial and Common" (Heroes 163), revealing to us "the Divine Idea of the World" (ibid 157). The Man of Letters represents, for him, the hope of the modern age, able to carry out the functions performed in the past by priest or divinity. He serves as a spiritual leader and a guide to moral action: "What he teaches, the whole world will do and make" (ibid 155). By showing us that God exists within and behind all things, that external reality consists of more than its mere superficial appearance, Carlyle tells us, the Man of Letters will influence our moral values which in turn will influence our actions.

Such an attitude lays an enormous degree of responsibility upon the poor poet. However, Carlyle portrays the poet as a kind of super-hero willing to shoulder that burden. The poet, as Carlyle describes him,

achieves spiritual contentment through his "insight" into that truth out of which he makes his poetry. Carlyle quite naturally embodies his notion of poetic insight in eye imagery, portraying it as the ability to see, whereas perception of only the empirical world he portrays as blindness. He describes Benthamite Utilitarianism as "an approach toward a new faith" (ibid 172), "fearless" and "manful" in its commitment to its principles. However, he goes on to say that "you may call it Heroic, though a Heroism with its eyes put out" (ibid). Repeating the same image, Carlyle continues: "Benthamism is an eyeless Heroism: the Human Species, like a hapless blinded Samson grinding in the Philistine Mills, clasps convulsively the pillars of its Mill" (ibid). Carlyle associates Benthamism with atheism, as embodied in the image of a blind man going endlessly around in circles. In contrast, anyone who will "take the spectacles off his eyes and honestly look" (ibid 175-176) will clearly perceive the truth, as Carlyle sees it, that a divine presence fills the world. Such insight, Carlyle believes, results from what he calls "power of thinking," which leads to perception of truth as he defines it. The "unthinking man" cannot "think and see, but only grope, and hallucinate, and missee" (ibid 192).

Barrett Browning, too, uses the imagery of sight and blindness, as well as related images of windows and light, in the delineation of her poetic theory. Compare, for instance, her darkly humorous comments on Utilitarianism to

those of Carlyle quoted above. Barrett Browning declared Utilitarianism the "iron philosophy of our days" (Raymond & Sullivan I:24). She thought little of the values of the commercial classes, considering them too materialistic and lacking in nobleness of thought. For this reason she disliked Sir Robert Peel, whose father was a wealthy mill owner:

The man's identity is in his father's mills - going toward manufacture - and indeed his whole mind rather revolves like a mill-wheel than advances or aspires. In regard to power, there is not a redundancy of it on either side, I readily grant to you. The country is sinking on one side like a willow tree, for the lack of power - for the want of a supporting soul. We have hands enough, and tongues rather more than enough, but of souls there is a deficit. (Raymond & Sullivan I:382)

Barrett Browning's image of the mill wheel revolving continuously, making no progress, echoes Carlyle's image of "blinded Samson grinding in the Philistine Mills." She implies the need for a different kind of leader, one who will minister to the soul. Without such leadership, "we should sit on the floor of our dark dungeon, between its close stifling walls, gnawing vainly with the teeth of the mind, at the chains we wear" (Kelley & Hudson VIII:353). On the other hand, men of "genius" like Thomas Carlyle have "knocked out his window from the blind wall of his century..... We may say, too, that it is a window to the east: and that some men complain of a certain bleakness in

the wind which enters at it, when they should rather congratulate themselves and him on the aspect of the new sun beheld through it, the orient hope of which he has so discovered to their eyes" (ibid). Barrett Browning declares Carlyle a poet by virtue of his yearning "to make the inner life shine out" (ibid) and his "insight into the activity of moral causes working through the intellectual agencies of the mind" (ibid:356).

Poetic insight, for Barrett Browning, incorporates transcendent vision, an ability to perceive the presence of God in physical reality: "Because the whole atmosphere of God's creation (man's work being a part of it, even as the bee's geometry is) is a medium of beholding God - and we are not called upon to look away from the creation up to God, but to look through the creation up to Him!" (Raymond & Sullivan III:375). In an early letter to Hugh Stuart Boyd, dated 1828, in which she compares poetry to painting, she outlines what amounts to a transcendentalist view of nature and the poet's relation to it:

Surely poets do see more in nature than artists do! Surely you cannot disagree with me in this! I do not mean to shut artists from the Eden of ideal beauty, where the voice of God is speaking to the soul of Man! The great artist does see more than the actual light and shade before him - more than the hills and valleys around him - more than the clouds and sunshine above him; but still he sees only light and shade, only hill and valley, only cloud and sunshine! He only deals with matter, under whatever beautiful combination his genius may

enable him to view it. With the poet, on the other hand, matter is not an object, but a medium. He looks through nature that he may look beyond nature! He binds together the moral and the natural with golden bonds, rendering what is beautiful in nature, more hallowed, by associating it with what is elevated in intellect, and rendering intellectual conceptions more distinct and definite by a reference to material objects. (Kelley & Hudson II:138)

Barrett Browning's comments reflect Carlyle's definition of poetry as "a continuous revelation of the Godlike in the Terrestrial and Common" (Heroes 163), disclosing to us "the Divine Idea of the World" (ibid 157). Like Carlyle, she attributes visionary power to poets, declaring them "the enunciators of thoughts by which the practical flourish and the virtuous grow happier, and the world gathers gradual light. Without these men, there would be no song in the world, and the halo would drop from around it" (Raymond & Sullivan III:70). Yet she also implies, in this statement and elsewhere, that poetry can have a pragmatic and tangible effect upon its audience and that it can ultimately influence the way society functions. Carlyle's many rhetorical assertions regarding the nature of poetic vision (or insight, or thought) all lead toward a single and not very remarkable notion: the existence of a deity whose presence manifests itself in all things. Having lost faith in traditional Christian symbols, which he felt no longer carried any substance, Carlyle had to re-invent religion, using not the material symbols of conventional religion, but a symbol system composed of language alone,

which he creates from a combination of recurrent words and phrases composed in a unique oracular style. W. David Shaw states that the agnostic philosophies of the nineteenth century made God "less and less accessible to conceptual understanding," and that as a result poetry had to "define the indefinable or take the place of religion altogether" (120). In Sartor Resartus, Carlyle "has been led into the wilderness. The only alternative to perishing there is to become the author of a new sacred book" (120).

Barrett Browning demonstrates a clear grasp of this aspect of Carlyle's rhetoric, describing his language as an organic embodiment of truth, its form and substance inseparable and indistinguishable:

Yet if the grammarians and public teachers could not measure it out to pass as classic English, after the measure of Swift or Addison, or even of Bacon or Milton,- if new words sprang gauntly in it from savage derivatives, and rushed together in outlandish combinations,- if the collocation was distortion, wandering wildly up and down,- if the comments were everywhere in a heap, like the "pots and pans" of Bassano, classic or not, English or not: it certainly was a true language; the significant articulation of a living soul: God's breath was in the vowels of it. And the clashing of these harsh compounds at last drew the bees into assembly, each murmuring his honey dream. And the hearers who stood longest to listen, became sensible of a still grave music issuing like smoke from the clefts of the rock. If it was

not "style" and "classicism," it was something better; it was soul-language. There was a divinity in the shaping of these rough-hewn periods. (Kelley & Hudson VIII:353)

In describing Carlyle's language as an embodiment of divine truth, Barrett Browning herself echoes Carlyle's Biblical rhetoric.

Albert J. LaValley, while recognizing Carlyle's overt purpose as an attempt to "redefine the stable aspects of the past and make them available for contemporary existence" (13), goes on to assert the primacy of Carlyle's aesthetic concerns, in which the medium itself embodies the message: "Priority must be given to the aesthetic quest, to the discovery of art, society, and selfhood launched in the early essays and Sartor and carried on with both adventurousness and strange disruptions through Sterling and the later histories" (14). LaValley's "strange disruptions" represent a contradiction in Carlyle's prose all too familiar to his readers, and which Barrett Browning recognized. She understood that Carlyle's thunderous calls to work and action did not accurately reflect his goal of reawakening, through aesthetic means, the reader's dormant spiritual awareness, and recognized the poet in Carlyle in spite of his frequent denigration of words as inferior to actions:

If we were to give him a sceptre, and cry, 'Rule over us,' nothing could exceed the dumb, motionless, confounded figure he would stand: his first words, on recovering himself, would be, 'Ye

have souls! work - believe.' He would not know what else to think, or say for us, and not at all what to do for us. He would pluck, absently, at the sceptre, for the wool of the fillet to which his hands were accustomed; for he is no king, except in his own peculiar sense of a prophet and priest-king, - and a vague prophet, be it understood. His recurrence to first principles and elements of action, is in fact, so constant and passionate, that his attention is not free for the development of actions. The hand is the gnomon by which he judges of the soul; and little cares he for the hand other than as a spirit-index. He will not wash your hands for you, be sure, however he may moralize on their blackness. (Kelley & Hudson VIII:356)

Barrett Browning considered that the act of writing a poem constitutes legitimate and important work, and she never wavered in her firm belief in the power of poetic language to influence its audience and inspire real change. "What a thing a book is!" she wrote to Mary Russell Mitford, "What power it has! It is a devil or an angel for power, - if a real, living book" (Raymond & Sullivan III:41), implying that literature, as a devil or an angel, has the capacity to influence behavior. Like Carlyle, Barrett Browning sees in religion the potential hope of the future, but unlike Carlyle, whose transcendentalism abandons entirely the forms and creeds of Christianity, she aims to infuse new meaning into the old forms. Both writers perceived established religious institutions as devoid of meaning and emotional content, but Barrett Browning believed it possible to restore them through poetry. Criticized early in her career for too frequent use of religious

subjects in her poems, she had to defend religion as fit material for poetry by asserting its inextricable connection both to the human condition and to human thought and feeling:

I do hold that all high thoughts look toward God, and that the deepest mysteries, not of fanaticism, but of Christianity, yes, doctrinal mysteries, are, - as approachable by lofty human thoughts and melted human affections, - poetical in their nature.Wherever there is room for HUMAN FEELING to act, there is room for POETICAL FEELING to act. We can't separate our humanity from our poetry - nor, when they are together, can we say or at least prove, that humanity looking downward has a fairer aspect than humanity looking toward God. I am afraid that the matter with some of us, may be resolved into our not considering religion a subject of feeling, of real warm emotion and feeling - but of creed and form and necessity. If we feel, it is wrong to show what we feel! - and this, only in religion! (Raymond & Sullivan II:141-142)

Furthermore, she indicates her belief that religion provides a moral ideal to which men can aspire: "Christ's religion is essentially poetry - poetry glorified. And agreeing with you that human interest is necessary to poetical interest, I would yet assume that religious interest is necessary to perfect the human - as the great and ever-influencing prospect and crown of universal humanity" (Raymond & Sullivan I:334). These passages reveal not only Barrett Browning's belief that Christianity can adequately embody both the individual and the collective spiritual life, but her

perception of poetry as having the power to restore it to its former status as a true haven for man's deepest religious feelings.

On the other hand, Barrett Browning believed that poetry must reflect reality, and that without adequate experience of life, the poet cannot achieve enough insight to fulfill his purpose. She perceived her own life as inadequate in this regard, lamenting the isolation and inexperience forced upon her by poor health. As a corollary to the imagery of sight and blindness with which she describes poetic vision, she uses images of windows and light to express her frustration with the limitations of her lifestyle: "I have been living all my life in something like Miss Martineau's mammoth cave (I have just finished her powerful work on America) and would seem shy and stupid with solitude and dark and dusty besides to eyes used to sunshine and moonlight" (Raymond & Sullivan I:34). In a letter to Browning, she wrote that "the brightest place in the house, is the leaning out of the window! - at least for me" (Kintner I:31), and in another letter to him described herself as a "blind poet" (Kintner I:41) because of her seclusion. In discussing with Mitford a planned collaboration with R.H. Horne, Barrett Browning wrote: We are to have real situations, I mean tangible - men and women talking loud out to one another..... There will be joy and grief - a child and a bridal - we are not quite in the clouds - we keep one foot on the ground" (Raymond & Sullivan

I:223); and similarly in another letter, "The plan of the work in question admits of the natural workings of humanity: there are real persons and events - there is not a naked allegory, or a mere embodiment of abstractions. (Raymond & Sullivan I:228)

Barrett Browning reconciles her assertion that poetry serves to reaffirm Christianity with her insistence that poetry deal with real life situations by focusing on religion, not as a belief system, but as a paradigm for human behavior embodied in the figure of Christ, whose status as both god and man symbolizes what Barrett Browning sees as the organic connection between the earthly and the divine:

Too much of the assured Humanity of Jesus Christ is put out of sight and out of hearing, when we muse and speak and pray. The result is a cold adoration, instead of a worshipping love. The result is that we come to write and to think of the Man-Christ, coldly as Epicurus might of his Possible-gods - at best solemnly as Plato might, of his God above the aeons - and not at all heartfully and with a love upturned, as to Him who is the Love-God - God in Humanity. (Raymond & Sullivan I:365)

Barrett Browning ultimately came to regard the values embodied in the figure of Christ - his moral and spiritual strength, his self-sacrifice and his love for man - as a universal standard applicable to all men in all situations. On the one hand she evolved an image of the poet as a Christ-like figure, and on the other used those values as a

moral yardstick in the depiction of contemporary social and political events.

The reader of Barrett Browning's poetic theory gets the distinct impression that she regards the primary purpose of poetry as the revelation of truth. However, she makes it very clear that poetry must inspire feeling as well as thought in its readers. Barrett Browning conceives of poetic truth, derived from intellect, and poetic beauty, derived from the poet's emotions, as intricately connected. However, one must differentiate between her use of the term "beauty" in reference to poetic technique and her far more elusive and abstract concept of beauty in relation to poetry's moral and spiritual content. As a poet, Barrett Browning valued technical excellence in others and expected it of herself. She never objected to experimentation in either rhyme or meter if it produced a result agreeable to the ear, as this comment on the versification of one of Mary Russell Mitford's plays makes apparent:

As to the roughness or irregularities in the numerical syllables, which you mentioned to me some time ago, there is nothing in them that I do not like. On the contrary the versification seems to me harmonious and graceful. A great deal has been written and talked about the difference between rhythm and metre. My doxy is different. At any rate, metre is nothing nobler than the guardian of Rhythm, and if Rhythm can take care of herself, and she is often Heaven-inspired to do it, where is the objection to the act? (Raymond & Sullivan I:28)

Criticized frequently for her own unorthodox use of feminine and irregular rhymes, she consistently defended herself: "I gave much time to the revision, and did not omit reforming some of the rhymes - although you must consider that the irregularity of these, in a certain degree, rather falls within my system than falls out through my carelessness" (Raymond & Sullivan III:293). Ultimately, however, she regarded the ability to create beautiful verse as a gift, a natural talent that technical practice alone cannot produce:

Tennyson and Shelley, more particularly, walk in the common daylight in their 'singing clothes;' they are silver-voiced when they ask for salt, and say 'Good-morrow' to you in a cadence. They each have a poetic dialect; not such a one as Wordsworth deprecated when he overthrew a system; not a conventional poetic idiom, but the very reverse of it - each poet fashioning his phrases upon his own individuality. (Kelley & Hudson VIII: 362)

Tennyson, in particular, she considered a master versifier:

Perhaps the first spell cast by Mr. Tennyson, he cast upon the ear. His power as a lyric versifier is remarkable. The measures flow softly or roll nobly to his pen; as well one as the other. He can gather up his strength, like a serpent, in the gleaming coil of a line; or dart it out straight and free. Nay, he will write you a poem with nothing in it except music, and as if its music were everything, it shall charm your soul. (ibid:362)

She also deals with specifics, pinpointing the technical elements that make Tennyson's poetry so exquisite. In

commenting on his blank verse, for example, she focuses on his fluidity:

In fact I seem to hear more in that latter blank verse than you do, - to hear not only a 'mighty line' as in Marlowe, but a noble full orbicular wholeness in complete passages - which always struck me as the mystery of music and great peculiarity in Tennyson's versification, inasmuch as he attains to these complete effects without that shifting of pause practiced by the masters, - Shelley and others. A 'linked music' - in which there are no links! - that, you would take to be a contradiction - and yet something like that, my ear has always seemed to perceive; and I have wondered curiously again and again how there could be so much union and no fastening. (Kintner I:93)

Drawing upon the traditional connection between poetry and music, Barrett Browning uses musical terminology to describe the various aspects of poetic technique; the more technically excellent the verse, the more musicality it possesses. However, she also defines poetic beauty as a moral quality deriving from the poet's sincere emotional response to the truths he wishes to communicate. Her comments on the relationship between beauty and truth in poetry imply a complex relationship between them, but one in which truth retains the ascendant position. In a letter to Mary Russel Mitford she described her own writing process as "that gentle quiet flowing of the heart along the graceful channel made for it by the intellect, of which we scarcely know whether to say - 'how beautiful', - or 'how good'. And

so, I have recourse to my Greeks who when they said 'how beautiful' meant 'how good'" (Raymond & Sullivan I:5). Poets are those "who discern, not only that beauty is beautiful, but that it is true and holy" (Raymond & Sullivan III:70). These comments reflect Carlyle's equation of beauty and morality in "The Hero As Poet," in which he, too, harkens back to the ancient Greeks whose word "Vates" means both prophet and poet: "the Vates Prophet, we might say, has seized that sacred mystery rather on the moral side, as Good and Evil, Duty and Prohibition; the Vates Poet on what the Germans call the aesthetic side, as Beautiful, and the like" (Buckler 115). He then goes on to paraphrase Goethe's idea that "The Beautiful is higher than the Good; the Beautiful includes in it the Good" (ibid), but with a further qualification: "The true Beautiful; which however, I have said somewhere, 'differs from the false as Heaven does from Vauxhall!'" (ibid 115-116).

In contrast to Carlyle's abstract definitions, Barrett Browning's imagery indicates her belief that intellect should remain the controlling force in poetry, guiding the emotions along a quiet and reasonable course. Another comment to Mitford concerning the work of Laetitia Landon, whom she criticized for excessive sentimentality and lack of both significant intellectual content and lofty passion, further emphasizes Barrett Browning's view of poetic emotion as subservient to thought: "And besides, is it not true that the strength of our feelings, often rises up out of our

thoughts - out of our bare intellectuality, - hard and cold thing that it is, of itself?" (Raymond & Sullivan I:18). Yet despite her insistence on the ascendancy of thought in poetry, she consistently describes an organic interrelationship between its intellectual and emotional content, criticizing with equal vehemence those poets whose work she feels lacks sincere passion. She criticized Shelley for his coldness, calling him "that high, and yet too low, elemental poet, who froze in cold glory between heaven and earth, neither dealing with man's heart, beneath, nor aspiring to communion with supernal Humanity, the heart of the God-Man. Therefore his poetry glitters and is cold - and it is only by momentary stirrings that we can discern the power of sweet human love and deep pathos which was in him and should have been in it" (Raymond & Sullivan I:229).

Carlyle defines poetry as "musical thought," which he describes as a thought:

spoken by a mind that has penetrated into the inmost heart of the thing; detected the inmost mystery of it, namely the melody that lies hidden in it; the inward harmony of coherence which is its soul, whereby it exists, and has a right to be, here in this world. All inmost things, we may say, are melodious; naturally utter themselves in Song. The meaning of Song goes deep. Who is there that, in logical words, can express the effect music has on us? A kind of inarticulate unfathomable speech, which leads us to the edge of the Infinite, and lets us for a moment gaze into that! (Heroes 83)

Carlyle implies here that poetic language possesses the power to express the inexpressible, thereby defining poetic music as the only possible verbal manifestation of poetic vision. Form and technique by themselves cannot engender true music in poetry: "whatsoever is not sung is properly no Poem, but a piece of prose cramped into jingling lines" (ibid 90). Although he acknowledges the importance of the poet's emotional involvement with his material, he ultimately defines poetic "music" as a function of intellect: "It is only when the heart of him is rapt into true passion of melody, and the very tones of himbecome musical by the greatness, depth and music of his thoughts, that we can give him right to rhyme and sing; that we call him a Poet, and listen to him as the Heroic of speakers, - whose speech is Song" (ibid 91).

Although in her poetry Barrett Browning imagines the poet as a singer and makes extensive use of music imagery in defining poetry's function, in her prose she tries to achieve the kind of specificity never approached by Carlyle. To designate her belief that the intellectual content of a poem should carry more importance than aesthetic concerns, she uses the term "unity of thought," by which she means that a poem must communicate a single predominant and coherent idea. She wrote to Mary Russell Mitford that:

a work without unity is a defective work
 - and that a work which leaves no
 sovereign impression, cannot have unity.
 The reader's impression is the

transcript - may it not be called so? - of the author's conception And it appears to me - to me who dares to babble about criticism with your face turned toward me and your opinion against me - that all the chief works of art from Shakespeare to your Mr. Haydon's must evolve a thought for either reader or spectator. (Raymond & Sullivan I:370)

She denied the status of poet to any writer of poetry or prose whose work she felt lacked this essential element: "Have patience with me once more when I dare to whisper that exactly in the unity of conception which appears to me the great accomplishment of the artist, Walter Scott appears defective. :.....He is a great writer - but not a poet - a maker - in any high sense!" (ibid:371). Similarly, she criticized the poetry of DeLamartine, describing it as "holy and beautiful, though deficient, as it appears to me, in concentration of expression and grasp of thought" (ibid:64). In contrast, she praised Edward Bulwer's novels for being "true to the soul of poetic Art, in evolving from each of his books an IDEA" (ibid:363).

One can find perhaps the best illustration of Barrett Browning's notion unity of thought in her comments on Tennyson, whom she admired early on for his extraordinary technical abilities, but later came to regard for his ability to express a coherent set of ideas with sincerity of feeling. She recognized what she considered his transition from the poet of sensation of his earlier works to the poet of deeply felt ideas of his later poems. Taken as a whole, she feels, Tennyson's early poems lack focus and direction:

But for all this unity of every separate poem produced by him, there is, or appears to be, some vacillation of intention, in his poetry as a mass. To any question upon the character of his early works, the reply rises obviously, - they are from dream-land; ...As the matter rests in this instance, we have the idea of a poet (his volumes in our hands) who is not in a fixed attitude; not resolute as to means, not determined as to end - sure of his power, sure of his activity, but not sure of his objects. There appears to be some want of the sanctification of a spiritual consistency. (Kelley & Hudson VIII:367)

Yet she recognizes in the poet the struggle to achieve this: "We seem to look on while a man stands in preparation for some loftier course - while he tries the edge of his various arms and examines the wheels of his chariots, and meditates, full of youth and capability, down the long slope of glory" (ibid:367).

Barrett Browning followed Tennyson's career with great interest, and her comments over time indicate that she wholeheartedly approved of the creative direction he had chosen. After reading the 1842 edition of poems, she wrote to Mary Russell Mitford:

Of the new poems we may say, there is less of the quaint peculiarity, more individuality, more power in the sense of nervous utterance, more thought under the obvious ordinary forms, and less of that high ideality which distinguished the old Tennyson lyrics, and includes always however occultly a higher degree

of philosophic thought than the critical world wotteth of. That is my doxy about the poems - the poet being divine as I always felt him to be. (Raymond & Sullivan I:415)

Finally, in her comments on In Memoriam, she indicates that he has, in her opinion, achieved that ideal combination of unity of thought and sincerity of feeling:

Who that has suffered, has not felt wave after wave break dully against one rock, till brain and heart with all their radiances seemed lost in a single shadow? So the effect of the book is artistic and true, I think - and indeed I do not wonder at the opinion which has reached us from various quarters that Tennyson stands higher through having written it. You see what he appeared to want according to the view of many, was an earnest personality and direct purpose. In this last book, though of course there is not room in it for that excercise of creative faculty which elsewhere established his fame, he appeals, heart to heart, and we all feel him nearer to us - I do - and so do others. (Raymond & Sullivan III:318)

In other words, Tennyson has channeled his feelings into a coherent and acceptable pattern of thought.

The relationship between the poet's emotions and his poetry evolved into a complex and conflict-laden issue in Barrett Browning's poetic theory. In order to gain a clearer understanding of that conflict, one can first look to Carlyle's comments on the quality of "sincerity" in poetry. Carlyle defines his literary hero as "he who lives in the inward sphere of things, in the True, Divine, and Eternal which exists always, unseen to most, under the Temporary, Trivial: his being is in that; he declares that

abroad, by act or speech as it may be, by declaring himself abroad" (Heroes 155). Literature is here declared to be self-expression, the artist drawing on his inner self as the source of vision. Carlyle demands that his artist abandon artifice, that his expression remain un-selfconscious and sincere: "He is to reveal that to us, - that sacred mystery which he more than others lives ever present with. While others forget it, he knows it; without consent asked of him, he finds himself living in it, bound to live in it. Once more, here is no Heresay, but a Direct Insight and Belief; this man too could not help being a sincere man" (ibid 81). It is apparent here that Carlyle has defined sincerity within very narrow bounds, in that the emotional honesty which it implies he has placed within the confines of his belief system. In other words, sincerity has become a factor of external circumstance. When Carlyle praises Robert Burns for his sincerity, he defines it as "his indisputable air of Truth" (Essay on Burns 267). He says of Burns that "he speaks forth what is in him," that "the passion that is traced before us has glowed in a living heart," but the source of that passion is external rather than internal:

He does not write from heresay, but from sight and experience; it is the scenes that he has lived and laboured amidst, that he describes; those scenes, rude and humble as they are, have kindled beautiful emotions in his soul, noble thoughts, and definite resolves; and he

speaks forth what is in him, not from any outward call of vanity or interest, but because his heart is too full to be silent. (ibid 267-268)

Carlyle defines poetic emotion as deeply felt thought:

No one, at all events, is ignorant that in the poetry of Burns keenness of insight keeps pace with keenness of feeling: that his light is not more pervading than his warmth. He is a man of the most impassioned temper; with passions not strong only, but noble, and of the sort in which great virtues and great poems take their rise. It is reverence, it is love towards all Nature that inspires him, that opens his eyes to its beauty, and makes heart and voice eloquent in its praise. There is a true old saying, that 'Love furthers knowledge': but above all, it is the living essence of that knowledge which makes poets. (ibid 279)

For Carlyle, the poet's emotions, the internal material of self, must always have reference to something external.

The passages above imply an underlying assumption that certain kinds of emotions might not be acceptable in poetry. Since all poetic feeling must tend toward the "revelation of the Godlike in the Terrestrial and Common," any cynical, negative or too purely aesthetic feeling has no place in what Carlyle would designate great poetry. Hence Keats' poetry "consists in a weak-eyed maudlin sensibility, and a certain vague random tunefulness of nature" (ibid 277). Byron's work he considers insincere and vulgar, filled with "stormful agonies" and "volcanic heroism, superhuman contempt and moody desperation, with so much scowling, teeth-gnashing, and other sulphurous humor" (ibid 269). But

perhaps Carlyle's greatest poetic sin is the expression of unresolved religious doubt, which for him represented the primary social disease of his era. Doubt, he tells us, is healthy and normal when it is "the mystic working of the mind on the object it is getting to know and believe" (Heroes 174). But when doubt becomes its own end, paraded in public instead of held silent, the doubt itself becomes a kind of affirmation. When doubt becomes skepticism, it is "as if you should overturn the tree, and instead of green boughs, leaves and fruits, show us ugly taloned roots turned up into the air, - and no growth, only death and misery going on" (ibid).

This loaded statement implies that the sincere skeptic ought not to express his honest thoughts because of their potential negative effect. Carlyle sees skepticism as a "godless untruth of a world," as the underlying cause of "the whole tribe of social pestilences" (Heroes 175). The social function of literature is here given pre-eminence over the artist's self-expression. If literature functions to affirm belief and to provide a moral ground base, then there is no room for unrelenting doubt, and Carlyle's declaration that the poet's primary attainment is "to read its own consciousness without mistakes" (Essay on Burns 269) creates a seemingly unresolvable conflict. It is helpful at this point to recall Carlyle's equation of poet and priest: "He that can write a true Book, to persuade England, is not he the Bishop and Archbishop, the Primate of England and All

England? I many a time say, the writers of Newspapers, Pamphlets, Poems, Books, these are the real working effective Church of a modern country" (Heroes 162). In fact, Carlyle believes that poets have already begun to replace priests as spiritual leaders: "The noble sentiment which a gifted soul has clothed for us in melodious words, which brings melody into our hearts, - is this not essentially, if we will understand it, of the nature of worship? There are many, in all countries, who, in this confused time, have no other method of worship" (ibid 162-163). Just as one would not expect a skeptic to choose to become a priest, Carlyle would not expect a skeptic to choose to become a poet. A priest is expected to manifest sincere obedience to his system of beliefs. Carlyle expects the same of his poet, for "the sincere man" is "by nature the obedient man" who manifests "loyal Obedience to the Heroic" (ibid 179). Who else but Carlyle would equate sincerity with obedience, and how would he expect the poet to deal artistically with emotions that do not conform to his concept of the heroic?

However much the concepts of sincerity and obedience might seem intrinsically opposed to one another, and as outrageous as Carlyle's attempt to connect them might appear, the conflict implicit in that equation played a major role in Barrett Browning's poetic theory and practice as well as those of her contemporaries. In Victorian to Modern Poetics, Carol Crist describes the Victorian

rejection of the self as a vehicle for poetic expression, pointing out that Victorian critics clearly favored an objective art over a subjective. The use of dramatic forms by the Victorian poets "resolves the tension between subjective and objective appearances not by the dogmatic separation of proper from improper responses that we often find in the criticism but by leaving ambiguous its organizing principle" (67). Barrett Browning more than once declared the highest forms of poetry to be the dramatic and the epic, an opinion shared by Carlyle, who in "The Hero as Poet" cites Dante and Shakespeare as the greatest poets. In fact, Barrett Browning felt that drama more properly belonged on the printed page than in the theatre:

I admit to you willingly that in reading and taking pleasure in the Drama, my ideas of it never enter the theatre from first to last. I have a notion, - that the theatre interprets between the dramatic poet and the unpoetic multitude, - and always where the poetry is high, desecrates it in translation. I believe in a high spiritual Drama clear of the theatre - and the higher and more spiritual, the more clear.
(Raymond & Sullivan II:2)

The development of her career reflects her increasing preference for dramatic forms, yet she persisted in thinking of poetry, at least on one level, as a form of self-expression, favoring the sonnet as a lyric form.

Barrett Browning's approach to poetic self-revelation reveals a discomfiture with her inner life, and although she regarded her writing as a necessary outlet for personal

emotions, she also considered certain classes of feelings dangerous and inappropriate in poetry. On the one hand, she emphasizes the importance of sincerity in poetry, insisting upon emotional honesty. When the Athenaeum published a review of her 1838 volume of poems in which the reviewer accused her of "affectation," she was incensed, retorting that she "writes from the real natural impulse of feeling and thought" and that her style "formed itself by force of writing" (Raymond & Sullivan I:83). She disliked emotional affectation of any sort, saying of Letaetia Landon:

Her genius was not strong enough to assert itself in truth. It suffered her to belie herself - and stood by, while she put on the mask. Where is the true deep poetry which was not felt deeply and truly by the poet? What is the poet, without the use of his own heart? And thus, the general character of Miss Landon's most popular poems is - melancholy without pathos. A conventional tone pierces through the sweetness. (ibid)

She leveled a similar criticism at Felicia Hemans, calling her poems polished and refined, sweet and noble, the work of a "lady" rather than a "woman" or a "poetess," lifeless and repetitious, lacking in "passion" (Raymond & Sullivan II:88).

Nonetheless, Barrett Browning expresses ambivalence over the revelation of the full compass of her emotions in her poetry. At the age of twenty five she wrote to Hugh Stuart Boyd: "Have you ever observed this in me - that though I can restrain myself and mask myself as well as

anybody else, in conversation, yet as soon as I begin to write, - out everything comes, foolish or otherwise, just as it enters my head? That is the effect of writing so much, and of encouraging myself in writing naturally" (Kelley & Hudson II:303). Here she reveals a clear awareness of the emotional difficulty she experiences in adhering to her own principle of composition. In describing her inner life she further reveals a direct conflict with her idea that in poetry intellect should guide emotion: "I do confess to you that I have not what is called a 'well-regulated mind' - and my didactic treatise on 'self-examination,' ought in fairness to begin by some such confession. My very first emotion will overturn my very first philosophy, - and I am subject to multitudinous ones, coming from all opposite points of the compass, till I grow ashamed of my own nature" (Kelley & Hudson IV:217). One can easily identify those aspects of her emotional life that caused her such discomfort. First, she had great difficulty coping with painful or negative feelings:

I sometimes feel that for the rest of my life, I would barter almost every kind of pleasure for the loss of every kind of pain, and consent to be only tranquil instead of pleased. For a long time my powers of feeling pleasure and pain have been clashing against each other - and neither my body nor mind can bear it any longer. It has been my misfortune to expect to be too happy and too much pleased with everybody, - every string of my imagination has been tuned to

happiness, and when first one breaks and then another, the ear of the mind cannot bear, without shrinking, the loss of harmony. (ibid:35)

In Barrett Browning's early poetry, the expression of pain does not function as catharsis, enabling the poetic speaker or character to better cope with and resolve difficulty. Rather, such expression leads to disharmony, chaos and death. Barrett Browning seems to want to deal with negative feelings by obliterating them from her mind as well as from her poetry. She reveals an inability to cope with the intensity of her own emotions, which she associates with her powerful imagination. In her adolescent autobiographical essays, she describes in some detail her attempts to control her thoughts concerning the nature of God and the universe, as well as her reactions to the sophisticated works of literature she read. Later, as an adult, she indicates that poetry has afforded her some protection from her potentially dangerous inner life:

Let those who have imaginative daughters, beware of that 'safe plan', as it is said to be, of keeping them in seclusion - let them beware of their love of solitude and habits of silence. They may be drinking deeper of life among the sheep, than they ever would think of doing in the city. Such girls will not run away with Mr. A or Mr. B - no, nor with their father's footman by an illusion. They may be above that - but scarcely safer than that. At least, life in the mind is not nothing. It is as operative in its effects on the character as exterior life, - and then, who can controul it?. (Raymond & Sullivan III:61)

She goes on to say that "in my own case, poetry was my safety valve, - and that without it, the disease within (we must call it a form of insanity) would have manifested itself fantastically someday" (ibid).

By considering poetry a necessary emotional outlet while at the same time regarding certain kinds of emotions as too dangerous and inappropriate to express, Barrett Browning backs herself into a corner from which she attempts to extricate herself by adopting an attitude of resignation. During their courtship, she wrote to Robert Browning:

You are not to think ...that I lean either to the philosophy or affectation which beholds the world through darkness instead of light, and speaks of it wailingly. Now, may God forbid that it should be so with me. I am not desponding by nature - and after a course of bitter mental discipline and long bodily seclusion, I come out with two learnt lessons ...the wisdom of cheerfulness - and the duty of social intercourse. Anguish has instructed me in joy - and solitude in society - it has been a wholesome and not unnatural reaction. And altogether, I may say that the earth looks the brighter to me in proportion to my own deprivations: the laburnum trees and rose trees are plucked up by the roots - but the sunshine is in their places - and the root of the sunshine is above the storms. What we call life is a condition of the soul - and the soul must improve in happiness and wisdom, except by its own fault. These tears in our eyes - these faintings of the flesh - will not hinder such improvement. (Kintner I:34-35)

Barrett Browning here imposes upon herself an attitude of optimism which seems equivocal at best. Her apparent need

for optimism reflects a characteristic of the period shared by her contemporaries. The later Victorian poets had far less difficulty with the expression of unrelenting despair, but to Barrett Browning, as well as to Tennyson, Arnold and Robert Browning, the highest goal seems to have been the successful integration of personal emotion with positive vision. The obvious problem with such a goal is that the demands of the artistic process do not necessarily allow for the editing of emotional content. What can the poet do with feelings of which he disapproves and which he would rather not express? Matthew Arnold ultimately gave up writing poetry. The same feelings which led him to portray bleak landscapes, hopeless sorrow, or a suicidal character in his poems enabled him to create a prose filled with pungent humor and irony, turning melancholy despair into constructive criticism. Robert Browning evolved a style of dramatic poetry which allowed him to objectify personal feeling through character, to overlay a positive philosophic message underneath which lurk layers of ambiguous irony. Both Tennyson and Barrett Browning seem to have shaped their careers to reflect Carlyle's emphasis on the public role of poetry, struggling to subordinate subjective needs to objective concerns. Barrett Browning, although she repeatedly stresses the need for passion and honest emotion in poetry, places even greater emphasis on the poet's reliance on objective experience, as well as personal sacrifice.

Like Carlyle, Barrett Browning considers poets morally responsible to their audience, attributing to them a greater than average moral sense: "Genius, I maintain always, you know, is a purifying power and goes with high moral capacities" (Raymond & Sullivan III:280). The words "purifying power" imply that the poetic faculty can somehow purge an individual of undesirable feelings and characteristics. As a counterbalance to the inner life, she asserts that the poet must have adequate experience of the external world to provide material for his art:

Is it not true that change in the sensations, - and in those ideas more closely connected with the external world, - must react strongly, deeply, and freshly on the inner being, - conducing to the fuller development of the Imaginative and Reflective powers? I think so. Not that traveling will make a man wise or imaginative - but that its tendencies are to increase the wisdom of the thoughtful, and multiply the images of the poetic. (Raymond & Sullivan II:345)

Barrett Browning here expresses in theoretical terms her own sense of confinement, in that at this point she still lived the life of an invalid, had seen almost nothing of the world and felt that, for artistic purposes, she dwelt too much in her inner life. The terms of her own poetic theory indicate an external source for the material of poetry. One must recall her image of the poet as a visionary, reawakening the reader's awareness of transcendent reality. At times she even echoes Carlyle's portrayal of the poet as a vehicle for

divine revelation, as for example when she states that to ask the poet to be silent "would be like asking a prophet to forbear his prophecy - he has a word to speak from Nature and God, and he must speak it!" (Raymond & Sullivan I:386).

In viewing the poet as subservient to his vision, Barret Browning implies the need for a degree of self-sacrifice. On the surface, she seems to advocate another form of sincerity, in that the poet must not acquiesce to public taste simply for the sake of popularity if such acquiescence will compromise his artistic integrity. She insists that poets not cave in to the demands of critics or of their readers, saying of herself that "I never would write a line nor unwrite a line with the intent of being popular among a contemporaneous public" (Raymond & Sullivan II:162). However, she distinguishes popularity from fame, which she defines as the just recognition of artistic excellence and toward which she displays some ambivalence. On the one hand she feels "that Fame, reputation, the recognition of a master-power available for goodness or for truth, I undervalue as little as anyone in the world, and never did undervalue. Perhaps, if the secret hearts of us were beheld, I value it even more than you do - I think I do" (ibid:161). On the other hand, she asserts that "it is not for the sake of popularity, no, nor of a higher kind of fame, but for poetry's own sake - rather to speak more accurately, for the sake of my love of it. Love is the

safest and most unwearied moving principle in all things - it is an heroic worker" (Raymond & Sullivan I:334).

In her comments on the life of the poet, Barrett Browning consistently indicates the need for the subjugation of self to art, "the devotion of heart to noble ends, overlooking life - the joy in self-sacrifice - the consciousness of power! How fine this life of genius is! - and its religion too!" (Raymond & Sullivan I:275). Dorothy Mermin theorizes that Barret Browning could not reconcile her desire for fame with her identity as a woman. However, one must recognize the influence of Carlyle in Barrett Browning's attitude. Carlyle proposes suffering and self-sacrifice as necessary preconditions for the creation of true art. The poet must "know that outward profit, that success of any kind is not the goal he has to aim at. Pride, vanity, ill-conditioned egoism of all sorts, are bred in his heart, as in every heart, - to be, with whatever pangs, torn out of it, cast forth from it, as a thing worthless" (Heroes 166). He proposes that artists follow the example of the mendicant monastic orders, whose embrace of poverty and sorrow and "every species of worldly Distress and Degradation" (ibid 167) taught them lessons necessary to their total devotion to their calling. Carlyle believes that profit and fame will work against the artistic process and that suffering will promote it: "He {the artist} must pass through the ordeal, and prove himself. This ordeal; this wild welter of a chaos which is called Literary Life:

this too is a kind of ordeal!" (ibid). He attributes the failure of Robert Burns to achieve the highest level of poetic greatness to his continued seeking after wordly success: "Amid the vapors of unwise enjoyment, or bootless remorse, and angry discontent with Fate, his true loadstar, a life of Poetry, with Poverty, nay, with Famine if it must be so, was too often altogether hidden from his eyes" (Essay on Burns 304).

Barrett Browning levels a similar charge at Sir Walter Scott, whose downfall, she believes, resulted from worldly ambition:

The martyrdom of genius was a name to him. He had a crown on his head and a check in his pocket. He was the shirra as well as the poet. Most happy he was in his family - most beloved and most blessed - blessed in their lives and loves. What was wanting in the destiny of this man! ...Surely there was no darkness but in the closing scene, - and out of his faults arose that cloud. It was his ambition of landed proprietorship (a false pitiful thing!) which wrecked him - his love of money and land!. (Raymond and Sullivan I:252)

This is, of course, a questionable interpretation of Scott's demise. It is, furthermore, ironic that the English poet whom both Carlyle and Barrett Browning admired above all others was William Shakespeare, a man who certainly was motivated, at least in part, by a desire for worldly success. In fact, both Barrett Browning and Carlyle experienced during their lives the difficulty of living by their pens, and were not unsympathetic to the hardships

imposed by financial want. Perhaps the severe terms in which they seem to demand personal sacrifice from the poet may be interpreted metaphorically as the necessity of sacrificing certain aspects of self for the sake of what they each believed to be ideal poetic vision. In other words, subjective elements in poetry must conform to objective requirements. The conflict engendered by this self-imposed demand reflects itself in Barrett Browning's early poetic practice.

