



**University  
of Cyprus**

**DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH**

**(RE)VISIONS OF FORM: THE POLITICS OF POETICS AND THE  
POETICS OF POLITICS IN ELIZABETH BARRETT BROWNING'S  
*OEUVRE***

**DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY DISSERTATION**

**ANASTASIA ANGELIDES**

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**ANASTASIA ANGELIDES**

**A Dissertation Submitted to the University of Cyprus in Partial  
Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy**

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## **VALIDATION PAGE**

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The present doctoral dissertation was submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy of the University of Cyprus. It is a product of original work of my own, unless otherwise mentioned through references, notes or any other statements.

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## ABSTRACT

Η υφιστάμενη διδακτορική διατριβή διερευνά τις αναπροσαρμογές των παραδοσιακών ειδών ποίησης και την ενασχόληση με καίρια πολιτικά ζητήματα της εποχής στο έργο της Ελισάβετ Μπάρετ-Μπράουνιγκ. Μέσα από την ανάλυση των βασικότερων έργων της, καταδεικνύεται ότι η ποιήτρια καταφέρνει να εισέλθει στην παροδοσιακά ανδροκρατούμενη λογοτεχνική περιοχή για να επαναπροσδιορίσει τα τυπολογικά στοιχεία του έπους, του σονέτου και του δραματικού μονόλογου οδηγούμενη από την επιθυμία της να ανανεώσει τις ποιητικές φόρμες αλλά και να αναταποκριθεί στις κοινωνικοπολιτικές συνθήκες της εποχής της. Το βασικό επιχείρημα αυτής της διατριβής έχει οδηγήσει στην αποδοχή της ύπαρξης μιας διαδραστικής λογοτεχνικής κοινότητας που απορρίπτει τη διαιώνιση της περιθωριοποίησης των ποιητριών λόγω της υποτιθέμενης τάσης τους προς το συναίσθημα. Αντίθετα, υποστηρίζεται ότι η απόδοση της αρμόζουσας ιστορικής προσοχής στο έργο της Ελισάβετ Μπάρετ-Μπράουνιγκ προϋποθέτει την απάμβλυνση της έντασης ανάμεσα σε αντιθετικά ζεύγη όπως άνδρας/δημόσια ζωή/πολιτικός λόγος και γυναίκα/ιδιωτική ζωή/συναισθηματικός λόγος, αναγνωρίζοντας έτσι τις πολιτικές προεκτάσεις του συναισθηματικού λόγου. Το Ρομαντικό της ιδεώδες για ένα νέο κόσμο αποδεικνύεται να είναι άμεσα συνδεδεμένο με τον επαναπροσδιορισμό της αντίληψης για τον εαυτό σε σχέση με τον άλλο και με τις μετασχηματιστικές δυνάμεις του ποιητή. Αποδεικνύεται ότι η ενασχόλησή της με κοινωνικοπολιτικά ζητήματα και η επιθυμία της να υψώσει μια επιβλητική φωνή στην ανροκρατούμενη λογοτεχνική κοινότητα υπήρξαν νευραλγικής σημασίας για την ποιητική της. Με σκοπό να προβληθεί ο τρόπος με τον οποίο επαναπροσδιορίζει την εμπειρία της γυναίκας συγγραφέως/ποιήτριας στοιχειοθετείται η καυστική κριτική της ενάντια στην κοινωνική ανισότητα, τα συστήματα καταπίεσης καθώς και η αξίωσή της για οικουμενική ειρήνη και εθνικό αυτοπροσδιορισμό.

## ABSTRACT

This thesis investigates Elizabeth Barrett Browning's revisions of traditional verse forms and her engagement with political debates of her time. Through an analysis of key works, I demonstrate how the poet trespasses traditionally male literary territory and rewrites the map of composition of the epic, the sonnet and the dramatic monologue, arguing that her revisionary impulse was cognate with the desire to address sociocultural contingencies. The main argument of this thesis has led to the acceptance of the existence of a dynamic interactive literary community and opposes the perpetuation of women poets' marginalization on account of their alleged predisposition to the sentimental. On the contrary, I argue that granting the deserved historical attention to the *oeuvre* of Elizabeth Barrett Browning presupposes the effacement of the tension between gendered antithetical pairs such as male/public/political and female/domestic/sentimental, thus acknowledging the political undercurrents informing the discourse of the sentimental. Her Romantic ideal of a new, transfigured world is shown to arise from her investment in re-calibrating the notion of the self in direct relation to the other and in assigning a transformative power to the function of the poet. Her entanglement with sociopolitical issues and her drive to assert an authoritative voice in the male dominated literary marketplace are shown to have played a seminal role in the shaping of her poetics. I demonstrate her trenchant critique of social inequality, and systems of oppression, as well as her plea for international conviviality and national self-definition showing how she manages to redefine female poetic experience.