II

VISION TURNED INWARD: "THE POET'S VOW"

Can your poet make an Eden
 No winter will undo,
 And light a starry fire while heeding
 His hearth's burning too?
 Drown in music the earth's din
 And keep his own wild soul within
 The law of his own harmony?

"Isobel's Child"
 (Poetical Works 28)

The development of Barrett Browning's mature poetic voice hinges upon the gradual convergence of her negative self-image and her poetic ideal. At the relatively early stage of her career which The Seraphim and Other Poems represents, the process of that convergence has not yet begun, resulting in a volume of poetry characterized by seemingly unresolvable conflict, one that reflects the difficulty of putting into practice an overly idealized poetic theory. Barrett Browning ultimately grew into a strong and confident poet, capable of projecting a coherent body of thought through a single, clearly identifiable persona. At the age of thirty two, however, her personal outlook, clouded by chronic depression, chronic illness, and a generally negative self-image, came into direct conflict with a poetic theory inspired by the need for optimism and moral certitude. Barrett Browning displays a

characteristically Victorian drive to overcome personal pessimism, or at least to exclude it from her poetry. Like Tennyson and Arnold, she felt that the expression of morbid sentiment has no place in poetry. These poets did not object to poetic self-expression in general; rather, they felt the need to edit out emotion they considered objectionable. Unable to accept their own feelings of depression and confusion, which came into direct conflict with their insistence that poetry serve as a vital source of moral and spiritual sustenance for its audience, each created, in their early work, dramatic personae reflecting their own inner torment.

In Barrett Browning's poetry, one can trace this conflict in terms of her use of the imagery of sight and sound, each functioning on two levels, one with an internal, the other with an external source. Images of poetic vision abound in her work, signifying both the poet's ability to perceive a transcendent reality accessed through the physical world, and the poet's perception and expression of the material of self. According to Barrett Browning's own poetic theory, the poet must look within himself as well as without in order to produce a sincere and emotionally effective portrayal of truth. We have seen that in this regard her theory reflects the influence of Carlyle. However, the poet who looks inside himself and finds predominantly pain and pessimism ends up tormented and split apart by conflicting needs. Similarly, images of music in

Barrett Browning's poetry signify the poetic ideal of divine song, the final manifestation of the poet's transcendent vision. The poet as singer finds his reflection in the music of heaven, providing a link with God. On the other hand, in his ordinary human mode, the poet speaks from his own heart. The relationship between speech and song in Barrett Browning's work helps to clarify the dichotomy between the poet's ability to express his ideal vision and his ability to reveal the full compass of his inner life. Her early work, in which many of her poet figures can produce divine song only by refraining from speech, depicts the inner life as a destructive, often fatal force. In this regard, her early poetry resembles that of Tennyson.

To fulfill her own requirement that poetry contain "unity of thought," Barrett Browning provides The Seraphim and Other Poems with a moral theme which, as Dorothy Mermin has pointed out, is somewhat reminiscent of Wordsworth: each man is born innocent, retaining a vestige of Eden which he loses as he grows into adulthood and accepts both the cruelty and injustice of modern industrialism and the hypocrisy and superficiality of conventional society. His only hope of salvation lies in his ability to love his fellow man, as Christ did, but since human love is often unreliable, man's ultimate happiness lies with God in heaven. Barrett Browning's vision of nature, unlike Wordsworth's, offers only limited consolation, but she unfortunately fails in her attempt to substitute religious

feeling as a source of solace. The religious pieces in the collection would seem to represent Barrett Browning's desire to reinstate religion as a fit subject for poetry and as an appropriate embodiment for deep emotion. They are, however, the weakest poems in the volume.

One cannot call Barrett Browning a religious poet, in spite of her early concentration on religious themes. Dorothy Mermin points out that Barrett Browning's religious poetry is far from her best. The two great Victorian religious poets, Christina Rossetti and Gerard Manley Hopkins, write poetry in which "their faith enacts itself poetically through difficulty and struggle" (69). She quotes T.S. Eliot's comment that Tennyson's In Memoriam is a great poem because of the quality of its doubt rather than its faith. In contrast:

Elizabeth Barrett's religious poems do not doubt, and rarely struggle. Nor do they pay attention to the great religious questions of the time. They give an almost childishly literal picture of a heaven inhabited by a tender Christ, adoring angels, and a paternal deity who reminds us rather too much of Edward Moulton-Barrett. Their universe is comfortably small, unbreached by the scientific movement that was expanding space and time to make the vast inimical emptiness in which Tennyson's imagination had already begun to explore. (69)

Barrett Browning's religious poems do not portray the struggle to achieve faith nor do they convey a sense of the poet's deeply felt spiritual conviction. Rather, they

represent a mental landscape that serves as an escape from conflict, very much like Tennyson's landscapes, which, as James Richardson points out, function not as pictorial setting but as "places in the mind" (17). Subsequent to the 1844 poems, Barrett Browning exchanged religious themes for contemporary social issues.

The title piece, The Seraphim, presents, in the form of a drama in verse, the crucifixion as witnessed by two angels halfway between heaven and earth. Barrett Browning attributes her inspiration for the piece to the thought that, had Aeschylus lived after the time of Christ, he would surely have found the Christian story a more satisfying subject than that of Prometheus. In essence, she is attempting to portray the crucifixion in the form of a Greek tragedy. Unfortunately she does not succeed. The Seraphim presents the crucifixion from too great a distance, thereby destroying any possibility of real dramatic tension. The two seraphic observers, Ador and Zerah, cannot provide an adequate emotional context for the story because they are not human and cannot feel the human pathos evoked by the tragedy of Christ's death. The reader fails to identify with such characters. In addition, much of the poetry is awkward and overblown. Barrett Browning experimented boldly with verse form throughout her career, but at this relatively early stage she had more success with tighter structures that provided a better context for her variations.

The reviewers of the 1838 volume preferred, for the most part, the shorter pieces, particularly the ballads, which they praised and admired. Of The Seraphim one reviewer stated: "In this conception there is not much power, nor does it admit of that breadth and force in the treatment of which the subject is susceptible" (Kelley & Hudson IV 372). Another wrote that "In 'The Seraphim' there is poetry and piety - genius and devotion; but the awful Idea of the Poem - the Crucifixion - is not sustained - and we almost wish it unwritten" (ibid 379). Modern critics have tended to agree with such assessments, as does Virginia Radley, for example, who writes: "The major defect in it arises from the selection of a topic which is, paradoxically, its strongest virtue. It took a mature Milton to plan and execute Paradise Lost, but Miss Barrett, thirty-two and relatively inexperienced. could not sustain the high plane her subject demands" (40). Dorothy Mermin, too, cites the passive position of the protagonists as the source of the poem's failure: "The Seraphim is Prometheus Bound without Prometheus: a lyrical dramatization not of suffering and acting, but of watching others suffer and act. The chorus, one might say, becomes the protagonist" (EBB 62). Mermin acknowledges the general inferiority of the religious poems in the 1838 volume, yet characterizes the collection as demonstrating "an access of power, confidence, and control" (62) by the author.

From a technical standpoint, the finest poems in the volume are the ballad "Isobel's Child" and two excellent sonnets, "Bereavement" and "Consolation." The significance of The Seraphim and Other Poems, however, does not lie in its technical merit, but rather in its treatment of thematic material common to Barrett Browning and her contemporaries. The 1838 volume focuses on the writing process itself, and the poet's inability to reconcile his poetic self with the mythologized ideal poet of Victorian theory. Barrett Browning deals poetically, for the most part in dramatic forms, with the questions and conflicts implicit in her own theory of poetry. Her use of dramatic forms allows her to embody conflicting aspects of the poetic persona in separate characters, the resulting distance affording her more creative control. The four ballad poems, perhaps the most important in the collection, each present a pair of characters, closely related and set in opposition to one another, locked in a conflict concerning art and/or love. These poems project, not the joys of salvation, but the internal suffering of the artist/lover whose ultimate death in each case represents the only possible resolution of conflict.

In the passage from "Isobel's Child" quoted above, Barrett Browning bluntly defines the Victorian poet's inability to unify his identity as artist with his sense of self. The vision and the music represent the ideal poet who, through an almost magical transcendence, can light up

the universe with his song and create order in a discordant world, an image which can find no earthly, flesh-and-blood manifestation. Recent studies have attributed Barrett Browning's early inability to identify herself as poet to a gender-based conflict centering upon the absence of female predecessor poets and the resulting anxiety experienced by a woman who attempts to forge a place for herself in a sphere from which women have traditionally been excluded. Such a theory, however, provides only a partial explanation for a theme which Barrett Browning shares in common with several of her male contemporaries. The fear of self-expression which clearly characterizes the 1838 poems has its origin not only in her identity as woman, but in her identity as Victorian poet, apart from gender.

In their early poetry, Tennyson, Arnold and Barrett Browning each display an intense concern with defining the role of the poet in society. These poetic manifestations of poetic theory present a Carlylean model of the ideal poet, frequently depicted as a dramatic figure entirely separate from the poetic self composing the poem in which that figure appears. In theoretical prose, the writer can reasonably separate himself from his own definition of poet, since he is working within a non-poetic context. In a lyric poem, on the other hand, the writer cannot reasonably separate himself from the poet he describes without creating the impression of conflict or confusion. A dramatic context can help the poet to achieve some distance from his own

description by allowing him to attribute it to a fictional character, as in "Isobel's Child," in which a young mother, lost in a nocturnal reverie as she watches over her sick baby, imagines that he might grow up to be a poet:

'Or, baby, wilt thou think it fitter
 To be eloquent and wise,
 One upon whose lips the air
 Turns to solemn verities
 For men to breathe anew, and win
 A deeper-seated life within?
 Wilt be a philosopher,
 By whose voice the earth and skies
 Shall speak to the unborn?
 Or a poet, broadly spreading
 The golden immortalities
 Of thy soul on natures lorn
 And poor of such, them all to guard
 From their decay, - beneath thy treading,
 Earth's flowers recovering hues of Eden, -
 And stars, drawn downward by thy looks,
 To shine ascendant in thy books?'

(Poetical Works 26)

One recognizes in this passage Barrett Browning's own description of Carlyle's philosopher-poet, reviving men's souls by rejuvenating lost truths. Isobel attributes eloquence and wisdom to both the philosopher and the poet, but whereas the philosopher acts as a vehicle through which nature can speak, the poet speaks the "golden immortalities" of his own soul, implying that he draws his inspiration not only from the external world but from within himself. Barrett Browning's character mythologizes the poet, surrounding him with images of heaven and Eden, and placing him on a pedestal that she imagines her child will one day occupy. The infant child, speaking to his mother in a vision, responds by pointing out the impossibility of

negative emotion incompatible with a mythologized ideal. In "Supposed Confessions of a Second-Rate Sensitive Mind," for example, Tennyson describes his gnawing religious doubt, his melancholy obsession with death, the pain of adult life and his wish to recover the happy innocence of childhood. The poem opens with a cry of pain ("O God! my God! have mercy now./I faint, I fall) and closes without resolution:

O weary life! O weary death!
 O spirit and heart made desolate!
 O damned vacillating state!
(ibid 10)

Similarly, in the short lyric "Song" (1830), a succession of images of death and decay reflect the speakers' deep melancholic depression.

Barrett Browning, too, laments her lost youth in "The Deserted Garden," a nostalgic portrayal of a childhood retreat made from the perspective of an adult whose knowledge of death engenders a powerful melancholy unquenchable even by the pious assertion of faith at the conclusion of the poem. The speaker not only remembers the happy hours spent in a garden overgrown from long disuse, but imagines those who might have occupied that garden before her, during a time when it was cared for and thriving, occupants who, although now dead and buried, at the time could not foresee either its abandonment or their own graves. Sadness and death surround this speaker's childhood memories to the extent that they cannot provide any respite from present pain. One naturally feels tempted

to seek a biographical source for such feelings, particularly in the case of Barrett Browning, whose biography critics have used extensively to explain her poetry. In fact, Barrett Browning's autobiographical sketches, written during her early adolescence, provide some very useful material that sheds light on the source of her melancholy. Barrett Browning declares herself to have been an intense, stubborn and passionate child who struggled to control her emotions. "I was always of a determined and if thwarted violent disposition - My actions and temper were infinitely more inflexible at three years old than now at fourteen" (Kelley & Hudson I 349), she writes, with the qualification that:

I have acquired a command of myself which has become so habitual that my disposition appears to my friends to have undergone a revolution - But to myself it is well known that the same violent inclinations are in my inmost heart and altho habitual restraint has become almost a part of myself yet were I once to loose the rigid rein I might again be hurled with Phaeton far from every thing human - every thing reasonable! (ibid 353)

This self-description finds its parallel in Isobel's child's declaration that a poet must contain his wild soul within the confines of his poetic function. Apparently, Barrett Browning could not feel comfortable with the idea that poetry should give free rein to the imagination because she did not feel entirely comfortable with her own imagination:

So great was the strength of my imagination which is now often too powerful for my controul. This year I read Milton for the first time thro together with Shakespeare and Pope's Homer - In perusing these glorious models of Poetic excellence I have often felt my soul kindled with the might of such sublime genius and glow with the enthusiasm of admiration!!.....And yet my mind since the first year of my birth has ever been in commotion not proceeding from external causes but from those internal reflections and internal passions which are such powerful attributes of my character and which I trust it has been my study to subdue! (ibid 352)

In the opening paragraph of this essay, written when she was fourteen, she provides a telling example of the uncomfortable territory into which her imagination could lead her:

Man is naturally enamored of immortality, and tho the brazen trump of fame echoes his deeds when he sleeps, tho the cold sod is closed over his corrupted form yet he shrinks from that deathlike and awful stillness, the dreadful attribute of the grave - Nothing can more plainly denote the souls eternity than the instinctive thirst for immortality which universally throbs in the heart of man - Would that benevolent Being whose kind spirit finds pleasure in the happiness of his Creatures have implanted in their bosoms such a feeling in vain? Is it consonant with divine mercy to tantalise us afar with the bright and heavenly fields of immortality and then closing at once the glorious prospect, forbid that endearing hope to console and allow the cold turf to moulder with our dust and the soul which once animated it fondly considered by us immortal, instead of those glorious and celestial plains to find its last sad asylum in the grave? (ibid 348)

Surely this does not represent typical fourteen-year-old thinking. All of the defining elements of *The Seraphim* volume - the obsession with death, the fear of passionate self-expression, the melancholy longing for simplicity and calm - are delineated in this early self-description. Undoubtedly, the death of Barrett Browning's mother when she was twenty two contributed to her sense that adult life brings irrevocable loss and accompanying pain. In addition, the debilitating asthma condition which by 1838 had claimed a good portion of her health and strength could only have exacerbated her already melancholy mental state (see appendix).

In several lyric poems in *The Seraphim* volume, Barrett Browning imagines a natural setting that can potentially provide an escape from emotional turmoil. In "An Island," the speaker dreams of an idyllic island retreat, lush and peaceful, where her "sanguine soul" can dwell with two or three others "whom dreams fantastic please as well" (*Poetical Works* 33). Both the speaker and her companions are apparently poets who, in their ideal setting, will create perfect poems:

Our fancies shall their plumage catch
From fairest island birds,
Whose eggs let young ones out at hatch,
Born singing! then our words
Unconsciously shall take the dyes
Of those prodigious fantasies.

Yea, soon, no consonant unsmooth
Our smile-tuned lips shall reach;
Sounds sweet as Hellas spake in youth
Shall glide into our speech:

(What music, certes, can you find
As soft as voices which are kind?)

And often, by the joy without
And in us, overcome,
We, through our musing, shall let float
Such poems, - sitting dumb, -
As Pindar might have writ if he
Had tended sheep in Arcady;

Or Aeschalus - the pleasant fields
He died in, longer knowing;
Or Homer, had men's sins and shields
Been lost in Meles flowing;
Or poet Plato, had the undim
Unsetting Godlight broke on him.
(ibid 33-34)

The seemingly contradictory connection in this passage between silence and song signifies the wish for an unselfconscious expressiveness and, by implication, the difficulty of poetic self-expression. Barrett Browning's speaker longs for the easy, contented innocence of the bird's song, and imagines that she and her companions can absorb those natural qualities by dwelling in their presence. The island image in the poem represents a mental landscape both literally (the poem records the speaker's dream) and figuratively, in that it reflects the speaker's wish for inner peace and contentment. Nature, as the speaker imagines it, can offer that emotional peace which will then allow her an unselfconscious, quasi-verbal expressive power: her poems will "float" from her as she remains "dumb." Silence here represents not the opposite of song, but its equivalent, with vision as its companion: the speaker fantasizes that by absorbing the visual images that surround her on her island she will renew her poetic powers,

which in their ideal form she compares to the ancient Greeks. In fact, she goes so far as to imagine that the Greek poets would have written better poems had they spent more time in a pastoral setting. Throughout the poem, however, the speaker retains the awareness of fantasy, and at the conclusion, awakening to a painful reality, resigns herself to God and prayer.

"An Island" bears a relationship to Tennyson's "The Palace of Art" in that both poems portray the poet's wish to turn away from the difficulties of the real world and retreat to an enclosed, isolated environment from which he/she hopes to draw inspiration. In each case, the poet ultimately abandons that environment as foolish, unrealistic, and sinful. Tennyson's setting is not a natural one, but an edifice, and his "soul," or artistic self, dwells there alone, without the companions of Barrett Browning's poem. Nonetheless, Tennyson exorts his soul to reign there "a quiet king," implying a silence equivalent to Barrett Browning's. After drawing inspiration from the splendid tapestries and murals that line the palace walls, the soul pours forth "rivers of melodies," "Singing and murmuring in her feastful mirth,/Joyful to feel herself alive" (Houghton & Stange 22), not unlike the "smile-tuned lips" of Barrett Browning's speaker who is overcome "by the joy without/And in us." Tennyson's palace, too, takes on a dream-like quality when the soul experiences nightmarish visions of suffering and death. The poem's moral would

attribute these visions to the soul's sinful abandonment of the real world, and, by implication, of God as well. However, the soul's description of her emotional response to her nightmares indicates the possibility that they represent, not images of reality, but a visual projection of emotional turmoil:

And death and life she hated equally,
 And nothing saw, for her despair,
 But dreadful time, dreadful eternity,
 No comfort anywhere;

Remaining utterly confused with fears,
 And ever worse with growing time,
 And ever unrelieved by dismal tears,
 And all alone in crime.

(ibid 24)

Both Tennyson and Barrett Browning create poetic environments of escape, purportedly from the horrors of modern society and from the finality of death, but their pain inevitably follows them because its source lies within the self. Barrett Browning indicates her awareness of this in "The Soul's Travelling," in which she imagines, as Tennyson does in "The Palace of Art," her soul as separate from herself, the two of them taking a journey of escape from the city, symbol of social and industrial corruption. They fly away from civilization and toward a natural environment, seeking isolation even from pastoral companions, finally coming to rest in a hollow niche on the side of a cliff overlooking the sea. Here, alone with only her own thoughts for companionship, she realizes that she cannot escape her inner pain:

Alway! alway? must this be?
 Rapid soul from city gone,
 Dost thou carry inwardly
 What doth make the city's moan?
 Must this deep sigh of thine own
 Haunt thee with humanity?
 (ibid 37)

Rather than face the implications of such an utterance, the speaker once again turns to God for comfort, a gesture which fails to provide adequate closure for the poem. God represents, not the means of resolving inner conflict, but the ultimate escape from it, one which allows for a total obliteration of self. At the poem's conclusion, the speaker admits the futility of either mental or physical escape from an urban to a pastoral setting, imagining instead the fatherly protectiveness of a God whose angels lose themselves in his presence:

For here they travel vainly, vainly pass
 From city-pavement to untrodden sward
 Where the lark finds her deep nest in the
 grass
 Cold with the earth's last dew. Yea, very
 vain
 The greatest speed of all these souls of
 men
 Unless they travel upward to the throne
 Where sittest THOU the satisfying ONE,
 With help for sins and holy perfectings
 For all requirements: while the archangel,
 raising
 Unto thy face his full ecstatic gazing,
 Forgets the rush and rapture of his wings.
 (ibid 38)

Both Tennyson's and Barrett Browning's projections of the self in "The Palace of Art" and "The Soul's Travelling" represent an attempt to achieve poetic distance from personal experience, thereby allowing the "I" speaker to attribute emotional pain to his/her "soul," a dramatic

other. Several poems in The Seraphim collection make patently clear Barrett Browning's inability to acknowledge and accept her own negative feelings within a poetic context.

In "A Song Against Singing," dedicated to Barrett Browning's neice, Elizabeth Jane Hedley, of whom she was very fond, the speaker/author laments her inability to produce verse equal in its expression of optimistic joy to that of the happy child. The image of the child in this poem functions as an equivalent to the joyful bird's songs in "An Island:" both represent an unselfconscious innocence irrevocably lost to the speaker, whose inability either to rise above her melancholy depression or to relieve it through poetic expression impels her to seek comfort in the arms of a paternal God. Barrett Browning repeatedly invokes Wordsworth's images of nature and childhood, but finds no comfort there. The act of writing a poem, rather than functioning as a record of emotional catharsis and spiritual renewal, evokes a deep sense of guilt in a writer who feels unable to fulfill her own definition of the poet's function:

How could I think it right,
New-comer on our earth as, Sweet, thou art,
To bring a verse from out a human heart
Made heavy with accumulated tears,
And cross with such amount of weary years
Thy day-sum of delight?

(ibid 54)

The speaker imagines that by renouncing poetry and substituting prayer, she can somehow facilitate an

immortalization of the little girl's childhood, but in a perfected state:

Therefore no song of mine, -
 But prayer in place of singing; prayer that
 would
 Commend thee to the new-creating God
 Whose gift is childhood's heart without its
 stain
 Of weakness, ignorance, and changing vain -
 That gift of God be thine!

So wilt thou aye be young,
 In lovelier childhood than thy shining brow
 And pretty winning accents make thee now:
 Yea, sweeter than this scarce articulate
 sound
 (How sweet!) of 'father,' 'mother,' shall
 be found
 The ABBA on thy tongue.

(ibid)

The speaker transforms the child into an ideal poet, an idealized but unrealizable self whose "scarce articulate" sounds stand in contrast to the self-conscious utterances of the melancholy speaker.

In "Night and the Merry Man," really a dramatic monologue in spite of the opening lines spoken by the figure of "Night," the speaker, labeled the "Merry Man," is a thinly disguised projection of the poet herself. He recalls a number of Barrett Browning's own childhood experiences at Hope End, including a description of her hair blown around her face by the wind as she played on the grounds of the estate. The poem's bitterly ironic tone, reminiscent of some of Browning's dramatic monologues, echoes its theme of irrevocable loss reflected in the image of the mental grave

prepared by the speaker, into which he will toss his most treasured memories:

I am digging my warm heart
 Till I find its coldest part;
 I am digging wide and low,
 Further than a spade will go,
 Till that, when the pit is deep
 And large enough, I there may heap
 All my present pain and past
 Joy, dead things that look aghast
 By the daylight: now 'tis done.
 Throw them in, by one and one!
 I must laugh at rising sun.

(ibid 39)

The speaker must bury his memories of the past in order to suppress his present emotional suffering which, as he indicates in the final two lines above (a refrain recurring at the end of each verse), he must conceal from public view. Required to assume a mask of optimism during the daylight, he must confine the expression of negative emotion to the night hours, a time of solitude, or escape. However, his desire to "kill" his pain indicates not only the need to conceal it, but an inability to deal with or accept it. His discontent not only with his public image, but with his private self leaves him nowhere to turn, creating a lack of closure not characteristic of the volume's other poems, Barrett Browning's typical response to such conflict being abject surrender to God. In this respect, the poem further resembles Browning's dramatic monologues, as well as foreshadowing Barrett Browning's own later style.

The conflict between the need for an optimism roughly equivalent to the lost joy of childhood and the

unidentified, all-encompassing pain of adult life finds dramatic embodiment in The Seraphim volume's ballad poems. "The Poet's Vow," written in ballad form, although without a typical ballad theme, focuses on a young poet who, disillusioned with what he perceives as a fallen society, decides to abandon his life and live as a recluse, alone with nature, which he perceives as free of man's sins. He gives away all his possessions (which are substantial) and in a grand gesture offers his fiancee in marriage to his best friend, who warns him that his purpose is sinful and wrong, and that he will ultimately suffer for it. Rosalind, his betrothed, proudly refuses to be passed on like a piece of property, but then proceeds to die slowly of a broken heart. The poet, meanwhile, forced to confront his inner self in his isolation, discovers that he can no more write poetry in a solitary setting than he could in a social one. The narrator, functioning as the moral voice of the poem, tells us that the poet is slowly withering away from lack of human companionship, but in fact his inability to express himself has little to do with his environment. In the denouement of the poem, the dead Rosalind, who has had herself placed on a bier along with a letter written before her death, is carried to the poet's doorstep where, when he finds her, he utters a monumental cry of remorse and falls dead on top of her. The poem's moral, declared in the epigraph from Wordsworth (the last lines of "Lines Left Upon a Seat in a Yew Tree") and in the author's preface, in which she states

that "The Poet's Vow" was written "to enforce the truth that the creature cannot be isolated from the creature" (ibid 14), only superficially accounts for its meaning. The focus of this poem is the writing process itself, the acute difficulty of self-expression, and the impact of its imagery lies in the portrayal of the main character's unresolvable emotional dilemma.

The narrative voice in the poem provides a framing context for the story such that the reader is expected to share the narrator's point of view. In the first three stanzas, the narrator sets up the moral context with a series of images of human interaction - friends, fellow workers, parents and children, all of whom love each other and share their lives and concerns. The opening statement that "Eve is a twofold mystery" indicates that the poem's moral will tie into the concept of original sin. Juxtaposed against the warm social images is the image of the poet sitting alone in his gloomy and isolated family home, surrounded by images of death and decay reminiscent of the setting of a gothic novel. He seems not to have any other family members, only "ancient lords/In the confined place of stone" (ibid), implying that, prior to his abandonment of fiance and friends, he was already isolated. The poet's surroundings seem to reflect his mental state, which suggests the torment of a writer who cannot write:

Nor wore the dead a stiller face
 Beneath the cerement's roll:
 His lips refusing out in words
 Their mystic thoughts to dole,
 His steadfast eye burnt inwardly,
 As burning out his soul.

(ibid)

The image of the eye signifies, for Barrett Browning, poetic vision, both the material the artist wishes to communicate and his ability, or inability, to do so. Barrett Browning's use of eye imagery is not unique; poets from the ancient Greeks to the romantics have imagined the poet as a seer or visionary, an idea which the Victorians, led by Carlyle, readily adopted. However, the extent to which she uses such imagery impels one to consider it vital to a thorough understanding of her work. On one level, eyes function, for Barrett Browning, as a universal symbol both of artistic vision and of human love, both of which mirror divine love. This reflects the general moral context of The Seraphim collection, in which God's love, manifest in his son who shed tears and gave his life for mankind, represents man's only hope of salvation from his own evils - his inhumanity to his fellow man, his inability to sustain love, and his subjugation to death - the ultimate source of which is original sin. Tears, represented by the weeping eyes of the Saviour, signify the ability to feel and love. Vision signifies awareness of the moral truth that Barrett Browning has delineated. In her poetic theory, she attributes to poets an ability to perceive truth beyond that of other men. It therefore follows that the poet's message must be to

The moral message is clear. However, the poet and Rosalind, whom Barrett Browning intends to illustrate the moral, fail to do so. Recent critical studies of this poem have interpreted the poet as the male projection of a female writer who cannot imagine herself both as woman and poet, and Rosalind as the conventional suffering female victimized by a rejecting lover. Alternatively, however, one can interpret the poet and Rosalind as dual projections of a single persona. The eye imagery used in conjunction with these two characters functions not as universal symbol, but as an individualized representation of inner conflict. Just as Tennyson, early in his career, imagined most of his protagonists as female, Barrett Browning, in her early poems, imagines many of hers as male. Gerhard Joseph, in pointing this out, theorizes that, prior to the composition of In Memoriam, Tennyson "had been personifying the image of his melancholia, projecting it upon actual female protagonists or upon a female soul ('The Palace of Art')" (72). Joseph refers to Lionel Stevenson's theory that Tennyson's female figures correspond to Carl Jung's archetypal anima, "the symbol of the unconscious self which is always of the opposite sex" (53). Barrett Browning's male poet figures might then correspond to Jung's animus.

If, however, one views Jung's theory within the context of the dramatic structures of Barrett Browning's and Tennyson's poems, one can then interpret the creation of such characters as a masking device. Carol Crist has

demonstrated the usefulness of dramatic structures in allowing Victorian poets to distance themselves from emotions with which they felt uncomfortable. What better way to achieve that distance than by creating a character of the opposite sex? Furthermore, a variety of characters allows the poet to isolate various aspects of self, the gender of those characters determined both by dramatic necessity and by the need for disguise. Barrett Browning's use of this technique in the 1838 ballad poems allows her to speak in a variety of voices, thereby avoiding the problem of conflicting points of view in a single persona. She also avoids having to acknowledge that such points of view belong to her. Wendell Johnson puts it well when he states that "the greatest difficulty for the Victorian writer is to know what his own voice is" (6), and he cites examples of conflicting emotions and motivations in Tennyson and Browning as well as Arnold. The need to believe in and communicate some form of moral and/or religious truth conflicts, in these writers, with "the ineluctable urge to examine and project the writer's personality" (ibid). In "The Poet's Vow," the superimposed moral stands in sharp conflict with the tortured souls and self-inflicted deaths of the protagonists.

The poet and Rosalind, having grown up together like brother and sister and later become lovers, join together, then separate, and finally reunite in death. The poet, a

writer by profession, remains mute, unable to speak as an artist, because of internal pressures:

Nor wore the dead a stiller face
 Beneath the cerment's roll:
 His lips refusing out in words
 Their mystic thoughts to dole,
 His steadfast eye burnt inwardly,
 As burning out his soul
 (Poetical Works 14)

and external pressures:

But, weights and shows of sensual
 things
 Too closely crossing him,
 On his soul's eyelid the pressure slid
 And made its vision dim.
 (ibid)

His vision has nearly destroyed him, as indicated by the images of the inwardly burning eye and the protective eyelid, and he cannot control his artistic temperament:

- The nature at his heart,
 And that quick tune along his veins
 He could not change by art, -
 (ibid)

Rosalind, on the other hand, depicted initially as the silent and child-like maiden, proceeds to speak her mind effortlessly and forthrightly. Her character, like that of the child in "A Song Against Singing" or the ideal poets in "An Island," functions as another example of Barrett Browning's paradoxical notion of silent self-expressiveness. Her innocence and lack of self-consciousness contrast sharply with the poet's jaded and rather pompous attitude. Whereas the poet's eyes burn, hers weep tears: she has achieved the emotional expressiveness which has eluded him. The tenacity with which she possesses her tears and the

proud defiance with which she rejects the poet's offer of his land and marriage to Sir Roland echo the poet's rejection of society as a whole. Her statement that "The teachings of the heaven and earth/Should keep us soft and low," generally thought to refer to her status as a woman, in fact represents her projection of traditionally feminine characteristics onto all human beings, who must humble themselves before God. Having now been exposed to the cruelty of which the poet seems capable (and therefore, by implication, all men and women), she aspires to the same callousness:

But now that in thy face I read
 Thy cruel homily,
 Before their beauty I would fain
 Untouched, unsoftened be, -
 If I indeed could look on even
 The senseless, loveless earth and
 heaven
 As thou canst look on me!
(ibid 16)

Both of these characters have embarked upon an inevitable movement toward their own deaths.

The poet's declaration that man's sinfulness has sullied an innocent earth would seem to dictate a retreat to a Wordsworthian pastoral setting, but instead, he buries himself in an environment saturated in death and decay, overrun with the vile creatures of gothic settings, devoid of any signs of vegetation or of human habitation. As he departs from his friends he enters a fugue state of complete emotional withdrawal:

'I heard,' the poet said, 'thy voice
 As dimly as thy breath:
 The sound was like the noise of life
 To one anear his death, -
 Or of waves that fail to stir the pale
 Sere leaf they roll beneath.

'And still beneath the sound and me
 White creatures like a mist
 Did interfloat confusedly,
 Mysterious shapes untwist:
 Across my heart and across my brow
 I felt them droop like wreaths of snow,
 To still the pulse they kist.
 (ibid 17)

In this vision of his own impending death, the poet dreamily submits to the ghost-like shades that would silence both his emotions ("heart") and his intellect ("brow"), the images of white and cold indicating an icy relief from the fiery inward burning from which he has tried to escape.

Part Three of the poem consists entirely of the narrator's description of the poet's life in isolation, interspersed with moral explication:

The self-poised God may dwell alone
 With an inward glorying,
 But God's chief angel waiteth for
 A brother's voice, to sing;
 And a lonely creature of sinful nature
 It is an awful thing.
 (ibid)

The narrator illustrates this principle with a description of the poet sitting alone in a tower looking down upon life through his window. The images he sees echo those in the opening of the poem - images of the friendship and domestic happiness that he has rejected. However, he has failed to escape the pressures which originally impelled him to turn

his back on society. Alone, his fear of himself has reached monumental proportions:

He dwelt alone, and sun and moon
Were witness that he made
Rejection of his humanness
Until they seemed to fade;
His face did so, for he did grow
Of his own soul afraid.

(ibid)

In this ambiguous image, the framing narrator begins to converge with the framed character. For whom do the sun and moon seem to fade - for the poet, for the narrator (and by implication, the reader), or perhaps for both? The poet has lost all sense of himself, both in relation to the external world and to his physical being, his fear of his inner life having totally enveloped him. He cannot bear to face either himself or the outside world - "He bore by day, he bore by night/That pressure of God's infinite/Upon his finite soul" (ibid) - and has allowed both to fade as though he were conceding to death. However, the narrator, by placing him/herself in the poet's position, momentarily loses dramatic distance and undermines his/her controlling moral perspective. This reinforces the reader's attention to the tortured emotions of the poet and Rosalind rather than the moral lesson invoked by the narrator.

Parts four and five of the poem, in which the perspective switches from that of the poet to that of Rosalind, close the gap between these two characters through a series of parallel images. Rosalind, like the poet, has withdrawn from life, shutting herself up in a room in which

she insists that the windows remain closed (the poet, at least, has allowed himself to view the world from the window of his room). Oppressed by inner torment, she appears "calm," "white," and "still," her eyes "dim with death" and devoid of tears, images echoing those that characterize the poet in part I. Rosalind's body, enveloped in a white shroud and laid out on a bier, represents the realization of the death-images used to describe the poet's surroundings. Her final gesture, remarkably parallel to that of Tennyson's Lady of Shallott, displays a degree of action of which the poet seems incapable. She wills his death in the same manner in which she has willed her own:

'I charge thee by the living's prayer,
 And the dead's silentness,
 To wring from out thy soul a cry
 Which God shall hear and bless!
 Lest Heaven's own palm droop in my hand,
 And pale among the saints I stand,
 A saint companionless.'

(ibid 19)

Rosalind demands that the poet release his pent-up emotions in full knowledge that it will result in his death, just as her expression of emotional pain has led inevitably to her own death, which represents the final, safest retreat from life:

'I left thee last, a child at heart,
 A woman scarce in years.
 I come to thee, a solemn corpse
 Which neither feels nor fears.
 I have no breath to use in sighs,
 They have laid the dead-weights on my
 eyes
 To seal them safe from tears.'

(ibid)

Once again, Rosalind's ability to manipulate the course of her own life and the poet's belies our image of her as meek and child-like. She fulfills her desire for a reunion with her lover in heaven, the only environment that offers safety. The image of dead-weights on her eyes signifies protection very different from the emotional blockade implied in the image of the poet's burning, pressured vision. The moment in which he allows himself the relief of tears is the moment in which he dies.

The real issue in "The Poet's Vow" is the danger of self-expression either as an artist or in human relationships. This danger exists for those of artistic temperament, although not necessarily for all men. As a dramatic character, the poet illustrates the risk of exposing oneself in art, as well as the pain and difficulty of the writing process itself; Rosalind illustrates the ultimately fatal emotional riskiness of love as well as its irreconcilability with a life in art. Both characters represent aspects of the artist-figure, and all roads in the poem lead inevitably to death. In commenting on "The Poet's Vow," Helen Cooper points out that Barrett Browning has written "an uncanny counterpoint to Tennyson's 'The Lady of Shallott,'" but she attributes the characteristics of each plot to the respective gender-identities of its author:

Tennyson, the male poet who is free, whatever his psychopathology, to move in the world beyond his house and engage in its activities, projects a fantasy of escape from the public world onto a

female artist whom he condemns to stay removed from the world and its destructive energies. Barrett, a woman writer confined to a domestic sphere, transforms such domestic enclosure into the gothic habitat of a male poet who deliberately turns from love and the world, and chooses to stay within his tower. (40)

Dorothy Mermin also sees the connection to Tennyson's poem, but only in terms of plot, interpreting "The Poet's Vow" as a female writer's angry rejection of Romantic male-oriented nature poetry. Rosalind, unlike the Lady of Shallott, "is not a projection of the male poet, a figure for the fatally self-enclosed artist: instead, she is his victim" (65). Such interpretations, however, fail to account for the fact that the poet's "vow" is determined not so much by choice as by emotional necessity, or that Rosalind is very active in her passivity, or that nature's role in the poem is entirely superficial, pertaining only to the declared moral lesson.

In fact, "The Poet's Vow" and "The Lady of Shallott" (1832) share a good deal of thematic material. Tennyson and Barrett Browning have each imagined an artist-figure of the opposite sex who dwells alone in a tower, high above the world and isolated from it, and whose death results directly from his/her interaction with a lover. Like "The Poet's Vow," "The Lady of Shallott" also begins with a description of the idyllic country life that surrounds the lady's tower, which, like the poet's, appears silent and gray. The mysterious curse that prohibits the lady from looking directly at life through her window bears marked similarity

to the curse of overly intense vision that impels the poet to turn away from direct participation in life. The lady's mirror provides protection from emotional intensity of the sort that caused the poet's eyes to burn with inward pressure. Unlike the poet, however, the lady seems able to function as an artist, at least on some level, for as long as she views life only indirectly, she can reproduce it in her tapestry - an image of an image, or a work of art twice removed from reality. Whereas the local inhabitants can only see the poet silently looking out of his window, they can hear the Lady of Shallott singing in her tower. In an echo of Carlyle, both Tennyson and Barrett Browning imagine the poet, in their early work, both as singer and seer, two ancient and conventional images which Barrett Browning, in particular, exploits extensively. "The Poet's Vow," however, contains no hint of song because the single poet figure cannot write. The lady, on the other hand, produces a "magic web with colors gay" as she looks into her "mirror clear" in which only "Shadows of the world appear" (Houghton & Stange 18). Tennyson's ideal poet, described in "The Poet," sees far more than mere shadows; his penetrating vision pierces "through life and death, through good and ill," and "through his own soul" (ibid 16). "The Lady of Shallott" illustrates the fatal danger of such vision because it engages the poet's own deepest emotions.

The lady betrays no hint of emotional intensity, as long as she continues to weave her image of the sights in

the mirror. She delights in her task and suffers no cares, but feels the lack of companionship, particularly male companionship. At the end of part 2, Tennyson anticipates the conclusion of the poem with a strange juxtaposition of imagery:

But in her web she still delights
To weave the mirror's magic sights,
For often through the silent nights
A funeral, with plumes and lights
And music, went to Camelot;
Or when the moon was overhead,
Came two young lovers lately wed;
'I am half sick of shadows,' said
The Lady of Shallott.

(ibid 18)

Art, love and death seem as inextricably bound together in Tennyson's poem as they do in Barrett Browning's, except that in Tennyson's poem only the lady dies, and not her beloved, perhaps because no real relationship exists between them. Rosalind and her poet have shared a life-long bond, whereas Lancelot appears only as one of the images in the lady's mirror, albeit a powerful image that stirs quiescent feelings. Lancelot and Rosalind would appear to have little in common: he is mature, strong, sexual, she is quiet and child-like, if only superficially. Yet both these characters function as instruments of action.

Tennyson's description of Lancelot focuses on images of motion, fire and music, everything on or near him sparkling and burning with power and passionate intensity:

All in the blue inclouded weather
Thick-jewelled shone the saddle-leather,
The helmet and the helmet-feather
Burned like one burning flame together
As he rode down to Camelot.

As often through the purple night
 Below the starry clusters bright
 Some bearded meteor, trailing light,
 Moves over still Shallott.
 (ibid)

The image of Lancelot's burning plume takes on cosmic proportions in its clearly erotic significance. Unlike the poet, whose passion turns inward and figuratively burns him destructively from within, Lancelot's ability to express his passion affords him great strength. Lancelot is not generally considered to represent a poet figure, and yet everything about him rings with music:

The gemmy bridle glittered free,
 Like to some branch of stars we see
 Hung in the golden galaxy.
 The bridle bells rang merrily
 As he rode down to Camelot;
 And from his blazoned baldrick slung,
 A mighty silver bugle hung,
 And as he rode his armor rung,
 Beside remote Shallott.
 (ibid)

His bridle and his armor sing freely, and he himself sings a song as he appears in the lady's mirror: "From the bank and from the river/He flashed into the crystal mirror,/'Tirra lirra,' by the river/Sang Sir Lancelot" (ibid). One cannot avoid the association in this poem between poetry and song: the lady sings as she weaves her magic web, and Lancelot sings as he rides along, almost like an itinerant poet-hero, a minstrel singing of his own exploits. Like the poet and Rosalind, Lancelot and the Lady of Shallot function as dual projections of a single poet-persona. On the one hand, Tennyson imagines a man of action, able to sing his song in the world, and on the other hand, he imagines an isolated

female fearful of her own passion and of participation in life, whose art represents only an indirect reflection of reality. Tennyson's exclusive focus on the lady's point of view would seem to indicate his identification with her rather than with Lancelot, whose presence only as an external image limits him to a representation of a desirable but unachievable status.

Lancelot's appearance in the mirror incites the lady's emotions to such an extent that she cannot help but invoke the curse by looking directly at him through her window. The physical violence that results represents the internal destructiveness of her passion, which ultimately kills her. Her final song, "a carol, mournful, holy/Chanted loudly, chanted lowly" (ibid 17), echoes, in its strange juxtaposition of the lady's death with a celebration of the birth of Christ, the earlier image of the funeral procession displaying all the characteristics of a party. Tennyson's blending of life and death imagery underscores the poem's dramatic rendering of the dangers of self-expression, both in art and in love. The Arthurian legend on which the poem is loosely based functions merely as a dramatic vehicle for the working out of that theme. Unlike Tennyson's later treatment of the Lancelot and Elaine story in Idylls of the King, the Lady of Shallott does not interact with Lancelot, and he therefore functions merely as a catalyst to her situation. Lancelot's position as a "red-cross knight forever kneeled/To a lady in his shield" (ibid 16), a

reference to Guinevere, who does not otherwise appear in the poem, makes clear that her love will remain unrequited. At the same time, the very experience of love destroys her art.

The complex relationship between art and love evokes enormous conflict in both Tennyson's and Barrett Browning's poems. On the one hand, they each imagine an ideal poet who stands outside the sphere of ordinary life as an observer and/or teacher, but not as a participant, while on the other hand, they must incorporate into their poetry their own human longings and feelings. In *The Seraphim* volume, Barrett Browning depicts the fatal danger of love relationships, the inability to overcome melancholy, and the resulting impossibility of fulfilling an artistic ideal. The dramatic technique employed in "The Poet's Vow" for the purpose of segmenting conflicting emotions also characterizes the other ballad poems in the volume. "The Romaunt of Margret," in which the title character literally speaks to her own alter-ego, reinforces the concept that Barrett Browning's dramatic characters represent conflicting aspects of a single persona. In this poem, Barrett Browning separates the poet/narrator from the lover/character whose two voices combine with the narrator's for a total of three. As in "The Poet's Vow," the framing narrator sets the stage and provides the moral commentary. Speaking in the first person, this narrator acts the role of minstrel-poet whose opening comments anticipate the atmosphere of death that pervades the entire poem:

I plant a tree whose leaf
 The yew-tree leaf will suit:
 But when its shade is o'er you laid,
 Turn round and pluck the fruit.
 Now reach my harp from off the wall
 Where shines the sun aslant;
 The sun may shine and we be cold!
 O hearken, loving hearts and bold,
 Unto my wild romaunt.

Margret, Margret.

(Poetical Works 20)

The image of the yew tree, the fruit of which is often poisonous, implies the insidiously fatal dangers of love, from which one expects to derive sweet pleasures and enduring nourishment. Margret, a young woman who believes herself secure in the love of her father, brother, sister and lover, confronts her own shadow, the dark and pessimistic side of her nature which, once it has surfaced, shatters her illusion of happiness and causes her to commit suicide. This poem, a companion piece to "The Poet's Vow," carries the stated moral that "the creature cannot be sustained by the creature," a superimposed lesson that, once again, fails to reflect its underlying content.

Margret's two voices, like Tennyson's in his poem of that name, engage in a life-vs-death struggle, but in Barrett Browning's poem, unlike Tennyson's, death triumphs. The poem's physical setting functions as a reflection of Margret's internal state, the opening description of her sitting by night at the edge of a river indicating that death has already claimed her:

The night is in her hair
 And giveth shade to shade,
 And the pale moonlight on her forehead
 white

Like a spirit's hand is laid;
 Her lips part with a smile
 Instead of speakings done:
 I ween, she thinketh of a voice,
 Albeit uttering none.
 Margret, Margret.
 (ibid)

Her silence, which in one sense foreshadows her death, serves as another example of the silent female who speaks volumes, although in this instance the silence might also indicate the interior nature of Margret's dialogue with herself, taking place within her mind and therefore not spoken aloud. Oblivious to the natural setting that surrounds her, Margret remains lost in her own thoughts as her shadow rises up from the river to confront her with its knowledge of death and the ephemeral nature of love. Barrett Browning relies upon the conventional images of light and dark to signify Margret's movement toward the grave. As long as she retains her faith in the power of love, the light of life continues to envelop her:

'Now, sooth, I fear thee not -
 Shall never fear thee now!
 (And a noble sight was the sudden light
 Which lit her lifted brow.)
 'Can earth be dry of streams,
 Or hearts of love?' she said;
 'Who doubteth love, can know not love:
 He is already dead.'

Margret, Margret.
 (ibid 21)

Throughout her poetic career, Barrett Browning continued to see human love as a reflection of divine love, both of which provide life with much of its meaning. Yet Margret allows her faith to crumble passively before the voice of doubt, the source of which lies within herself.

When she looks into her shadow's face and hears its voice, as the narrator bids her to, she envisions her own death: "For so will sound thy voice/When thy face is to the wall,/And such will be thy face, ladye,/When the maidens work thy pall" (ibid). The shadow prevails by literally draining her of the forces of life: "Mine eyes from thine and my lips from thine/The light and breath may draw" (ibid) and "My lips do need thy breath,/My lips do need thy smile,/And my pallid eyne, that light in thine/Which met the stars erewhile:" (ibid).

The shadow does offer her one chance at life, provided she can demonstrate that her loved ones return her love in kind. Margret eagerly describes what she perceives as mutually loving relationships with her father, brother, sister and lover, relationships which her shadow declares illusory and insincere, against which charges Margret makes no argument, accepting the shadow's words despite the lack of corroborating evidence. The final blow comes when the shadow tells her that her lover has died, at which point she acquiesces to her own death, laying her face upon the ground and allowing the river tide to envelop her. The framing narrator concludes the poem by declaring love to be the province of death, not poetry:

Hang up my harp again!
I have no voice for song.
Not song but wail, and mourner's pale,
Not bards, to love belong.

O failing human love!
 O light, by darkness known!
 O false, the while thou treadest earth!
 O deaf beneath the stone!
 Margret, Margret.
 (ibid 23)

Having adopted the pessimistic attitude to which Margret has submitted, the narrator feels unable to write any longer, presumably because such negativity does not constitute appropriate poetic material. However, Margret creates and perpetuates her own pessimism through the medium of a projected self, a shadow incorporating that part of herself that she feebly and unsuccessfully tries to suppress. Margret's loved ones have not actually betrayed her, yet she perceives them as false solely because her shadow - her hidden self - has declared them so. She willingly interprets her lover's death as a betrayal rather than a blameless act of God and allows her negativity to dominate her to the point that her death, like the poet's in "The Poet's Vow," becomes inevitable. Margret's shadow orchestrates her death as Rosalind does the poet's; just as Rosalind must die with her lover, the shadow must die with the individual who creates it.

The narrative refrains which precede each of the shadow's counter-arguments portray landscape images of impending doom foreshadowing Margret's death, which the narrator blames on external circumstances, but which in fact result from unresolvable internal conflict. Although in this poem, unlike in "The Poet's Vow," Barrett Browning separates her poet-figure from her lover-figure, the

dramatic consequences do not change: the lover-character's death, resulting from an overpowering pessimism, effectively silences the poet-narrator who, in laying down her "harp," submits to a kind of verbal death. In "The Two Voices," Tennyson's narrator actively argues against his own pessimism, finally enabling a positive voice to emerge and assert a will to live. The dramatic structure in Tennyson's poem focuses on the narrator, who, by acknowledging the two voices as his own, overtly defines the internal nature of his struggle. He ultimately uses an external image - that of an idealized family walking to church on Sunday morning - to lift himself out of his depression and avoid the suicide he has contemplated at the beginning of the poem. Barrett Browning's narrator, on the other hand, dramatizes the life-vs-death struggle in a projected character. The two voices do not belong to the narrator, but to Margret, a separate entity, the narrator thereby avoiding having to acknowledge any conflict of self. Even Arnold's Empedocles, who defines his conflict as an opposition between himself and his social environment, externally manifest in the characters of Pausanias and Callicles, openly acknowledges at several points in the poem that the source of his pain lies within himself: "Sink in thyself!" he cries, and "there ask what ails thee, at that shrine!" (Culler 53: line 146). Unlike Tennyson, Arnold's Empedocles cannot find an external source of comfort and jumps into the crater, yielding to death as the only relief from unbearable conflict. Barrett Browning

portrays such conflict repeatedly in The Seraphim volume's dramatic poems, with death as the inevitable conclusion.

This same theme re-enacts itself in "Isobel's Child," perhaps the finest ballad in the volume from the standpoint of technique. Once again, Barrett Browning creates a pair of linked characters, this time a mother and her infant son, whose unresolvable emotional struggle leads inevitably to their deaths. A framing narrator, although not as powerful a presence as in "The Poet's Vow" or "The Romaunt of Margret," voices a moral which only superficially accounts for the poem's meaning. This poem contains very little plot, consisting mainly of Isobel's prayers for the life of her gravely ill child, followed by the child's exhortations to his mother to cease her praying and let him die so that he may go to heaven and dwell with God. Both the epigraph, from Shakespeare's Antony and Cleopatra, and the poem's conclusion, voiced by the narrator, suggest the idea that one should leave one's fate in the hands of God who ultimately must make the final decisions concerning life and death. Barrett Browning achieves a highly effective and heart-rending portrayal of maternal love, replete with well-chosen and beautifully phrased images. Isobel's emotions take hold of the reader with such power that the baby's stylized and idealized speeches fail to take precedence and make both his death and Isobel's seem totally inappropriate. However, a closer look at the poem's landscape imagery, together with the child's identity as a poet-figure,

provides a clear explanation for the deaths of these two characters.

As the poem opens, the baby's nurse, whom Isobel has sent to sleep after a long vigil, dreams of an eerie churchyard beside a hill whose trees grasp at the waning sun as the moon rises. Foreshadowing the poem's conclusion, she sees in her dream an image of the dead child, even though his fever has passed and he sleeps nestled in his mother's arms. The calm stillness of the room in which Isobel keeps watch over her baby contrasts sharply with the storm raging outside, a contrast between peace and turmoil, silence and sound. Isobel sits as quiet and motionless as her sleeping child:

So motionless she sate,
 The babe asleep upon her knees,
 You might have dreamed their souls had gone
 Away to things inanimate,
 In such to live, in such to moan;
 And that their bodies had ta'en back,
 In mystic change, all silences
 That cross the sky in cloudy rack,
 Or dwell beneath the reedy ground
 In waters safe from their own sound:
 Only she wore
 The deepening smile I named before,
 And that a deepening love expressed;
 And who at once can love and rest?

(Poetical Works 24)

The image of Isobel having exchanged her active soul for the silence of inanimate objects that dwell "safe from their own sound" suggests an extreme discomfort with strong emotion which is borne out by the assertion that love and rest cannot coexist. The description of the storm outside

further suggests the difficulty of controlling one's inner life, which takes on a tempestuous power:

The wind in intermission stops
 Down in the beechen forest,
 Then cries aloud
 As one at the sorest,
 Self-stung, self-driven,
 And rises up to its very tops,
 Stiffening erect the branches bowed,
 Dilating with a tempest-soul
 The trees that with their dark hands break
 Through their own outline, and heavy roll
 Shadows as massive as clouds in heaven
 Across the castle lake.

(ibid)

Barrett Browning gives human form to natural images in her portrayal of the wind crying aloud in self-inflicted pain and the trees tempestuously breaking out of their boundaries, thereby implying a metaphorical relationship to human emotions and experience. These natural objects achieve the expressive freedom denied to the tortured, emotionally blocked poet in "The Poet's Vow." In this poem, nature becomes a character, the embodiment of overly intense and unacceptable emotion, leaving Isobel free to express only the purity of maternal devotion. Even those readers who disapprove of such use of natural imagery must respond in this case to Barrett Browning's descriptive power. The silence in the room belies both the storm raging outside and Isobel's unbroken stream of thoughts, the former serving as an effective counterpoint to the latter. At the poem's midpoint, Barrett Browning leads the reader to expect a happy ending, God having answered Isobel's prayers and taken away the child's fever. Yet while Isobel happily muses upon

her child's future, the storm outside grows still wilder and more destructive, threatening the safety of the quiet room and creating a sense of foreboding. The reader becomes aware of impending doom when the storm halts abruptly:

No wind, no rain, no thunder!
 Their noises dropped asunder
 From the earth and the firmament
 From the towers and the lattices,
 Abrupt and echoless
 As ripe fruits on the ground unshaken
 wholly -
 As life in death!
 And sudden and solemn the silence fell,
 Startling the heart of Isobel
 As the tempest could not:
(ibid 27)

The silencing of the storm signifies the approaching deaths of the baby and of Isobel.

At this point in the poem, the baby's role alters from that of the object of Isobel's ideal maternal devotion to that of active participant in a life-vs-death conflict. Isobel, rejoicing in her child's apparent recovery, muses upon his future, imagining for him, not a conventional career choice, but a life as either a philosopher or a poet, invoking Barrett Browning's own idealized image. At the same time, she imagines the child following in the footsteps of her own self-denial:

Thy heart is of thy mother's made,
 Thy looks are very meek,
 And it will be their chosen place
 To rest on some beloved face,
 As these on thine, and let the noise
 Of the whole world go on nor drown
 The tender silence of thy joys:

Or when thy silence shall have grown
 Too tender for itself, the same
 Yearning for sound, - to look above
 And utter its one meaning, LOVE,
 That He may hear his name.
 (ibid 26-27)

Isobel portrays life as offering only two alternatives - art and love - both of which require an annihilation of self: the poet must "keep his own wild soul/Within the law of his own harmony" and the lover/mother must sacrifice the self for the object of her love. Isobel clearly invokes a conventional feminine model of passive devotion, yet she imagines her son (the child is referred to several times in the poem as "he") filling that role, indicating a concept of love that crosses gender lines.

The child, suddenly transformed as the storm fades into a mature and articulate man in the body of a three-month-old baby, rejects both alternatives as unsatisfactory, choosing death instead as an escape route to an idealized heaven. He imagines the perfections of divine love:

Oh, the shining holinesses
 Of the thousand, thousand faces
 God-sunned by the throned ONE,
 And made intense with such a love
 Though I saw them turned above,
 Each loving seemed for also me!
 (ibid 28)

and of heavenly poetry:

A little harp awaits me there,
 A harp whose strings are golden all
 And tuned to music spherical,
 Hanging on the green life-tree
 Where no willows ever be.
 Shall I miss that harp of mine?

Mother, no! - the Eye divine
 Turned upon it makes it shine;
 And when I touch it, poems sweet
 Like separate souls shall fly from it,
 Each to the immortal fytte.
 (ibid)

Isobel's child expects to achieve fulfillment of love and of artistic ambition in a perfected state in heaven. Like Rosalind, the child expects to be reunited with his mother in heaven, an expectation which Isobel intends to fulfill when she declares that "My death will soon/Make silence."

Like Margret, Isobel moves too readily from active defense of her life's purpose to passive acquiescence to death. Like Margret's shadow, Isobel's baby views life as offering only pain and suffering, in spite of his portrayal of heaven as a superior alternative. His death occurs by his own choice, and not, as the poem's moral would indicate, by the will of God. This infant-poet retains the innocent state of childhood and can therefore die without having experienced the emotional turmoil of the adult poet in "The Poet's Vow." Isobel's desire for domestic happiness, her wish to love her child and raise him to maturity, remains incompatible with the child's (and Barrett Browning's) artistic ideal. Yet perhaps the chief dramatic figure in "Isobel's Child" is the storm raging outside, a metaphoric representation of Barrett Browning's own emotional intensity, described in her early autobiographical writings and perceived by her as negative and unacceptable both in her life and in her art. Isobel cannot succeed in guarding her child both from death and from the storm of feeling that

accompanies adult life. Barrett Browning's admiration of William Cowper, in her poem "Cowper's Grave," for what she perceives as his ability to write serene and uplifting poetry in spite of his struggle with schizophrenia, serves as testimony to her idea that the poet must not give free reign to his emotions if they fail to conform to his idea of poetic function. During the stage of her career represented by The Seraphim collection, her inability to reconcile her poetic theory with the full scope of her emotions led her to create dramatic scenarios in which death serves as a welcome release from unresolvable conflict.

relationships via correspondence. She saw only family members and a few select friends (mainly John Kenyon, the cousin who acted as her literary advocate, and Mary Russell Mitford, whose visits were few and far between, as she lived in the country caring for her ailing father and had little time or money for travel). It seems somewhat surprising that during the three years following the greatest sorrow and physical debility she had ever known, she should produce such a strong collection of poems as those in the 1844 volumes. Extreme adversity, on the other hand, can serve to strengthen the spirit, and examination of Poems of 1844 reveals the manner in which Barrett Browning used her own grief to poetic advantage in enabling her to begin to develop a stronger sense of self and a clear set of values, both of which serve an artistic purpose.

Whereas The Seraphim and other Poems focuses on the theme of inner torment and weariness culminating in death, Poems of 1844 presents a glimmer of hope in its theme of pain as a potentially cleansing and strengthening agent. She communicates a sense of having accepted her grief and melancholy, and learned to live with it. She glorifies, even deifies pain, perceiving human suffering as the reflection of Christ's pain and suffering. This enables her to portray the poet as a Christ-like figure who willingly accepts humility and self-sacrifice (two traditionally feminine virtues) as the price he must pay for saving man. At the same time, Barrett Browning begins to project a

stronger sense of self, exhibiting a remarkable degree of self-awareness in the sonnets, and focusing almost exclusively, in the dramatic poems, on female protagonists (with the exception of the poet figure in A Vision of Poets). By proposing the traditionally female virtues of humility and love, embodied in the image of Jesus, as universal values, she begins a movement toward her ideal view of poetry as an agent of change in its ability to inspire spiritual renewal in its audience and reaffirm Christian values. She creates an image of the poet that incorporates both "male" and "female" characteristics (strength, vision, intelligence, love and humility) and thereby begins to transcend gender barriers and reconcile her personal identity with her ideal poet.

Barrett Browning's desire to participate in the Victorian debate concerning the function of poetry and the role of the poet as communicator of truth required that she gain acceptance for herself as a poet of major stature. In so doing, she did create a place for women within the ranks of great literary figures, yet she maintained all her life a stringent set of standards for admittance to that exclusive group, standards by which she judged all writers, male or female. At the same time as she believed that women should never deny their intellectual strengths for fear of being labeled "unfeminine," she also believed that men would benefit from some attention to the womanly virtues, writing to Mary Russell Mitford in 1843: "But I like gentle manners,

and think a 'soft low voice' almost as excellent a thing in man as in woman" (Raymond & Sullivan II:276). The figure of Jesus Christ, male in his strength and courage, female in his humility and acceptance, yet transcending gender altogether in his identity as God, served for Barrett Browning as the perfect embodiment of her ideal. Yet, with the exception of A Drama of Exile, she does not focus on Christ himself in the 1844 poems, extrapolating instead the values which he represents and applying them to human circumstances. As a result, Poems of 1844 displays some of the realism that ultimately became one of Barrett Browning's greatest strengths as a poet. "The Cry of the Children" and "The Cry of the Human" reveal her growing awareness of modern social ills and her conviction that poetry can serve as an effective forum for dealing with them. As she matured, Barrett Browning came increasingly to believe that poetry must concern itself with the realities of contemporary life rather than with the past. Helen Cooper aptly points out that the ballad poems in the 1844 collection, unlike those in The Seraphim and other Poems, boldly reject the traditions of medieval courtly love and begin to rewrite the parameters of male-female relationships in remarkably modern terms.

The aesthetic principles set forth in the 1844 poems essentially correspond to those outlined in her letters from this period. She focuses particularly on the balance between emotional and intellectual content which she

considered a critical component of great poetry. Barrett Browning never felt especially inclined to produce a Tennysonian poetry of sensation, but she did long for an uninhibited expression of personal emotion in her poetry. On the other hand, her belief that poetry must serve what she viewed as a higher moral/spiritual/social purpose did not always allow for such self-expression. The poet's dilemma, then, becomes his/her struggle to balance and reconcile these two elements. Barrett Browning never doubted her intellectual strength and competence, but her physical disability combined with the frustrations of her family life caused her to perceive herself as weak and inadequate. In Poems of 1844 she gives direct vent to such feelings in the sonnets, which in this collection she groups together as a unit, unlike The Seraphim and other Poems, in which she scattered them among other forms. If she intended her readers to view the 1844 sonnets as an interconnected series, one must attribute significance to the fact that their subject matter alternates exclusively between personal revelation and poetic theory.

Barrett Browning's grief over the loss of her brother, mother and grandmother, combined with a feeling of general physical exhaustion, finds expression in the sonnets "Grief," "Tears," and "The Prisoner." One must keep in mind that Barrett Browning never entirely recovered from the blow dealt to her spirit by the death of a loved one. Her diary of 1831 reveals the extent to which her mother's death left

her desolate and bereft. Overwhelmed by her intellectual and emotional dependence on Hugh Stuart Boyd, she expresses a deep longing for the sympathetic advice and loving support that her mother could have provided. Her aunt "Bummy," who had come to run the household, considered Barrett Browning to be obstinate, socially remiss and physically self-indulgent and served only to heighten her sense of loss. Nor did her siblings fully understand her preference for the eccentric blind scholar over the more suitable social connections available to her:

They have, as most people have, a clearer idea of the aristocracy of rank and wealth, than the aristocracy of the mind. Therefore it appears singular to them, and not very reasonable, that I should obviously prefer Mr. Boyd's society than that of other individuals. I love dearest B & H [Bro and Henrietta] to the bottom of my heart; and they deserve my love to the bottom of theirs: but without my pursuits they cannot have my tastes, and without having my tastes, they cannot be expected to understand them. (Kelley & Hudson, Diary 104)

Yet, in spite of differences in taste and Barrett Browning's superior intellect, she and Bro loved each other deeply. He more than anyone in her family seemed able to accept who she was even if he couldn't always understand her, and when he died, her world fell apart. A year after Bro's death, she described her reaction in a letter to Mary Russell Mitford:

All the sorrow of my life besides, and that life not free from sorrow, showed without sting or agony in comparison with the deep deep woe of last year, It was the sharpest laceration of the tenderest affection - an affection never agitated till then except with its own delight. Oh my beloved friend - there was no harsh word, no unkind look - never from my babyhood till I stood alone - A leaf never shook till the tree fell. The shade was over me softly till it fell. And although what I cannot help feeling as a natural tenacity to life, prevented my following my beloved, quickly quickly as I thought I should, - and although I have learned even to be calm and to talk lightly sometimes, yet the heavy sense of loss weighs at my heart day and night, and will, till my last night or day.There is much left to love, left to me, close to me always - But there is no one close to me always, to whom I can say, 'Is this which I have written, good? Is it worth anything?' and, be sure of the just answer. The nearest sympathy, the natural love which was friendship too, is not close to me now. (Kelley & Hudson V:57)

Barrett Browning, who at fourteen had exhibited a remarkably precocious awareness of the ephemeral nature of life and the inevitability of death, found herself overwhelmed when death actually touched her life. At the same time, however, her powerful and defiant intellect enabled her to fight against her tendency toward emotional fatalism, as is evident in the sonnets "Tears" and "Grief." In each of these poems, Barrett Browning focuses once again on eye imagery, imagining the inability to weep in terms of a desert landscape, and ultimately associating the ability to shed tears with poetic vision. The first eight lines of "Grief" differentiate between the experience of grief, which

the individual can vent in "loud access/Of shrieking and reproach" (Poetical Works 99), and despair, which she likens to a desert that "In souls as countries, lieth silent-bare/Under the vertical eye-glare/Of the absolute Heavens" (PW 99). The image of the desert sun burning out the soul of the hopelessly grieving individual harkens back to "The Poet's Vow," in which the poet's eyes burn inwardly for lack of the ability to express himself. However, the poet dies at the moment in which he finally releases his torrent of emotion, as does Rosalind, whose continued weeping causes her slow but relentless movement toward death. In the final six lines of "Grief," on the other hand, the poet likens the lack of emotional expression to a death-like state:

Deep-hearted man, express
Grief for thy Dead in silence like to
death -
Most like a monumental statue set
In everlasting watch and moveless woe
Till itself crumble to the dust beneath.
Touch it; the marble eyelids are not wet:
If it could weep, it could arise and go.
(ibid)

The statue image, dry, motionless and cold, contrasts with the possibility of continued life suggested in the final couplet. In this poem, the poet associates emotional expressiveness with life rather than death, representing a major change from the theme of The Seraphim and other Poems.

Similarly, in "Tears," the speaker differentiates between those who can manage their grief and those who feel overwhelmed by it. She considers fortunate all those "Who suffer not/More grief than ye can weep for" (ibid), likening

their tears to the tears of an infant, a bride at the altar, or a poet inspired by his vision of nature, all of which she describes in the octet. In the sestet, she again places the hopelessly grief-stricken individual in a desert setting, and again suggests the possibility of moving from despair to life rather than death, but this time within the specific context of poetic endeavor:

If, as some have done,
Ye grope tear-blinded in a desert place
And touch but tombs, - look up! those
tears will run
Soon in long rivers down the lifted face,
And leave the vision clear for stars and
sun.

(ibid)

Barrett Browning seems to have extracted the poet's vision from what she has viewed as the prison of self and turned it up toward the heavens. Her assertion in the octet that "before the oracle/Of high-faned hills the poet has forgot/Such moisture on his cheeks" (ibid) provides a fairly direct indication that at this point she has adopted the Carlylean notion of the poet's prophetic voice and the idea that suffering is a prerequisite to the achievement of poetic vision.

The rhetoric of imprisonment and fear of self, although it still plays an important role in Poems of 1844, has become part of a dialogue in which the poetic speaker struggles to overcome the sense of personal inadequacy which has served as an impediment to poetic speech. Barrett Browning's illness undoubtedly contributed to her feelings

of entrapment, as indicated in the sonnet "The Prisoner," in which the speaker laments her estrangement from nature and from participation in life itself. Beginning in 1835, when Edward Moulton Barrett moved his family to London, Barrett Browning began to compose poems in which she laments her isolation from nature. She portrays London's urban environment as the embodiment of the evils of the Industrial Revolution, focusing on imagery that conveys the blight of poverty, the bleak surroundings, and the callous indifference of city dwellers in a fashion reminiscent both of Wordsworth and of Dickens. Yet unlike Wordsworth, for whom nature represents a viable alternative, a source of spiritual sustenance and comfort, Barrett Browning views natural environments with a powerful sense of hopeless nostalgia, in essence lamenting the loss of Hope End, her childhood home with its vast acres of natural beauty. As a child, Barrett Browning enjoyed fairly good health, although the family correspondence indicates that she did suffer from the chronic cough associated with asthma. However, her health clearly deteriorated during her adolescence, and the chronic lack of energy, shortness of breath, incessant coughing, poor appetite and sleeplessness from which she suffered reached a peak during the two years immediately prior to the sale of Hope End. In Sidmouth, where the Barretts lived from 1832-1835, Barrett Browning's health improved enormously. The moist sea air apparently had an efficacious effect and her coughing gradually ceased almost

entirely, her energy and appetite improved and she began to take exercise and live a far more normal life. In London, however, her asthma once again grew worse: the cough returned and her prevalence for catching head colds exacerbated the problem. The upper respiratory infection that she suffered in 1837 apparently triggered such a severe asthmatic response that she did not recover, becoming, in essence, a respiratory cripple. This time the attempt to find relief at the seaside did not do much good (at Torquay, where her father sent her to recover, her health improved only very slowly), and ultimately the death of her brother dealt her a psychological blow that permanently destroyed her love of coastal environments.

Barrett Browning generally associates nature, in her poetry, with the pain of loss, whereas her room on Wimpole Street represents both physical safety and intellectual isolation. However, in analyzing Barrett Browning's need for safety, one cannot discount the impact of living day to day with insufficient lung function, of experiencing each breath as difficult and inadequate. In 1838, she returned to London in a precarious state of health, barely able to rise from her bed and walk to her sofa. For nearly two years her doctors had kept her bedridden, insisting upon a state of total inactivity both physical and mental. Barrett Browning understandably found intellectual stagnation intolerable, and regularly ignored her physicians' orders to abstain from reading and writing, but she had not the

courage to disobey also their proscriptions against physical exertion. In short, she kept her mind free at the expense of becoming a prisoner of the body, confined to her bedroom by her own physical weakness, unable to participate even in family meals and other gatherings downstairs. Had she had her health, she surely could have made excursions into the country to visit Mary Russell Mitford or various family members who lived in rural areas. The longing for nature evident in "The Prisoner" expresses itself as a nostalgia for for a time in her past when she felt physically free. Rather than setting up a contrast in this poem between a natural and an urban environment, in which the city represents the speaker's prison, she places the speaker within her room, its four walls defining her imprisonment:

Nature's lute
 Sounds on, behind this door so closely shut,
 A strange wild music to the prisoner's ears,
 Dilated by the distance, till the brain
 Grows dim with fancies which it feels too
 fine:

(ibid 104)

This passage describes a condition of solitude, a separation not from nature but from other human beings. The shut door cuts the speaker off from contact with the life of the household, forcing her to live too much within her own mind. The natural images which she invokes with such longing function metaphorically to recall a time when she participated fully in life. Finally, the sonnet confronts the problem of the speaker's identity as a poet who must function artistically in spite of her isolated existence:

components of individual personality, i.e. "dream," "thought" and "feeling," with which the song remains nonetheless intertwined. With its sound wave frequency ratio of 2:1, the octave, a perfect consonance, represents the only musical interval which, although composed of two different pitches, gives the effect of a unison, and therefore appropriately signifies the divine expression toward which Barrett Browning believes that all poetry aims. Ironically, however, for Barrett Browning individual personality cannot function in unison with ideal poetic utterance. The imagery suggests that the poet uses the material of self as a catalyst in the process of achieving a higher moral or spiritual vision, but that the reality of self-examination presents a psychological danger which the speaker struggles to confront. The apocalypse image at the poem's conclusion suggests the destruction of self concurrent with creative fulfillment:

But if I did it, - as the thunder-roll
Breaks its own cloud, my flesh would
perish there,
Before that dread apocalypse of soul.
(ibid 98)

Barrett Browning's imagery in "The Soul's Expression" warrants comparison to Tennyson's in "The Kraken," in which the poet creates a metaphor for emergence and death using a similar apocalypse image, but without direct reference to self. Tennyson's poem focuses on a third person description of a mythic monster lying asleep on the ocean floor, surrounded by a dark, eerie, ominous landscape. The

Kraken's rise to the surface functions as the equivalent of Barrett Browning's threshold beyond which lie both death and resurrection. Although Tennyson's poem suggests a variety of possible interpretations, particularly in its clearly erotic overtones, one can reasonably conclude that the Kraken represents, on one level, the poet's inner life. However, one cannot determine to what degree Tennyson exercised conscious control over the poem's meaning. On the other hand, Barrett Browning's poem, with its "I" speaker and direct imagery, indicates a high degree of self-awareness which certainly contributed to the increased sense of personal strength exhibited in the 1844 poems.

Barrett Browning includes in her sonnet group a number of important poems whose focus on poetic theory serves as a counterpoint to the poems in which the speaker engages in self-analysis and self-revelation. "Perplexed Music" and "Work and Contemplation" explore the relationship between reality and art. "On a Portrait of Wordsworth by B.R. Haydon" and the two sonnets to George Sand, "A Desire" and "A Recognition," focus on those characteristics Barrett Browning considers essential to the poet. Her insistence in these poems upon defining the artist in feminine as well as masculine terms further demonstrates her increased personal courage and her emerging sense of self as artist. In "Perplexed Music" she once again makes use of her favorite music metaphor, employing a number of musical terms that imply a modest degree of technical knowledge. The poem

melodies and street songs. A chant is a liturgical melody used as a setting for a psalm or biblical hymn. A barcarole, from the Italian "barcaruolla," or "boat-song," is a piece written in imitation of boatmen rowing their gondolas. Its 6/8 rhythm gives it a dance-like character. The term ballad, with reference to verse, can mean a historical narrative or satirical piece. In Barrett Browning's time, ballads most often took the form of romance narratives written by women. However, in music, the term refers to a melody with lyrics in 6/8 time intended for dancing as well as singing. In the nineteenth century, ballads were considered popular music. The word "lines" clearly implies a reference not only to thread but to lines of poetry, indicating that Barrett Browning intends the spinning woman to delineate a relationship between poetry, religion and everyday life.

Barrett Browning does not stand alone among Victorian poets in her use of the spinning woman image. In Matthew Arnold's "The Forsaken Merman," Margaret sits at her spinning wheel singing a joyful song in which she, too, ties together images of street life and of religion:

She sits at her wheel in the humming
town,
Singing most joyfully.
Hark what she sings: "O joy, O joy,
For the humming street, and the child
with its toy!
For the priest, and the bell, and the
holy well;
For the wheel where I spun,
And the blessed light of the sun!"

(Culler 34)

Yet when she gets up and looks out of her window toward the sea, remembering her abandoned family, she feels overwhelmed with sorrow. Arnold closes the poem with descriptions of personal grief and longing, indicating a conflict between an individual's adherence to social responsibility and his personal desires. Margaret fears the consequences, fatal to her "soul," of giving in to her wish to return to the sea. If one interprets Margaret's situation as a metaphor for the poet's dilemma, one can conclude that Arnold's poem demonstrates a conflict between the desire to produce morally responsible poetry and the need for subjective expression.

Tennyson's *Lady of Shallott*, although she weaves a tapestry rather than spinning thread for cloth, represents a similar conflict clothed in somewhat different terms. She strives to maintain the protective isolation of her creative environment in order to avoid the ill-defined but inevitably fatal consequences of acting upon her personal feelings and desires. The tapestry, like Margaret's spinning, represents safety, whereas Lancelot and the merman represent the dangers of intense desire. In "Work and Contemplation," however, Barrett Browning does not express her poetic in terms of conflict, as she so often did in the 1838 poems. Rather, she delineates an ideal followed by a prayer that she can live up to it. She creates an analogy between the woman working at her spinning wheel and the poet working

poetry and the music of the spheres, a connection which she develops more fully in A Vision of Poets.

Finally, "Work and Contemplation" introduces the gender-neutral image of the poet which Barrett Browning develops more fully in her sonnets to Wordsworth and George Sand. "Work and Contemplation" opens with the image of a creative woman whose characteristics blend the traditionally male ("swift and steadfast," "intent and strong") with the traditionally female (the "sweetness of our song"). Similarly, in "Wordsworth," a sonnet written in praise of a portrait of the poet by Benjamin Robert Haydon, she ascribes feminine characteristics to the male poet figure. Barrett Browning wrote the sonnet as a tribute to Haydon as well as to Wordsworth. Her sisters, upon viewing the portrait at an exhibit in 1842, commented to the artist that Elizabeth would very much like to see it, whereupon Haydon sent it to Wimpole Street. Charmed by the portrait and by Haydon's gesture, Barrett Browning responded with the sonnet which she sent to Haydon, who in turn sent it to Wordsworth. Wordsworth responded with a note of thanks in which he included several critical comments and a suggested revision of lines 11-12. Barrett Browning exercised her characteristic independence of thought by not adhering to his suggestions. When it concerned her work, she did not bow to male authority (even her father's criticisms rankled her when she disagreed with them).

saves man through love, forgiveness and sacrificial tears. His adoption of female traits removes the burden of guilt from Eve, and thereby from all women, allowing Barrett Browning to place Adam and Eve in positions of equality at the conclusion of the poem. Their mutual experience has endowed them both with the poet's ability to perceive truth:

Our spirits have climbed high
By reason of the passion of our grief,
And, from the top of sense, looked over
 sense
To the significance and heart of things
Rather than things themselves.

(ibid 80)

Barrett Browning conceives of her poet as gender-neutral, combining those characteristics of both sexes which she considered essential to the poet's moral and spiritual level of functioning. Whereas she praises Wordsworth for his incorporation of feminine virtues, she criticizes George Sand for her denial of them. In her two sonnets to Sand she displays a keen awareness both of her own femininity and of woman's inferior social position, combined with an insistence that intellectual equality between the sexes must transcend gender issues. Having personally experienced some of the difficulty confronted by women who aspire to intellectual excellence, Barrett Browning begins "To George Sand: A Desire" in praise of Sand's open defiance. Nonetheless, she refers to Sand's adoption of a male persona as "the applauded circus" (PW 103) and expresses the hope that Sand will incorporate into that persona a more feminine strength:

I would some mild miraculous thunder ran
 Above the applauded circus, in appliance
 Of thine own nobler nature's strength and
 science,
 Drawing two pinions, white as wings of
 swan,
 From thy strong shoulders, to amaze the
 place
 With holier light!

(ibid 103)

These lines evoke a complex set of references, the most obvious to the myth of Leda and the swan. Barrett Browning imagines Sand in Zeus's role, thereby placing her in the position of power. The union of Zeus the deity with the mortal Leda produced two children, one male (Pollux) and one female (Helen), each half god, half human. This image resonates with Barrett Browning's use of the Christ figure to represent the poet, in that Christ also represents the fruits of a union between God and a mortal, but whereas Christ represents a blending of male and female characteristics, the Zeus-Leda union actually produces a female offspring. In this poem, Barrett Browning implores Sand not to deny her own feminine nature, but with the significant qualification that she emphasize the spiritual rather than the sensual side of that nature.

In her correspondence, Barrett Browning's extensive comments on George Sand indicate an intense admiration combined with moral disapproval. She more than once declares George Sand and Victor Hugo to be the most powerful contemporary French writers, attributing both eloquence and ideality to each, and calling them both poets. Of Sand's

style, she comments that it "thrills with a sharp throbbing music - throbs with ecstatic harmonies, and throws off deep and sounding concords lapsing into an all-various sweetness" (Raymond & Sullivan II 128). Yet she vehemently objects to what she views as Sand's glorification of illicit passion:

The dangerous point in George Sand, appears to me to lie in the irresistible power she attributes to human passion. The moral of Jaques, - to apply such a term to the most immoral of lessons, - is just that love, guilty love, observe, - cannot be resisted by the strongest will and most virtuous individuality. Then the disgusting tendency she has toward representing the passion of love under its physical aspect! I could not read Lelia, for all its eloquence. After all, however, she is great, and capable of noble elevations both intellectual and moral: and I should not be ashamed before the whole world, to confess my sense of this. (ibid 462)

Barrett Browning considers passion an essential part of great writing, but not necessarily sexual passion. Rather, the poet must feel passionately the moral and philosophical ideas he wishes to express. When Barrett Browning places metaphoric wings on Sand's shoulders, they represent not only the power of Zeus, but the spiritual realm of angels, whose existence transcends eroticism. She further equates the purity of angels with the innocence of the child and maiden, concluding the poem with the hope that Sand will rise above "the lions" of her "tumultuous senses" and achieve a "stainless fame." By imposing a modern perspective on this poem, one might easily disparage Barrett

Beat purer heart, and higher,
Till God unsex thee on the heavenly shore
Where unincarnate spirits purely aspire!
(ibid)

Once again, Barrett Browning falls back upon her poetic ideal, in which the artist's subjective emotions must align themselves with an essentially transcendentalist notion of moral and spiritual truth. The poet uses the world of sense, and his sincere emotional responses to it, in order to reach a higher truth. The poet who denies such a vital part of her own nature as gender cannot, in Barrett Browning's view, achieve a sufficient degree of sincerity. Yet she acknowledges the difficulty of remaining true both to oneself and to one's ideal, as evidenced in "Insufficiency," in which she expresses the wish that she may "something farther, fuller, higher, rehearse, / To the individual true, and the universe" (ibid 104). That difficulty finds expression in her image of the suffering artist who ultimately achieves spiritual glory, an image fully delineated in A Vision of Poets.