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## Introduction

Imperius Man! Is this alone thy pride  
T' enslave the heart that lingers by your side?

Eternal Genius! Thou mysterious tie,  
That links the mortal, and Divinity!  
Say, hath thy sacred influence never stol'd,  
With radiance unobsured, on Woman's soul;  
Till, waking into greatness, it hath caught  
The glow of fancy, and the life of thought,  
Breathing Conception, eloquence that fires,  
And all that learning gives & Heav'n inspires?  
Is Woman doomed obscure, and lone, to sigh?  
Comnena, Dacier, More, DeStaël, reply!<sup>1</sup>

Elizabeth Barrett Browning was only sixteen when she wrote her first manifesto on female creativity which brilliantly encapsulates women's diachronic claim to intellectual achievement. Why would a teenage girl who led a quiet life in a secluded environment which offered countless books to read, yet no friends or tutors to discuss them with, be interested in the plight of the woman artist? What was it that aroused her most intense attention to the woman poet's experience? Invisibility and sighing were women's lot, yet in casting anxious glances behind her at an array of literary women, she set a lifelong task for herself: to erase doubts about women's genius.

Her 'Essay on Woman' might be read as a complaint in response to Alexander Pope's 'An Essay on Man' (1733-34), which is cast in the mould of heroic couplets and celebrates male literary greatness. Addressing her 'Essay on Woman' to the 'imperious Man', the role of the literary women with which the poem breaks off is undermined,

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<sup>1</sup> Elizabeth Barrett Browning, 'Essay on Woman', *Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Selected Poems*, eds. Marjorie Stone and Beverly Taylor (Peterborough, Ontario: Broadview, 2009), p. 50, ll. 35-36, 50-61. Stone and Taylor inform us that 'the essay survives in a manuscript (R D308) carrying the watermark 1822 (when EBB turned sixteen). The date of composition might be earlier however, since the manuscript is not a working draft but a signed fair copy. The poem was first published in 1984 by Eleanor Hoag, yet the text here differs from Hoag's transcription at several points'. p. 52.

betraying her anxiety as regards their efficacy to incite inspiration to future generations of women poets, including Elizabeth Barrett Browning herself. ‘Is Woman doomed obscure, and lone, to sigh?’ she asks her female predecessors, inviting at the same time, as if having a future grasp of the diverse reception of her work, the contemporary reader never to lose sight of this thread of thought. This question in all its capacity as a rhetorical device conveys the sheer affirmation of her preoccupation with female poetic experience, guiding us through her dialogues with the literary imagination and poetical forms inherited by forefathers and forged by male peers. The unresolved cultural tension inherent in pairs of binary concepts such as male / female, public / private, active / passive, speaking / silent was catalytic in the organization of private lives and public conduct in Victorian times, setting thus the wider background against which her poetry demands to be measured. It is precisely this anxiety emanating from the elision of women from public life, and consequently the literary scene, that was meant to supplant and invigorate her poetical endeavours along with the unremitting vitality of a progressive mind. Ultimately, the question ‘Is Woman doomed obscure, and lone, to sigh?’ directs our attention to the fact that Elizabeth Barrett Browning wrote from the gendered margins of art to claim an esteem that was denied to earlier women writers. At the same time, it also harbors an anxiety emanating from her awareness of the persistent association of female poetry with the expression of suffering and excessive emotion that countered her desire to perform socio-political critique.

Ironically, early critics of her work were reluctant to acknowledge her concern with the lack of a female poetic tradition, silencing thus the ideological implications of such a viewpoint. Eric Robertson,<sup>2</sup> Lilian Whiting,<sup>3</sup> Osbert Burdett<sup>4</sup> and Louise Boas<sup>5</sup> were just a few of the commentators who provided idealized readings of her poetry and

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<sup>2</sup> Eric Robertson, *English Poetesses* (London: Cassell, 1893).

<sup>3</sup> Lilian Whiting, *A Study of Elizabeth Barrett Browning* (London: Gay, 1899).

<sup>4</sup> Osbert Burdett, *The Brownings* (London: Constable, 1928).

<sup>5</sup> Louise Boas, *Elizabeth Barrett Browning* (New York: Longman, 1930).

correspondence by accentuating the experience of womanly love as the driving force of her poetical impulse. In 1932, Virginia Woolf, responding to the prolonged critical neglect of her work, attempts to rehabilitate her, arguing that the myth of her clandestine marriage to Robert Browning and their elopement to Italy, deeply rooted in popular and literary imagination as it had been, was the main culprit for her obscure position as a poet. Lamenting Elizabeth Barrett Browning's declined reputation, she writes:

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. The primers dismiss her ... In short, the only place in the mansion of literature that is assigned to her is downstairs in the servants' quarters, where, in company with..., she bangs the crockery about and eats vast handfuls of peas on the point of her knife.<sup>6</sup>

In 1965 Alethea Hayter's twenty-nine page assessment of Elizabeth Barrett Browning's language and versification reveals that nothing had changed regarding her literary status during the three decades that had elapsed from Woolf's account. According to Hayter, the prospect of recuperating her poetry was so grim that it was 'still too soon to say whether her fame as a poet will ever return' and that 'she may have to wait two hundred years as Ford and Webster did till Charles Lamb brought them back to life'.<sup>7</sup> Fortunately, as Margaret Reynolds observes in documenting the trajectory of Elizabeth Barrett Browning's critical reception, 'feminism happened'<sup>8</sup> and thus Elizabeth Barrett Browning escaped the confines of Woolf's mansion of literature. Her fame did return within eleven years of Hayter's verdict. Ellen Moers in her seminal work, *Literary Women*, published in 1976, recognises Elizabeth Barrett Browning as a woman writer of astonishing intellectual capacities and champions

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<sup>6</sup> Virginia Woolf, *The Common Reader: Second Series* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1932), p. 219.

<sup>7</sup> Alethea Hayter, 'Elizabeth Barrett Browning', *Writers and Their Work* (London: Longman, 1965), p. 29.

<sup>8</sup> Elizabeth Barrett Browning, *Aurora Leigh*, ed. and introd. Margaret Reynolds (New York and London: Norton, 1996), p. ix.

*Aurora Leigh* as ‘the feminist poem’ (61) of English Literature. In Elaine Showalter’s *A Literature of Their Own: British Women Novelists from Brontë to Lessing*, Elizabeth Barrett Browning appears on the list of women writers who ‘were breaking new ground and creating new possibilities’.<sup>9</sup> It was not until 1978 though with Cora Kaplan’s pioneering introduction to *Aurora Leigh and Other Poems* that Elizabeth Barrett Browning began to receive critical approbation systematically on account of the transformative strength and the political overtones of her poetic strategies. Kaplan is credited with the inauguration of a strand of criticism investigating the enhanced potentiality of Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s poetry to renegotiate ‘a metaphorical tradition and political perspective formed and dominated by the male voice’.<sup>10</sup> Kaplan’s recovery of *Aurora Leigh* was followed by a surge of articles, critical biographies and book-length studies of Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s major works and voluminous correspondence, while at the same time her *magnum opus* was taken up by feminist academic circles. Susan Gubar and Sandra Gilbert’s *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination*, though primarily interested in canonizing nineteenth-century women’s writing focusing on the novel, engages in an incisive analysis of Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s work; while Kathleen Hickok’s *Representations of Women*,<sup>11</sup> providing a selection of studies on prominent Victorian women poets including Elizabeth Barrett Browning, breaks the rule of critical silence enveloping nineteenth-century women’s poetry.

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<sup>9</sup> Elaine Showalter, *A Literature of Their Own: British Women Novelists from Brontë to Lessing* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977), p. 19.

<sup>10</sup> Cora Kaplan, Introduction. *Aurora Leigh and Other Poems*, by Elizabeth Barrett Browning (London: The Women’s Press, 1978), p. 14. In a review entitled ‘The Heroine as Hero’ published in *The Times Literary Supplement* (April 14, 1978), p. 404, Lorna Sage argues that, taking into consideration Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s ‘recalcitrant and ruthless individualism’, Cora Kaplan’s introduction of the poem should ‘provide a sharp focus for feminist debate’.