Like The Poet's Vow, A Vision of Poets is a dramatic poem about a poet attempting to define his place in modern society. However, rather than focusing on the poet's internal conflicted state, A Vision of Poets attempts to define a modern poetic and to place the poet within his historical tradition. Upon completing the poem in 1842, Barrett Browning described it to Mary Russell Mitford as "allegorical and mystical and everything it ought not to be

to please you" (Raymond & Sullivan 276). In the preface to the poem, she more fully describes her intended purpose:

I have endeavored to indicate the necessary relations of genius to suffering and self-sacrifice. In the eyes of the living generation, the poet is at once a richer and poorer man than he used to be; he wears better broad-cloth, but speaks no more oracles; and the evil of this social-incrustation over a great idea, is eating deeper and more fatally into our literature, than either readers or writers may apprehend fully. I have attempted to express in this poem my view of the mission of the poet, of the self-abnegation implied in it, of the duty and beauty of what Balzac has beautifully and truly called 'la patience angelique du genie;' and of the obvious truth, above all, that if knowledge is power, suffering should be acceptable as part of knowledge. (Kelley & Lewis IX 320)

By embodying her purpose in a dramatic form, Barrett Browning can effectively isolate key aspects of her poetic, as well as her personal feelings about it. She splits her poet-persona into three separate characters: the poet, who ostensibly experiences the vision of the poem's title; the lady who guides him through the vision; and the narrator, who does not become an overt presence until very late in the poem. Yet Barrett Browning seems to achieve far more creative control over these characters than she does over those in The Poet's Vow. Using her favorite images of vision and music, she articulates a set of themes which together comprise a coherent, if idealistic, poetic according to which poetry aims to communicate spiritual

truth: the poet uses his special sensory gifts to see through physical reality to its God-given essence.

For Barrett Browning, as for Carlyle, the physical world offers proof of God's existence to those perceptive enough to see it. The poet strives to connect with God, but because the road to God passes through the physical world, the poet cannot achieve his goal without real life experience which, for Barrett Browning, includes life's negative aspects. The poet must experience pain and suffering as well as beauty and joy. However, because the public requires time to accept the poet's insights, his work goes unappreciated during his life, and fame comes only after death. Hence, art and success remain incompatible: scorned while alive, poets must sacrifice their personal happiness to their art, and often die young. Barrett Browning coherently delineates these three themes - the spiritual goal of poetry, the poet's need of real life experience, and the incompatibility of art and life - in A Vision of Poets. Yet she manipulates her characters to create complexity and ambivalence, concluding the poem with the conflicting points of view of two of them.

Although A Vision of Poets contains two distinct divisions, a main body of 819 lines and a conclusion of 186 lines, its structure organizes itself around the dominance of two pairs of characters. The first 722 lines focus on the interaction between a male poet whose insomnia inspires a midnight walk in the forest and the mystical lady on

horseback whom he encounters there. Lines 723 to the end focus on the interaction between the narrator as she retraces, by daylight, the poet's path in the forest, and the young son whom the poet, now dead, has left orphaned. Until line 723, the narrator has no overt presence in the poem, and the vision of the title seems to belong exclusively to the poet introduced in the opening lines. This poet does not suffer the torturous writer's block that afflicts the title character of The Poet's Vow, whose "steadfast eye burnt inwardly/As burning out his soul" (PW 14). In contrast, A Vision of Poets opens with a qualitatively different description of the poet's vision:

A poet could not sleep aright
For his soul kept up too much light
Under his eyelids for the night.
(Poetical Works 128)

He displays the calm serenity and the acute perception of earthly beauty which Barrett Browning considered essential to a poetic sensibility, but his thoughts remain unfocused:

The poet who, with spirit-kiss
Familiar, had long claimed for his
Whatever earthly beauty is,

Who in his spirit bore
A beauty passing the earth's store, -
Walked calmly onward evermore.

His aimless thoughts in metre went,
Like a babe's hand without intent
Drawn down a seven-stringed instru-
ment.
(ibid)

The lady whom he meets functions on one level as his muse, but only in the capacity of mentor, not object. Barrett Browning's early male poet figures each confront a female

who teaches him something concerning the nature of art and/or love. These females are never passive objects of inspiration, but active manipulators, in this case a heavenly representative who teaches the poet that in order to find adequate expression for his as yet unfocused thoughts and feelings, he must turn his eyes upward toward God. Barrett Browning has begun to imagine God as the ultimate Poet whose creation provides both a model and a source of inspiration for the poet. She incorporates into her poetic the Christian explanation of evil and suffering as a necessary part of God's benevolent purpose for man and requires that the poet focus on the external world as the manifestation of that purpose. In so doing, she provides her poet with a rationale for personal unhappiness and enables him to remove his focus from himself. The lady in A Vision of Poets articulates Barrett Browning's poetic, thereby teaching the poet what he must do in order to join the ranks of great poet-predecessors. She emphasizes two qualities which the poet, and Barrett Browning herself, according to her own judgement, lacks: true humility and adequate experience of life. In her letters, Barrett Browning wrote often of her constant struggle to suppress her desire for fame and recognition, as well as her regret that her physical disabilities prevented her from gaining the kind of life experience she considered essential to a writer.

Although the lady remains a mystical figure, a regal form on horseback who emerges from the nocturnal mists of the forest, she displays characteristics of Barrett Browning's ideal poet: she is a singer, possessed of a "voice where song/Eddied through speech" (ibid 130). She has the poet's clear-sighted vision, enabling her to see into the heart both of her poet-pupil ("Her brow was troubled, but her eye/Struck clear to his soul," ibid) and of herself ("but he could see arise/Her soul from far adown her eyes,/Prepared as if for sacrifice," ibid 128). She leads the poet out of the forest to a wild and desolate moor upon which lie four pools of water representing the darkest aspects of life. The poet must drink from each of these pools in order to gain experience of life's cruelty as well as its beauty, for without such knowledge, the poet cannot perform his true function. He emerges from this experience having undergone a symbolic death and rebirth:

His lips sobbed through the water rank,
His heart paused in him while he drank,
His brain beat heart-like, rose and sank,

And he swooned backward to a dream
Wherein he lay 'twixt gloom and gleam,
With death and life at each extreme:

And spirit thunders, born of soul
Not cloud, did leap from mystic pole
And o'er him roll and counter-roll,

Crushing their echoes reboant
With their own wheels. Did Heaven so
grant
His spirit a sign of covenant?

At last came silence. A slow kiss
 Did crown his forehead after this;
 His eyelids flew back for the bliss -

The lady stood beside his head,
 Smiling a thought with hair dispread;
 The moonshine seemed dishevelled

In her sleek tresses manifold
 Like Danae's in the reign of old
 That dripped with melancholy gold:

But she was holy, pale and high
 As one who saw an ecstasy
 Beyond a foretold agony.

(ibid 130)

The relationship between the lady and the poet suggested by this passage takes on a complexity both in its reversal of the standard fairy tale image of the prince whose kiss saves the heroine from a cruel fate and in the reference to the myth of Danae, another instance in which the union of a female mortal with a male god produces a heroic offspring. The kiss with which the lady awakens the poet from his swoon suggests a curious blend of chaste holiness and eroticism. Although planted on his forehead rather than on his mouth, this kiss elicits an intense response from the poet. The lady rises up from the kiss with her hair spread out behind her, an image hinting at feminine sexuality, and reminiscent of the image of George Sand with which Barrett Browning indicates her wish that Sand accept her feminine identity. Yet, as in the sonnets to George Sand, the lady in this poem rises above her sexual identity in order to fulfill the poet's function. Furthermore, the reference to Danae evokes that portion of the myth in which Danae's father shuts her up in an

underground house with only an opening in the roof to let in light and air, an image of imprisonment that resonates with Barrett Browning's own situation as an invalid whose respiratory illness made it far more difficult for her than for her brothers and sisters to evade their father's strict limits on forays into the world outside their home. Barrett Browning's window represented her portal to the outside world, her lack of experience of which she considered an enormous drawback to her ability to write credible poetry.

By projecting an aspect of her own self-image upon this female character, and by clothing her in the image of the ideal poet, Barrett Browning indicates that the lady functions not simply as muse to the male poet whom she has undertaken to instruct. These linked figures function as dual projections of a poet-persona, but in this case, unlike The Poet's Vow, Barrett Browning exerceizes a far greater degree of creative control by systematically manipulating her characters to articulate a poetic. As the poet emerges from his swoon, he finds himself standing before a mystical altar within a church presided over by an angel-organist who calls up the ghosts of the great poets of the past, each of whom represents the fulfillment of a poetic ideal: "these were poets true,/Who died for Beauty as martyrs do/For Truth - the ends being scarcely two./God's prophets of the Beautiful/These poets were;" (ibid 131). The lady further expands upon this idea in her description of the angel's organ music:

'His organ's clavier strikes along
 These poet's hearts, sonorous, strong,
 They gave him without count of wrong,-

'A diapason whence to guide
 Up to God's feet from these who died,
 An anthem fully glorified -

'Whereat God's belssing, IBARAK
 Breathes back this music, folds it
 back
 About the earth in vapory rack,

'And men walk in it, crying "Lo
 The world is wider, and we know
 The very heavens look brighter so:

'"The stars move statelier round the
 edge
 Of the silver spheres, and give in
 pledge
 Their light for nobler privilege:

'"No little flower but joys or
 grieves,
 Full life is rustling in the shieves,
 Full spirit sweeps the forest-leaves."

'So works this music on the earth,
 So God admits it, sends it forth
 To add another worth to worth -

'A new creation-bloom that rounds
 The old creation and expounds
 Hid beautiful in tuneful sounds.
 (ibid 133)

Such a poetic embodies optimism, religious certainty and a clear moral sense, and therefore requires that the poet cleanse himself of any personal feelings or desires that might contradict those qualities. The lady instructs the poet that in order to join the ranks of great poets, he must sacrifice all personal happiness and comforts, as well as any desire for fame or success. When the lady first appears in the poem, she announces that she has come "to crown all

poets to their worth" (ibid 128), to which the poet sarcastically responds that "They are scorned/By men they sing for, till inured" (ibid). In order for the poet to accept this truth, he must witness a procession of insincere, self-conscious and publicity-hungry poets whose crowd-pleasing ambition will prevent them from ever joining the ranks of Homer, Dante and Milton. Unwilling to sacrifice themselves, they can never achieve the articulation of divine truth which is the true end of poetry.

The poet's self-sacrifice does, however, offer one very significant reward: the fulfillment of poetic expression. Barrett Browning uses the angel's organ playing as a metaphor for the mystical union with God that the poet can achieve:

Then rose and fell (with swell and sound
Of shapeless noises wandering round
A concord which at last they found)

Those mystic keys: the tones were mixed,
Dim, faint, and thrilled and throbb'd
betwixt
The incomplete and the unfixed:

And therein mighty minds were heard
In mighty musings inly stirred,
And struggling outward for a word:

Until these surges, having run
This way and that, gave out as one
An Aphrodite of sweet tune,

A harmony that, finding vent,
Upward in grand ascension went,
Winged to a heavenly argument,

Up, upward like a saint who strips
 The shroud back from his eyes and lips,
 And rises in apocalypse:

A harmony sublime and plain,
 Which cleft (as flying swan, the rain,-
 Throwing the drops off with a strain

Of her white wing) those undertones
 Of perplexed chords, and soared at once
 And struck out from the starry thrones

Their several silver octaves as
 It passed to God. The music was
 Of divine stature; strong to pass:

And those who heard it, understood
 Something of life in spirit and blood,
 Something of nature's fair and good:

And while it sounded, those great souls
 Did thrill as racers at the goals
 And burn in all their aureoles;
 (ibid 134)

Barrett Browning repeats, in these lines, her favorite music images to delineate a highly abstract and philosophical, but nonetheless clear poetic principle: the poet's special gifts, when properly focused upon external reality, enable him to unlock the mysteries and elucidate the meaning of life for his audience. God's purpose for man, and the essentially benevolent nature of God's will, become clear when embodied in a poetic medium. For Barrett Browning, the universe, presided over by the Christian deity, provides an orderly context (represented by the image of heavenly music) within which man functions. The poet illuminates that context through his heartfelt responses to all aspects of reality - life's cruelty and sadness as well as its beauty and joy. Barrett Browning's dictum that the poet must rise above personal insecurities and desires in order to fulfill

a higher purpose appears in the sonnets, clothed in similar imagery. The poet's unformed, unfocused internal music unites with the "perplexed" music of life to form those "octaves of a mystic depth and height," the "harmony sublime and plain" which represent Barrett Browning's idea of creative fulfillment. The "dread apocalypse of soul" of "The Soul's Expression" becomes, in A Vision of Poets, a saint's triumphant apocalyptic rise to heaven.

The swan who casts off the rain as she rises toward heaven resonates with the swan image in "To George Sand: A Desire," in which Barrett Browning seeks to defuse the gender issue upon which Sand focused so vigorously. Barrett Browning manipulates her gender imagery so as to neutralize it by rising above it. Both her male and female poet figures embody images of entrapment and escape focusing on the issue of poetic self-expression. The source of entrapment, however, goes well beyond the issue of gender. Helen Cooper's emphasis on Bloom's "anxiety of influence" theory provides only one context within which to explain A Vision of Poets. Barrett Browning's catalogue of predecessor poets does include a woman - Sappho - as does her group of insincere contemporary poets, thereby undermining the idea of strict gender exclusion. Rather, admission to the ranks of great predecessor poets depends, for Barrett Browning, upon the achievement of an ideal form of self-expression unattainable by any poet who lacks either total selfless commitment or adequate life experience. A

I only would be spent - in pain
 And loss, perchance, but not in vain -
 Upon the sweetness of that strain;

Only project beyond the bound
 Of mine own life, so lost and found,
 My voice, and live on in its sound;

Only embrace and be embraced
 By fiery ends, whereby to waste,
 And light God's future with my past.'
 (ibid 137)

The poet has assumed a Christ-like posture in his dedication to God's will and his self-renunciation. In fact, Barrett Browning's description of the great dead poets' purpose clearly identifies them with Christ:

But where the heart of each should beat,
 There seemed a wound instead of it,
 From whence the blood dropped to their
 feet

Drop after drop - dropped heavily
 As century follows century
 Into the deep eternity.
 (ibid 133)

Barrett Browning's image of the poet as the product of a union between man and deity, whether drawn from Christianity or Greek mythology, represents an idealized extreme which the narrator of A Vision of Poets undercuts by questioning its applicability in the real world. As it becomes clear that the vision belongs as much to the narrator as the poet, the conflict between their points of view creates an ambiguity that seems both deliberate and purposeful. The poet expresses a certainty of purpose which the narrator cannot share:

Nor know I if the man who prayed,
 Rose up accepted, unforbade,
 From the church-floor where he was laid,-

Nor if a listening life did run
Through the king-poets, one by one
Rejoicing in a worthy son:

My soul, which might have seen, grew blind
By what it looked on: I can find
No certain count of things behind.
(ibid 137)

She observes the vision fade upward into the heavens at dawn, as the lady once again wakes the poet with a kiss and then disappears, leaving him to reaffirm his dedication to God and poetry.

Without the intrusion of the narrator, A Vision of Poets would represent an unequivocal affirmation of Barrett Browning's idealized poetic. However, the conclusion, by extending the poem's action into the future, demonstrates for the reader the consequences of the poet's self-sacrifice. The narrator retraces the poet's path in the forest, but by daylight, and rather than encountering an ethereal lady on horseback and a mystical church, she encounters a group of children on their way to the poet's funeral procession. One of the boys among them, in recounting the poet's last words, makes clear that the poet has indeed assumed the Christ-like role embodied by the great dead poets of the vision:

'I am content to be so weak:
Put strength into the words I speak,
And I am strong in what I seek.

'I am content to be so bare
Before the archers, everywhere
My wounds being stroked by heavenly air.

'I laid my soul before Thy feet
That images of fair and sweet
Should walk to other men on it.

'I am content to feel the step,
Of each pure image: let those keep
To mandragore who care to sleep.

'I am content to touch the brink
Of the other goblet and I think
My bitter drink a wholesome drink.
(ibid 139)

He has now joined the ranks of poets whose dedication to their art has caused them to suffer an early death, after which they achieve fame and recognition.

The narrator, on the other hand, represents an alternative image: that of a poet who walks in daylight, concerning him/herself with the everyday reality that a group of children might signify. The image of the child appears frequently in Barrett Browning's earlier poetry and becomes increasingly important in her later work. In The Seraphim and other Poems, one calls to mind the little girl in "A Song Against Singing" and the infant in "Isobel's Child," each of whom embodies the innocence, enthusiasm and clarity of vision lost to the adult, whose hopeless internal battles with tumultuous emotion precludes ideal poetic expression. On the other hand, Roland's son in The Poet's Vow represents the poem's only objective observer, a character who has played no part in the drama concerning Rosalind and the poet and whose father now attempts to teach him the consequences of a life devoted to art. The narrator of A Vision of Poets questions that life as well. The child to whom she speaks identifies himself as the now dead poet's son. The poet's last words, as the boy recounts them,

include no hint of regret at having to leave his child alone, and they both seem content to accept his father's calm acquiescence to an early death. The narrator, however, expresses concern for the child's orphan status, and the poem ends with a juxtaposition of the narrator's and the child's conflicting points of view:

'But thou,' I murmured to engage
The child's speech further - 'hast
an age
Too tender for this orphanage.'

'Glory to God - to God!' he saith:
'KNOWLEDGE BY SUFFERING ENTERETH,
AND LIFE IS PERFECTED BY DEATH.'
(ibid 140)

The penultimate verse undercuts the certainty of the final statement, creating an ambiguous ending that implies an incompatibility between art and life, not unlike that in The Poet's Vow. However, this poet does not suffer a torturous death, nor does he take his loved ones with him to the grave. Furthermore, the other half of the poet-persona - the narrator who has created the poem - remains alive to deal with the problem of how to live her life as a human being and as a poet, a problem that Barrett Browning continued to grapple with throughout the remainder of her career.

In contrast to the image of the self-sacrificing artist whose total dedication to his work causes him to suffer an early death stands the image of the worldly, ambitious and self-indulgent poet who presumably lives to a ripe old age surrounded by physical comforts. Tennyson's "The Vision of

"Sin" (1844) focuses on this latter image. Except for a similarity of title, the relationship between "The Vision of Sin" and A Vision of Poets does not make itself immediately apparent, yet there is a strong thematic connection. Each poem focuses on a poet-figure's choice of an artistic goal and the ultimate consequences of that choice. The vision of Tennyson's poem, rather than overtly defining a poetic ideal, implies an ideal by demonstrating the consequences of misdirected artistic goals. In each poem, the poet figure appears first as a youth and later as an older man, although in Barrett Browning's poem he has already died. Tennyson's poet-figure belongs in the company, not of the great predecessor-poets of Barrett Browning's poem, but of the false, superficial poets whose aims subvert the true purpose of poetry.

The vision in Tennyson's poem, as in Barrett Browning's, belongs to a first person narrator who reports seeing a young man riding a winged horse escorted into a palace, where he joins a company of sensuous, self-indulgent sinners. The palace image evokes an obvious association with "The Palace of Art," and the winged horse, of course, represents Pegasus, whose connection to Helicon and the muses makes indisputable the young rider's identity as a poet-figure. Pegasus' oblique connection to the myth of Danae evoked in Barrett Browning's poem confirms a link created by the image of the poet as a winged creature engaging in an upward struggle in his attempt to fulfill a

poetic ideal. Danae's son, Perseus, slays Medusa with the help of Hermes, whose gift of winged sandals facilitates his escape from the other Gorgons. From Medusa's blood springs Pegasus, the winged horse, whose captor and rider, Bellerophon, is the offspring of a god (Poseidon) and a mortal (Eurynome, whose education by Athena has given her the wisdom of the gods). With the help of Pegasus, Bellerophon accomplishes great feats until he attempts to usurp the power of the gods, at which point Pegasus throws him from his back and the gods banish him even from the company of other men. The desire for power and glory, it seems, undermines artistic endeavor.

Regardless of whether or not Tennyson intends his youth to represent Bellerophon, the fact that "He rode a horse with wings, that would have flown/But that his heavy rider kept him down" (Houghton & Stange 39) evokes an association with that mythological figure and indicates a connection between personal ambition and an over-indulgence in sensuality that, together, constitute the poet's greatest sins. Tennyson emphasizes the sin of sensual self-indulgence, whereas Barrett Browning focuses more on the self-conscious posturing and personal ambition of her false poets. Tennyson maintains a serious, moralizing tone; Barrett Browning evokes a detached sarcasm. Yet both use strikingly similar imagery in their descriptions. Compare Tennyson's depiction of the occupants of his palace:

And from the palace came a child of sin,
 And took him by the curls and led him
 in,
 Where sat a company with heated eyes,
 Expecting when a fountain should arise.
 A sleepy light upon their brows and
 lips -
 As when the sun, a crescent of eclipse,
 Dreams over lake and lawn, and isles and
 capes -
 Suffused them, sitting, lying, languid
 shapes,
 By heaps of gourds, and skins of wine,
 and piles of grapes.

(ibid)

to Barrett Browning's portrayal of her group of false poets:

A company came up the isle
 With measured step and sorted smile;

 Cleaving the incense-clouds that rise,
 With winking unacustomed eyes
 And love-locks smelling sweet of spice.

One bore his head above the rest
 As if the world were dispossessed,
 And one did pillow chin on breast,

Right languid, an as he should faint;
 One shook his curls across his paint
 And moralized on worldly taint;

One, slanting up his face, did wink
 The salt rheum to the eyelid's brink,
 To think - O gods! or - not to think.
 (Poetical Works 135)

Both descriptions emphasize a languid sensuality that precludes the moral and spiritual aims toward which Tennyson and Barrett Browning believe the poet must aspire. However, unlike Barrett Browning, who offers a clear alternative to earthbound, superficial poetry, Tennyson only hints at the possibility of a higher aim. God's purpose for the poet, so clear in Barrett Browning's poem, remains here only a distant image:

of sensuous indulgence in "The Palace of Art" has become in this poem an unequivocally dangerous indulgence, as a consequence of which Tennyson's poet ends up a wizened old cynic whose acerbic commentary on modern society implies a degree of pessimism which Barrett Browning never approaches. The old man's monologue, comprising the bulk of the poem, reveals a disillusioned individual who views social evils and individual hypocrisy as inevitable and as unalterable as the physical decay of death. Barrett Browning's idea that poetry can open our eyes to moral truth and actually provoke change in society and in individual behavior seems, in Tennyson's context, far-fetched at best. By outlining a clear poetic purpose in A Vision of Poets, Barrett Browning sets the stage for a dialogue in which she deals with the problem of how stringently the poet can or should live up to that purpose. The poet-protagonist not only drinks the waters of others' pain, but also experiences the joys and sorrows of conjugal and parental love, something which had not yet touched Barrett Browning's own life. Nonetheless, at this point in her career, she had already begun to think in terms of applying her poetic theory to social issues that concerned her.

"The Cry of the Children" and "The Cry of the Human" represent implementations of the poetic theory outlined in A Vision of Poets. According to Barrett Browning's logic, if man must live according to a set of God-given moral and spiritual principles, and if God can speak to man through

poetry, then the poet can use his art to address problems of social immorality and hypocrisy. Throughout her later career, Barrett Browning continued to write poems on controversial political topics that represented, for her, not partisan, but moral issues. She consistently denied serving as an advocate for any political party, asserting instead her desire to make her audience feel the suffering of the victims of oppression and war. The overtly controversial nature of such an endeavor did not escape either her notice or that of the people close to her. In 1845, having already published "The Cry of the Children" and "The Cry of the Human," she seriously considered acquiescing to a request that she compose a poem for an event sponsored by the Anti-Corn-Law League. However, her father and brothers, her cousin and mentor John Kenyon, and her publisher Edward Moxon objected so strongly that she finally abandoned the project, a decision which she later regretted. According to her judgement, such a poem "would not be merely a party-poem - it would be an exponent of the present Grievance (admitted by liberals of every class) - just as 'The Cry of the Children' was an exponent of the Factory Grievance" (Raymond & Sullivan III:73). A Vision of Poets - mystical, theoretical and idealistic - and the "Cry of the Children" - harshly realistic, contemporary and political - would seem to stand in sharp contrast to one another. Yet Barrett Browning successfully joined her poetic theory with her personal convictions to produce a practical

application of an ideal construct. She set out to accomplish what she accused Carlyle of failing to do: she intended to try to wash the hands of society as well as commenting upon their blackness.

Barrett Browning composed "The Cry of the Children" in response to a report issued by her friend Richard Hengst Horne, whose government job required that he evaluate the employment of children in factories and mines. Considering that she never had any personal contact with such children or their workplaces, one must credit her imagination with the power to portray so vividly a reality of which she had no experience. "The Cry of the Children" represents her first successful attempt to harness some of the themes and images with which she previously expressed personal conflict and grief, and turn them outward, away from the self, in order to invoke an extraordinary commentary on a social situation about which she clearly felt very strongly. In order to appreciate the full impact of the poem, one must first recall Barrett Browning's portrayals of childhood up to this point. When depicting her own youth, in such poems as "The Deserted Garden" or "The Lost Bower," she evokes a melancholy nostalgia for the joy and innocence of childhood. For Barrett Browning, the child, having not yet suffered the pain of disappointment and death which the adult must endure, can experience pure happiness unsullied by the emotional depression with which she had so much difficulty coping. In "A Song Against Singing" she asserts that the

poet who cannot successfully recapture the child's joyous optimism ought not to write poetry at all. The poet's young son at the conclusion of A Vision of Poets represents the first of Barrett Browning's child figures who have had their innocence tainted by a tragic event. The children in "The Cry of the Children" live lives of ongoing tragedy to the extent that they never have the opportunity to reap the benefits of that innocence.

The two images upon which this poem builds its structure - that of the weeping children and that of the iron wheel spinning endlessly and blindly on in the dark - together create a powerful indictment of laissez-faire industrialism. The image in the second stanza of the old man weeping for his lost youth evokes a poignant irony in that child-laborers have neither memories nor the fortitude of a mature adult upon which to rely for comfort. The longing for death expressed by the children in the poem reflects only the desire to escape unendurable misery, without the hope for happiness with God in heaven that inevitably accompanied Barrett Browning's own death-wish in her early poems. In the subject of child labor, Barrett Browning apparently found an external focus for some of the personal feelings revealed with such pain and conflict in her poetry. The children represent, not a dramatic projection of self, but a true movement away from self and toward the outside world.

Barrett Browning portrays child laborers as innocent victims whose enslavement represents an ironic contradiction to individual freedom in a democratic society. Unlike Carlyle, she advocated democracy as a political system, but she did share with Carlyle the belief that those who wield power must exercise a sense of moral responsibility in their treatment of those who depend upon them. In other words, the freedoms afforded by a political system must not over-ride that God-given code of behavior to which all men must adhere. Barrett Browning's Christianity focused upon the figure of Christ as a model for man's treatment of his fellow man. She believed that humility and selflessness should guide individual action, and that therefore the leaders of industry must exercise compassionate responsibility toward their workers, even though a free society might permit otherwise. Although one must acknowledge her somewhat naive trust in the essential goodness of man, one must also admire her moral idealism in believing that the ethical principles embodied in Christianity provide the only context within which man can progress. Scientific and materialistic motivation leads not to progress but to stagnation. Man should focus, rather, on spiritual and moral goals. One should recall Barrett Browning's prose comments on industrialism, particularly those in The New Spirit of the Age, published several years prior to "The Cry of the Children," in which the same image of the mill wheel appears. The aimless repetitiveness of

its circular motion provides an ironic reversal of the Macaulay's complascent theory of social progress. In "The Cry of the Children" she develops the circle image to suggest that materialistic goals ultimately turn men away from God and undermine His purpose:

VII

'For all day the wheels are droning, turning;
 Their wind comes in our faces,
 Till our hearts turn, our heads with pulses
 burning,
 And the walls turn in their places:
 Turns the sky in the high window, blank and
 reeling,
 Turns the long light that drops adown
 the wall,
 Turn the black flies that crawl along the
 ceiling:
 All are turning, all the day, and we
 with all.
 And all day the iron wheels are droning,
 And sometimes we could pray,
 "O ye wheels" (breaking out in a mad moaning),
 "Stop! be silent for today!"

VIII

Ay, be silent! Let them hear each other
 breathing
 For a moment, mouth to mouth!
 Let them touch each other's hands, in a fresh
 wreathing
 Of their tender human youth!
 Let them feel that this cold metallic motion
 Is not all the life God fashions or
 reveals:
 Let them prove their living souls against the
 notion
 That they live in you, or under you, O
 wheels!
 Still, all the day, the iron wheels go onward,
 Grinding life down from its mark;
 And the children's souls, which God is calling
 sunward,
 Spin on blindly in the dark.

(Poetical Works 157)

Barrett Browning implies in these lines that manufacture, as practiced in contemporary England, constitutes a Godless

pursuit. She suggests that children who suffer such severe emotional and physical privation inevitably suffer spiritual privation as well. The circumstances of their lives have, through no fault of their own, severed their connection to God. Barrett Browning unequivocally blames their employers, who have abdicated their social responsibility and ignored the destructive consequences of their actions:

XI

'But no!' say the children, weeping faster,
 'He is speechless as a stone:
 And they tell us, of His image is the master
 Who commands us to work on.
 Go to!' say the children - 'up in Heaven,
 Dark, wheel-like, turning clouds are
 all we find.
 Do not mock us; grief has made us unbelieving:
 We look up for God, but tears have made
 us blind.'
 Do you hear the children weeping and dis-
 proving,
 O my brothers, what ye preach?
 For God's possible is taught by this world's
 loving,
 And the children doubt of each.
 (ibid 158)

Barrett Browning implies a clear relationship between God's purpose and human behavior: the cruel actions of men in the world can undermine God's intent. The images of light and vision that she associates with God contrast with the images of darkness and blindness associated with the condition of child labor. However, the theme of senseless destruction of human life finds perhaps its most powerful embodiment in the final image of the poem, in which England is portrayed as an armored soldier marching to victory over the spilt blood of innocent children:

'How long,' they say, 'how long, O cruel
 nation,
 Will you stand, to move the world, on
 a child's heart, -
 Stifle down with a mailed heel its
 palpitation,
 And tread onward to your throne amid
 the mart?
 Our blood splashes upward, O gold-heaper,
 And your purple shows your path!
 But the child's sob in the silence curses
 deeper
 Than the strong man in his wrath.'
 (ibid)

The association with war and martyrdom adds further irony to the poem in that the destruction of a child's future for purely material gain stands in stark contrast to the conventional image of the soldier valiantly sacrificing his life for an honorable cause. Barrett Browning deftly evokes an image of barbarism that leads the reader to condemn the thoughtless cruelty of child labor practices.

Poems of 1844 contains additional commentary on industrial England, each instance expressing the idea that only spiritual endeavor, rather than materialistic ambition, enables man to achieve a better life. "The Cry of the Human" highlights in graphic terms the suffering of the poor at the hands of the wealthy:

The curse of gold upon the land
 The lack of bread enforces;
 The rail-cars snort from strand to strand,
 Like more of Death's White Horses:
 The rich preach 'rights' and 'future days,'
 And hear no angel scoffing,
 The poor die mute with starving gaze
 On corn-ships in the offing.
 (ibid 168)

These are harsh and courageous words coming from a woman of Barrett Browning's class. In "Lady Geraldine's Courtship,"

she delineates in more general terms, and using remarkably contemporary imagery, the idea that man's future lies not in scientific but in spiritual pursuits:

'If we trod the deeps of ocean, if we struck
the stars in rising,
If we wrapped the globe intensely with one
hot electric breath,
'T were but power within our tether, no new
spirit-power comprising,
And in life we were not greater men, nor
bolder men in death.'

(ibid 123)

The spirituality Barrett Browning advocates goes beyond mere religious devotion. In fact, she consistently mocked those who pay lip service to religion but do not live according to its principles. On the contrary, she interprets spirituality as a means of acting in the real world, using Christ as a model. Unlike Carlyle, however, she firmly believes that writing poetry constitutes a valid action with a palpable effect upon its audience, an idea which she expresses very explicitly in "The Dead Pan." Barrett Browning wrote "The Dead Pan" in response to Schiller's "Gods of Greece," which, in her words, "consists of an eloquent lament for the gods of Greece and the ancient mythology - for all that luminous effluence from antique Souls which beautified Life and Creation for the Greeks" (Raymond & Sullivan II 205). She intended the poem to serve as an affirmation and celebration of Christianity:

I take the contrary side of the
question; and think the false gods well
gone, and stand up for the best Beauty
which is in Truth. I do not follow

Schiller's poem, mind - I only take the opposite view to his view, and look at it with my own eyes - and for a basement to my poem I refer to that mystic story of Plutarch's which relates that, at the time of the Crucifixion, a wail was heard by voyagers over the Aegean, crying, 'Pan is dead, Pan is dead'! - Pan signifies 'all', besides his individual goat-godship: and the tradition is that the 'oracles were dumb' from the moment of the cry - which conveyed that the whole Dynasty of Heathen Gods perished from the earth then!. (ibid)

The poem's position at the conclusion of the 1844 volumes reflects Barrett Browning's judgement of it as her finest work up to that point, although in stating that opinion she might well have recalled her own comment that authors rarely prove the best judges of their own works. The poem is unremarkable in its expression of religious certainty. Its significance lies, rather, in its concise elucidation of Barrett Browning's poetic which, at this stage of her career, rested firmly upon a Christian foundation. The contrasting images of Christ and Pan, which she continued to reinterpret throughout her career, represent in this poem the simple dichotomy between the earth-bound and the heaven-directed. Both figures are half-god, half-human, yet Pan remains the pagan deity of the past, while Christ represents the highest moral and spiritual goals for man in the present and future:

Truth is fair: should we forgo it?
Can we sigh right for a wrong?
God Himself is the best Poet,
And the Real is his song.

Sing his truth out fair and full,
And secure his beautiful!

Let Pan be dead!
(Poetical Works 191)

These lines delineate a poetic theory in which the poet must reach beyond the self for his material. He must look to reality for his subjects, but he must then look up to God for his values, applying Christian principles to real-life situations through the medium of his sincere emotional responses, thereby creating the powerful impact on its audience of which poetry is capable. Throughout the remainder of her career, Barrett Browning continued to expand her focus on contemporary issues in her poetry. However, there yet remained the issue of her personal emotional status. Although at this stage she had summoned the resignation to lift herself out of the death-oriented torment displayed in The Seraphim and other Poems, she had not yet achieved the inner peace necessary to a full reconciliation of self to poetic theory.

IV

RESOLUTION AND RECONCILIATION: SONNETS FROM THE
PORTUGUESE

I would kneel down where I stand, and
say - Behold me! I am worthy
Of thy loving, for I love thee. I am
worthy as a king.

"Lady Geraldine's Courtship"
(Poetical Works 125)

Elizabeth Barrett's marriage to Robert Browning clearly marked the major turning point in her life. Yet the popular image of one gallant poet rescuing another from a life of imprisonment distorts not only the nature of their relationship, but the manner in which that relationship served as a catalyst enabling Barrett Browning to effect a profound transformation of self-image. In her youth, Barrett Browning's longing for personal contentment and inner peace had been in conflict with the deep pessimism and unhappiness she tried so futilely to excise from her mind and heart. Her inability to eliminate her own negative emotions from her poetry resulted in fragmented personae, representing various aspects of the poetic self, whose stories culminate in death. The lyric poems in The Seraphim and other Poems amply display her inner turmoil. During her mid-to-late thirties, that period of her life marked by severe illness and Bro's death, she renounced the very idea

of happiness, accepting pain as a necessary condition of life:

I, for one, never felt satisfied, content, I call it - until the illusion of my life was gone. When I think of the future now - I think of something to be done, something to be suffered, not of what is to be enjoyed. It is not when we talk or write lightly that we do not feel heavily - it is not at least so for me. My only individual hopes now are prospective actions and duties. My castle-building is at an end! A great change has passed both upon my inward and outward life within these two years. I scarcely recognize myself sometimes. One stroke ended my youth. (Raymond & Sullivan I:378)

She refers here to the death of her brother Edward, an event she associates with her illness, which had come to dominate her life in such a way that she felt imprisoned by it.

By 1840, Barrett Browning had become a respiratory cripple, unable to exert herself without severely compromising her ability to breathe, unable to eat or sleep properly, feeling herself the victim of chronic asthmatic coughing and physical weakness. Her inevitable image of herself as an unattractive middle-aged invalid, responsible for her brother's death, caused her to focus exclusively on her intellectual life, the only remaining aspect of herself that she considered intact and worthwhile (by the early 1840's she had built up a reputation as a first rate poet and critic). The widening gap between Barrett Browning's intellectual self-confidence and her personal insecurity led her to retreat even further from actual contact with people,

and to conduct her affairs almost exclusively by mail. When she and Robert Browning began their correspondence, she felt delighted to have earned the professional respect and admiration of so talented a colleague. Nevertheless, she repeatedly refused to allow him to visit her for fear that he would withdraw from the relationship after making her personal acquaintance. When she finally granted him permission to come and see her, four months into their correspondence, she forwarned him:

You cannot 'quite know,' or know at all, whether the least straw of pleasure can go to you from knowing me otherwise than on this paper - and I, for my part, 'quite know' my own honest impression, dear Mr. Browning, that none is likely to go to you. There is nothing to see in me; nor to hear in me - I never learnt to talk as you do in London, - although I can admire the brightness of carved speech in Mr. Kenyon and others. If my poetry is worth anything to an eye, - it is the flower of me. I have lived most and been most happy in it and so it has all my colours; the rest of me is nothing but a root, fit for the ground and the dark. (Kintner I:65)

Robert Browning's acceptance of and love for Elizabeth Barrett the woman serves as a totally plausible explanation for her gradual movement from despair to happiness. Yet an examination of her correspondence and poetry prior to her acquaintance with Browning reveals that she herself had already laid the groundwork for such a relationship. In fact, Robert Browning represented a flesh-and-blood incarnation of a story which she had already written, and

Sonnets from the Portuguese, although it does trace the course of their relationship, also records Barrett Browning's personal spiritual journey from darkness to light. In much the same fashion as Tennyson's In Memoriam and Carlyle's Sartor Resartus recount their authors' loss and reaffirmation of faith in God, Sonnets from the Portuguese recounts Barrett Browning's gradual development of faith in herself as an individual as well as a poet. Although Poems of 1844 amply demonstrates the fortitude and intellectual resilience that enabled her to turn away from internal conflict and focus more clearly upon external poetic goals, it yet remained for her to resolve that conflict by reconciling her self-image with her artistic ideal.

As a young woman, long before she had come to think of herself as unmarriageable, Barrett Browning decided that she would never marry. In keeping with her perception of the unbridgeable gap between the potential for personal fulfillment and participation in social conventions, she viewed the institution of marriage as unable to provide her with the kind of relationship she imagined might bring her happiness. The psychiatrist Robert Coles, in his introduction to Barrett Browning's 1831 diary, comments upon "her almost defiant efforts to know someone more than superficially, more than properly or conventionally or routinely" (Kelley & Hudson: *Diary by EBB* xli). Dr. Coles points out that in the midst of a large and active family,

and a community of acquaintances, she felt lonely and isolated. "It is very extraordinary," she wrote in her diary, "but I never was acquainted with a young man of any mind or imagination" (ibid 125). In response to a friend's comment that she "would not marry an angel from Heaven" she wrote: "Certainly if ever I were to make up my mind to marry, I would fancy my selection to be an angel, at the very least. But I never will marry!" (ibid 180). She never could imagine living intimately with a man with whom she did not share true intellectual compatibility and sympathy of spirit. "I believe besides as you do," she wrote to Mary Russell Mitford, "that a married life where the parties are in tune, is happier than any single life of independent self-love. The difficulty is for the parties to be in tune - and to my own private ear, I have not above once or twice or thrice, met with any who were quite so. And oh! - isn't it better to live single, than to live miserably married - with your own solitude in a social state?" (Raymond & Sullivan II 45). Furthermore, she had nothing but contempt for the idea of marriage, in the abstract, as a woman's goal in life:

At any moment of my past life I would have deliberately preferred a leap down an precipice to a marriage with the best and greatest of mankind whom I did not love in the sense of love. Marriage in the abstract, has always seemed to me the most profoundly indecent of all ideas - and I never could make out how women, mothers and daughters, could talk of it as of setting up in trade - as of

a thing to be done. That life may go on smoothly upon a marriage of convenience, simply proves to my mind that there is a defect in the sensibility and the delicacy, and an incapacity for the higher happiness of God's sanctifying. (ibid III:160)

At the time of her marriage to Robert Browning, she wrote to Mitford: "I for my part never could have married a common man - and never did any one man whom I have had the honor of hearing talk love, as men talk, lead me to think a quarter of a minute of the possibility of being married by such an one. Then I thought always that a man whom I could love, would never stoop to love me" (ibid 189).

Barrett Browning's interest in Robert Browning predated by about eight years her actual acquaintance with him. Always interested in contemporary young poets, she naturally read "Paracelsus" shortly after its initial publication, and from then on followed Browning's career with great enthusiasm. Yet her characteristic intellectual objectivity led her to combine genuine admiration with what she considered valid critical objections to certain aspects of his work. Using the vocabulary of her own poetic theory, she consistently praised his "genius" and "poetic insight" while at the same time censuring him for his "obscurity" and "lack of harmony." "I have a high admiration of Mr. Browning," she wrote to Mitford after reading Bells and Pomegranates, "and recognize all the poet in him, if a little of the riddle-maker, and often great thoughts which while they love the cloud, have the glory of lightning. He

is defective in harmony it strikes me: but the power of objecting dies away before the palpable presence of poetic genius everywhere, from 'Paracelsus' to these last dramatic scenes" (ibid II:48). Similarly, after reading Pippa Passes three times, she revised her initial ironic comment that "'Pippa passes'..... comprehension," concluding that "I who am used to mysteries, caught the light at my second reading - but the full glory, not until the third. The conception of the whole is fine, very fine - and there are noble, beautiful things everywhere to be broken up and looked at" (ibid I:238). She also recognized and appreciated the passionate intensity in Browning's writing, a quality that apparently resonated with her own emotional intensity: "I always believed that Mr. Browning was a master in clenched passion, - concentrated passion - burning through the metallic fissures of language" (ibid II:173).