<sup>11</sup> Kathleen Hickok, *Representations of Women: Nineteenth-Century British Women’s Poetry* (Westport and London: Greenwood Press, 1984).

Angela Leighton's,<sup>12</sup> Dorothy Mermin's<sup>13</sup> and Marjorie Stone's<sup>14</sup> monographs have successfully reclaimed Elizabeth Barrett Browning's high artistic and intellectual merit by foregrounding the radical self-reflexiveness, the reformulation and fusion of Romantic and Victorian understandings of selfhood, and the complexity of meaning resulting from her entanglement with sentimentality and politics. The aforementioned critical re-evaluations along with Simon Avery and Rebecca Stott's<sup>15</sup> more recent contribution constitute nowadays the standard works of reference for Elizabeth Barrett Browning studies. The intriguing, original voice of Elizabeth Barrett Browning has justified the recuperative purpose of yet another inspiring book-length study published in 2011 by Avery, who investigates the representations of spiritual, emotional and political 'home', as well as its restructuring across her poetical career.<sup>16</sup>

Moreover, the emotional content of Elizabeth Barrett Browning's *oeuvre* has been paid generous attention by Leighton in her ground-breaking study *Victorian Women Poets: Writing Against the Heart*<sup>17</sup> and Glennis Byron (formerly Stephenson) in *Elizabeth Barrett Browning and the Poetry of Love*. While Leighton discusses the gender-specific and political connotations of the surprising swerve of the aesthetics of self-denial of the Sappho / Corinne myth in Elizabeth Barrett Browning's poetry, Stephenson seeks to correct the pious iconography of the suffering heroine that has corrupted Elizabeth Barrett Browning's critical assessments by arguing that 'while sentimentality is certainly a distinguishing feature of the myths, it is hardly characteristic of the love poetry: the poems often exploit and undermine the

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<sup>12</sup> Angela Leighton, *Elizabeth Barrett Browning* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986).

<sup>13</sup> Dorothy Mermin, *Elizabeth Barrett Browning: The Origins of a New Poetry* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1989).

<sup>14</sup> Marjorie Stone, *Elizabeth Barrett Browning* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1995).

<sup>15</sup> Simon Avery and Rebecca Stott, *Elizabeth Barrett Browning* (Harlow: Longman, 2003).

<sup>16</sup> Simon Avery, *Elizabeth Barrett Browning* (London: Northcote House, 2011).

<sup>17</sup> Angela Leighton, *Victorian Women Poets: Writing Against the Heart* (Hemel Hempstead, Hertfordshire: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1992).

sentimental, but they rarely *indulge* in it.<sup>18</sup> More recently, Kirstie Blair's *Victorian Poetry and the Culture of the Heart*<sup>19</sup> has offered new insights with a chapter-length discussion of the emotional currency of her poetry by exploring the reasons why male poets sought to immerse their writing in the rhetoric of the heart, and by further illuminating Elizabeth Barrett Browning's appropriation of the heart in the discourses of desire, love, politics and poetics. Claire Knowles enters the critical discussion of Elizabeth Barrett Browning's confrontations with the legacy of sensibility with her book *Sensibility and Female Poetic Tradition, 1780-1860*<sup>20</sup> which was published in 2009. In response to the discomfort of feminist critics who tend to overlook the religious aspects of her poetry as it signals a more private, unassertive zone of expression, Linda M. Lewis's<sup>21</sup>, Karen Dieleman's<sup>22</sup> and Heather Shippen Cianciola's<sup>23</sup> erudite studies have proved that Elizabeth Barrett Browning's religious poetics apart from being aesthetically intriguing, are also more intellectually sophisticated and politically engaged than was previously thought.

In this study I will concentrate on a selection of poems which, in my view, serve as touchstone pieces for Elizabeth Barrett Browning's interest in the relation between women poets' literary creativity and the desire to address sociocultural formations of her time. Although the initial feminist recuperative work already targeted the elucidation of the social context and the cultural representations of identity, my task is inspired by the more recent critical trend which was systematically advocated in Isobel Armstrong, Linda Peterson and Virginia Blain's book *Women's Poetry, Late Romantic*

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<sup>18</sup> Glennis Byron, *Elizabeth Barrett Browning and the Poetry of Love* (Ann Arbor and London: UMI Research Press, 1989), p. 2.

<sup>19</sup> Kirstie Blair, *Victorian Poetry and the Culture of the Heart* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006).

<sup>20</sup> Claire Knowles, *Sensibility and Female Poetic Tradition 1780-1860* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2009).

<sup>21</sup> Linda Lewis M., *Elizabeth Barrett Browning's Spiritual Progress: Face to Face with God* (University of Missouri Press, 1998).

<sup>22</sup> Karen Dieleman, *Religious Imaginaries: The Liturgical and Poetic Practices of Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Christina Rossetti, and Adelaide Procter* (Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 2012) and 'Elizabeth Barrett Browning's Religious Poetics: Congregationalist Models of Hymnist and Preacher', *Victorian Poetry* 45.2 (2007): 135-157.

<sup>23</sup> Heather Shippen Cianciola, "Mine Earthly Heart Should Dare:" Elizabeth Barrett's Devotional Poetry." *Christianity and Literature* 58.3 (2009): 367-400.

*to Late Victorian: Gender and Genre, 1830–1900* in emphasizing ‘the poetic investigation of gender and its interplay with genre’.<sup>24</sup> My project thus looks closely at the specific ways in which Elizabeth Barrett Browning engaged progressively with important political and social issues through generic revision and ideological reconsideration of prominent discourses. In view of the increasing attention to genre and the shift in the meaning of ‘women’s poetry’ in the field of Victorian studies,<sup>25</sup> Elizabeth Barrett Browning, a poet who made important contributions in a wide range of genres, deeply immersed as she had been in the poetic theory of the Romantic and the Victorian period, invites a more concentrated discussion of her work as not only crossing gender lines but also the borders of genres. Women’s writing, in performing a transgression of borders, also interrogates strict periodization of the literary production in the Romantic and Victorian periods. My study thus follows the pioneering work of Richard Cronin in his book *Romantic Victorians* and suggests that we no longer need to cling to such rigid periodization. Refraining from valorising two distinct ideologies and practices for the Romantic and Victorian projects, we might be able to better grasp ‘the relations between texts’<sup>26</sup> and particularly the similarities and divergences between the approaches of poets from different points in time. To this end, throughout this thesis attention will be placed on the development of various poetic models,

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<sup>24</sup> Isobel Armstrong, Linda H. Peterson and Virginia Blain, *Women’s Poetry, Late Romantic to Late Victorian: Gender and Genre, 1830–1900* (London: Macmillan, 1999), p. xiv.

<sup>25</sup> My understanding of the development of a strand of criticism of ‘women’s poetry’ moving beyond the recovery of female authored forgotten poetical works accommodates the concept of literary scene as a vibrant, interactive community. It owes a great deal to Marion Thain’s charting of the shifting critical currency of the ‘term women’s poetry’. In her article ‘What Kind of a Critical Category is “Women’s Poetry?”’, *Victorian Poetry* 41.4 (2003): 575–584, she informs us that ‘the differences between the conception of ‘women’s poetry’ represented at Isobel Armstrong, Virginia Blain, and Laurel Brake’s 1995 ‘Rethinking Women’s Poetry: 1730–1930’ conference and that apparent at the 2002 ‘Women’s Poetry and the Fin-de-siècle’ conference might be a useful starting point. Certainly, in 1995 the sense in which ‘women’s poetry’ was a recuperative term was still in the air. In contrast, the discourse of the forgotten was hardly in evidence by the 2002 conference ... If there was a change apparent in the 2002 conference from the agenda aired in 1995, it might be the subtle twist of the focus from ‘Gender and Genre’ to, more specifically, ‘Gender as Genre’. The debate about the genre of gender was, of course, already apparent in the 1995 conference in the concern of several speakers with the historical role played by the category “women’s poetry” and the necessity, to current critical thinking, of understanding the generic qualities of this label’. p. 575.

<sup>26</sup> *Romantic Victorians: English Literature, 1824–1840* (Hounds mills: Palgrave, 2002), p. 4.

performances and preoccupations that, more often than not, lie outside the boundaries of particular periods.