Browning's achievement of unity of thought, in Barrett Browning's view, more than compensated for his technical deficiencies. Yet she admired Tennyson, whose unity of thought she considered not fully developed until the publication of In Memoriam, above Browning, commenting to Mitford in regard to "Locksley Hall" and "The Two Voices" that "I would rather have written them than any poem of the day - which is an answer to your question about Browning" (ibid 119). On the other hand, as much as she revered Tennyson's poetry, she never demonstrated the interest in his personal life that she seemed to have in Browning's.

Barrett Browning and Mary Russel Mitford maintained for years a standing difference of opinion regarding Browning's chosen life-style, Mitford severely criticizing and Barrett Browning staunchly defending his devotion to and financial dependence upon his family. What Mitford considered weak and effeminate, Barrett Browning considered courageous and admirable. Mitford insisted that Browning should get himself a job and earn a living rather than continuing to write poetry at his parents' expense. Barrett Browning, exempting him from the usual male social responsibilities, placed his artistic genius above all conventional requirements. She further admired his selfless acquiescence to his parents' wishes with regard to such mundane matters as horse-back riding, which Browning apparently gave up in deference to his family's fear that he might injure himself, an act which Barrett Browning defended against Mitford's charge of effeminacy. Her interest in making Browning's personal acquaintance dates back to her discovery of the friendship between him and John Kenyon. The knowledge of Browning's ill health (he suffered from migraine headaches) seems to have suggested to her a degree of personal sympathy between them. Yet when Kenyon first proposed their meeting, she emphatically declined. Only after establishing an epistolary relationship with him did she build up the courage to meet him face to face and risk, in her mind, losing his friendship.

Barrett Browning clearly admired Browning's defiance of social conventions for the sake of his art, and it does not require any great leap to imagine her extension of that idea into the realm of love. In fact, the poem which inspired Browning's first letter to her tells the story of just such a relationship, in which two young lovers deliberately disregard the marital restrictions imposed by class differences, risking inevitable social ridicule in order to achieve a truly happy union. "Lady Geraldine's Courtship," published in Poems of 1844, portrays the love affair between a wealthy and beautiful earl's daughter and a poor poet born of peasant stock. Once again Barrett Browning creates a pair of linked characters, one male, one female, each representing aspects of the poetic persona, but this time she allows them self-expression and self-fulfillment both as artists and lovers. Viewed as an idealized self-projection, Lady Geraldine possesses all the qualities Barrett Browning felt she lacked: youth, beauty, and, most critically, control over her own destiny. Fatherless and brotherless, she manages her property with an unfettered hand. Barrett Browning imagines her, furthermore, as a highly intelligent and thoughtful woman with a strong social conscience and an awareness of the emptiness of most conventions. Strong and independent, yet feminine, she embodies Barrett Browning's ideal of a blended gender image: "And a kingly blood sends glances up, her princely eye to trouble,/And the shadow of a monarch's crown is softened in her hair" (PW 118).

Bertram, low-born and self-educated, considers himself vastly inferior to Geraldine, although not to her vain and superficial friends. According to his view, only his poetry warrants Geraldine's respect and admiration. The personal insecurity he suffers despite his professional success reflects Barrett Browning's own self-image and impels one to view Bertram as another dramatic projection of the poetic self. Yet Bertram's intelligence, sensitivity, and emotionality make him a perfect foil for Geraldine, and together they discover their intellectual compatibility prior to declaring their mutual physical desire. In short, their story uncannily foreshadows the affair between Barrett Browning and Browning. One can easily identify Bertram, who narrates his story in the form of a letter to a friend, with Barrett Browning the correspondent, whose letters reflected her most intense feelings and thoughts. Bertram concludes his letter in a desperate state of mind, convinced that Geraldine can only despise him and scorn his declaration of love. The introduction of a third person narrator in the poem's conclusion adds a further dimension to Geraldine's revelation of her feelings for Bertram by shifting the point of view from subjective to objective, implying that one's judgement of oneself does not always reflect reality. By acknowledging this possibility, Barrett Browning lays the groundwork for her own transformation from negative to positive self-image.

Like Barrett Browning, Geraldine and Bertram both seek to discover truth through speech. They each recognize the function of language as a symbol system, capable either of honestly representating universal and individual truths or of masking them behind superficialities. Early in the poem the scene shifts from a London dinner party to Geraldine's rural Sussex estate, to which she has invited Bertram, an act which in itself defies the rules of propriety and shocks her friends, who scorn him as socially inferior. She implies that in a natural setting, away from the city, men and women alike can exist in a state of equality. She extends her invitation with the qualification that:

'I am seeking
More distinction than these gentlemen think
worthy of my claim.

'Ne'ertheless, you see, I seek it - not
because I am a woman,'
(Here her smile sprang like a fountain and,
so, overflowed her mouth)
'But because my woods at Sussex have some
purple shades at gloaming
Which are worthy of a king in state, or
poet in his youth.

'I invite you, Mister Bertram, to no scene
for worldly speeches -
Sir, I scarce should dare - but only where
God asked the thrushes first:
And if you will sing beside them, in the
covert of my beeches,
I will thank you for the woodlands, - for
the human world at worst.'
(Poetical Works 119)

Bertram associates Geraldine's speech with the natural outpouring of a fountain, and elsewhere attributes to her the poet's vision and music: "And her mouth stirs with the

superficial acquaintances in the same way that the poet and the lady contrast with the pretentious false poets in A Vision of Poets.

Barrett Browning typically frames this contrast in terms of nature versus civilization, country versus city. Her poets seek enlightenment in a natural environment, viewing nature both as the source of benevolent universal truth and of dangerous self-confrontation. Barrett Browning sometimes imagines that environment as menacing and destructive ("Isobel's Child" or The Poet's Vow), while at other times she depicts it as nourishing and protective ("An Island" or A Vision of Poets). As they struggle to achieve full poetic expression, her poet-figures reach varying degrees of self-fulfillment. Yet, in an apparent contradiction, she encases their free-flowing thought within a context of silence. "Lady Geraldine's Courtship" further explores Barrett Browning's already established metaphoric use of silence to signify song. Geraldine leads Bertram and some of her other guests (a group of ladies, and several suitors) to a secluded fountain in her garden, in which sits a statue of Silence languidly leaning toward the water and holding a rose. Barrett Browning clearly associates Geraldine with the statue, in that she communicates her emotions wordlessly: "But her deep blue eyes smile constantly, as if they in discreetness/Kept the secret of a happy dream she did not care to speak" (ibid 120). Her eyes, not her words, provide a window to her soul in a

manner reminiscent of the lady in A Vision of Poets. Yet she then proceeds to assert total verbal dominance over the others (with the exception of Bertram) as she discourses on the degree to which language can represent truth. Using the image of silence to explicate the relation of symbol to meaning, she creates an enclosed natural environment into which human speech may not enter:

Spake she unto all and unto me - 'Behold,
 I am the warden
 Of the song-birds in these lindens, which
 are cages to their mind.

'But within this swarded circle into which
 the lime-walk brings us,
 Whence the beeches, rounded greenly, stand
 away in reverent fear,
 I will let no music enter, saving what the
 fountain sings us
 Which the lilies round the basin may seem
 pure enough to hear.

(ibid)

The sleeping statue of Silence, who provides the only human representation in Geraldine's idyllic scenario, illustrates the concept that appearance does not always signify reality:

'That the essential meaning growing may
 exceed the special symbol,
 Is the thought as I conceive it: it
 applies more high and low.
 Our true noblement will often through
 right nobleness grow humble,
 And assert an inward honor by denying
 outward show.'

(ibid)

Beyond the obvious rejection by a female poet of the traditional image of the silent woman, Geraldine's statue provides the means by which she cuts through social inequalities to address the issue of whether or not material symbols can adequately represent moral and spiritual values.

Of all her companions, men and women alike, only Bertram engages her on this subject, she remaining optimistic while he proves himself the pessimist: 'Let the poets dream such dreaming! madam, in these British islands/'Tis the substance that wanes ever, 'tis the symbol that exceeds" (ibid 121). They address each other as intellectual equals, capable of a level of thought far beyond that of Geraldine's shallow friends: "Friends, who listened, laughed her words off, while her lovers deemed her fair" (ibid). One recalls Barrett Browning's youthful complaint that neither her friends nor her relations could understand her intense need for intellectual companionship. In Bertram and Geraldine she creates a pair of lovers who fill that need for each other, successfully defying the rules of propriety in order to achieve personal happiness. Unlike Tennyson, whose lovers in "Locksley Hall" and "Maud" experience only suffering and grief as the result of their attempts to consummate socially unacceptable love relationships, Barrett Browning can imagine a positive outcome to such unconventional behavior.

Bertram, however, although he feels entirely deserving of Geraldine's intellectual respect, does not feel at all deserving of her love. He holds his feelings bottled up inside him, unexpressed, until provoked beyond endurance by an interchange between Geraldine and one of her rejected suitors in which she asserts that the man she marries shall "be noble,/Ay, and wealthy. I shall never blush to think

how he was born" (ibid 124). At this moment Bertram experiences a revelation in which he realizes that his love for her affords him the same degree of worthiness as any man of rank. The idea that love itself ennobles the individual became for Barrett Browning the critical factor in the development of her relationship with Browning. Yet the concept had already formed itself in her mind before that relationship began. Like the poet in A Vision of Poets, Bertam faints from emotional exhaustion after pouring out his heart to Geraldine, but unlike Barrett Browning's other poet figures, he does not die, entering instead into a relationship through which he can potentially find self-fulfillment. At the poem's conclusion the narrator describes Bertram's "lips that quiver/From the deep unspoken, ay, and deep unwritten thoughts of grief" (ibid 126), a description that clearly reflects Barrett Browning's own conflict concerning the poetic expression of negative emotions.

Bertram's description of "the desolate sand-desert of my heart and life undone" (ibid 127) resonates with the desert images with which Barrett Browning depicts her own mental state in the sonnets "Tears" and "Grief." Until the conclusion of the poem, Geraldine stands on the pedestal where Bertram has placed her, he worshipping from below. However, in acknowledging his love, she places him on a pedestal, asking, "'Dost thou, Bertram, truly love me? Is no woman far above me/Found more worthy of thy poet-heart

than such a one as I?' (ibid). In their correspondence, Barrett Browning and Browning continually competed for the role of lowly worshipper of a more worthy lover. Yet both Bertram and Geraldine ultimately declare her an "apparition," a "vision," as though their love cannot exist in reality. In "Lady Geraldine's Courtship" Barrett Browning wrote the story of a love affair which she could envision for herself but which she did not believe would ever materialize.

The fact that it did materialize in the form of Robert Browning lends a unique twist to Barrett Browning's own theory that the poet must take his material from real life experience. When Robert Browning declared his love for her, a story she had formed in her imagination became part of her reality. During their courtship, she re-transformed that reality into art. Sonnets from the Portuguese, in its unique blend of highly personal experience with strictly traditional poetic form, provided a vehicle through which its author could reconcile real and imagined experience, and close the gap between her self-image as a poet and as a woman. In choosing the sonnet sequence as the form through which she would tell her own love story, Barrett Browning placed herself within a tradition whose conventions she both embraced and transformed. Like the traditional sonneteer, she places her lover on a pedestal and worships him from below, expressing both disbelief that he should honor her with his love and fear that he might withdraw it. She also

makes several direct references, in the manner of Shakespeare, to the function of the poems themselves as a record of her love.

Even her choice of the strict Petrarchan rhyme scheme indicates her desire to impose upon herself the parameters of a long-standing tradition. Yet the details of her love story inevitably caused her to step outside of that tradition, rewriting those parameters to suit her role as the female poet responding to the proffered love not just of a man, but of another poet. She presents herself first as beloved and then as lover, or, as Dorothy Mermin and Helen Cooper state it, as both object and subject, with the ultimate goal of recording the establishment of a relationship between equals and its consummation in marriage. Her story, like Geraldine's and Bertram's, tells not of unrequited love, but of love fulfilled both spiritually and physically. Her discreet yet joyful expression of her sexual passion for Robert not only represents a courageous defiance of the Victorian feminine image, but provides a direct link to what she heretofore considered the lost emotions of her childhood.

Barrett Browning's passionate nature, to which she gave free expression during her childhood, found no appropriate outlet during her adult life other than her poetry. She knew that conjugal love could provide her with another such outlet, but did not believe that she would ever find a mate with whom she could have a fulfilling relationship. When

the asthmatic condition that had plagued her all her life grew much worse after the family's move to London, gradually destroying her health and her physical appearance (Mary Russell Mitford notes that by 1844 Barrett Browning's looks had altered from those of a young and pretty girl to those of a tired old woman), she gave up all hope of happiness, considering herself no more than a potential burden upon anyone who came close to her. Throughout both the love letters and the sonnets, Barrett Browning repeats her fear that her ill health will cause Robert undue misery either by placing a continuous burden on him or by causing him to grieve should she die. In September of 1845, she wrote to Robert that "the best future you can imagine for me, what a precarious thing it must be - a thing for making burdens out of - only not for your carrying; as I have vowed to my own soul" (Kintner I:196). In sonnet xxxvi she openly expresses the "still renewable fear" that her eventual death will cause him pain: "And Love, be false! if he, to deep one oath,/Must lose one joy, by this life's star foretold" (Poetical Works 222).

In her letters to Browning, Barrett Browning reveals a powerful sense of personal inadequacy, imagining herself as hopelessy unattractive and unlovable. Yet at the same time she displays her intellectual self-confidence, speaking to him as an absolute intellectual equal and professional colleague, and recognizing with appreciation his respect for her extraordinary abilities. Their relationship transcends

gender barriers in a manner quite remarkable for the nineteenth century and admirable even in the twentieth. Barrett Browning began their correspondence by exacting from Browning a "promise to treat me 'en bon camarade,' without reference to the conventionalities of 'ladies and gentlemen'" (Kintner I:13), to which he responded by discussing her work without regard to gender, referring to her as an artist among other artists and calling her poetry "the very highest," worthy of "universal recognition" (ibid 6). In her very first letter to Browning, in which she asks him for critical commentary on her poetry but warns him that she may not take his advice, she refers with sharp irony to the meekness of women and makes it quite clear that she will not take a subservient role in intellectual matters. A year into their friendship, commenting on their unconventional relationship, she wrote to Browning: "For we break rules very often - as that exegetical third person might expound to you clearly out of the ninety-sixth volume of the Code of Conventions - only you are not like another, nor have you been to me like another - you began with the most improvident and (will you let me say) UNmasculine generosity" (ibid 495). Clearly she delighted in casting aside the rules of propriety. Yet throughout their courtship, Barrett Browning maintained an attitude of extreme self-denigration, periodically reminding Browning that she would not hold him to any promises made should he change his mind about her.

The deep division between Barrett Browning's professional and personal self-image reflects the painful and frustrating circumstances of her life. The success with which she established her reputation as a poet did not compensate for her inability to find a satisfactory place for herself in the social sphere. Gradually, the limitations placed upon her by her own impatience with conventional social relations and by her father's restrictions, compounded by the loss of her mother and brother and by the slow exacerbation of her illness, caused her to withdraw into a state of morbid solitude. Unable to recover from the blow dealt her by Bro's death, she succumbed to her poor health and ceased all real attempts to recover. "Since my illness," she wrote to Browning six months before their marriage, "when the door of the future seemed shut and locked before my face, and I did not tire myself with knocking any more - I thought I was happier - happy, I thought, just because I was tranquil unto death" (ibid II:581). She lived entirely in her darkened bedroom, lying on her sofa or in her bed, plagued by chronic shortness of breath, insomnia and poor appetite, to the point that even her work failed to stir her passion: "I who sate here alone but yesterday, so weary of my own being that to take interest in my very poems I had to lift them up by an effort and separate them from myself and cast them out from me into the sunshine where I was not - feeling nothing of the light which fell on them even" (ibid I:255).

Perhaps Barrett Browning's clear awareness of the split between her intellectual and emotional life enabled her to continue to work and produce new volumes of poetry despite the bleak depression that she could not quell. Her ability to retain her self-confidence as a poet led her readily to grant Browning's request that she comment on his poetry. Yet she could not imagine what he saw in her as a woman. During their courtship she gradually became aware of her value as an individual and realized that she could make Browning happy, and by April, 1846 could write that "I have the audacity to believe, as I think I have told you, that no woman in the world could feel for you exactly what I feel" (ibid II:621). She finally recognized that their sympathy of spirit could provide the basis for a lasting happiness:

Always I know, my beloved, that I am
unworthy of your love in a hundred ways
- yet I do hold fast my sense of
advantage in one - that, as far as I can
see, I see after you - understand you,
divine you - call you by your right
name. Then it is something to be able
to look at life itself as you look at it
- (I quite sigh sometimes with
satisfaction at that thought)! (ibid
958)

Sonnets from the Portuguese embodies biography in the sense that it tells the story recounted in the correspondence between Barrett Browning and Browning. One can trace a good number of the poems' images and events directly to some of the letters. However, its significance as poetry lies in its relationship to Barrett Browning's prior and subsequent

work. The sonnets trace the speaker's gradual achievement of a sense of self-worth through a process of painful self-examination performed in the secure atmosphere generated by the unswerving devotion of a revered lover. Previously, Barrett Browning created dramatic poems in which linked characters represented fragmented aspects of the poetic self: Rosalind and her poet, Isobel and her child, Margaret and her soul, the lady and the poet of A Vision of Poets, even Bertram and Geraldine.

Although the sonnet sequence does provide a dramatic context within which to tell a story, its essentially lyric structure does not allow for such fragmentation. For the first time, Barrett Browning cannot separate the poet from the lover, the artist from the individual. One can see the artist at work in Barrett Browning's skilfull manipulation of the sonnet form, but the speaker in these poems embodies the unspoken painful emotions against which her dramatic characters had waged battle. In order to affirm an identity within a love relationship and stand beside her beloved as an equal, the speaker must first confront the dark side of her soul. Many readers have felt embarrassed by the extremely personal nature of the poetic material, and by the image of the speaker prostrating herself at the feet of the lover who adores her. However, one must recognize the speaker's courage as she struggles to assert her value as an individual. Sonnet xliiii, "How do I love thee? Let me count the ways," which embodies the successful outcome of that

struggle, has unfortunately lost much of its impact through too many appearances in Valentine's Day cards. Yet, as Helen Cooper so aptly states, it "is, in fact, less sentimental than authoritative about its speaker's desire. The 'I' is confidently female, while the object of her attention is assuredly male" (108). The entire sonnet sequence moves toward this moment through a series of recurring linked images of sight and sound. Although the sonnets do contain, in Cooper's words, some "unfortunate and cloying images" (ibid), these represent a small portion of the poetic material which, on the whole, consists of a fine group of poems that rekindled interest in a form that had fallen into disuse.

Thematically, Sonnets from the Portuguese traces its speaker's emotional transformation from melancholy resignation to joyful zest for life, from self-denigration to self-valuation, from passive submission to active self-assertion. The opening sonnet reveals to the reader a woman who has resigned all hope of happiness and waits resolutely for death to unite her with God. The image of the "mystic Shape" which sneaks up behind her and pulls her "backward by the hair" (Poetical Works 214) underscores her fearful passivity which not even the knowledge of the shape's identity as love rather than death can abate. In the second poem the speaker places God between herself and her lover as an external authority who might potentially keep them apart. "'Nay' is worse/From God than from all others, O my friend!"

(ibid), she tells her lover, implying a kind of competition between God in heaven and the lover on earth. Although she assures her lover at the poem's conclusion that no earthly barriers could separate them, she remains passive in the face of God's ultimate authority. The idea that God should deny her the comfort of human love implies a remarkable degree of self-devaluation. Yet by the end of the sequence the speaker has undergone an emotional transformation of incredible proportion. In sonnet XLIII she makes a full and active declaration of her love at both the spiritual and physical level. Clearly she has come to value her own feelings of love as much as her lover's toward her. In sonnet XLIV she offers to him the gift of her poems as the expression and embodiment of her feelings. The garden imagery with which she signifies her poems derives from the many gifts of flowers brought by Robert from his family's garden, and implies an equal exchange of mutual giving. The speaker now perceives herself as an active giver of gifts rather than a passive taker with nothing to offer in return.

One can understand the process by which the speaker achieves her transformation in terms of the reconnection of her adult self with the lost joys of her childhood, the lover serving as a link between the two. By depicting him as the source of her salvation and inspiration, she places him in a Christ-like role. However, unlike the poets in A Vision of Poets, who sacrifice their lives for the sake of their art, the lover in Sonnets from the Portuguese neither

bleeds nor suffers for the sake of the speaker. Whereas Christ redeemed man from death with the gift of eternal life in heaven, the lover redeems the speaker by inspiring her to exchange her death-wish for earthly happiness with him:

As brightest ladies do not count it
 strange,
 For love, to give up acres and degree,
 I yield the grave for thy sake, and
 exchange
 My near sweet view of Heaven, for earth
 with thee!

(ibid 219)

She makes clear that he has enabled her to undergo a rebirth:

My own Beloved, who has lifted me
 From this drear flat of earth where I
 was thrown,
 And, in betwixt the languid ringlets,
 blown
 A life-breath, till the forehead hope-
 fully
 Shines out again, as all the angels see,
 Before thy saving kiss!

(ibid 220)

Yet she blends the savior image with a physicality and sexuality clearly indicative of earthly joys. In sonnet XXIX she imagines the lover as a palm tree, invoking the association of Christ with the palm leaves gathered by followers and laid before him as a tribute and to provide a path to cushion his feet from the rough ground. Rather than depict herself as a worshipper, however, she imagines her thoughts of him as wild vines enveloping him to the point of obscuring him from view. In commanding his physical presence, she turns the tree image into a powerfully erotic metaphor:

Rather, instantly
 Renew thy presence; as a strong tree should,
 Rustle thy boughs and set thy trunk all
 bare,
 And let these bands of greenery which in-
 sphere thee
 Drop heavily down, - burst, shattered,
 everywhere!

(ibid)

Barrett Browning's speaker consistently subverts her own image of herself as the passive undeserving beloved of a god-like lover, ultimately picking herself up off the ground and asserting her right to give and receive love. "Yet love, mere love, is beautiful indeed/And worthy of acceptance," she states in sonnet X, and similarly, in sonnet XI, "And therefore if to love can be desert,/I am not all unworthy" (ibid 216). She further underscores this idea through an indirect association of the lover with the Greek god Apollo. Sonnet XIX describes the lover's gift to the speaker of a lock of his hair, comparing its color to that of the Muses' hair and placing upon his head a metaphoric crown of laurel leaves, images which evoke an association with the story of Daphne and Apollo. Daphne, daughter of the river god Peneus and an independent young huntress opposed to the idea of love and marriage, rejected the advances of Apollo, who loved her and pursued her through the forest. When she asked her father to help her outrun Apollo, he responded by changing her into a laurel tree. Apollo decided to take the laurel for his symbol, and vowed that from then on his followers would wear a bay-crown and tell stories in song. The image of Daphne obviously evokes

the young Elizabeth Barrett's attitude toward men and marriage, but unlike Daphne, the mature Barrett Browning did not retreat to her father for help. Quite the contrary, in returning the love of her pursuer, she actively uproots herself, severing all ties with her family, an act which she describes in sonnet XXXIV, "If I leave all for thee, wilt thou exchange/And be all to me?" (ibid 221).

The gradual emergence in Sonnets from the Portuguese of the speaker's assertive and passionate nature creates a direct link to Barrett Browning's childhood personality, described in her own words as "determined and if thwarted violent" (Kelley & Hudson I: 349). Although her youthful writing expresses some discomfiture with her own intense nature, her adult poetry prior to her marriage evokes a powerful longing for the joyful optimism of youth. She describes her childhood from the perspective of an observer, as though completely severed from her own experience. Her intellectual assertiveness represents the only adult manifestation of her childhood willfulness. At the physical and emotional level, she imagines herself in the role of leper, repelling all who come near her. Recounting her courtship to Mary Russell Mitford, she describes herself as one "who loved Flush [her dog] for not hating to be near me" and "who by a long sorrowfulness and solitude, had sunk into the very ashes of selfhumiliation" (Raymond and Sullivan III:188). In sonnet IX the speaker declares that "I will not soil thy purple with my dust,/Nor breathe my poison on

thy Venice-glass" (Poetical Works 216). Using several variations on her favorite images of vision and music, Barrett Browning's sonnet sequence documents a transformation from self-loathing to self-affirmation.

At the beginning of the sequence, the speaker draws a sharp contrast between herself and her lover. Identifying them both as poets, she portrays him as a Renaissance minstrel, associating him with royal colors and princely song. "Thou hast thy calling to some palace-floor,/Most gracious singer of high poems! where/The dancers will break footing, from the care/Of watching up thy pregnant lips for more," she writes in sonnet IV, and similarly in sonnet III, "Thou, bethink thee, art/A guest for queens to social pageantries,/With gages from a hundred brighter eyes/Than tears even can make mine, to play thy part/Of chief musician" (ibid 215). She describes herself as "A poor, tired, wandering singer, singing through/The dark, and leaning up a cypress tree" (ibid), an image in which even the placement of commas implies a slow and relentless movement toward death. In sonnet IV she depicts the lover standing at her door awaiting admittance, his eyes raised toward her window: "Look up and see the casement broken in,/The bats and owlets builders in the roof!/My cricket chirps against thy mandolin" (ibid). Elsewhere she contrasts the "gold and purple" of his heart with her "pale cheeks," the rich dark lustre of his hair with the drab brown of hers, images which reinforce the illogic of a

sickly, desperately unhappy, reclusive woman accepting the love of an attractive and brilliant man of the world.

Sonnet XVII depicts the lover in terms of Barrett Browning's ideal poet, whose combination of experience and insight enables him to inspire and uplift his audience:

My poet, thou canst touch on all the
 notes
 God set between his After and Before,
 And strike up and strike off the
 general roar
 Of the rushing worlds a melody that
 floats
 In a serene air purely. Antidotes
 Of medicated music, answering for
 Mankind's forlornest uses, thou canst
 pour
 From thence into their ears.

(ibid 218)

The healing images in this passage signify poetry's potential ability to resolve man's confusion and unhappiness by revealing God's purpose for him. The speaker then humbly offers herself as the object of his song:

How, dearest, wilt thou have me for most
 use?
 A hope, to sing by gladly? or a fine
 Sad memory, with thy songs to interfuse?
 A shade, in which to sing - of palm or
 pine?
 A grave, on which to rest from singing?
 Choose.

(ibid)

Placing herself in the role of the lover's muse, she associates herself with sadness and death; even hope, something wished for but not yet achieved, implies unfulfilled desire. In contrast, when the lover serves as muse to the poet composing the sonnets, he serves as a source of healing and inspiration.

Unlike the lover, who takes his poetic material from the real world, sonnet XXVI describes the sources of the speaker's own poetic material, which in her youth came not from reality but from her imagination:

I lived with visions for my company
 Instead of men and women, years ago,
 And found them gentle mates, nor thought
 to know
 A sweeter music than they played to me.
(ibid 220)

As an adult, she clearly indicates that her own life experience became an obstacle rather than an aid to creative endeavor:

But soon their trailing purple was not
 free
 Of this world's dust, their lutes did
 silent grow,
 And I myself grew faint and blind below
 Their vanishing eyes.
(ibid)

The images of blindness and ashes with which the speaker describes herself signify the negative emotions that interpose themselves between her and her poetry, emotions which by her own admission she has worked hard to suppress.

The experience of love, in stirring her deepest feelings, disturbs the state of calm resignation projected in Poems of 1844, at first frightening her with its intensity. Sonnet V, employing the image of a dormant ember left among the ashes of her emotions, reveals her belief in the destructive potential of her awakening passion:

I lift my heavy heart up solemnly,
 As once Electra her sepulchral urn,
 And, looking in thine eyes, I overturn
 The ashes at thy feet. Behold and see

What a great heap of grief lay hid in me,
 And how the red wild sparkles dimly burn
 Through the ashen grayness.

(ibid 215)

The image of the funeral urn, containing the supposed ashes of Orestes, underscores the irony of the speaker's depicting herself as Electra, who in fact saved her brother's life by sending him out of reach of his mother's murderous intentions. The act of revealing her deepest unhappiness to her lover leads her to discover a spark of something as yet unidentified and possibly dangerous if not stamped out:

If thy foot in scorn
 Could tread them out to darkness utterly,
 It might be well perhaps. But if instead
 Thou wait beside me for the wind to blow
 The gray dust up, ...those laurels on thy
 head,
 O my Beloved, will not shield thee so,
 That none of all the fires shall scorch
 and shred
 The hair beneath. Stand farther off then!
 go.

(ibid)

The imagery clearly indicates that their identities as lovers rather than poets represents the source of danger: the poet's laurel crown cannot protect the man's hair from burning. Yet the "red wild sparkles" represent the first visual image in which the speaker associates herself with color rather than "ashen grayness." In sonnet X, which represents the first important transition point in the sequence, the speaker has transformed the same fire image into something positive, identifying it with love and emphasizing its power to create light rather than to destroy.

Sonnet X opens with the revelation, previously discovered by Bertram in "Lady Geraldine's Courtship," that the act of love itself has value and can enable the individual to recognize his own worth. "Fire is bright,/Let temple burn, or flax; an equal light/Leaps in the flame from cedar-plank or weed:/And love is fire" (ibid 216), states the speaker, implying an emotional equality among individuals. Pointing out that God loves all creatures equally, the lowest as well as the highest, the speaker for the first time imagines light projected from herself toward the lover:

And when I say at need
I love thee...mark!...I love thee - in
thy sight
I stand transfigured, glorified aright,
With conscience of the new rays that proceed
Out of my face toward thine.
(ibid)

The speaker here recognizes her own love as a positive emotion, something which she can experience unambivalently and which enhances her self-image:

And what I feel, across the inferior
features
Of what I am, doth flash itself, and show
How that great work of Love enhances
Nature's.
(ibid)

Yet she still cannot imagine an equal light emanating from both herself and her lover: "For we two look two ways," she states in sonnet XV, "and cannot shine/With the same sunlight on our brow and hair" (ibid 217). Depicting herself as "a bee shut in a crystalline," she once again reverts to an image of imprisonment to signify the severe

limitations imposed on her life by her illness. She does, however, begin to merge the poet with the woman in recognizing her previous inability to confront her deep melancholy within a poetic context:

Cheeks as pale
 As these you see, and trembling knees
 that fail
 To bear the burden of a heavy heart, -
 This weary minstrel life that once was girt
 To climb Aornus, and can scarce avail
 To pipe now 'gainst the valley nightingale
 A melancholy music,

(ibid 216)

The speaker moves directly from a description of the woman's unhappiness to a description of the poet's inferior music, with a direct reference to her youthful strength and optimism. The acknowledgement of her own negative emotions in her poetry gradually increases as the speaker examines, within a poetic context, her changing responses to a lover whose perception of her conflicts so sharply with her own. At first relying on her own self-perception, she refuses to trust the lover, pushing him away and avoiding any hint of commitment. However, as she begins to view herself from the lover's perspective, she gradually gains self-confidence. In sonnet XXX the speaker, lamenting the lover's absence and doubting the reality of his love, recognizes that he provides a flesh-and-blood link to an already imagined ideal. The sonnet's conventional theme, in which the lover longs for the beloved's presence, frames its underlying meaning, which entails a confrontation of the

response to the emotional intensity of the mass, the speaker implies that she, too, hungers for a vision of an unseen God. Still unable to believe in the reality of the lover's troth, she imagines him as part of a dream, recoiling from the intensity of her own emotional response. The image of the speaker fainting when "Too vehement light dilated my ideal,/For my soul's eyes" resonates with the image of the poet in The Poet's Vow who cannot confront his deepest feelings: "On his soul's eyelid the pressure slid/And made its vision dim" (ibid 14). Similarly, in A Vision of Poets, the poet's "soul kept up too much light/Under his eyelids for the night" (ibid 128). Tennyson's Lady of Shallott, confronting this same conflict, succumbs to her own death as a result. However, this speaker, not a dramatic projection functioning as a mask for the self, but a direct representation of self, stands ready to face that light again.

By the end of the sequence, the speaker has revised her self-image to conform to the lover's perspective. He has penetrated her emotional depths without rejecting her: "Because thou hast the power and own'st the grace/To look through and behind this mask of me/.....and behold my soul's true face" (ibid 222), she tells him, professing her gratitude that "Nor all which makes me tired of all, self-viewed, -/Nothing repels thee" (ibid). However, her ability to rediscover the positive emotions of her youth ultimately enables her to achieve the secure sense of self projected in

the final sonnets. The first reference to the speaker's youth occurs relatively early in the sequence, in sonnet XVIII, as part of a negative comparison: giving the lover a gift of a lock of her hair, she tells him, "My day of youth went yesterday;/My hair no longer bounds to my foot's glee,/Nor plant I it from rose or myrtle tree,/As girls do, any more" (Pibid218). She refers to her youthful persona with a sense of melancholy nostalgia and disconnection, as something lost forever. Midway through the sequence, however, perceiving the lover in his role of savior, she transfers her emotional ties from God, with whom she can only experience union in death, to the lover, with whom she can have a tangible relationship on earth: "I yield the grave for thy sake," she declares in sonnet XXIII, "and exchange/My near sweet view of Heaven, for earth with thee!" (ibid 219).

In sonnet XXXIII the speaker for the first time makes the critical link between her current feelings for the lover and her youthful feelings toward her family members. Written in response to Browning's use of her pet name, "Ba," she evokes a memory of energetic childhood play with her siblings and the warmth of secure parental love. Referring to her years of sorrow over the deaths of her mother and eldest brother, she indicates that the lover has enabled her to cease her perpetual mourning and re-experience joy:

relieve her internal pain become in the later sonnet a function of her self-perception: "While budding, at thy sight, my pilgrim's staff/Gave out green leaves with morning dews impearled" (ibid 223). She can now imagine herself as a source of life and light.

Finally, Sonnets from the Portuguese reconciles the dual significance implicit in Barrett Browning's use of silence and song/speech as metaphors for self-expression. Up to this point, silence has signified, on the one hand, an extreme discomfiture with the poetic expression of negative emotions. Unable to edit out that class of feelings, the poetic persona cannot speak at all. On the other hand, silence also signifies the inability of language to adequately embody one's deepest feelings. Within this context, the poetic persona imagines the silent and effortless communication of the soul. Sonnets from the Portuguese represents the speaker's confrontation, within a poetic context, of her own morbid melancholy and self-loathing, followed by the discovery and expression of a new class of positive feelings both toward the lover and toward herself. By the end of the sequence, poetic language has become for the speaker a comfortable and satisfying vehicle for personal expression. The process by which she achieves that end begins with an examination, in sonnet XIII, of the speaker's inability to express her love in words:

drop some golden orb of perfect song/Into our deep, dear silence" (ibid). This image has reference to the lovers' identities as poets, and bears a relationship to the angel's organ music in A Vision of Poets, in which the poet-protagonist concentrates his focus upward toward God in order to disseminate spiritual truth born of heavenly inspiration:

So works this music on the earth,
God so admits it, sends it forth
To add another worth to worth -

A new creation-bloom that rounds
The old creation and expounds
His Beautiful in tuneful sounds.
(ibid 133)

This idealized conception of poetry's purpose implies a partnership between the poet and God, one that requires the poet's total devotion to the absolute exclusion of other aims. One recalls that the narrator, at the conclusion of A Vision of Poets, calls into question the poet's ability to function both as parent and as artist. For Barrett Browning, up to this point, artistic and personal goals have remained incompatible. In sonnet XXII, however, she shifts her poetic focus from heaven to earth:

Let us stay
Rather on earth, Beloved, - where
the unfit
Contrarious moods of men recoil away
And isolate pure spirits, and permit
A place to stand and love in for a day,
With darkness and the death-hour round-
ing it.

(ibid 218)

Common human emotion and real life experience, despite their imperfections and inevitable end, have become the material of Barrett Browning's poetry.

The final poem in the sequence completes Barrett Browning's journey from fearful self-aversion to confident self-expression. Imagining her sonnets as flowers grown in her mind's garden, she asserts her newly formed ability to embody her deepest feelings in her poetry: "So, in the like name of that love of ours,/Take back these thoughts which here unfolded too,/And which on warm and cold days I withdrew/From my heart's ground" (ibid 223-224). Having fully abandoned her passive position, she now assumes an active role both as lover and as poet. She has undergone a process of self-healing and documented it in the sonnets, thereby placing them within an important Victorian genre. As an innovative sequence of love poems, Sonnets from the Portuguese provided a model for such later works as Christina Rossetti's Monna Innominata (before 1882), D.G. Rossetti's The House of Life (1870), and Meredith's Modern Love (1862). However, the sonnets also serve as an example of Victorian conversion literature, generally represented by such standard works as Carlyle's Sartor Resartus (1834), Tennyson's In Memoriam (1850), and Mill's Autobiography (1873). Like these works, Sonnets from the Portuguese documents its author's spiritual transformation, the term "spiritual" signifying the individual's conception of himself in relation to the external world. Victorian

conversion literature typically depicts its author's loss of an accustomed set of values, generally triggered by a traumatic event, leading to a period of confusion and depression, ultimately followed by the discovery and adoption of a new set of values (sometimes revealed through a single or a series of enlightening moments) that allows him once again to feel comfortable and optimistic. Having perceived a formerly accepted "truth" as false, he embarks on a quest for a different "truth" with which he can once more feel secure.

Tennyson's In Memoriam and Carlyle's Sartor Resartus trace their author's loss of religious faith and its rediscovery in a different form. Mill's Autobiography recounts its author's disillusionment with Utilitarian philosophy and his quest for a more workable set of values by which to live. Barrett Browning's highly personal journey in Sonnets from the Portuguese has far more in common with these other works, particularly with In Memoriam, than might at first seem apparent. Barrett Browning never questioned her belief in the almighty or the existence of life after death. However, her use in the early poetry of a personified God as a crutch to compensate for her lack of faith in herself indicates a religious belief distorted by personal need. Furthermore, the sonnets function as poems of mourning to the extent that they document Barrett Browning's gradual emergence from years of sorrow over the death of her brother. Like Tennyson's

elegy, they recount the author's struggle to let go of the past and look to the future.

The process of conversion requires the writer to confront his own deepest fears in order to move beyond them. "Alas!" cries Teufelsdröckh in Sartor Resartus, "the fearful Unbelief is unbelief in yourself" (Buckler 88). Having lost his religious belief, which encompasses the set of moral values by which he functions in the world, Teufelsdröckh descends into a state of panic, "a hot fever of anarchy and misery raging within" (ibid 85): he has internalized the moral anarchy that he perceives in a world without God. As a result, he enters an emotional abyss from which he fears he cannot emerge: "To me the Universe was all void of Life, of Purpose, of Volition, even of Hostility: it was one huge, dead, immeasurable Steam-engine, rolling on, in its dead indifference, to grind me limb from limb" (ibid 88-89). Silent and isolated, he takes no comfort in friendship: "I kept a lock on my lips: why should I speak much with that shifting variety of so-called Friends, in whose withered, vain and too-hungry souls Friendship was but an incredible tradition?" (ibid 88). Ultimately, Teufelsdröckh emerges from despair by defiantly turning away from internal contemplation, which he regards as cowardly and useless: "Ever from that time, the temper of my misery was changed: not Fear or whining Sorrow was it, but Indignation and grim fire-eyed Defiance" (ibid 90). Carlyle clearly spurns the very concept of self-examination as part

of the healing process. He deflects his emphasis away from the self by focusing on individual productivity rather than individual feelings:

A certain inarticulate Self-consciousness dwells dimly within us; which only our Works can render articulate and decisively discernible. Our works are the mirror wherein the spirit first sees its natural lineaments. Hence, too, the folly of that impossible Precept, Know thyself; till it be translated into this partially possible one, Know what thou canst work at" (ibid 88).

Carlyle considers the expression of deep despair acceptable only if it leads to catharsis and regeneration. He displays a mortal fear of sinking into an abyss of depression from which he might not feel able to extract himself, a fear which he transforms into an intense disapproval of any literary endeavor that focuses too closely on its author's self-contemplation. The dramatic structure of Sartor Resartus distances Carlyle from the autobiographical nature of his material by splitting its focus between the narrator, who observes experience from a distance, and Teufelsdröckh, a fictional creation who serves as the object of both sympathy and laughter. On the other hand, In Memoriam, like Sonnets from the Portuguese openly autobiographical, offers no clear distinction between author and poetic persona. Without dramatic distance, the avoidance of self-examination becomes far more difficult. Tennyson, unlike Barrett Browning, remains unable to

confront fully his deepest fears and therefore fails to achieve as full a resolution of conflict.