The main argument of the thesis is that the intrinsic concern with the woman poet's experience in Elizabeth Barrett Browning's *oeuvre* is cognate with a progressive, politicised poetics that informs the deep structure of meaning. Since poetics and politics in Elizabeth Barrett Browning's work are inexorably bound, the thesis is divided into two sections with a view to facilitating the elucidation of her strategies of interrogating and relating to the patriarchal foundation of literary culture and socio-political establishment of her time. In the first section I track the political undercurrents of her revisions of traditional verse forms, while in the second section attention is shifted onto the overtly sociopolitical concerns of her poetry. Ultimately, this thesis aims at three objectives. First, to make another step forward in dissociating Elizabeth Barrett Browning's work from biographical narratives and the myth of the heroine with ringlets. As the strictures imposed by the reliance on biographical elements suspend the emergence of a poetical voice and the solution of a wide range of issues, the poet's authorial anxiety and the difficulties of addressing the socio-cultural reality of her time are obscured. Second, I enter the on-going dialogue amongst critics with the hope that this study will propose an alternative lens through which her poetry can be approached. In my view, Elizabeth Barrett Browning's adherence to modes of poetry not typically aligned with female approaches to poetic production demands to be read by deploying theoretical frameworks that repudiate segregational attitudes. Third, this project hopes to pique scholarly interest in the writings of Elizabeth Barrett Browning as part of a larger endeavour to chart the trajectory of nineteenth century women's generic and ideological interventions, as they reveal an astute, progressive and self-sufficient poetic genius.

The first chapter of my thesis elucidates Elizabeth Barrett Browning's theory of the role of the poet. I therefore investigate the models she inherits from the Romantics, specifically Lord Byron and William Wordsworth, and delineate her position in relation to the two poetesses, Felicia Hemans and L.E.L. Furthermore, I investigate how her complex concept of the poet becomes itself a subtext in *Aurora Leigh*, with the deployment of Carlyle's *vates* figure and its conflation with the voices of the epic and Romantic bard.

Due to the fact that her renegotiation of the construct of the poetess can be vividly illustrated in the reconfiguration of the boundaries of poetic sorrow in her critique of L.E.L.'s elegy to Hemans, I will read Elizabeth Barrett Browning's 'Stanzas Addressed to Miss Landon' with a view to investigating the hypothesis that L.E.L.'s elegiac attraction to death and her understanding of suffering as a woman's natural duty is substituted in Elizabeth Barrett Browning's poetry with optimism and woman's triumph over death.

In order to shed light on her cross-generic strategies in the adaptation of topics and techniques from fiction in *Aurora Leigh*, I will deploy Bakhtin's theory of language to show that the *heteroglossia* emanating from the novelistic qualities of this epic poem enables Elizabeth Barrett Browning to work with social and cultural material in more immediate ways. Moreover the Bakhtinian theory of novelization proves a serviceable means to understand Aurora's journey to self-realization through the narration of her exposure to the traditional socio-cultural establishment represented by Romney and her efficacy to transform herself and her beloved through her oracular function as a woman poet.

Chapter two will explore the manifestations of the poet's androgynous imagination in the poetry of the 1830s and *Aurora Leigh*. With a view to contextualizing the symbol of the androgyne in the framework of the vision of a

transformed society, I will turn to her two attempts at translating *Prometheus Bound* in 1833 and 1850, so as to show that Prometheus embodied the union of masculine and feminine characteristics and that this reconstruction of the mythic hero implies that the promise of a transfigured society will be predicated on the harmonisation of opposing forces and the acceptance of otherwise ‘silenced’ agencies. The comparison between the two translations is important as it delineates the poet’s trajectory to a Christianised androgynous imagination, which is manifest in her 1838 volume, entitled *The Seraphim and Other Poems* (1844). From this volume, two poems will be discussed: ‘The Tempest’ and ‘The Seraphim’. The reading of ‘The Tempest’ will clarify the androgynous significance the poem’s protagonist develops with the utilization of alternating images of the Burkean categories of the sublime and the beautiful. ‘The Seraphim’ will be read by deploying Toril Moi’s rendition of the Derridean concept of the ‘transcendental signified’ and Luce Irigaray’s ‘sensible transcendental’ in order to show how the poet subverts the structure of such a signified by the representation of Christ as both powerful / masculine and humiliated / feminine in the moment of Crucifixion.

Moving on to *Aurora Leigh*, the androgynous imagination of the poet will be explored by deploying Irigaray’s theory of sexual difference. Focusing on Aurora’s subversive identificatory model of inspiration and the closure of the poem, I will demonstrate how the poet’s androgynous ideal, as a salving of male and female principles, is fully articulated: first, by claiming for her heroine an active position in society based on the acceptance of difference and, second, by envisioning a new society wherein men and women enjoy equal standing.

Chapter three explores the reworking of the amatory sonnet by positing the discussion in the ideological context of Petrarchism and focuses on the aesthetic implications generated by the fact that the speaker in the sonnets is a woman. The idea

of constructed authenticity will be linked with her appropriation and revision of Spanish and Portuguese sonneteers, while the emergence of a discursive zone within which the speaker and the beloved coexist will be explained as the effect of the literary *mise en abyme*. Female agency in the *Sonnets* will be further elucidated by the exploration of the dynamics of exchange, which sets the speaker in a position to negotiate her way to matrimonial love. *Sonnets from the Portuguese* will be approached as a ground-breaking sequence. What will be argued is that the materialization of subjectivity defies entrenched hierarchies, prevails as inextricably bound to discursive demarcations enabling thus the blurring of gender boundaries, the proliferation of identities and an intersubjective experience of romantic love. I will therefore demonstrate how Elizabeth Barrett Browning's choice to write in the traditional form of the sonnet reveals a writerly impulse which was revisionary, playful and progressive in a specific literary and psychological sense. In so far as it empowered her to subvert the tropes of female silence inherent in the conventions of the sonnet form and to procure role reversals and conflations which attribute to the female speaker of the sequence a strong voice, it also enabled her to claim agency in the economy of love on equal terms with the beloved, who, in this exceptional case, is male.

Chapter four, entitled ‘The Cosmopolitan ideal in Enlightenment and Victorian Thought and the Cosmopolitan Poetics of Elizabeth Barrett Browning in “Casa Guidi Windows”, “Napoleon III in Italy” and “Italy in the World” from *Poems before Congress*’ will explore the cosmopolitan outlook of Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s *Risorgimento* poetry with a view to examining how her cosmopolitan vision diverges from dominant ideologies informing the thought of Kant and her contemporaries. What will be argued is that Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s cosmopolitan poetics is not to be understood merely as the product of her enthusiasm with her adopted country,

Italy, and her disinterested stance towards England; rather, that it constitutes a conscious and systematic contribution to a cosmopolitan ideal which would allow the building of Italian nationhood and Italy's emancipation from foreign rule. The enquiry will begin by contextualizing her understanding of cosmopolitanism in Romantic and mid-Victorian thought and it will draw the connections with Kant's cosmopolitanism. In tracing the trajectory of her cosmopolitan thought and poetics, I will accept that she proposes a cosmopolitan ideal very much similar to Kant's, who supports that the human race must seek perpetual peace between nations through a free federation of nations; an account whose explanatory potential is crucial in understanding Elizabeth Barrett Browning's commitment to the formation of Italian nationhood. At the same time, I will utilize concepts from modern critics in order to substantiate the hypothesis that her cosmopolitan politics may bear a lasting appeal in the contemporary understanding of cosmopolitanism. Focusing on her appropriation of male republican figures, such as Dante, and her admiration of Napoleon III, I will show that her revisititation of Carlyle's 'Able-man' is viscerally linked with her notion of civic citizenship. It will be argued that her cosmopolitan poetics is contiguous to a cross-dwelling subjectivity, which allows the speaker of 'Casa Guidi Windows' to move freely on multiple spatial and temporal planes. For the explication of the speaker's cross-dwelling capacity I will be utilizing Charles Spinoza and Hubert Dreyfus' theory, which posits 'cross-dwelling' within an anti-essentialist discussion championing the acceptance of multiple worlds. Therefore, I will be able to expose the multiple positions which enable her to deploy a diverse set of poetic strategies, such as the fenestral viewpoint conditioning the assertion of authorial voice. It will be argued that the discursive context created by the frame of the window allows the poet to take up multiple subject positions so as to either re-appropriate to opposite effect or vehemently attack all discourses which impede the enactment of her plea for Italy,

which is part and parcel of her cosmopolitan ideal of international conviviality. Moreover, it will be proposed that the fenestral viewpoint accommodates a dynamic interplay of the different types of nationalistic devotion to Italy and detachment from Britain, which causes, as it will be shown, the blurring of boundaries. Finally, as the visual technique of the poem has often been read as serving Elizabeth Barrett Browning's scheme to occupy and therefore speak from multiple positions, I will embark on the analysis of the poem's metaphors targeting the denunciation of traditional feminised representations of Italy and the conflations of Italy's republican past with the English nation's masculine character.