Both Sonnets from the Portuguese and In Memoriam began as private poems, not necessarily intended for publication. Both poems consist of short, tightly structured units organized within a larger framework. Each work represents a critical point of transition in the life of its author. However, Barrett Browning's poetic purpose remains coherent and consistent: the story of her love affair provides a framework through which she documents her personal spiritual journey, which she universalizes by embodying it within a familiar traditional form. Tennyson's poem, on the other hand, begins with a dual focus: relieving his personal sorrow over Hallam's death, and re-establishing the belief in immortality which Hallam's death has shattered. In order to resolve such a spiritual crisis, Tennyson must either find his way back to faith, or learn to live with his doubt. Unfortunately he accomplishes neither goal. In his fevered attempt to lift himself out of the abyss of suffering into which Hallam's death has thrown him, he draws upon contemporary evolution theory in order to prove the immortality of the human spirit. He apparently soothed the doubts of his Victorian audience more successfully than his own, since the poem's imagery reveals a man still filled with doubt and dread, trying to cover over his pessimism with a self-willed optimism. Tennyson fails to make the critical connection between his personal sorrow and his lack

of religious faith, thereby maintaining rather than resolving the split apparent in the personae of his earlier poems.

From the outset of In Memoriam Tennyson expresses disapproval of his own grief, displaying guilt in the opening prayer, the final three quatrains of which begin, respectively, "Forgive what seem'd my sin in me," "Forgive my grief for one removed," and "Forgive these wild and wandering cries" (Houghton & Stange 45). In section V he comments, "I sometimes hold it half a sin/To put in words the grief I feel" (ibid 46), and by section XVI clearly associates such expression with a loss of self-control:

What words are these have fallen from me?
 Can calm despair and wild unrest
 Be tenants of a single breast,
 Or sorrow such a changeling be?

(ibid 49)

The word "fallen," implying a non-volitional revelation of feeling, indicates an ambivalence toward poetic expression at the personal level. Like Barrett Browning, he reveals an intense concern with the ability of language to fully embody emotion, alternatively frustrated with and fearful of the writing process. Reversing the traditional idea that commemoration in poetry bestows a form of immortality on both the poet and his subject, Tennyson denigrates his verbal tribute to Hallam by indicating that it cannot possibly communicate the depth of his feeling: "I cannot love thee as I ought,/For love reflects the thing beloved;/My words are only words, and moved/Upon the topmost

froth of thought" (Houghton & Stange 58). He transmutes the intensity of his loss into the sense of his own failure as a poet: "But half my life I leave behind./Methinks my friend is richly shrined;/But I shall pass, my work will fail" (ibid 60). Each time the speaker begins to lose sight of his poetic purpose, the voice of his muse pulls him back on track: "The high Muse answer'd: 'Wherefore grieve/Thy brethren with a fruitless tear?/Abide a little longer here,/And thou shalt take a nobler leave'" (ibid). Unlike Barrett Browning, who allows herself to fully experience her grief in the presence of another human being, Tennyson feels compelled to turn away from his grief rather than work his way through it.

Tennyson seems to associate his deep sorrow with a sense of internal chaos which he connects at one critical point in the poem with his youthful periods of depression. In section LXVIII, during a dream in which he walks with Hallam prior to his death, he sees his own emotional turmoil reflected in his dead friend:

But what is this? I turn about,
I find a trouble in thine eye,
Which makes me sad I know not why,
Nor can my dream resolve the doubt;

But ere the lark hath left the lea
I wake and I discern the truth;
It is the trouble of my youth
That foolish sleep transfers to thee.
(ibid 62)

Unlike Barrett Browning, however, Tennyson does not examine the relationship between past and present, focusing instead

in section CII on the sense of nostalgia for his youth and regret over his loss evoked by a return to his family home. In fact, Tennyson never really ceases to mourn for Hallam. Throughout the poem, he continues to search for Hallam's image, in his dreams or during moments of poignant memory, as though his belief in immortality rests upon the idea that Hallam's spirit still possesses its individuality and can still communicate with the living. Although in section LXXXV he declares that "My heart, tho' widow'd, may not rest/Quite in the love of what is gone,/But seeks to beat in time with one/That warms another living breast" (ibid 68), he fails to find solace in another loving relationship. Edmund Lushington, his sister's fiancée, cannot replace Hallam in his affections, nor does he take poetic refuge in his relationship with Emily Sellwood, whom he married just after the poem's publication. He observes his sister's marriage at the poem's conclusion, taking vicarious pleasure in her happiness while still unfulfilled himself.

His emergence from years of mourning involves a process of resignation and self-control rather than resolution and regeneration. Throughout the poem, he wills himself away from his grief, which he imagines as belonging to his physical self, and strives toward a purely spiritual plane, represented not only by Hallam's post-mortem existence, but by his vision of man's evolutionary future. Tennyson describes his inner turmoil in purely corporeal terms:

Tennyson takes comfort, not in the present, but in a vision of the future that he fervently wants to but cannot wholeheartedly believe in. How unlike Barrett Browning's joyous assertion of faith in herself and her poetry at the conclusion of Sonnets from the Portuguese. Her ability to confront and overcome her darkest fears, to fuse the spiritual and physical aspects of human relationships, and to proclaim her work as the successful embodiment both of herself and her vision, enabled her, after her marriage, to focus her attention outward, drawing on a variety of contemporary issues and personal experiences for her poetic material. Between 1846 and her death in 1861 she produced her finest work.

theory which, although retaining many of her earlier principles, applies them to a specifically contemporary context. Having gained, during the years subsequent to her marriage, the life experience she had always believed the poet must have, she readily incorporated it into a poem which depicts a select number of modern problems and unreservedly prescribes poetry as a remedy. Barrett Browning ended her career still subscribing to a theory of art essentially based upon Carlylean principles, but without Carlyle's reactionary backlash. She managed to create a poem that brings those principles to fruition, for, as Dorothy Mermin states, Aurora Leigh "is the kind of poem it describes" (185).

As early as 1842, Barrett Browning seems already to have conceived the idea of producing an innovative long poem. As she began to prepare material for Poems of 1844, she wrote to Mary Russel Mitford: "I have by me quite enough fugitive poetry to make a volume - and my notion was that such a publication might prepare the public for a kind reception of a poem of more importance which is floating in my brain and might emerge another season" (Raymond & Sullivan II:138). Several years later she wrote to her friend:

"A few characters - a simple story - and plenty of room for passion and thought - that is what I want - and am not likely to find easily - without your inspiration. But people care for a story - there's the truth! And I who care so much for stories, am not to find

fault with them. And now tell me, - where is the obstacle to making as interesting a story of a poem as a prose work - echo answers where. Conversations and events, why may they not be given as rapidly and passionately and lucidly in verse as in prose - echo answers why. You see nobody is offended by my approach to the conventions of vulgar life in 'Lady Geraldine' - and it gives me courage to go on, and touch this real everyday life of our age, and hold it with my two hands. I want to write a poem of a new class, in a measure - a Don Juan, without the mockery and impurity - under one aspect - and having unity, as a work of art - and admitting of as much philosophical dreaming and digression (which is in fact a characteristic of the age) as I like to use" (Raymond & Sullivan III:49).

Unlike Byron, who subverts the epic tradition by mocking it, Barrett Browning subverts it by making her hero a female and a poet, and by creating an unheroic, novelistic plot. Yet Barrett Browning's own heroic gesture lies in her insistence upon separating moral truth from social convention:

"But my chief intention just now is the writing of a sort of novel-poem - a poem as completely modern as 'Lady Geraldine's Courtship,' running into the midst of our conventions, and rushing into drawing-rooms and the like 'where angels fear to tread;' and so, meeting face to face and without mask the Humanity of the age, and speaking the truth as I conceive of it, out plainly. That is my intention. It is not mature enough to be called a plan. I am waiting for a story, and won't take one, because I want to make one, and I like to make my own stories. because then I can take liberties with them in the treatment" (Kintner I:31).

Like a novelist preparing to write a work of fiction, Barrett Browning wanted to invent her own plot, rather than retelling an ancient heroic tale like an epic poet. Yet her lifelong interest in epic poetry had already inspired her to compose A Battle of Marathon during her youthful love affair with Greek literature, and later The Seraphim and A Drama of Exile, Christian epics in the Miltonian tradition. On the other hand, her interest in the novel as a genre, also dating back to her youth, inspired her to read all the contemporary English and French novelists and to particularly admire those who painted broad and accurate pictures of modern life.

While Barrett Browning considered poetry a higher form of art than prose, she did not necessarily confer the title of poet upon all those who wrote verse, nor did she exclude all novelists from that class. Although she shifted the focus of her subject matter over time, she never altered her definition of poetry as the embodiment of moral and spiritual truth. In evaluating the achievement of a novelist, she determined the degree to which he has attained the poet's goal. She called Balzac, for example, "the most powerful writer of the French day next to Victor Hugo and George Sand" (Raymond & Sullivan II:124). However, she further declared him "less a poet than either Hugo or George Sand - less ideal - less eloquent - nearer to the ground" (ibid). For a novelist to achieve the status of poet, according to Barrett Browning, he must focus not only on

external reality but on the inner life as well. She did not, therefore, consider Jane Austen a poet, judging her novels lacking in "the poet's beauty, the ideal" (ibid 237), by which she means: "We rise from her books - amused, pleased - charmed, if you like it, - but elevated and purified in soul, we never rise. Conventional life is not the inner life - and a writer who is not one-sided must comprehend both in his view of Humanity. Jane Austen is one-sided - and her side is the inferior and darkest side. God, Nature, the Soul - what does she say, or suggest of these?" (ibid 238).

Barrett Browning viewed Walter Scott from a similar perspective, declaring him, not overly conventional, but too painterly and superficial: "I honor Walter Scott for much - but never for his knowledge of human nature. It seems to me that he paints human nature - that he looks at it pictorially and conveys it to his canvas in its attitude and garment of picturesqueness - thinking at least as much of the setting of the folds, as of the beating of the heart. He is more a painter than a poet or a philosopher. It is an outside view of humanity - not the view our Shakespeare took" (ibid 128). She believed that the novelist's plot should ideally serve the poet's higher purpose, a goal achieved by Edward Bulwer, who, she believed, "is a poet when he writes prose, and the spirit world therefore presses around and pierces into sight through the material world when he contemplates it" (ibid 259). The poet, then, must

explore the individual's moral and spiritual perspective, and plot provides the external reference point to which he must try to reconcile himself.

Aurora Leigh has much in common with Victorian novels. Dorothy Mermin compares its plot to that of Jane Eyre, Villette, Mme. de Stael's Corinne, Sand's Consuelo, Mrs. Gaskell's Ruth, and Charles Kingsley's Alton Locke. Yet it resembles Dicken's David Copperfield perhaps more than any other novel of the period. Both works present the fictional autobiography of a writer-protagonist who undergoes an extended period of emotional hardship before finally achieving true happiness with a compatible spouse. Aurora and David each lose the parent of the same sex at a very young age, then lose the other parent in their youth, only to be left in the care of a cold and unfeeling guardian. David hates the education provided him by his stepfather as much as Aurora hates that provided by her aunt, and both characters take refuge in their fathers' books, which they each find packed away in an upstairs room, and which provide them with a revelatory introduction to the literary genre they each ultimately focus upon as writers. Each character grows up with a childhood companion who later becomes a potential lover, although David remains as blind to Agnes' love for him as Aurora does to Romney's. The recognition of that love opens the door to a happiness not provided by the professional success which each has already achieved.

Furthermore, the subplots of both novels involve a lower class young woman whose romantic entanglement with an upper class man leads to her fall and subsequent redemption. Emily Pegotty's ambition to rise above her station bears little resemblance to Marian Erle's selfless humility, and Emily clearly bears responsibility for her seduction, while Marian remains innocent of her rape. Yet Dickens, like Barrett Browning, demonstrates some sympathy for women forced into a life of prostitution, and by allowing Pegotty to forgive his ward and restore her to a socially acceptable lifestyle, albeit in Australia, he subverts the traditional sentence of death imposed by novelists on their fallen women. Clarissa, for example, who runs off with Lovelace to escape a forced marriage to a man whom she despises, protects her virtue so fiercely that the unscrupulous Lovelace must drug and rape her, after which she seems to have no option other than death. Clearly Dickens, like other novelists of the period, attempted to at least question the justness of certain conventional social attitudes. Barrett Browning had already attempted something similar in such poems as "The Cry of the Children" and "The Runaway Slave at Pilgrim Point." In Aurora Leigh she clearly intended to continue on a larger scale her quest to influence specific societal conventions, a goal entirely in keeping with her idea of poetry as an agent for social change.

However, Barrett Browning does not intend her poem to function as a vehicle for stating social theory. As poetry, it reveals to us the history of Aurora's inner life, her spiritual musings, her personal conflicts, and the course of her maturation as an artist. Written in nine books of blank verse, it recounts the history of its heroine from her birth to the age of thirty. Yet its overall epic structure gets somewhat eclipsed by the self-contained interior monologues that piece the poem together. Barrett Browning employs the technique of interior monologue in a manner similar to that of Virginia Woolf and James Joyce seventy years later. Aurora's internal commentary both on her own state of mind and the external events of the story create a dramatic counterpoint that helps to compensate for some apparent chronological inconsistencies. Aurora begins her story with her birth in Italy, the deaths of her parents, and her move to England to live with a maiden aunt. By the end of Book 2, she has described her friendship with her cousin Romney Leigh, his proposal of marriage on her twentieth birthday, and her rejection of him. Her comment that "It is seven years since" (2:1238) pinpoints her age at 27 years. Yet in Book 8 she indicates that she has reached the age of thirty by referring to that proposal as a "ten years birthday" (8:348). At some point in Aurora's story, therefore, her perspective changes from a narrative of past events to a recapitulation of events as they happen. The transition seems to occur in Book 5, in which Aurora, having recounted

her story through the point at which she attends Romney's thwarted marriage to Marian Erle, takes stock of her life and her professional accomplishments thus far, and decides to leave England to return to Italy. However, the chronology does not add up to 27 years: at the beginning of Book 3, she indicates that three years have passed since Romney's proposal and her aunt's subsequent death ("Three years I lived and worked" - 3:161), making her 23 years old; in Book 5 she states that two more years have passed since she last saw her cousin on his wedding day ("I have not seen Romney Leigh/Full eighteen months...add six, you get two years" - 5:172-3). In Book 5, then, she has apparently reached the age of 25, not 27, and the passage of time during the events of the story does not take up the slack.

Virginia Woolf, in her essay on Aurora Leigh, accurately identifies the main problem encountered by the writer of a novel-poem: the need to severely compress narrative detail in order to conform to the requirements of verse. The precise placement of events in time remains vague because Barrett Browning favored the concerns of the poet over those of the novelist. "Thus, if Mrs. Browning meant by a novel-poem a book in which character is closely and subtly revealed, the relations of many hearts laid bare, and a story unfalteringly unfolded," states Woolf, "she failed completely. But if she meant rather to give us a sense of life in general, of people who are unmistakably Victorian, wrestling with the problems of their time, all

brightened, intensified, and compacted by the fire of poetry, she succeeded" (217). Barrett Browning's main concerns in Aurora Leigh remain those of the poet: she charts the development of her protagonist's inner life, the "growth of a poet's mind" in both its public and private contexts. Aurora's poem functions not merely as autobiography, but as a statement of her own artistic purpose, which mirrors Barrett Browning's. The dramatic tension of the poem lies in the conflict between Aurora's artistic goals and her private desires, a conflict which Barrett Browning had treated poetically from the outset of her career and largely resolved at a very personal level in Sonnets from the Portuguese. Aurora desires personal happiness, but not at the expense of professional fulfillment. Her relationship to Romney also dramatizes the conflict between the artist's and the sociologist's approaches to diagnosing and remedying social ills. These two concerns - the reconciliation of the poet's life with his work, and the ascendance of art over science as the means to social salvation - comprise the main themes of Aurora Leigh.

The poem's unorthodox narrative structure serves to underscore the first of these themes. In narrating past events, Aurora exercises a good deal of authorial control over her material, punctuating her story with self-conscious statements of editorial awareness. The very opening of the poem, in which she declares that she "Will write my story

for my better self,/As when you paint your portrait for a friend,/Who keeps it in a drawer and looks at it/Long after he has ceased to love you, just/To hold together what he was and is" (1:4-8), indicates her idea that art captures and enhances the moment, preserving it against the ravages of time. In Book 2, as she describes Romney's response to her rejection of his attempt to give her an independent income, she indicates her awareness of the poet's ability to manipulate his audience's perception of real events: "why, so, indeed,/I'm writing like a poet, somewhat large/In the type of the image, and exaggerate/A small thing with a great thing, topping it" (1168-1171). In Book 3, as she begins to recount Marian's story, she acknowledges her authorial license in filling in details and altering Marian's natural but unpoetical and unimpassioned speech: "She told me all her story out,/Which I'll retell with fuller utterance,/As colored and confirmed in after times/By others and herself too" (827-830), Aurora declares, and continues, "I tell her story and grow passionate./She, Marian, did not tell it so, but used/Meek words that made no wonder of herself/For being so sad a creature" (847-850).

Aurora self-consciously justifies her choice of the epic form for her story, judging it superior to both the ballad, whose "race/Is rapid for a poet who bears weights/Of thought and golden image" (5:84-86), and the sonnet, in which the poet "can stand/Like Atlas, in the sonnet, - and support/His own heavens pregnant with dynastic stars;/But

then he must stand still, nor take a step" (5:86-89). She perceives the epic as inherently offering more flexibility, allowing the potential to realize her theory that poetic form should evolve out of the poet's material:

What form is best for poems? Let me
 think
 Of forms less and the external. Trust
 the spirit,
 As sovran nature does, to make the form;
 For otherwise we only imprison spirit
 And not embody. Inward evermore
 To outward, - and so in life, and so in
 art
 Which still is life.

(5:223-229)

Perhaps this brief passage provides Barrett Browning's own justification for the gradual modulation of form in Aurora Leigh. Aurora's poem moves closer to the events of her life, so that by the middle of the poem, she no longer knows the outcome of her own story and therefore can no longer exercise the same degree of manipulation, providing one reason why in Books 6 and 7 Marian tells her own story unaided and unaltered. Gradually Aurora learns to respond more openly and spontaneously as a participant in life's events.

Barrett Browning, on the other hand, retains total authority over her protagonist, using the technique of interior monologue to plot the course of Aurora's maturation. As a result, the reader begins to separate the author from her character who, although she encompasses a good deal of autobiographical material, does not directly represent her creator. In the first two books, Aurora

curiosity concerning her cousin Romney, whom she has not seen in three years. We begin to see the restless, discontented and somewhat defensive side of Aurora that ultimately causes her to deny her feelings for Romney. Throughout the poem, Barrett Browning continues to use interior monologue to provide the reader with knowledge of Aurora that she herself does not possess. Books 3 and 4 revert to retrospective narrative, but book 5 begins with Aurora's six hundred line monologue on the nature of art. Unlike Browning, who uses a dramatic situation as a vehicle for his character's self-revelation, Barrett Browning places Aurora alone in a room and opens up her mind to the reader. We feel Aurora's pain and frustration as she struggles to overcome her personal unhappiness, which professional success has done nothing to mollify, and we empathize with her failure to achieve contentment through the process of turning her life into art. Although Barrett Browning uses Aurora as a mouthpiece for her idea that poetry must deal with contemporary reality, and find its subject matter in the lives of real people and events, she scrupulously separates the artist from his/her art: Aurora cannot achieve happiness in her own life merely by writing about it or by writing about the lives of others.

In Aurora Leigh, then, Barrett Browning has created a poem about a poet writing an autobiographical poem in which she makes reference to other poems she has written. However, unlike Dickens, who invests David Copperfield with

complete authority over his life story, Barrett Browning, by combining straight narrative with interior monologue, alternates the reader's perspective between that of listener to Aurora's story as she narrates it and observer of her conflicts as she reveals them unawares. Throughout the poem Aurora reiterates a consistent philosophy of art the validity of which she never doubts. She feels much less certain, however, of her ability to realize that ideal in her own poetry because she instinctively recognizes the potential for conflict between the poet's individual passions and poetry's revelatory function. Aurora experiences this conflict much as Barrett Browning did in her own life and resolves it in a similar fashion.

Aurora expresses the common Victorian belief that, while scientific inquiry can provide an understanding of the physical nature of the universe, it cannot satisfy people's inescapable need for spiritual fulfillment. She associates science with pure intellect and spirituality with emotion which, she believes, provides the basis for all positive human interaction: the individual's moral sense, his awareness of beauty and his ability to love are all a function of his willingness to feel intuitively the existence of a spiritual reality which she associates with God. "Earth's crammed with heaven," declares Aurora, "And every common bush afire with God" (7:821-22). The poet, according to Aurora, possesses a heightened awareness of this reality:

Art's the witness of what is
 Behind this show. If this world's show
 were all,
 Then imitation would be all in Art;
 There, Jove's hand gripes us! - For we
 stand here, we,
 If genuine artists, witnessing for God's
 Complete, consummate, undivided work
 That every natural flower which grows on
 earth
 Implies a flower upon the spiritual side,
 Substantial, archetypal, all aglow
 With blossoming causes, - and not so far
 away,
 But we, whose spirit sense is somewhat
 cleared,
 May catch at something of the bloom and
 breath, -
 Too vaguely apprehended, though indeed
 Still apprehended, consciously or not,
 And still transferred to picture, music,
 verse,
 For thrilling audient and beholding souls
 By signs and touches which are known to
 souls.

(7:835-850)

Aurora believes that moral action stems from spiritual awareness: merely filling a man's belly and putting clothes on his back will not necessarily inspire him to behave better. Barrett Browning's depiction of lower class coarseness, selfishness and cruelty functions to corroborate the idea that without access to moral and spiritual teaching, people cannot learn empathy or kindness. Unlike Dickens, who perceives a natural goodness in at least some members of the lower classes, Barrett Browning sees only a moral wasteland:

Within Saint Margaret's Court I stood alone,
 Close-veiled. A sick child, from a ague-
 fit,
 Whose wasted right hand gambled 'gainst his
 left
 With an old brass button in a blot of sun,
 Jeered weakly at me as I passed across

Some fragmentary phrases, here and there,
 Of that fine music,- which being carried
 in
 To her soul, had reproduced itself afresh
 In finer motions of the lips and lids.
 (3:998-1008)

Romney, who fails to redeem the behavior of any of the bedraggled souls whom he brings to Leigh Hall, can save Marian because she already has within her the potential for goodness. She selflessly devotes herself first to Lucy Gresham and later to her child, whom she can love in a manner unknown to her class. Compare Barrett Browning's depiction of the neglected infants of poor mothers:

 babies, hanging like a rag
 Forgotton on their mother's neck, - poor
 mouths,
 Wiped clean of mother's milk by mother's
 blow
 Before they are taught their cursing.
 (4:576-79)

to her description of Marian's maternal feelings: "She leaned above him (drinking him as wine)/In that extremity of love, 't will pass/For agony or rapture" (6:599-601); and "She plunged her fingers in his clustering locks,/As one who would not be afraid of fire;/And then with indrawn steady utterance said,/'My lamb, my lamb'" (6:624-27). Marian has avoided the legacy of parental abuse and cruelty which her own parents would have passed on to her. Literature has enabled her to learn how to love and to discriminate between right and wrong.

This concept underscores Aurora's definition of the function of art in society:

Thus is art
 Self-magnified in magnifying a truth
 Which, fully recognized, would change
 the world
 And shift its morals. If a man could
 feel,
 Not one day, in the artist's ecstasy,
 But every day, feast, fast, or working
 day,
 The spiritual significance burn through
 The hieroglyphic of material shows,
 Henceforward he would paint the globe
 with wings,
 And reverence fish and fowl, the bull,
 the tree,
 And even his very body as a man -
 Which now he counts so vile, that all the
 towns
 Make offal of their daughters for its use,
 On summer nights, when God is sad in heaven
 To think what goes on in his recreant world
 He made quite other;

(7:855-69)

This passage moves from abstract concept to specific example, theorizing that art has the power to alter men's attitudes and behavior, extending into the realm of male-female relations. Aurora's concept of spirituality is entirely bound up with real, physical life, reflecting Barrett Browning's shifting focus away from heaven and out into the world. She looks for God in the lives of men and perceives literature as having the power to make men more God-like. Unlike Tennyson, whose sense of the spiritual remains disconnected from, even antagonistic to the physical, Barrett Browning allows Aurora to reverence man's physical existence. In describing the material of her art, Aurora uses similar erotic images to describe nature, human sexuality and death:

Aurora Leigh, be humble. Shall I hope
 To Speak my poems in mysterious tune
 With man and nature? - with the lava-
 lymph
 That trickles from successive galaxies
 Still drop by drop adown the finger of God
 In still new worlds? - with summer-days in
 this
 That scarce dare breathe they are so
 beautiful?
 With spring's delicious trouble in the
 ground,
 Tormented by the quickened blood of roots,
 And softly pricked by golden crocus-sheaves
 In token of the harvest-time of flowers?
 With winters and with autumns, - and beyond
 With the human heart's large seasons, when
 it hopes
 And fears, joys, grieves, and loves? - with
 all that strain
 Of sexual passion, which devours the flesh
 In a sacrament of souls? with mother's
 breasts
 Which, round the new-made creatures hanging
 there,
 Throb luminous and harmonious like pure
 spheres? -
 With multitudinous life, and finally
 With the great escapings of ecstatic souls,
 Who, in a rush of too long prisoned flame,
 Their radiant faces upward, burn away
 The dark of the body, issuing on a world
 Beyond our mortal?

(5:1-24)

In this remarkable passage, which opens book 5, Barrett Browning has successfully introduced a previously unspoken subject into the literature of the period by associating it with the imagery of religious ecstasy. Having set out to intentionally shock her readers, she managed to do so without giving much offense: although some of the reviewers censured her for treating such taboo themes as sexual passion and rape, Aurora Leigh sold out its first edition in two weeks. Perhaps the poem gained its popularity in part

because Barrett Browning successfully redefines sinfulness and innocence outside the bounds of social convention. She celebrates the erotic love of married partners while still condemning illicit passion, seeing to it that Marian's innocence depends upon her total lack of responsibility for her fate. More importantly, however, she sanctifies human sexuality as one of God's creations which, in spite of its association with original sin, has found redemption through Christ. After the fall of man, the earth "remained stiff and dry,/A mere dumb corpse, till Christ the lord came down,/Unlocked the doors, forced open the blank eyes,/And used his kingly chrism to straighten out/The leathery tongue turned back into the throat;/Since when, she lives, remembers, palpitates/In every limb, aspires in every breath,/Embraces infinite relations" (5:103-112). Eroticism gains acceptability through its association with Christ, whose redemption encompasses all aspects of life, including the unsavory. Barrett Browning perceives earthly life as essentially benevolent for those who have learned to recognize its underlying spirituality; the poet serves to "give it voice/With human meanings, - else they miss the thought,/And henceforth step down lower" (5:125-27).

The idea of nature's reproductive permanence provides the basis for Aurora's philosophy of transcendent spirituality, and she, like Barrett Browning in her maturity, asserts the need to give it expression in human

form by taking ordinary contemporary life as the subject matter of poetry. Art must live and breathe real life:

The full-veined, heaving, double-breasted
 Age:
 That, when the next shall come, the men of
 that
 May touch the impress with reverent hand,
 and say
 'Behold, - behold the paps we all have
 sucked!
 This bosom seems to beat still, or at
 least
 It sets ours beating: this is living art,
 Which thus presents and thus records true
 life.'

(5:216-222)

The blending of erotic and female reproductive imagery with which Aurora celebrates the sanctity of human existence also serves as a metaphor for the creative process, which she has personally found difficult and painful. In Aurora leigh Barrett Browning has largely abandoned her favorite image of music to represent the poetic process, substituting instead images of fertility and childbirth. "If life-blood's fertilizing, I wrung mine/On every leaf of this" (5:356-57), she writes in describing her current project, further declaring that "Each prophet-poet's book must show man's blood" (5:355). The fertilization images resonate with her image of Pygmalion coupling with his own artistic creation, "feeling the hard marble first relent,/Grow supple to the straining of his arms,/And tingle through its cold to his burning lips" (5:400-403). Aurora makes a negative comparison between herself and Pygmalion, concluding that "I cannot thoroughly love a work of mine,/Since none seems

worthy of my thought and hope/More highly mated" (5:411-413). The perception of her own artistic failure leads to the conclusion that the artist "may be childless like a man./I labored on alone" (5:420-421).

Aurora's negative self-perceptions belie her poetic productivity and success, an inconsistency stemming from her inability to reconcile her professional and personal identities. Having boldly asserted her right to try to earn a place among the great poets, she must at the same time fulfill her individual woman's desires. By incorporating specifically female images into her definition of creativity, she brings her woman's identity to bear upon her poem. On the other hand, she repeatedly insists upon the subordinate position of gender in forming artistic goals: when Romney, preparing to propose, declares that "I have seen you not too much/Witch, scholar, poet, dreamer, and the rest,/To be a woman also" (2:85-87), she tartly replies that "Poets needs must be/Or men or women - more's the pity" (2:90-91). Aurora makes gender a primary issue in her attempt to redefine gender-based social attitudes and in her insistence upon the intellectual equality of men and women. However, the conflict she feels between her artistic goals and her despondent emotions transcends gender and mirrors, in many respects, the similar conflict depicted in Barrett Browning's earlier poetry. Referring to the creative process as "a sudden sense of vision and of tune" (3:200), she reiterates Barrett Browning's own images of fire and

represents a portal to emotional freedom. Lacking a human object for her love, she substitutes both nature and literature:

I used to get up early, just to sit
 And watch the morning quicken in the
 gray,
 And hear the silence open like a flower
 Leaf after leaf, - and stroke with list-
 less hand
 The woodbine through the window, till at
 last
 I came to do it with a sort of love,
 At foolish unaware: whereat I smiled, -
 A melancholy smile, to catch myself
 Smiling for joy.

(1:680-689)

Uninhibited by the physical limitations Barrett Browning had to endure, Aurora can leave her room and take refuge in the expansive wooded grounds of her aunt's home. However, she finds an even greater emotional outlet in her father's books:

Or else I sat on in my chamber green,
 And lived my life and thought my thoughts,
 and prayed
 My prayers without the vicar; read my books,
 Without considering whether they were fit
 To do me good. Mark, there. We get no good
 By being ungenerous, even to a book,
 And calculating profits, - so much help
 By so much reading. It is rather when
 We gloriously forget ourselves, and plunge
 Soul-forward, headlong, into a book's
 profound,
 Impassioned for its beauty and salt of
 truth -
 'Tis then we get right good from a book.
 I read much. What my father taught before
 From many a volume, Love re-emphasized
 Upon the self-same pages:

(1:698-712)

Although Aurora's emotional isolation conforms to her image of the artist as seer, observing life's events and

announcing its truths to the participants, she also suffers the pain of loneliness. Until she forms a bond with Marian and her child in book seven, Aurora remains on the periphery of life, watching and commenting from a solitary vantage point. From her London room, she observes city life and finds inspiration for her poetry equal if not superior to that found in nature. Yet her main interaction with others seems limited to correspondence received from admiring strangers. At Romney's wedding and at Lord Howe's evening party she recounts the interactions of other guests, providing sharply critical commentary without participating herself. Aurora considers such detachment appropriate, even necessary to the fulfillment of her artistic intent. In book 3, Vincent Carrington, Aurora's painter friend, asks her to judge between two interpretations of Danae as she receives Jove into her arms. The first, "A tiptoe Danae, overbold and hot,/Both arms aflame to meet her wishing Jove/Halfway and burn him faster down; the face/And breasts upturned and straining, the loose locks/All glowing with the anticipated gold" (3:122-126), depicts a passionate and assertive figure. The second, lying "flat upon her prison floor,/The long hair swathed about her to the heel/Like wet seaweed. You dimly see her through/The glittering haze of that prodigious rain,/Half blotted out of nature by a love/As heavy as fate" (3:128-133), depicts a prostrate figure passively awaiting her lover's arrival. Aurora concurs with Carrington's preference for the second image:

less known and less left alone,/Perhaps a better woman after
all,/With chubby children hanging on my neck/To keep me low
and wise" (2:513-517).

The reader must take care not to confuse the gender-related implications of these lines with their significance to Aurora's poetic theory. The poet, she insists, must rise above gender roles and concerns in fulfilling his purpose, separating himself from common life in order to write about it. Yet when Aurora declares that poets "must needs be/Or men or women - more's the pity," she implies that they must also confront their ordinary needs and emotions, and recognizes that professional success cannot compensate for personal unhappiness:

To have our books
Appraised by love, associated with love,
While we sit loveless! Is it hard, you
think?
At least 't is mournful.

(5:474-477)

Aurora envies those poets among her acquaintances who enjoy loving relationships with parents, spouses and children. On the one hand, she bravely asserts that artistic fulfillment serves a more important function than personal:

We needs must hunger, - better, for man's
love,
Than God's truth! better, for companions
sweet,
Than great convictions! let us bear our
weights,
Preferring dreary hearths to desert souls.

(5:498-501)

On the other hand, she sinks progressively into a state of emotional despair and self-hatred. As she grows more aware

Unfortunately, a visit to her childhood home serves only to heighten her frustration. The sight of a young Italian girl sitting on her old front porch surrounded by gay young men causes her to abandon her search for "The irrecoverable child-innocence/(Before the heart took fire and withered life)/When childhood might pair equally with birds;" (7:1104-1106). "Enough," she cries to herself. "My horse recoiled before my heart;/I turned the rein abruptly. Back we went/As fast, to Florence. That was trial enough/Of graves" (7:1140-1143). Her parents long dead, and her nurse Assunta as well, Aurora begins to conceive of herself as living a kind of death-in-life:

I was past,
It seemed, like others, - only not in
 heaven.
And many a Tuscan eve I wandered down
The cypress alley like a restless ghost
That tries its feeble ineffectual breath
Upon its own charred funeral brands put
 out
Too soon, where black and stiff stood up
 the trees
Against the broad vermillion of the
 skies.

(7:1158-1165)

The recognition that she loves Romney only provokes further frustration, because he, although not dead, remains absent from her. Believing that he has never loved her, and that he now loves another woman, she requires an outlet for her emotional pain, but cannot use her art to that end because she considers such self-absorption inappropriate to poetic expression. Recalling her own early attempts at verse, she

disparages the youthful habit of purging the emotions in rhyme:

Many fervent souls
Strike rhyme on rhyme, who would strike
steel on steel
If steel had offered, in a restless heat
Of doing something. Many tender souls
Have strung their losses on a rhyming
thread,
As children cowslips: - the more pains
they take,
The work more withers. Young men, ay,
and maids,
Too often sow their wild oats in tame
verse,
Before they sit down under their own
vine
And live for use.

(1:942-951)

Poetry, she insists, must turn away from the self, "cognizant of life/Beyond this blood-beat, passionate for truth/Beyond these senses!" (1:916-918). Aurora cannot reconcile her need to fulfill a poetic ideal with her consuming desire for Romney: "We thunder down,/We prophets, poets, - Virtue's in the word!" (6:217-218), she declares in one breath, and cries "Yet Romney leaves me" in the next.

Ultimately, Aurora comes to recognize the crux of her dilemma:

Books succeed,
And lives fail. Do I feel it so, at
last?
Kate loves a worn-out cloak for being
like mine,
While I live self-despised for being
myself,
And yearn toward some one else, who
yearns away
From what he is, in his turn.

(7:704-709)

She has begun to understand the complexity of her own emotions and accept her need for love despite its threatening nature. Having lost every person she ever loved, including Romney, whose attitude toward women poses a major hindrance to their relationship, she has turned her frustration into self-hatred in much the same way that Barrett Browning did in her youth.

Unlike Barrett Browning, however, Aurora does not have the good fortune to fall in love with a man who truly respects her intellect and professional endeavors. Romney places serious and very real obstacles between himself and Aurora, allowing Barrett Browning to use her poem as a forum for examining contemporary male-female relationships. Aurora's thinking on this subject mirrors that of her creator who, in so much of her earlier poetry, made repeated efforts to define male and female characteristics and then locate individuals, especially poets like George Sand and William Wordsworth, in whom those characteristics overlap. Strength, self-control, decisiveness and directness typically belong to the male personality, according to Aurora, while humility, self-sacrifice and emotionality are quintessentially feminine. Each set of traits has negative counterparts: decisiveness can become obstinacy, for example, just as female humility can become abject submission to male domination. In describing her adolescent training under her aunt's tutelage, Aurora delivers a scathing critique of the English ideal of womanhood:

tantamount to selling one's soul. She even refuses the legacy Romney attempts to give her through a gift to her aunt, who dies before she can sign the necessary papers. Associating financial dependence with intellectual domination, Aurora fights to maintain her autonomy at all costs. She clearly perceives intellectual endeavor and marriage as incompatible in conventional terms, and unlike Lady Howe, who serves as a decoration to the evening's events rather than an equal participant, she demands a man's respect:

Said I, 'my dear Lord Howe, you shall not
 speak
 To a printing woman who has lost her place
 (The sweet safe corner of the household
 fire
 Behind the heads of children), compliments,
 As if she were a woman. We who have clipt
 The curls before our eyes may see at least
 As plain as men do. Speak out, man to man;
 No compliments, beseech you.'

(5:805-812)

Aurora here verbalizes the conventional dichotomy between an intellectual life and marriage/motherhood, an idea espoused by Lady Waldemar when she tells Aurora that "You stand outside,/You artist women, of the common sex;/You share not with us, and exceed us so/Perhaps by what you're mulcted in, your hearts/Being starved to make your heads" (3:406-410).

Lady Waldemar represents the surreptitious, and ultimately dishonest usurpation of male power, engaging in acts that Aurora considers reprehensible. Typical of the wily female of Victorian novels who sets out to get herself the husband of her choice by any means, she underhandedly

manipulates events while feigning mild-mannered submissiveness. Rejecting such feminine dishonesty, Aurora invariably speaks her mind to men and women alike, adopting a masculine directness not encountered in the poem's other female characters. In fact, Aurora tries to assume several aspects of the male character, as when she chooses to write plainly and directly to Lord Howe and Lady Waldemar informing them that she has found Marian in Paris and knows the entire story of her departure from England. "Put away this weakness," she admonishes herself. "If, as I have just now said,/A man's within me,- let him act himself,/Ignoring the poor conscious trouble of blood/That's called the woman merely. I will write/Plain words to England" (7:228-233). Aurora seems to disparage in life the same feminine traits she admires in the poet, because in ordinary women she associates such traits with weakness, whereas in the poet they represent strength. Abhorring any sign of weakness in herself, she continually works to suppress feelings for Romney that stir up emotional turmoil.

Unfortunately, Romney's initial attitude only serves to reinforce Aurora's fears. "You write as well ... and ill ... upon the whole,/As other women." Romney declares. "If as well, what then?/If even a little better, ... still, what then?/We want the best in art now, or no art" (2:146-149). He insists that women do not possess the intellectual capacity to comprehend the highest truths to which poetry aspires: "You play beside a death-bed like a child,/Yet

measure to yourself a prophet's place/To teach the living.
None of all these things/Can women understand" ((2:180-183).
Perceiving women as dependent and child-like, he relegates
them to the position delineated by Aurora's aunt:

You weep for what you know. A red-haired
child
Sick in a fever, if you touch him once,
Though but so little as with a finger-
tip,
Will set you weeping; but a million
sick ...
You could as soon weep for the rule of
three
Or compound fractions. Therefore, this
same world,
Uncomprehended by you, must remain
Uninfluenced by you. - Women as you are,
Mere women, personal and passionate,
You give us doating mothers, and perfect
wives,
Sublime Madonnas, and enduring saints!
We get no Christ from you, - and verily
We shall not get a poet, in my mind.
(2:213-225)

Yet despite his chauvinistic attitude, he and Aurora have
become friends and intellectual companions. Aurora recounts
that as teenagers, "We read, or talked, or quarrelled, as it
chanced./We were not lovers, or even friends well-
matched:/Say rather, scholars upon different tracks,/And
thinkers disagreed: he, overfull/Of what is, and I, haply,
overbold/For what might be" (1:1105-1110). Romney, even as
he disparages women's intellect, recognizes that Aurora
"never can be satisfied with praise/Which men give women
when they judge a book/Not as mere work but as mere women's
work,/Expressing the comparative respect/Which means the
absolute scorn" (2:232-236). He fails to perceive the

conflict between his idea of womanhood and the real nature of his friendship with Aurora.

Aurora, on the other hand, is so incensed by Romney's condescending attitude as a lover that she fails to recognize their feelings for one another. His apparent insistence that she subordinate her life's goals to his provokes her own assertion of the woman's right to pursue her work independent of her husband:

You misconceive the question like a man,
 Who sees the woman as the complement
 Of his sex merely. You forget too much
 That every creature, female as the male,
 Stands single in responsible act and
 thought
 As in birth and death. Whoever says
 To a loyal woman, "Love and work with
 me,"
 Will get fair answers if the work and love
 Being good themselves, are good for her -
 the best
 She was born for. Women of a softer mood,
 Surprised by men when scarcely awake to
 life,
 Will sometimes only hear the first word,
 love,
 And catch up with it any kind of work,
 Indifferent, so that dear love go with it.
 (2:434-447)

Aurora does not disparage women who choose love and marriage for their life's aim. In fact, she rather envies Kate Ward's contentment in marrying her artist friend Vincent Carrington. However, she recognizes her own inability to feel satisfied with love alone, declaring, "I too have my vocation, - work to do" (2:455). Romney's prejudice against the idea of the intellectual equality of women provokes Aurora's pride to the degree that it obscures not only her

Helen Cooper states that the conclusion of Aurora Leigh "redefines woman by uniting the expression of her intellectual powers with the realization of 'the very heart of passionate womanhood'" (181). Dorothy Mermin, too, focuses on Aurora's belief that women must choose between work and motherhood, but cannot have both. Mermin links this fear with "the widespread Victorian conviction that one cannot have both art and life, both love and fame" (198), stating that the poem reflects "the paradigmatic fear of the Victorian poet - Tennyson, Arnold, Clough - and often Browning, too - that art means isolation and intellection kills the feelings" (ibid). "Despite the immense satisfaction of leading her own life and doing her own work," Mermin concludes, Aurora "feels cut off from experience" (ibid).

Like the poet in The Poet's Vow, Aurora finds her solitude far more painful than protective. Nonetheless she fears that full participation in the domestic sphere would undermine her personal strength and independence. Romney recognizes the haughty detachment by which Aurora has maintained her distance from what she has considered the demeaning aspects of feminine self-sacrifice: "you sweep your sex/With somewhat bitter gusts from where you live/Above them, - whirling down from your heights/Your very own pine-cones, in a grand disdain/Of the lowland burrs with which you scatter them," he tells her (8:202-206). Although she yearns for the fulfillment that love provides to other

women, she cannot allow herself to take that risk until she learns to separate love from self-abasement. Marian Erle, whose courage and independence defy society's edicts, provides the model for Aurora's transformation.

Initially assuming the role of Maid Marian to Romney's Robin Hood, she allows him to rescue her and then devotes herself to his schemes for helping the poor and downtrodden. Deeply grateful and humble before goodness unlike anything she has experienced, she readily accepts his proposal of marriage, placing herself metaphorically at his feet to serve the cause of his happiness: "That, since I know myself for what I am," she states, "Much fitter for his handmaid than his wife,/I'll prove the handmaid and the wife at once,/Serve tenderly, and love obediently" (4:226-229). Marian's self-effacing attitude prevents her from considering such matters as mutual love and respect. Aurora, who believes in marrying only for love, disparages Romney's motive for proposing to Marian:

He loved not Marian, more than once he
loved
Aurora. If he loves at last that Third,
Albeit she prove as slippery as spilt oil
On marble floors, I will not augur him
Ill luck for that.. Good love, howe'er ill-
placed,
Is better for a man's soul in the end,
Than if he loved ill what deserved love
well.

(5:1108-1114)

Believing that Romney loves Lady Waldmar, Aurora can intellectually sanction his union to a woman she considers dishonest and morally deficient. When she finds Marian and

her child in Paris, she transfers her own thwarted feelings of affection to them.

At first, Aurora stands in awe of the pure and passionate affection between mother and child. Waking from a nap, the baby "saw his mother's face, accepting it/In change for heaven itself with such a smile/As might have well been learnt there" (6:589-591). Unlike Isobel's child, a symbolically Christ-like figure who willingly exchanges his mother's love for heaven, this child functions as Marian's savior in life rather than death. Through her maternal role, she achieves strength, dignity and a sense of self-worth that prompts her to refuse Romney's second offer of marriage. Knowing that she and Romney do not love each other, and that Romney's heart belongs to Aurora, she cannot enter into a marriage out of gratitude or the desire for protection. Although low born and plain of speech, Marian has achieved a state of beatification through her suffering, her language taking on the rhythms and repeated phrases of a litany. Aurora describes her "thrilling, solemn voice, so passionless,/Sustained, yet low, without a rise or fall,/As one who had authority to speak,/And not as Marian" (9:248-251). The power and authority with which Marian utters truths concerning human love has its parallel in the authority of the poet's voice, which also encompasses truths that extend beyond personal utterance:

and gaining a better understanding of the differences and similarities between them:

But a man -
 Note men! - they are but women after all,
 As women are but Auroras! - there are men
 Born tender, apt to pale at a trodden worm,
 Who paint for pastime, in their favorite
 dream,
 Spruce auto-vestments flowered with crocus-
 flames.
 There are, too ,who believe in hell and
 lie;
 There are, too, who believe in heaven and
 fear:
 There are, who waste their souls in working
 out
 Life's problem on these sands betwixt two
 tides,
 Concluding, - 'Give us the oyster's part,
 in death.'

(7:1016-1026)

Aurora has also come to recognize the poetry inherent in common life. Blaming herself for Romney's supposed marriage to Lady Waldemar, she imagines a lost opportunity to serve as his savior as the poet serves all men:

I thought, 'Now, if I had been a woman,
 such
 As God made women, to save men by love, -
 By just my love I might have saved this
 man,
 And made a nobler poem for the world
 Than all I have failed in. But I failed
 besides
 In this; and now he's lost! through me
 alone!

(7:184-189)

Unlike a variety of Victorian artist figures - the Lady of Shallott, Margaret in "The Forsaken Merman," the poet in "The Poet's Vow" - who cannot reconcile their creative environments with their need to participate in common reality, Aurora successfully unites these two aspects of her

life. "O Art, my Art, thou'rt much, but Love is more!" she cries, "Art symbolizes heaven, but Love is God/And makes heaven. I, Aurora, fell from mine,/I would not be a woman like the rest,/A simple woman who believes in love/And owns the right of love because she loves" (9:656-662). In her poetic theory, Barrett Browning proposes love as the essence of spiritual truth and the basis for moral action. Aurora comes to learn that in order to write such truths, the poet must do more than theorize and pontificate, he must draw upon his own experience of life and love:

Passioned to exalt
The artist's instinct in me at the cost
Of putting down the woman's, I forgot
No perfect artist is developed here
From any imperfect woman. Flower from
 root,
And spiritual from natural, grade by
 grade
In all our life.

(9:645-651)

Barrett Browning allows Aurora to describe fully the physical intensity of her pent up feelings, using, among others, images of fire, with which she has portrayed the passion of creativity, to now portray her sexual passion:

Could I see his face,
I wept so? Did I drop against his breast,
Or did his arms constrain me? were my
 cheeks
Hot, overflowed with my tears - or his?
And which of our two large, explosive
 hearts
Shook me? That, I know not. There were
 words
That broke in utterance ... melted, in the
 fire, -
Embrace, that was convulsion, ... then a
 kiss

The other pivotal issue in Aurora Leigh, the conflict between science and poetry, does not get resolved through reconciliation, but the total eclipse of one by the other. In addition to their roles as protagonists in a love story, Aurora and Romney serve as representatives of antagonistic philosophies which Barrett Browning perceives as unable to coexist. Romney, the social engineer, represents the scientific approach to improving men's lives, seeking to remedy society's ills by altering its physical parameters. Barrett Browning portrays him as holding an essentially dour and pessimistic view of society, an attitude having its origins in the early loss of his parents and his premature assumption of the responsibilities of Leigh Hall and its estates. Unlike either Aurora or Marian, Romney does not read literature, but "mere statistics ... / ... count of all/The goats whose beards go sprouting down toward hell/Against God's separative judgement-hour" (1:525-528). Just as Aurora admonishes poets to account for the harsh realities of life as well as its beauty, she censures Romney for refusing to acknowledge life's beauty. Consumed by his perceptions of poverty and cruelty, he sees only a world "swollen hard/With perished generations and their sins:/The civilizer's spade grinds horribly/On dead men's bones, and cannot turn up soil/That's otherwise than fetid" (2:263-267). "Who/Being man," he asks Aurora, "can stand calmly by/And view these things, and never tease his soul/For some great cure?" (2:279-282).

Romney subverts his entire emotional life into his social altruism, which he expresses in terms of sums and statistics:

Dear, my soul is gray
 With poring over the long sum of ill;
 So much for vice, so much for discontent,
 So much for the necessities of power,
 So much for the connivance of fear,
 Coherent in statistical despairs
 With such a total of distracted life, ...
 To see it down in figures on a page,
 Plain, silent, clear, as God sees through
 the earth
 The sense of all the graves, - that's
 terrible
 For one who is not God, and cannot right
 The wrong he looks on.

(2:308-319)

Aurora cannot condone his choice of a bride based on his desire to promote social and economic equality, and has little patience with his dispassionate attitude, "built up as brick walls are, brick by brick,/Each fancy squared, each feeling ranged by line,/The very heat of burning youth applied/To indurate form and system!" (4:353-356).

Romney's attitude represents that of science and Utilitarianism, which in her early writing Barrett Browning portrays as leading to moral anarchy. The underlying moral philosophy depicted in Aurora Leigh reiterates within a poetic context Barrett Browning's early transcendentalist ideas concerning the nature of reality. Like Carlyle, she interprets material reality as the garment of God, masking a spiritual truth which every human soul has the potential to perceive. Aurora espouses Barrett Browning's philosophy, expressing it, like her creator, in the imagery of eyes,

and quell the beast there - take the soul, And so possess the whole man, body and soul" (8:547-550).

Rather than portray the conventional dichotomy between physical and spiritual, Aurora, like her creator, unifies them in the figure of Christ. Those who insist upon their separation, especially scientists, she portrays as blind and misguided. Romney, too, chastened by the failure of his life's work, describes his own blindness to spiritual reality:

Ay, materialist
 The age's name is. God himself, with some,
 Is apprehended as the bare result
 Of what his hand materially has made,
 Expressed in such an algebraic sign
 Called God - that is, to put it otherwise,
 They add up nature to a nought of God
 And cross the quotient. There are many even,
 Whose names are written in the Christian
 Church
 To no dishonor, diet still on mud
 And splash the altars with it. You might
 think
 The clay Christ lay upon their eyelids when,
 Still blind, He called them to the use of
 sight,
 Remained there to retard its exercise
 With clogging incrustations.

(8:635-649)

In this passage, Romney has become a mouthpiece for Barrett Browning's philosophy, employing imagery identical to that which occurs in both her poetry and prose. Not a particularly well developed character to begin with, at the end of the poem he becomes entirely representative of a type. His blindness, which seems an unnecessarily harsh punishment for a man with basically good intentions, has little to do with his status as an individual. It

moral consciousness. He berates himself for an excess of pride which he believes led him to usurp God's authority:

To think, - I have a pattern on my nail,
 And I will carve the world new after it
 And solve so these hard social questions -
 nay,
 Impossible social questions, since their
 roots
 Strike deep in Evil's own existence here,
 Which God permits because the question's
 hard
 To abolish evil nor taint free-will.
 (8:760-766)

Romney's social schemes have failed because the people he tried to help did not fit the mold he created for them:

My men and women of disordered lives
 I brought in orderly to dine and sleep,
 Broke up those waxen masks I made them
 wear,
 With fierce contortions of the natural
 face,
 And cursed me for my tyrannous constraint
 In forcing crooked creatures to live
 straight;
 (8:889-894)

He has come to recognize the limitations of both his methods and his goal. Recalling his first marriage proposal to Aurora, his statement "How dark I stood that morning in the sun" (8:419) underscores his ultimate exclusion from physical light simultaneous with his new insights: "O cousin, let us be content in work,/To do the thing we can, and not presume/To fret because it's little" (8:732-734).

Romney feels so thoroughly defeated that Aurora must remind him of his good intentions and his willingness to take action in response to his awareness of social ills:

better for our love,/And still our love be sweeter for our work" (9:924-926), Romney tells Aurora. However, Romney has renounced his work, having failed in it and suffered dire physical consequences. He chooses to devote himself to Aurora and her work, effecting a reversal of traditional marital roles: having at first expected Aurora to become his helpmate, he now volunteers to become hers: "Shine out for two, Aurora, and fulfill/My falling-short that must be! work for two,/As I, though thus restrained, for two shall love!" (9:910-912).

In many respects, Romney's transformation reflects the experience of John Stuart Mill who, in his autobiography, documents the consequences of his own Utilitarian upbringing. Born in 1806, the same year as Barrett Browning, he suffered a mental collapse in his early twenties resulting from his disillusionment with the idea of happiness as an achievable end through quantifiable means. His first exposure to Jeremy Bentham inspired him, like Romney, "to be a reformer of the world" (Mill 91). Mill's crisis occurred when he asked himself whether or not the realization of all his goals for social reform would bring him happiness, the negative answer to which plunged him into a state of extreme depression not unlike that experienced by Romney after the burning of Leigh Hall: "I hoped this feeble fumbling at life's knot/Might end concisely," he tells Aurora, "but I failed to die/As formerly I failed to live, - and thus/Grew willing, having tried all other ways,/To try

just God's" (8:1046-1050). Romney takes refuge in Aurora's poetry, from which he learns to draw spiritual solace. Mill, having learned that "the habit of analysis tends to wear away the feelings" (Mill 85), found comfort in the poetry of Wordsworth, from which he learned "to draw from a source of inward joy, of sympathetic and imaginative pleasure, which could be shared by all human beings" (ibid 91). Although he focuses on Wordsworth's ability to invoke the beauties of nature, he attributes poetry's salutary effect to its ability to unite and communicate human emotion and thought: "But Wordsworth would never have had any great effect on me, if he had merely placed before me beautiful pictures of natural scenery. Scott does this still better than Wordsworth, and a very second-rate landscape does it more effectually than any poet. What made Wordsworth's poems a medicine for my state of mind, was that they expressed, not mere outward beauty, but states of feeling, and of thought colored by feeling, under the excitement of beauty (ibid). Mill came to recognize "the importance of poetry and art as instruments of human culture" (ibid 89) and to realize that poetry dealt with "the common feelings and common destiny of human beings" (ibid 91-92). Although he does not explicitly use the word "truth" in connection with poetry, he clearly implies that poetry, in nourishing the spirit, imparts truth of a spiritual nature.

The parallels between Mill's experience and Romney's do not indicate any direct influence of one writer upon the

other, but rather highlight the essentially Victorian character of Barrett Browning's poetic theory. Aurora Leigh deals with primary philosophical issues of the period and resolves them in a manner consistent with a widely held belief in the power of poetry to influence man's individual and collective destiny. At the same time, the poem charts some new and radical territory in its treatment of human sexuality and the role of women in society. In this respect it diverges from its counterpart in Tennyson's career, the Idylls of the King (1859-1885), a series of poems which depict the destructive effect of human passion upon the social fabric. Unlike Barrett Browning, Tennyson never successfully integrated, in his poetry, personal desire with social responsibility. Conceived and written as a social allegory, over a period of many years, Idylls of the King, like Aurora Leigh, embodies Tennyson's "highest convictions upon life" (PW 254). However, each idyll focuses upon a quest for love that ultimately wreaks havoc upon the individuals involved and undermines communal values. The two love triangles, Guinevere-Lancelot-Elaine and Isolt-Tristram-Isolt, depict the irrevocable split between the stability of marriage and the uncontrollable demands of sexual desire, which leads in each instance to social collapse and death. Even Geraint and Enid, the only married pair who remain happy together, undergo a period of painful discord caused by Geraint's excessive passion for his wife. Merlin, the magician, prophet and poet-figure whose wisdom

had made him an invaluable adviser to Arthur, falls victim to the wiles of Vivien, the evil seductress who not only destroys him but subverts his art to her own malevolent use. Even the quest for the holy grail, symbol of pure ideality, signifies for Tennyson a conflict between desire and responsibility. With the exception of Geraint, none of the knights of the Round Table successfully finds either spiritual or sexual fulfillment within the bounds of the social order, implying a need to suppress personal desire in order to maintain that order. Aurora Leigh, on the other hand, by depicting the integration of passion and responsibility both at the personal and professional levels, projects a sense of resolution and fulfillment at its conclusion and represents the apex of Barrett Browning's career.

VI

MATURE VISION AND RESIDUAL CONFLICT

Drums and battle cries
 Go out in music of the morning star -
 And soon we shall have thinkers in the
 place
 Of fighters, each found able as a man.
 To strike electric influence through a
 race,
 Unstayed by city-wall and barbican.
 The poet shall look grander in the face
 Than even of old (when he of Greece
 began
 To sing 'that Achillean wrath which slew
 So many heroes') - seeing he shall treat
 The deeds of souls heroic toward the true
 Casa Guidi Windows (725-735)

Elizabeth Barrett Browning lived fewer than five years following the publication of Aurora Leigh, but during that time she produced some of her most controversial and powerful work. The majority of poems written during her last years (Poems before Congress, published in 1860, and Last Poems, published by Robert Browning after her death in 1861) focus upon Italy's struggle to free itself from Austrian rule and the attempt of France, under Louis Napoleon, to help bring about that end. As an Englishwoman living in Italy and making several lengthy stays in Paris, Barrett Browning acquired the advantageous perspective of a foreigner observing first-hand the political conflict of another people. Critics from that time up to the present have wondered at her passionate involvement with the Italian

cause and censured her for what they interpret as her blindly naive support of Louis Napoleon. Barrett Browning had already made herself an advocate for the downtrodden, writing poems against the practice of slavery and against abuse of the poor, particularly women and children. Modern feminist criticism has focused almost exclusively upon a proposed psychological origin of that advocacy, interpreting it as the result of her own enslavement by an autocratic father. Undoubtedly Barrett Browning's family life did contribute to the development of her adult thinking, just as all of us feel the influence of our backgrounds as we shape our adult lives. However, the critic who persists in viewing this great poet as the victim of male domination infantilizes her and belittles her intellect. Barrett Browning's political views merit the same objective analysis with which we would approach the opinions of a male poet.

By her own admission, Barrett Browning's passion for the Italian cause demonstrated a characteristic not shared by the majority of nineteenth century women: the propensity to feel very deeply about impersonal subjects. Aurora Leigh, in analyzing common differences between men and women, points out that, while a man will work to protect a group, a woman will weep for a single injured member of that group. Women did not generally concern themselves with politics, which were considered the exclusive province of men. However, Barrett Browning, from her youth, entertained opinions on any subject - religion, politics, literature -

that aroused her intellect, considering herself the equal of any man and never feeling afraid to express her views, in print or otherwise. Only once in her life did she acquiesce to male authority in refraining from speech: her refusal to write the anti-Corn-Law poem in 1845, an act of capitulation to her father and brothers that she deeply regretted.

As it happens, Barrett Browning's residence in Italy corresponded almost exactly with the dates of the two pivotal events in the movement toward Italian liberation: the revolution of 1848 and the Treaty of Villafranca in 1859. Her correspondence during those years reveals a gradually increasing interest in Italian affairs and a build-up of emotional involvement culminating in passionate partisanship. In 1860, frail in health but active in spirit, she sent a letter of apology to her friend and correspondent Mrs. Ogilvy:

"For a year past I have had my life at once so full and so frail that such sins of negligence or omission have been forced on me here and there. You said once that as you stepped into life, you felt the calm of the grave steal on you. I, an unbeliever in the the calm of the grave, may be as skeptical of calms of life - for though older than you, the further I walk into life, the louder grows the battle, the quicker beats the drum in my heart. Never did a year of youth pass to me in a hotter fire and passion than the last has. Not on personal subjects indeed. But what difference does it make, if the emotion is personal? - if 'these tears be wet'?" (Heydon & Kelley 149).

The martial imagery with which she describes her feelings underscores the intensity of her involvement with the Italian cause. She regarded her poetry as an outlet for that passion, declaring shortly after the publication of Poems before Congress that she felt "considerably relieved in having spoken out the word that burnt in me" (ibid).

The reader of Barrett Browning's late political poems benefits greatly from an exploration of her opinions on Italian liberation and on Louis Napoleon as revealed in her correspondence from that period. Considering herself a republican, she believed in democratic self-rule but within certain carefully proscribed limits. The wedding scene in Aurora Leigh provides just one example of Barrett Browning's distrust of the uneducated masses, whom she thought incapable of maintaining order and reason among themselves, and who therefore require the guidance of an intelligent, strong and just leader. On the one hand, she defended the right of a people to elect their leaders; on this basis, she upheld Napoleon's coup d'etat, viewing him as an elected president whom the French people wished to retain in office despite the law against second presidential terms.

On the other hand, she feared an undercurrent of lawlessness and cruelty as the necessary byproduct of liberation: "I do sympathize with you wholly and particularly, dearest Mrs. Ogilvy, in a detestation of the vulgar haggling and pushing and kicking, which is an underpart of the great struggle, and a condition of the progress

of the masses" (Heydon & Kelley 117). One recalls from Aurora Leigh Barrett Browning's idea that only through education can the individual develop the moral and intellectual discrimination necessary to participate in responsible decision-making. She believed it foolhardy to grant sweeping political power to the masses without first educating them. Reacting to Edward Kenyon's description of the workers' uprising in Vienna in 1849, with "cannons and bombs setting fire to out houses, and soldiers fighting in his garden," she admits to having "caught the feeling which we republicans nearly all have caught, that the horrors of popular despotism exceed the terrors of despotism after the old fashion. For my part I detect in myself spasms of an unnatural and ghastly sympathy with ancient forms and principedoms" (Raymond & Sullivan III:265). The humorous detachment with which Barrett Browning reports her initial emotional response implies a belief in moderation, somewhere between absolute populist rule and absolute monarchy. She had little use for socialist/communist political theory, concluding that the implementation of those philosophies would lead to another form of authoritarian rule. In 1848, she wrote to Mary Russell Mitford:

"As to communism, surely the practical part of that, the only not dangerous part, is attainable simply by the consent of individuals - who may try the experiment of associating their families in order to the cheaper employment of the means of life - and successfully in many cases. But make a government-

scheme of even so much, and you seem to trench on the individual liberty. All such patriarchal planning in government, issues naturally into absolutism, and is adapted to states of society more or less barbaric. Liberty and civilization when married together lawfully, rather evolve Individuality than tend to generalization" (ibid 235).

The history of communism in the twentieth century would tend to bear out Barrett Browning's statements.

Barrett Browning also perceived the dangers inherent in the misuse of liberty, of which she considered the French Revolution a prime example, interpreting the Reign of Terror as resulting from power having fallen into the hands of people who acted upon violent emotion rather than intellect. She astutely recognized the need for a relativist stance in defining truth and right within a democratic context: "It is deplorable to think how love of liberty and love of free opinion mean after all - love of me! - People cannot understand the doctrine of rights, unless it be of their own rights. In the hand of their opposite neighbor, the rights instantly become wrongs. 'O liberty, liberty! what crimes are committed in thy name'! - I say so with Madame Roland" (ibid 103). Her search for a middle ground led her to espouse constitutional monarchy, as evidenced by her support both of Napoleon in France and Victor Emmanuel in Italy.

From the beginning of her residence in Italy, Barrett Browning sympathized with the desire of the Italians to liberate themselves from Austrian rule and to depose the puppet rulers held in power in the various kingdoms.

However, she observed a lack of resolve among the people, attributing the failure of the 1848 revolts to their unwillingness to devote themselves to their cause. In her letters she speaks with a somewhat bitter irony of the Florentine uprisings, commenting:

"If they have at Rome such a republic as we have had in Florence, without a public - imposed by a few bawlers and brawlers on many mutes and cowards, - why the sooner it goes to pieces, the better of course. My faith in every species of Italian is however nearly tired out. I don't believe they are men at all, much less heroes and patriots. Since I wrote last to you, I think we have had two revolutions here at Florence - Grand Duke out, Grand Duke in - The bells in the church opposite rang for both - They first planted a tree of liberty close to our door, and then they pulled it down" (Raymond & Sullivan III:268).

By 1860, however, the revolutionary spirit had coalesced, and she could write to Eliza Ogilvy that "There is not a simple desire here for the unity of Italy, but a passion" (Heydon & Kelley 155), and that "The people are acting admirable, - miraculously, - considering their past. . . . No people, however educated, could have acted better" (ibid 158).

Barrett Browning did not attribute this transformation to the revolutionary tactics of Mazzini, or even to the military triumphs of Garibaldi, but rather to the political acumen of Cavour and the symbolic leadership of Victor Emmanuel. She vehemently disapproved of many of Mazzini's

intentions, particularly his failed plan to assassinate Louis Napoleon, calling him "Mazzini the unscrupulous" and arguing that freedom can never mean "freedom to murder" (ibid 139). Although she came to greatly admire Garibaldi, she considered him limited to his role as soldier, having little talent for diplomacy: "He is an arm (with the generous blood of the heart throbbing to the hilt of the sword) - he is not a brain" (ibid 165). She believed Cavour to have politically engineered Italian liberation by supporting unification under Victor Emmanuel and by enlisting the help of Louis Napoleon. An admirer of Piedmont's constitutional monarchy, she wrote in 1853 of its "progress in civilization and the comprehension of liberty, and the honesty and resolution of the king. It is the only hope of Italy, that Piedmont!" (Raymond & Sullivan III:388).

In her poetry, Barrett Browning portrays Victor Emmanuel as a self-effacing king concerned mainly for the good of his people. In fact, Victor Emmanuel initially supported a constitution in Piedmont only under pressure from Cavour, although he did ultimately declare himself a democrat and claimed that he would give up his throne for the sake of unification. By 1861, the king retained only very limited political power, Cavour and parliament having gained control of government, a fact of which Barrett Browning must certainly have been aware. Poetically, he serves for her a symbolic function, a figurehead representing both freedom and unity. In "King Victor

Emmanuel Entering Florence, April, 1860," she paints an idealized hero, larger than life, embodying the three essential qualities of intellect, might, and empathy: "King, we cried to thee! Strong in replying,/Thy word and thy sword sprang rapid and sure,/Cleaving our way to a nation's place" (PW 439). However, she places her greatest emphasis on the king's deep emotional response to the achievement of liberty:

Grave he rides through the Florence gateway,
 Clenching his face into calm, to immure
 His struggling heart till it half dis-
 appears;
 If he relaxed for a moment, straightway
 He would break out into passionate
 tears -

(ibid)

The king's passion echoes Barrett Browning's own, as well as providing another example of a heroic individual in whom gender characteristics are blended.

Her poetic portrayal of Napoleon, similarly idealized, belies the far more balanced view of him evident in her letters. "Napoleon III in Italy," which Dorothy Mermin aptly describes as "an ode of over four hundred lines in celebration of a hero that is matched (if at all) in the Victorian period only by Tennyson's laureate ode on the death of Wellington" (231), calls forth an image of a freely elected French ruler who, in a gesture of political altruism, offers his military aid in a just cause. She attributes to him a moral rather than a pragmatic motivation:

He, though the merchants persuade,
 And the soldiers are eager for strife,
 Finds not his country in quarrels
 Only to find her in trade, -
 While still he accords her such honor
 As never to flinch for her sake
 Where men put service upon her,
 Found heavy to undertake
 And scarcely like to be paid:
 Believing a nation may act
 Unselfishly - shiver a lance
 (As the least of her sons may, in fact)
 And not for a cause of finance.

(PW 414)

Yet she seems to admire the act more than the man himself. Although she persisted in believing Napoleon to have freely won election by the French despite strong evidence to suggest his having tampered with the electoral process, she did not in any sense worship him. Early in Napoleon's political career, she wrote to Mary Russell Mitford: "I have not made a demi-god of Louis Napoleon, by the way - no, and I don't mean it. I expect some better final result than he has yet proved himself to be, of the French Revolution, with all its bitter and cruel consequences hitherto, - so I can't quite agree with you - only so far - that he has shown himself, up to this point, to be an upright man with noble impulses, and that I give him much of my sympathy and respect in the difficult position held by him - A man of genius, he does not seem to be" (Raymond & Sullivan III:285).

The English, recalling the havoc wrought throughout Europe by Napoleon I, understandably mistrusted him. Barrett Browning, however, saw him as the potential healer

of the ailing French republic, and the only leader who might prevent the return of the French monarchy. She certainly recognized the extent of his political ambition: "But for ambition - for ambition! Answer from the depth of your conscience - 'de profundis" - Is he or is he not an ambitious man? Does he or does he not, mean in his soul to be Napoleon the second? Yes, yes - I think - you think - we all think" (ibid 335). Although Napoleon repeatedly placed restrictions on democratic freedoms, Barrett Browning refused to condemn him because she believed him to have a beneficial effect on France, restoring order and morale, and giving a financial boost to the country. Yet her own comments reveal that she had not entirely earned her reputation as a staunch Napoleonist: "But I have no enthusiasm for him on the other side, after all - he does not allow of enough liberty for me - he keeps too heavy a foot on the press. Observe, I perfectly understand that such and such may be the necessities of his position; but, as the position improves, the necessities become less stringent. He intends to let the people breathe, in their intellectual life, presently, when he can - or I would not bear with him for a moment - but til he has done it, I can't 'put my trust in princes" enough to give him my heart. Wait a little if you please - Here am I talking anti-Napoleonism, I who am called a Napoleonist by everybody, and who wrestle hard with my own husband on that very subject!! The amount of injustice which has been written and spoken against him

makes me his advocate; but when on the other hand you ask me for enthusiasm I draw back, and repeat 'wait a little'" (ibid 485).

One can account for Barrett Browning's frequent criticism of a leader she ardently defends by considering several factors. She had justifiably little faith in the French republican governments, which had proved unstable and ephemeral. She also liked to make herself the defender of those whom she believed had suffered unjust criticism, considering the English press to have condemned Napoleon prematurely. The influence of Carlyle's heroes theory also manifests itself in her insistence that political revolution can only succeed under the guidance of a morally and intellectually powerful individual. Napoleon's domestic policies did little to earn Barrett Browning's respect, as she herself often admitted. However, like Cavour, she perceived him as Italy's only hope for liberation, and when, after the conclusion of the Crimean War, he agreed to assist Cavour, he began to gain stature in her eyes. Eliza Ogilvy, commenting that Barrett Browning "had little of the clinging to ancestral tradition which had so large a place in my Scottish temperament" (Heydon & Kelley xxxiv), failed to understand her decidedly un-English response to Napoleon's rise to power. "She saw in him the Saviour of European peoples, where I and my husband saw the selfish snatcher at personal power" (ibid xxviii), wrote Mrs. Ogilvy in her memoir of Barrett Browning, commenting also: "It irked her

that, with almost equal desire for Italian freedom, I could not believe in Louis Napoleon's disinterested greatness and magnanimity" (ibid xxxiv).

In fact, Louis Napoleon facilitated Italy's liberation from Austrian rule, satisfying himself with Nice and Savoy as a reward. While England nominally supported the Italian cause without supplying any military or financial assistance, France sent in troops and lost lives in defense of a foreign people, an act which won Barrett Browning's loyal admiration. Recognizing that Napoleon had hoped to wield considerable influence over a liberated Italy, she defended his acceptance of his more modest prize with the prophetic comment that he had to justify "to the opposing parties in France, and also to posterity, in raising up what in the course of some fifty or a hundred years may be a rival power" (ibid 150). His retreat in the face of Prussia's threat reflected what Barrett Browning interpreted as a healthy pragmatism, and she did not censure him over Villafranca. In "Napoleon III in Italy," she makes clear her celebration of Napoleon, not as a hero of France, but of Italy, insisting that she will not worship a throne:

I was not used, at least,
Nor can be, now or then,
To stroke the ermine beast
On any kind of throne
(Though builded by a nation for its
own),
And swell the surging choir for kings of
men -

(PW 411)

Barrett Browning's reservations concerning Napoleon's domestic policies are apparent in her refusal to celebrate in verse his position as monarch. She asserts her intent to sing only of his role in the Italian revolution:

But now, Napoleon, now
That leaving far behind the purple
 throng
Of vulgar monarchs, thou
Tread'st higher in thy deed
Than stair of throne can lead,
To help in the hour of wrong
The broken hearts of nations to be
 strong, -

Now, lifted as thou art
To the level of pure song,
We stand to meet thee on these Alpine
 snows!

(ibid)

The image of song, as always in Barrett Browning's poetry, signifies an ideal linked to God and communicated by the poet to his audience. In the political poems, that ideal takes the form of moral actions carried out by heroic individuals whose moral courage carries greater significance than bravery in battle. Fully aware of the political advantages gained by both Napoleon and Victor Emmanuel, Barrett Browning celebrates in poetry each man's heroic and selfless devotion to a just cause. She extends the image of savior, of which Christ represents the foremost example, into the political sphere, using her poems to disseminate what she considers a moral truth. Napoleon, whom she portrays as possessing the selflessness and unswerving morality of a true hero, represents the instrument of Italy's release from bondage. Considering the Italian

people Austria's slaves, she responded to their cause with the same passionate outrage with which she championed the abolition of slavery in America:

He holds that, consenting or dissident,
 Nations must move with the time;
 Assumes that crime with a precedent
 Doubles the guilt of the crime;
 Denies that a slaver's bond,
 Or a treaty signed by knaves
 (Quorum magna pars and beyond
 Was one of an honest name)
 Gives an inexpugnable claim
 To abolish men into slaves.

(PW 414)

Barrett Browning clearly associated imperialism with slavery, and considered both practices not only morally reprehensible but politically untenable in modern times. Mrs. Ogilvy demonstrates a blatant misreading of Barrett Browning's motivations when she expresses surprise at the latter's lack of concern for such English conflicts as the uprisings in India. It seems perfectly logical that Barrett Browning would show more concern for the political problems in her chosen country of residence than those of a country half way around the world. Had she formed an interest in India's struggle for freedom from British rule, she would surely have placed her anti-imperialist beliefs above any feelings of patriotic loyalty and sided with the Indians against England.

Barrett Browning, then, believing that all men have the right to freedom, uses the image of Napoleon to symbolize the heroic struggle for liberation from bondage. The poet, providing a voice through which to articulate that struggle,

Browning has formed an image of the poet as visionary, singing a song of man rather than God. In the political poems she molds her own voice to this image, projecting great confidence in the power of her language. Only in "A Curse for a Nation" does she momentarily hesitate to speak harshly critical words against the practice of slavery in America, a country that had provided her with a large and appreciative audience for her poetry.

"A Curse for a Nation" begins with a dialogue between the speaker-poet and an angel who commands her to condemn the United States for continuing to sanction an immoral practice. Reluctant to obey, she counters with a series of arguments which the angel successfully refutes. To the argument that she cannot curse a country that has treated her with respect and admiration, the angel replies that the most effective criticism is motivated by love. To the argument that she cannot curse a foreign nation when her own country's injustices have continued unchecked, the angel responds by pointing out her courage in exposing those wrongs, thereby qualifying her to expose the wrongs of others. Finally, having run out of arguments, the speaker hides behind her female identity, suggesting that women cannot curse, but only weep and mourn in the face of injustice. The angel, of course, responds by asserting that women can curse as effectively as men. The figure of the angel recalls the similar figure in A Vision of Poets who serves as a link between the poet and God. However, in that

Considering freedom a God-given right, Barrett Browning wields her pen to lay a curse upon a nation that sanctions slavery. However, the powerful and unambivalent voice that speaks in this and the other partisan poems has another side that manifests itself in a willingness to look at some of the inevitable conflicts that such partisanship creates. Barrett Browning's political heroes share a number of traits with her ideal poet: both display moral courage, loyalty to an ideal truth even in defiance of convention and popular belief; both demonstrate humility and self-denial, the sacrifice of personal goals in favor of the requirements of their calling; both possess the feminine traits of compassion and empathy. At the conclusion of A Vision of Poets she began to explore the potential for conflict between the poet's dedication to the requirements of his art and the fulfillment of personal needs, focusing on the desire for love, companionship and family life. The poet's premature death, which leaves his young son an orphan, raises questions which the poem's narrator cannot resolve. Barrett Browning once again confronts these questions in two late poems, "A Musical Instrument" and "Mother and Poet," each of which redraws her poet-figure in a strikingly human and realistic light.

"A Musical Instrument" depicts the process by which Pan the goat-god carves a flute from a reed growing in a river, a story that evokes association with several myths. Dorothy Mermin identifies the poem with the story of Syrinx, the

nymph who, pursued by Pan, is transformed into a reed just in time to avoid capture. She interprets Pan's offhandedly violent act of carving the reed as a symbolic rape. Pan's identity both as a musician and as a lusty but unsuccessful lover, however, extends beyond the story of Syrinx and evokes an association with Apollo, also a musician and a rival in musical competition. Aurora Leigh invokes Apollo as her muse, imagining him shooting down her unworthy poems with his silver arrows. The Apollo of Greek myth mirrors Aurora's, and Barrett Browning's, ideal poet: master musician upon his silver lyre; master archer, shooting straight and true with his silver bow and arrows; god of healing, god of light and god of truth (Hamilton 30). Yet Aurora identifies poets as "mere men,/Being called to stand up straight as demi-gods" (PW 329). While Apollo provides a source of inspiration, Pan the demi-god, torn between his god-like status and his earth-bound desires, provides an object with which to identify. Assuming the reed's identification with Syrinx, she, too, represents a demi-god in her identity as woodland nymph.

Mermin further points out that, whereas the Romantic poets portray Pan as a sympathetic artist-figure, Barrett Browning transposes that image to the reed, to whose suffering Pan remains completely blind. She places herself outside the poem as narrator. Yet in an earlier poem entitled "A Reed," first published in 1846, she clearly identifies herself with the reed image. Rejecting the

heroic image of the trumpet as a metaphor for the poet, she imagines herself instead as a humble broken reed lying upon a riverbank. Rejecting heroic subject matter for her poetry, she chooses instead to sing of maids and children, indicating a shift to common life, especially those without a voice of their own. The final verse unmistakably evokes the story of Christ's recruitment of Peter:

I am no trumpet, but a reed;
Go, tell the fishers, as they spread
Their nets along the river's edge,
I will not tear their nets at all,
Nor pierce their hands, if they should
fall:

Then let them leave me in the sedge.
(PW210)

Encountering Peter and his brother casting their nets into Galilee, Christ enjoins them to follow him and become "fishers of men" (Matthew 18,19). However, unlike Christ, whose disciples abandoned their families and livelihoods in order to follow him, the speaker in the poem assures the fishermen that she will not make martyrs of them. "A Reed" deals with the identity of the poet in relation to his audience, projecting a metaphoric image of the poet speaking to plain and humble listeners from a position of extreme humility. The reed has already been formed into the instrument of art. "A Musical Instrument," on the other hand, depicts the process by which the natural reed undergoes that transformation, thereby shifting the focus to a consideration of the artist's internal dilemma.

The poem opens with an image of Pan destroying the natural beauty of the river as he tramps through the lilies to pluck out a reed:

He tore out a reed, the great god Pan,
 From the deep cool bed of the river:
 The limpid water turbidly ran,
 And the broken lilies a-dying lay,
 And the dragon-fly had fled away,
 Ere he brought it out of the river.
 (PW 437)

The image of turbid water, as though thick with the metaphoric blood of living things uprooted, underscores the violence implicit in Pan's creative act. Barrett Browning highlights the discrepancy between the reed's suffering and Pan's jovial complacency as he eviscerates it with his "hard bleak steel" (PW 438) to form it into a flute:

He cut it short, did the great god Pan,
 (How tall it stood in the river!)
 Then drew the pith, like the heart of a
 man,
 Steadily from the outside ring,
 And notched the poor dry empty thing
 In holes, as he sat by the river.
 (ibid)

The image of cutting out the reed's heart recalls the image of the poet's hearts dripping blood in A Vision of Poets, and signifies the intense pain inherent in the creative process. Yet Pan laughingly declares that such pain represents "The only way, since gods began/To make sweet music, they could succeed" (ibid).

Pan's music has a powerful healing effect on the same natural elements which suffered by his carelessness at the poem's opening:

An earlier poem, "The Dead Pan," depicts Christ, symbol of suffering and redemption, replacing Pan as the source of poetic inspiration. The poem enjoins poets to disseminate the word of God rather than sing of idle beauties and mythic fancies. In naming Pan from among all the Greek gods, Barrett Browning evokes what she considers a dangerous and false link between hedonism and art. The later poem, while reviving that image of Pan, shifts focus away from the god and onto the artist. Whereas earlier poems depict the poet's personal sacrifice in a heroic light, comparable to that of Christ, "A Musical Instrument" acknowledges that sacrifice with compassion and resignation but without aggrandisement. The poem implies that the man or woman who molds him/herself into a poet must unfortunately separate himself from ordinary life, but further indicates that as an artist he/she must not divorce himself from the reality of pain, as Pan has done. Having finally confronted her own pain, Barrett Browning dedicated herself to writing about the suffering of others, a concept implicit in this poem's conclusion. The tone of that conclusion, however, represents a major shift away from the heroic, displaying acceptance of an unresolvable dilemma. Pan remains oblivious to life's suffering while the "true gods" sigh "for the cost and the pain" (ibid), yet nothing can remove that pain from life - most particularly from the artist's life.

Barrett Browning portrays this conflict in concrete terms in "Mother and Poet," a powerful dramatic monologue in which the speaker, the Italian woman poet Laura Savio, agonizes over the loss of her two sons in the cause of Italian liberation which she had championed in her work. This poem's impact grows even greater if read together with "Only A Curl," in which the poet-speaker, a mother herself, comforts another set of parents on the loss of their son:

Shall I speak like a poet, or run
 Into weak woman's tears for relief?
 Oh, children! - I never lost one, -
 Yet my arm's round my own little son,
 And Love knows the secret of Grief.
 (PW 443)

The speaker, clearly Barrett Browning herself, articulates the conflict between her responses as a mother and as a poet. While empathizing with the bereaved parents, she can nonetheless write conventionally comforting verses that give them assurance of the child's place in heaven under the protection of a loving and purposeful God. In "Mother and Poet," the speaker, herself the bereaved mother, cannot reconcile her grief with the poetic purpose that ultimately caused it. Savio, the poet who celebrated the cause of Italian independence in her poetry, suffers the consequences of her own powers of influence. Speaking in a tone filled with bitter self-recrimination, she recalls the manner in which she encouraged her sons to fight for the cause which she held so dear:

To teach them ... It stings there! I
 made them indeed
 Speak plain the word country. I
 taught them, no doubt,
 That a country's a thing men should die
 for at need.
 I prated of liberty, rights, and about
 The tyrant cast out.

And when their eyes flashed ... O my
 beautiful eyes! ...
 I exulted; nay, let them go forth at
 the wheels
 Of the guns, and denied not. But then
 the surprise
 When one sits quite alone! Then one
 weeps, then one kneels!
 God, how the house feels!
 (PW 447)

Barrett Browning captures the overwhelming intensity of maternal grief, which supercedes all of the speaker's idealistic beliefs and ultimately causes her to reject her poetic vocation. Declaring women best suited for "hurting her breast with the milk-teeth of babes," and "to feel all their arms round her throat,/Cling, strangle a little!" (ibid), she abdicates any future obligation to sing Italy's cause: "When you sit at the feast/And are wanting a great song for Italy free,/Let none look at me!" (ibid).

Yet Barrett Browning does not reject the poet's role as political idealist; rather, she examines and accepts the inevitable and irreconcilable conflicts engendered by that role. She logically uses her own feminine perspective, focusing on the maternal role, rather than the man's roles a father and soldier, and creating parallel images of motherhood in Laura Savio and her sons, Mary and Christ, and

Italy and her soldiers. Savio cries that she cannot accept for herself the sacrifice made by Mary, imploring Christ to consider "How we common mothers stand desolate, mark,/Whose sons, not being Christs, die with eyes turned away,/And no last word to say!" (ibid 448). Invoking the image of Italy the mother country, she decries the suffering of women in the cause of freedom:

Forgive me. Some women bear children in
strength,
And bite back the cause of their pain
in self-scorn;
But the birth-pangs of nations will wring
us at length
Into wail such as this - and we sit on
forlorn
When the man-child is born.

(ibid)

Yet she does not reject that cause, documenting instead her altered emotional responses to her previous patriotic fervor. In a manner not dissimilar to "A Musical Instrument," "Mother and Poet" portrays the pain implicit in any act of creation. The poem's uniqueness lies in its author's willingness to leave unanswered the question of how to reconcile that pain with the creative acts that engender it.

At the end of her career, Barrett Browning had evolved a remarkably modern sensibility in her ability to confront nonjudgmentally the clash of idealism with such dark and contradictory emotions as anger, grief, even sexual jealousy. In "Bianca Among the Nightingales" a young dark-haired Italian girl agonizes over the loss of her fiance to

a blond, white-skinned English beauty. Dorothy Mermin describes the poem's subversion of conventional images: the jilted girl, called Bianca, does not possess the overt physical characteristics that signify purity, and manifests a passionately violent jealousy; her rival, whom she imagines as a sorceress whose superficial beauty masks dishonest and evil motives, manifests the physical traits associated with goodness and purity; the nightingale, whose song poets conventionally use to signify ideal beauty and love, here serves as a catalyst to Bianca's turbulent anger and pain. The intensity of her current feelings mirrors the intensity of her feelings for Giulio:

And we, too! from such soul-height went
 Such leaps of blood, so blindly driven,
 We scarce knew if our nature meant
 Most passionate earth or intense heaven
 The nightingales, the nightingales!
(PW 428)

Barrett Browning consistently uses the image of blindness to indicate a lack of insight, which in this case might signify Bianca's misinterpretation of her lover's intent toward her, a possibility implied by his somewhat ambiguous declaration of love:

We paled with love, we shook with love,
 We kissed so close we could not vow;
 Til Giulio whispered 'Sweet, above
 God's Ever guarantees this Now.'
(ibid)

Apparently, caught up in the intensity of new passion, they have not yet made a commitment to one another, and Giulio seems to promise his love only in the moment. Bianca also reveals an awareness that Giulio has found happiness with

poet. Like her contemporaries, she had formed early in her career a poetic ideal that dictated the poet's role as healer and problem-solver, providing answers to difficult questions concerning the existence of God and the after-life, as well as the changing social order. As a result, she and the other early Victorian poets felt compelled to suppress or subvert feelings of unresolvable negativity and uncertainty. Barrett Browning's poetry prior to Sonnets from the Portuguese highlights, both directly in the lyric pieces and through split personae in the dramatic poems, the unresolvable conflict between her intense need to communicate a positive message and the demand for expression imposed by an overwhelmingly negative self-image. Wishing to use her poetry as a vehicle through which to express her belief in a purposeful universe presided over by a benevolent God, she expected to take upon herself the characteristics of her ideal poet: serene, humble, dedicated, visionary, capable of perceiving great truths and communicating them in verse. Unfortunately, she could not reconcile that image with the reality of her self-hatred, the result of years of physical debilitation and emotional repression. Her early poetry manifests a mortal fear of expressing her deepest feelings. However, the successful confrontation of those feelings during her courtship, and her ability to document the healing process in the sonnets, freed her to mold her earlier poetic theory into a far more workable and realistic form.

Barrett Browning's attempt to reconcile overtly the poet's life as an artist with the fulfillment of his ordinary human needs represents a unique effort in the Victorian period. Speaking of necessity from a woman's point of view, she tried to balance the need for professional autonomy and success with the desire for love and motherhood. Having learned to embrace her own physical desires, she incorporated sexual passion into her love poetry, portraying it as the positive and joyful manifestation of deep spiritual attachment. Her successful confrontation of her own most volatile emotional issues seems to have given her the courage to take on some of the most volatile political and social issues of the period. More than any other poet of her time, she pulled poetry's subject matter out of the past and into the present. However, her relativist perspective, developed late in her career and cut short because of her premature death, remains her most important contribution to the development of the modern sensibility. The poets who came after her gradually began to examine contradictions and situations without resolution, and to deal with a range of emotions largely rejected by Tennyson's generation. Meredith's open treatment of a married couple's irreconcilable differences and extra-marital affairs, Swinburne's overt eroticism and his fervent support of Italian freedom, seem to continue a trend begun in Barrett Browning's late poems. One can link her treatment, in "Mother and Poet," of the death and

despair caused by war to the poems of Wilfrid Owen and the other World War I poets. In addition, Owens' poem "The Miners" recalls Barrett Browning's poetic treatment of child laborers and the adult working poor. A consistently productive poet, she would surely have had significantly greater influence had she lived another ten years. Unfortunately, her unexpected death cut short a poetic life that had come to maturity rather late and therefore had little time to flower. Nonetheless, the work of Elizabeth Barrett Browning remains an important component in the Victorian canon, and we should award her the place she deserves among her contemporaries.

ELIZABETH BARRETT BROWNING'S ILLNESS

"A breath unmakes me, as a breath has made."

Diary by E.B.B.

The issue of Elizabeth Barrett Browning's health and its influence on her life and work has inspired much controversy among scholars. Although her physicians never made a definitive diagnosis, the evidence does suggest that she suffered from a lung disorder which the conventional wisdom pinpoints as pulmonary tuberculosis. Until fairly recently, scholars and biographers have largely accepted this theory. However, a more recent point of view suggests that Barrett Browning's illness, probably psychogenic in origin, became for her an excuse to avoid participating in the conventional social life of a Victorian upper middle class woman - a life which she admittedly loathed as aimless and boring. Yet insufficient evidence exists to entirely justify a diagnosis either of tubercular or psychosomatic disease, as a result of which the exact nature of the disease has remained a mystery. Although Barrett Browning consulted a number of highly reputable physicians during her life, no extant medical records exist. This lack of direct evidence, combined with the primitive state of medical knowledge in the first half of the nineteenth century, makes a definitive diagnosis impossible. However, enough evidence

does exist in the family correspondence, as well as in Barrett Browning's early diary and the few extant letters to and from her physicians, to suggest that she suffered from chronic bronchial asthma, a condition which can cause extreme debilitation and serious, even fatal consequences.

Barrett Browning experienced two primary symptoms: chronic cough and shortness of breath. The first mention of the cough occurs in a letter written to her by her father in 1809, when she was three years old: "I can't say when I shall have it in my power to return but hope at the expiration of a couple of days more to be on my way back, that is happily as it may happen. I shall expect to see you well without any symptoms of that lurking Cough" (Kelley & Hudson I:1). In 1819, at age thirteen, she wrote to her mother: "As for myself the violent cough that I had when you were last here has not left me and I fear will accompany me to the end of my life - My constitution and my appetite is as bad as ever! But do not be uneasy for you know that natural ill health generally continues to death so it is nothing outree" (Kelley & Hudson I:81). This statement clearly suggests a chronic problem characterized by weakness, cough and poor appetite. The cough grew better during some periods of Barrett Browning's life and worse during others. However, three specific triggers always increased her symptoms: upper respiratory infections, exercise, and cold weather.

Despite the chronic cough, Barrett Browning seems to have enjoyed a relatively healthy and active childhood. Yet her comment to her mother concerning her "natural ill health" would seem to indicate a problem of some duration. At age thirteen, Barrett Browning would most probably have reached puberty. Nineteenth century medical lore viewed the female reproductive system as the source of a wide variety of medical problems and certainly encouraged post-pubescent young women to think of themselves as weak, delicate and easily excitable. Yet when Barrett Browning suffered her first major illness at age fifteen, her physicians expressed the absolute opinion that "the uterine system is not materially affected" (Landis 346). The 1821 illness began with a viral infection that apparently attacked Elizabeth and her two sisters, Henrietta and Arabella. All three girls experienced headache, bodyache and general malaise, but while Henrietta and Arabella recovered within a week or so, Elizabeth did not. Then, less than two months later, an epidemic of measles swept through the Barrett nursery, subsequent to which Elizabeth's health deteriorated progressively, causing her family a good deal of alarm. However, no one either at that time or since has identified the exact nature of her illness, the descriptions of which vary markedly. The impression that she had suffered a spinal injury seems to derive from a letter written by Dr. William Coker to Dr. George Nutall in which Dr. Coker describes a former patient of his whose symptoms,

purportedly quite similar to Elizabeth's, culminated in a diseased spine. Although Dr. Coker actually examined Elizabeth (unlike Dr. Nutall, a London physician who treated Elizabeth's paternal grandmother and who diagnosed and advised her via correspondence!), he could find no evidence of a diseased spine. Nonetheless, he decided to treat her for spinal disease, ordering her strung up in a "spine crib," a hammock-like apparatus suspended five feet off the ground. Dr. Nutall, on the other hand, seemed certain that her symptoms indicated a bowel problem, for which he prescribed purgatives. At this point, her father had already sent her to Gloucester hoping that the sea air would promote her recovery. There a Dr. John Baron attended her, prescribing intermittent blood-letting, as well as opium as a sedative, completing a menu of treatments that would serve to undermine the health of even the most robust individual.

Careful examination of the Barrett family correspondence from 1821 together with the letters exchanged among the various physicians reveals that Elizabeth suffered mainly from unspecified spasms of the muscles surrounding and including the diaphragm, accompanied by a pain in the right side and extreme agitation, a description possibly indicative of psychosomatic hyper-ventilation attacks. However, such attacks occur only when the sufferer is conscious, and never during sleep. Despite Dr. Coker's statement in his letter that "there are generally three attacks during the day and none at night," another comment

made by Elizabeth's brother Edward in a letter to their sister Henrietta clearly indicates otherwise:

Yesterday the first two spasms were long but they went off quietly, the last was only twenty minutes and was by no means violent, the first this morning was shorter than that of yesterday, and not more violent, she has just awoke out of a sound sleep, with the second spasm on her. Nothing seems to diminish these horrible attacks and sleep itself is broken in upon, time and patience will I hope overcome what doctors and physic cannot destroy. (Kelley & Hudson I:330)

When her parents revealed their belief that her illness might have a psychosomatic origin, Elizabeth responded with unequivocal indignance:

I am perhaps too tenacious of the good opinion of my Friends and yet believe me were I not so thoroughly assured of yours and my beloved Puppy's affection as I am your letter might perhaps have proved a dam head to the impetuous torrent of my vanity. When my dearest Mama I promised to exert myself I spoke sincerely and the promise I made I intended to keep. If it were possible believe me that any mental exertion could shake off bodily torture it should be affected without reluctance as without hesitation. I HAVE exerted all my energy all my locomotive intellects all the muscular power of my MIND and I HAVE found that though in some degree bodily anguish may be repressed from APPEARING yet it has failed to be overcome. (Kelley & Hudson I:127-8)

Elizabeth returned to Hope End after eleven months in Gloucester, having recovered her health to a reasonable degree but not her childhood vigor. From this time on her correspondence includes complaints of general physical weakness, chronic fatigue and insomnia. Between 1822 and

1832 (the year marking the sale of Hope End and the family's relocation to Sidmouth) she gradually reveals a set of symptoms that begin to point to a more specific health problem. As numerous Barrett Browning biographers have pointed out, several unfortunate events occurring during this ten year period served to undermine her childhood contentment. "Bro" left home in 1820 to attend school, an event which separated Elizabeth not only from her beloved sibling but from his tutor, Daniel McSwiney, whom she had recruited to teach her Greek and Latin. Bro returned home in 1826, but two years later, in 1828, their mother's sudden death left Elizabeth emotionally shattered. Between 1829 and 1832 she felt her friendship with Hugh Stuart Boyd increasingly thwarted not only by his lack of response to her intense feelings but by the disapproval both of her father and of her aunt Arabella ("Bummy"), who came to Hope End in 1831 to help look after the Barrett children. Always emotionally volatile and acutely aware of her inability to feel content with the social life of an upper middle class young lady, Elizabeth grew increasingly anxious and unhappy during these years. Undoubtedly her mental status detracted from her potential for improved health.

By 1831, Barrett Browning makes frequent mention, both in her correspondence and in the diary which she kept during that year, of her "cough." For the most part she attributes the cough to upper respiratory infections, from which she seems to have suffered more frequently than most people.

Yet she often seems to blame a "cold" for lack of a better explanation. After several days of illness, she wrote to Annie Boyd:

I am much better; and indeed little remains of the indisposition, but the VULGAR fractions of a cough and cold. I dare say - (and Occyta agrees with me -) cold was at the bottom of it all, - for I was so very wise as to lie down upon the grass last Monday, when the sun was shining deceitfully, - tho' the snow was staring at me from the hedges, with an expression anything but dog-days..ical! (Kelley & Hudson II:289)

Similarly, she often presents the cough as the prelude to a cold which does not necessarily materialize, as in this diary notation describing a visit to some neighbors:

Went - nobody there except ourselves. My cough was the pleasantest part of the evening; and that was very bad and disagreeable. I am going to have a 'prodigious' cold" (Kelley & Hudson: Diary 174). The tenacious quality of the cough becomes clear in another entry made two days later: "Reform meeting at Worcester and Hereford: and Sam to the former, and Bro to the latter. I think too that my cough is reforming: but it is not 'the whole bill': only a 'bit by bit' reform. (Kelley & Hudson: Diary 175)

By 1832 she had clearly dissociated her cough from any related illness, as indicated in her description of her father's concern for her health in his choice of a place for relocating the family: "Devonshire is very cheap, - and besides as I have a disagreeable cough when I attempt to walk or talk, he fancies that the warmth of the climate may do me good. The situation of Sidmouth is dry as well as

warm" (Kelley & Hudson III:37). Apparently, any physical exertion triggered fits of coughing, as well as shortness of breath and fatigue, problems which she mentions the previous year in several diary entries. For example, during an outing in which she engaged in such strenuous activities as riding a pony and climbing a hill, she became so fatigued that her brothers had to carry her from the carriage into the house. Similarly, after a day of running about rather wildly at a picnic in late September, she suffered such extreme exhaustion that she had to remain in bed the next day. Several weeks later she again exhausted herself chasing her pet squirrel which had escaped from its cage. Hours later, after supper, when the family asked her to sing, she could not oblige: "I played on the guitar; but my voice had gone away with my breath, in the squirrel chase" (Kelley & Hudson: Diary 159).

Chronic cough associated both with upper respiratory infections and an inability to sustain physical exercise suggests a medical profile that could very well justify a diagnosis of chronic bronchial asthma, a conclusion further corroborated by direct reference in the correspondence to the fact that both Edward Moulton Barrett and his mother suffered from asthma. In 1854, Barrett Browning wrote to her brother George: "You make me sad about dearest Papa, though you call him better and though a return of cough and asthma was a natural thing under the circumstances of your severe English season" (Landis 207), a comment which implies

that Mr. Barrett suffered from a recurrent asthma condition also triggered by cold weather. In addition, Barrett Browning makes scattered references in her letters to her father's "grevous cough" (Kelley & Hudson V:180). In 1825, Mary Moulton Barrett wrote to Barrett Browning: "We are grieved to hear of dearest Granny's asthma: has she tried the thirteen cloves of garlic in a pint of spring water; buried three or four days, and a cup full taken night and morning - it has done much good" (Kelley & Hudson I:207). Apparently, Elizabeth Barrett (Edward Moulton Barrett's mother) suffered as well from a seasonal cough, as indicated in a letter from Barrett Browning to her family during a visit to her paternal grandmother: "Granny suffers from her cough in spite of this UNseasonable weather" (Kelley & Hudson I:228). In 1829, Edward Moulton Barrett, who had gone to his mother's home to attend her during an illness, wrote to his daughter Henrietta:

"Trep sack will have communicated to you more particularly the improved state of my beloved Mother. I have only to add that since yesterday she had a good night, the cough is not more violent than I have known it for years and that the expectoration is of a more healthy character, as well as less of it; her weakness is however very great, which I am not much surprised at, as from the exciting cause she has been subjected to for the last three weeks in the high fever that has preyed on her. (Kelley & Hudson II:363)

Modern research has identified heredity as an indisputably important risk factor for the development of

asthma. Dr. Allan Weinstein, a nationally recognized asthma specialist, states in his handbook for asthma patients:

Clearly, heredity plays a major role in the tendency to develop asthma. The genetic mode of transmission probably involves many factors. The tendency to develop asthma is not as simple as, for example, the tendency to have brown or blue eyes. Although the chances of developing asthma can be influenced by various factors (such as allergies, infections, irritants, and environment), the genetic tendency for asthma in all probability must first be present.
(207)

Dr. Douglas R. Nelson of the Mayo Clinic defines asthma as:

characterized by episodes of coughing, wheezing, or dyspnea [a sense of difficulty in breathing], or a combination of these symptoms, which may vary from mild and infrequent to continuous and severe. The American Thoracic Society has described asthma as a clinical condition characterized by increased airway responsiveness to a variety of stimuli, manifested by narrowing of the airways, and reversible either spontaneously or as a result of therapy. A more recent definition of asthma suggests that the functional abnormalities of asthma - namely, airway obstruction and hyper-responsiveness - are consequences primarily of airway inflammation. (Nelson et al 1993)

In simple terms, in the lungs of certain individuals, the bronchial tubes manifest an extreme sensitivity to certain specific phenomena: exercise; cold or damp air, as well as sudden and excessive changes in temperature; upper respiratory infections; allergens. In response to these stimuli, the muscles covering the bronchial tubes constrict, limiting the flow of air, and the lining of the bronchial

tubes swells and secretes voluminous amounts of mucous which the body tries to eliminate through an involuntary cough. Patients with chronic asthma build up large amounts of mucous in the lungs which thickens over time and becomes difficult to cough up. The coughing then grows more intense and persistent. According to Dr. Weinstein, "The quantity of mucous coughed up can at times be truly astounding - as much as several cups per day. This mucous can clog the airways and make breathing more difficult" (269). Indeed, increased mucous production can lead to a number of serious complications in the patient with chronic asthma, who, according to Dr. Weinstein, may experience such warning symptoms as:

marked worsening of shortness of breath, chest pain located on one side only, or a cough that produces discolored mucous in association with fever. Complications of asthma can include rib fractures as a result of extensive coughing, escape of air from the airways into the chest (pneumothorax) which can occur without reason, as well as collapse of a portion of the lung, often due to mucous plugging the airways (atelectasis). By far the most frequent complication is infection, ranging from an infection of the mucous plugs that are trapped behind blocked airways to pneumonia. (270)

Further examination of Barrett Browning's correspondence from the 1830's and 1840's reveals repeated descriptions of a lung condition that matches with remarkable exactness the clinical parameters for chronic bronchial asthma. Three of the four most prevalent asthma

triggers - cold air, upper respiratory infections, and exercise - seem to have caused her to respond with a persistent dry, hacking cough. In 1837, two years after the Barrett Family moved to London, Elizabeth suffered her second lengthy and serious illness, during which her father engaged Dr. William Frederick Chambers, physician to Queen Victoria, to treat her. In several letters, she describes Dr. Chambers evaluation of her condition: "Dr. Chambers told me openly that my condition would not go, for medicine, He told me that, in his conviction, my lungs were without disease - but so weak, that they struggle against the cold air, which occasions the cough" (Kelley & Hudson IV:8); "Dr. Chambers says he is very confident of there being no disease on the lungs - 'not the least bit' was his expression - but that the lungs and chest being in a weak and delicate state, I am not likely to lose the cough until the warm weather - April or May" (ibid 9); "The weakness, he said came from the action of the cold air on the muscular system covering the lungs, which were both very weak and sensitive to changes in temperature" (Raymond & Sullivan III:139).

Asthma conditions manifest remarkable variation from one individual to the next, with one result, among others, that "many patients report that their asthma symptoms tend to flare with an assortment of weather conditions" (Weinstein 37). Barrett Browning's condition improved not only during the warm weather, but in a seaside environment. The chronic cough she had developed by the summer of 1832

gradually subsided and finally disappeared altogether during the family's residence at Sidmouth after the sale of Hope End. By September she reported that, "I am certainly much better in health, - stronger than I was, and less troubled with the cough. Every day I attend their walks on my donkey, if we do not go in a boat which is still pleasanter" (Kelley & Hudson III:57). By December she declared that "I am very much better than indeed I thought it probable that I should be, at least so soon. There is scarcely a ruin of my cough left - *deja fuit*: and the weakness is diminishing and has diminished so fast that my likeness to Hercules will in time be quite complete. For dear Papa's sake as well as for my own, I should be grateful for this mercy. I walk now every day instead of riding" (*ibid* 70).

Within a month of Barrett Browning's leaving Sidmouth and moving to London in 1835, her cough returned with a vengeance, to the point that she felt compelled to break an engagement to visit Hugh Stuart Boyd: "As certainly as that Arabel cannot draw the teacup, I had intended to go see you today. And I am quite aware that I shall drink a very large overflowing teacup of your wrath, in not going. It is at my lips. I must drink, for I cannot walk. I have such a cough again!" (Kelley & Hudson III:164). She herself blamed the filthy London air: "The house we are in is large enough to hold us comfortably, - and we are likely to remain in it for four months, - in which time our capacities for living the natural term of man's life in this smokygen and foggygen,

may be ascertained" (ibid 158). Dr. Weinstein cites irritants in the air, including pollutants, as common asthma triggers, thereby supporting her conclusion. In 1838, after months of unrelenting coughing and increasing weakness, Dr. Chambers advised her to make an extended stay at the seaside. Her father sent her to Torquay, where, as in Sidmouth, the climate had a beneficial effect, enabling her to engage in mild physical exertion. Edward Moulton-Barrett reported in September, 1838 that "the Climate is much more agreeable to her, than that of this Town, and there she gets air and exercise, one day going out in a Boat and the next in a Chair" (Kelley & Hudson IV:338), and, similarly, her sister Henrietta wrote to her brother Samuel that "Ba was only able to get out I think not more than three times during the last year in London, and now here she goes out almost every day, either in a chair or in a sailing boat" (ibid 339).

Barrett Browning clearly associates her cough with physical exertion as well as with cold air, as when, in 1832, she consoled herself for missing an opportunity to visit Boyd at Bath with the thought that "even if my going to see you had been possible, I might have hurried myself into a coughing fit, and made you wish in your heart that I had stayed away" (Kelley & Hudson III:46). However, she also describes an extreme degree of general physical weakness to which the enforced bedrest prescribed by her physicians must have made an enormous contribution. From

the time of her first illness in 1821, she received strict instructions to occupy neither her body nor her mind. At Gloucester, Dr. Barron confined her to her bed and sofa, and ordered her to sleep late every day. Her mother repeatedly warned her that too much studying would also injure her health. In London, in 1838, Dr. Chambers similarly prescribed complete bedrest, and later at Torquay, Dr Barry, her attending physician, although he allowed limited amounts of physical activity, insisted that she could not write any poetry without doing irreparable damage to her health! On the one hand, Barrett Browning mocked such restrictions: "I had the less ready patience for certain persecutions - and for not being allowed to write or read or eat or drink or go out or stay in, or put on my stockings, without a certificate from Dr. Barry" (Kelley & Hudson IV:92). On the other hand, although she openly ignored her doctor's orders regarding her creative and intellectual endeavors, she feared disobeying their proscriptions against physical exercise, as indicated in this comment to her brother George during her stay at Torquay: "I am lying in bed, from fear of the exertion of getting up. When a medical man stands by saying - 'Don't do it - you will throw yourself back again - it always does you harm -' it is rather difficult to take the other side of the question" (Landis 46-47).

Unfortunately for Barrett Browning, her inactive muscles grew gradually weaker through disuse, to the point

that every physical effort became a major hurdle to overcome. At Sidmouth, as her asthma subsided and she made slow but steady efforts to take more exercise, she grew gradually stronger. Years later, Robert Browning's advice produced a similar result. He instinctively felt that Elizabeth's total lack of physical activity had a detrimental effect on her health and insisted that she get up and move around. Such advice not only improved her muscular strength, it also undoubtedly helped clear her lungs by better enabling her to cough up accumulated mucous, a difficult endeavor from a reclining position. For much of her life as an invalid, Barrett Browning must have felt herself trapped in a web of coughing and inactivity. Modern asthma medications enable patients to breathe normally and live normal lives. Bronchodilating drugs expand the bronchial tubes and relax the muscles that cover them. Anti-inflammatory drugs (corticosteroids) reduce the inflammation inside the bronchial tubes and help break up the trapped mucous. Without treatment, however, the patient can end up with chronically insufficient lung function. During her periods of ill health, Barrett Browning must have felt persistently short of breath and therefore unable to exert herself physically, her inactivity compounding the problem by increasing her weakness.

The third and final factor contributing to Barrett Browning's asthma - upper respiratory infections - seems to have initiated her most severe episodes of illness. Her 1821

illness began with a viral infection followed by measles, a disease characterized by upper respiratory symptoms which certainly could have triggered a period of increased asthma symptoms. The 1837 illness also began with an upper respiratory infection:

I caught a cold nearly two months ago which turned into a cough and has kept me to the house ever since in a very weak state - and Dr. Chambers whom I was kindly persecuted into seeing yesterday (I have an abhorrence of 'medical advice', but my sisters were obdurate) says that I must not think of stirring into the air for weeks to come. He assures me that there is no DISEASE - only an excitability, and irritability of chest, which requires precaution. (Kelley & Hudson III:298)

Between September, 1837 and May, 1838 she continued to suffer from severe cough. Then, in late May, she caught another cold, which, "as all my colds make a point of doing, has diverged to my chest and increased the cough" (Kelley & Hudson IV:34).

Throughout her life, Barrett Browning coughed persistently for weeks or months following each head cold. Ultimately, her death seems to have resulted from an upper respiratory infection that triggered a particularly severe episode of asthma, culminating in what modern physicians refer to as status asthmaticus. For several years prior to her death in 1861, Barrett Browning's cough had once more become chronic, and her general health deteriorated proportionately. By June of 1861 she had grown thin and very weak, the warm weather failing to have its usual

beneficial effect on her cough. Robert Browning's letter to his sister Sarianna, following Elizabeth's death, gives a detailed description of her final illness, which apparently began with a sore throat and cold followed, as always, by an exacerbation of her asthma. However, this time the extreme degree of bronchial congestion and obstruction left her unable to cough: "She seemed little relieved till at 1 o'clock about or later she began to suffer distressingly from the accumulation of phlegm, which she had no power to cough up" (Hood 60). Frightened by her obvious respiratory distress, Browning went to fetch a physician, and upon returning with a Dr. Wilson, found her "worse, laboring most distressingly and ineffectually" (Hood 60). For several days she continued in the same manner, with only intermittent success in coughing up phlegm, together with episodes of light-headedness, presumably from oxygen deprivation. During the final night she began to hallucinate, imagining herself and Robert on their first journey to Italy following their marriage. Robert describes her last moments: "I felt she must be raised, took her in my arms - I felt the struggle to cough begin, and end unavailingly - no pain, no sigh, - only a quiet sight, - her head fell on me. I thought she might have fainted - but presently there was the least knitting of the brows - and A. cried, 'Quest' anima benedetta e passata'" (Hood 62).

Dr. Weinstein describes the manner in which death can occur as the result of status asthmaticus:

When asthma is out of control during status asthmaticus, there is increased constriction of the airways, increased inflammation within the lining of the airways, and increased mucous plugging the airways. As the airways become more and more obstructed, it becomes increasingly difficult for the asthma patient to breathe. To compensate for the blockage within the airways, the normal response of the body is an increase in the rate of breathing (hyperventilation).However, if the blockage in the airways is severe or if the patient becomes fatigued from the effort of breathing, the oxygen level eventually decreases and, more seriously, the carbon dioxide level increases because it cannot be effectively exhaled.Without mechanical ventilation, abnormalities in the oxygen and carbon dioxide levels in the blood can result in irregular heartbeats, which could be fatal. (251-252)

Robert's description of his wife's last hours support the conclusion that she died of heart failure due to prolonged oxygen deprivation. The fact that her cough had persisted for many months, even into the warm weather, indicates a greater than normal degree of prior inflammation and mucous build-up in her lungs. Her final illness seemed to her no different from those she had previously experienced: "It is the old story - they don't know my case - I have been tapped and sounded so, and condemned so, repeatedly," she told Robert. "This is only one of my old attacks. I know all about it and I shall get better" (Hood 60). She had no reason to think that a simple head cold (Robert's letter makes no mention of fever or any serious complication) could

pose a threat to her life. Unfortunately, chronic asthma left untreated over a prolonged period can prove fatal.

One final symptom from which Barrett Browning suffered her entire adult life might further corroborate a diagnosis of chronic bronchial asthma: in her letters she frequently complains of insomnia, for which she took laudenum (a solution of opium and alcohol commonly used in the nineteenth century as a general sedative and cough suppressant). She began her use of opium at age fifteen, during her first illness, a factor which logically connects with the "attacks" she suffered, some of which, as her brother Edward reported, roused her from a sound sleep. Her correspondence indicates that her inability to sleep increased during her periods of illness and subsided when her health improved. She makes direct association between her insomnia and the weather conditions which aggravated her cough:

Can anything grow anywhere or any way
with this terrible wind? The
temperature of my bedroom is kept up day
and night to 65 and I am not suffered to
be moved from the bed even for its
making - and yet the noxious character
of the air makes me very uncomfortable
and sleepless. I took two draughts of
opium last night - but even the second
failed to bring sleep. (Raymond &
Sullivan II:178)

In an 1837 letter to Mary Russell Mitford, she reported: "Even if I have not the nausea, the other fearful suffering is sure to come every morning, sometimes at four or five o'clock" (Kelley & Hudson III:299). According to Dr.

Weinstein, asthma, for reasons not yet well understood, tends to flare at night:

Asthma symptoms tend to occur at night and in the early morning hours. This can be quite annoying for the asthma patient as it often disturbs a night of sleep. In addition, flares of asthma that are severe also are more likely to occur at night or early in the morning.
(274)

Undoubtedly, Barrett Browning's physical inactivity contributed to her insomnia, as did her naturally high-strung temperament, thereby compounding the problem. During her periods of illness, any excitement during the day might cause her to feel wakeful at night. When her health improved and her cough subsided, and she began taking regular exercise, she reports sleeping better. Unfortunately, her opium use would certainly have had an adverse effect on her lung condition. Morphine (the narcotic substance in opium), which acts on the central nervous system as a depressant, is contra-indicated for use in patients with bronchial asthma or any form of respiratory insufficiency (Physicians Desk Reference 2082). It slows down breathing and suppresses the cough reflex, thereby making it more difficult for the asthma sufferer to clear the lungs of mucus.

In fact, the nausea and poor appetite of which Barrett Browning frequently complained might, at least in part, have also resulted from her opium use. Patients who use morphine can suffer such side effects as nausea and vomiting,

anorexia (loss of appetite), constipation and intestinal spasm. Opium use might therefore partially explain not only the acute pain in the side she complained of during her 1821 illness, but her sometimes extreme loss of weight during each of her illnesses. Furthermore, asthma patients frequently report nausea during acute attacks, as well as vomiting, which seems to relieve their symptoms, at least temporarily. In fact, some nineteenth century physicians deliberately induced vomiting in asthma patients as part of their treatment. In addition, digitalis, which her doctors invariably prescribed for her recurrent episodes of rapid pulse, can also cause anorexia, nausea and vomiting. On the other hand, an appetite disorder (over-eating as well as under-eating) can indicate a degree of emotional distress, and Barrett Browning, always high strung and extremely intense in her responses to events and people, may have experienced appetite loss during stressful periods in her life. Rapid pulse can also occur as the result of stress, and indeed she reports experiencing this symptom after any unusual event, very likely the result of her early avoidance of conventional social intercourse combined with years of living as a cloistered invalid. Yet the episodes of rapid pulse occurred almost exclusively during periods of ill health, indicating a connection to her physical as well as her emotional status.

Dr. Scully seems to have associated her pulse with her respiration, as reported by her sister Arabella in a letter

to one of her brothers: "Dr. Scully pronounced her to be better today. He said the respiration was much more tranquil - the pulse calmer - her countenance looked better, and to use his own words 'the storm has almost passed'" (Kelley & Hudson IV:360). The rapid breathing that occurs during an asthma episode can cause the heart-rate to increase, possibly compounded by the patient's own fear of the attack. Barrett Browning does reveal a significant degree of anxiety in anticipation of her attacks: "I am aware of being always on the verge of an increase of illness," she wrote to Boyd in 1838, "I mean, in a very excitable state - with a pulse that flies off at a word and is only to be caught by digitalis. But I am better - for the present - while the sun shines" (Kelley & Hudson IV:65). Dr. Weinstein points out that, while psychogenic factors cannot cause asthma, emotional factors can trigger or exacerbate asthma symptoms. Quite commonly, the fear experienced by the asthma sufferer in response to the sensation of insufficient breathing worsens the attack.

Although emotional factors very likely contributed to Barrett Browning's rapid pulse and poor appetite, little concrete evidence exists to corroborate the theory, proposed by British psychiatrist Peter Dally, that she suffered from anorexia nervosa, a late nineteenth and twentieth century emotional disorder that causes the sufferer, usually an adolescent girl, to refuse food in order to gain attention from and exert control over her parents. Anorexic girls

deliberately ignore the normal demands of appetite, starving themselves to the point of extreme danger and even death, in order to achieve a degree of thinness which they perceive as desirable and attractive but which in reality represents the result of gross malnutrition. Barrett Browning's correspondence and diary both indicate that she perceived no advantage either from her thinness or her lack of appetite. Her 1831 diary provides perhaps the most accurate barometer to her attitude toward eating and weight loss, in that it contains only private thoughts, not intended for anyone else's perusal. She expresses no pleasure in her thinness, considering it neither attractive nor advantageous: after a walk with her aunt "Bummy" she wrote, "Felt tired, - and was very unwell afterwards. How weak and thin I am growning" (Kelley & Hudson: Diary 229); another entry reads, "I do not feel well; and look like a ghost. Mrs. Martin called, and thought so too!" (ibid). Moreover, on a day appointed for fasting by the church, rather than perceiving any advantage in an opportunity for legitimate abstention from food, as would a true anorexic, she finds the experience difficult and counter-productive: "I was quite exhausted with fasting today. My head was dizzy, and my limbs languid, and my mind incapable of applying itself to any subject. This was not I believe altogether as it should be. I won't fast again without being more sure of Scriptural premises than I can feel just now" (ibid 227). She clearly associates her weight loss with ill health and

lack of strength, and invariably expressed delight during periods when, as her health improved, she put on weight: "Moreover the improvement in my health which began last summer has gradually increased rather than diminished," she wrote to Mary Russell Mitford in 1842. "I have grown fatter, stronger - do not look at all as I did!". (Kelley & Hudson V:294).

Looked at from another point of view, Barrett Browning's chronic thinness would certainly help to support a diagnosis of pulmonary tuberculosis, particularly when combined with the fact that during her 1837 illness, she experienced episodes of blood-spitting over a period of many months. In addition, she reports having night fevers during several of her more acute episodes of illness. Nineteenth century physicians included pulmonary tuberculosis in the category of consumptive diseases, meaning that the patient experienced a wasting away of the body mass. The term "consumption" did not signify a synonym for tuberculosis, in part because physicians lacked the technology to diagnose the disease definitively. The clinical evidence upon which they relied sometimes led them to confuse true tuberculosis with other lung disorders. Nonetheless, certain specific symptoms in combination did allow fairly accurate diagnosis: a wasting of the whole body (weight loss); a "hectic" fever, occurring in the morning and again in the evening; a cough, dry at first, that later becomes productive, resulting in the expectoration of blood-tinged mucous and, eventually,

solid lesions called "tubercles." We know that Barrett Browning experienced periods of weight loss. She also experienced night-time fevers during several of her illnesses. However, all fevers tend to increase in the late afternoon and evening and subside in the morning, and in all her correspondence, Barrett Browning makes no mention of morning fever. Her cough, dry and hard like that of an asthmatic, did become productive at times, causing her to expectorate clear mucous, and, during her 1838 illness, blood-tinged sputum. However, the coughing up of blood from the lungs, or hemoptysis, can occur as the result of trauma from the cough itself, or as a symptom of another infectious disease. Assuming that Barrett Browning did suffer from chronic bronchial asthma, and that she built up an extreme degree of mucous plugging over a period of years, she almost certainly would have developed one of the infectious complications described by Dr. Weinstein, perhaps chronic bronchitis or pulmonary aspergillosis (a fungal infection indigenous to Great Britain). This would explain the episodes of fever as well as the blood-tinged sputum.

Furthermore, the typical course of pulmonary tuberculosis does not match Barrett Browning's case history. Tuberculosis, an infectious disease, follows a progressive course, gradually destroying lung tissue and ultimately causing death. In some cases the disease makes rapid progress, while in others it takes a slower course, allowing the body time to fight the bacteria and arrest the disease.

Before the advent of antibiotics, patients who recovered from tuberculosis might experience a recurrence of the disease, which would then progress as before. Asthma, on the other hand, takes a chronic form in which the patient can enjoy symptom-free periods alternately with exacerbations that can occur in randomly milder or more severe forms. Barrett Browning coughed off and on for forty years, with varying degrees of intensity and duration, sometimes with fever and weight loss, sometimes without. Such a clinical picture does not point to a diagnosis of tuberculosis, nor did her own physicians ever definitively make such a diagnosis. In fact, they repeatedly asserted that she did not have true tuberculosis: to cite just one example, Barrett Browning reports that Dr. Scully, who treated her in Torquay, after calling in another physician for a consultation, concluded that "what they call tubercular disease is supposed to have not yet taken place in me" (Raymond & Sullivan II:168).

Assuming, then, that Elizabeth Barrett Browning had a chronic form of bronchial asthma with intermittent infectious complications, one must conclude that her illness represented not so much a disease as a chronic disability. One mother of a severe chronically asthmatic child recently described her as "weak, pale and curled up in a little ball" (Sander 10). It took several years for this child to get a correct diagnosis and a carefully tailored program of medications. Fortunately, she now leads a nearly normal

life. Barrett Browning, lacking the advantages of modern medicine, lived most of her adult life as a respiratory cripple. Students of both her poetry and her biography must recognize the effect of such a disability on her psychological status. Restricted from activity by insufficient lung function combined with enforced bedrest, unable to eat properly, and subjecting herself to medications and treatments that created more problems than they resolved, she inevitably developed an image of herself as physically inadequate in every respect. The rhetoric of imprisonment that periodically reappears in her poetry and correspondence refers to entrapment by the body, not the mind. How incredulous she must have felt when Robert Browning, a brilliant, handsome and socially active man six years her junior declared his eternal love for her.

Browning instinctively knew that Elizabeth could improve her health by adhering to a more healthful way of life. He slowly coaxed her to eat more nutritiously, reduce her intake of medication, and get some exercise, as a result of which she developed enough physical stamina to elope with him, an act that required enormous courage on her part. After their marriage, her health continued to improve under the same regimen, combined with residence in the warm Italian climate. Barrett Browning's five pregnancies during the first five years of her marriage may also have contributed to her improved health: about one third of women with asthma report fewer symptoms during pregnancy

(Weinstein 218). In Italy, her growing physical strength and increasingly normal respiration must have reduced her level of stress, to the point that she began to engage in social intercourse with a circle of friends and literati, and to make excursions to numerous points of interest. In short, as long as she felt trapped by physical disability, she never could have achieved the freedom, love and sense of self-worth she so vehemently desired and which she finally attained through her marriage. One must acknowledge, however, the active role taken by Barrett Browning in her own recovery and elopement. She allowed Browning to guide her, and her fear required that he make many of the decisions concerning details, but the decision to leave home remained hers alone, demonstrating that she had finally learned to apply her independent and strong-willed intellect to her personal life, thereby paving the way to integrate them. The poetry she wrote subsequent to her marriage clearly reflects that change.

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