Chapter five explores the emergence of the dramatic monologue and premises the reading of Elizabeth Barrett Browning's poem 'The Runaway Slave at Pilgrim's Point' on the acceptance of women poets' contribution to the formulation of the genre. As her adaptation of the conventions of the dramatic monologue betrays her wish to project an inverted moral order, I will attempt to show that her strategy is partly responsible for the inconsistent set of socio-political conclusions mobilised in this poem. In exposing how the poet employed literary forms to disclose oppressive and corrupt social formations my discussion will also reveal how these inform the organisation of a biopolitical sovereign state and the institution of slavery as a side-effect of a biopolitics that seeks to perpetuate life by setting in motion the structures of a state of exception. Inspired by the theories of Michel Foucault and Giorgio Agamben as well as John Stuart Mill's theory of poetry, my reading of the poem will attempt to foreground the complex visual techniques of surveillance that the poet deploys to create scenes of entrapment so as to launch a social critique that accentuates the totalizing oppression of slavery. Furthermore, infanticide will be discussed with close reference to other autobiographical slave narratives such as Harriet Jacobs's while the accountability of life in biopolitical institutions will be connected to the construction

of less privileged identities predicated upon the polarized sense of belonging and self-displacement. This reading responds to the idea that ‘The Runaway Slave at Pilgrim’s Point’ can no longer be merely subsumed beneath a grid of feminism or biographical detail and that its participation in so many diverse discourses prismatically illuminates the transformative power generated at the core of this collision of forms.

Ultimately, this thesis aspires to re-situate Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s work within a scholarly debate which examines men and women writers in equal dialogue with each other and considers them as members of an interacting literary community. As Stephen Behrendt argues, Romantic women’s poetry

seldom conform(s) to the familiar outlines of what we have customarily regarded as the male Romantic poetic tradition in Britain. But they are nevertheless *in conversation* with that tradition, as well as with one another, and this conversational aspect in fact characterises far more of Romantic literary production-by women and men alike-than has commonly been appreciated. Writers of both genders, and from across the economic, political, and ideological spectrum, understood themselves to be participants in an active-even interactive-community of writers and readers.<sup>27</sup>

Siding with Behrendt, I argue for the urgency to challenge successfully many common-place myths regarding female poets. The Bloomian model, in all its fascination with originality, nonetheless charts the history of poetic influence in the battlefield wherein the confrontational encounters between ‘strong poets’ and their ‘strong precursors’ take place. Bloom’s literary history becomes, to use his own words, ‘a history of anxiety and of self-saving caricature, of distortion, of perverse, wilful revisionism without which modern poetry as such could not exist’.<sup>28</sup> Since

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<sup>27</sup> Stephen Behrendt, *British Women Writers and the Romantic Writing Community* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2009), p. 4.

<sup>28</sup> Harold Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), p. 30.

according to Bloom only a small number of male poets are ‘strong’ enough to be truly original, how any account of a common literary tradition of men and women writers might feed into his theory is very difficult to imagine. Yet, Bloom’s theories continue to exert influence on critical assessments of poetic tradition in the aforementioned eras. Stone, for instance, in her discussion of *Aurora Leigh*’s embeddedness in the *Künstlerroman* tradition, while acknowledging the limitations of its patriarchal outlook refrains from a wholesale disavowal of Bloomian theories. Hence, in the following chapter I accept the operation of the self-reflexive structure of the *Künstlerinroman*, following Evy Varsamopoulou’s practice in her book-length study *The Poetics of the Künstlerinroman and the Aesthetics of the Sublime*.<sup>29</sup> Varsamopoulou concludes her exploration of sublime aesthetics in an array of female-authored *Künstlerinromane* from the Romantic period until modern times by launching a critique of the Bloomian model. Arguing for a critical atmosphere which is more responsive to the place of women in the literary tradition she states that

On the one hand, not all men who write need fall into the Bloomian paradigm, and on the other, not all women who write can be presumed not to function according to these ‘catastrophic’ Oedipal anxieties. We need to allow for the flexibility in the positions with which male and female subjects identify, irrespective of or despite biological sex (itself not impervious to ambiguities) (246-247).

Undoubtedly, the wealth of scholarship on women writers of the Romantic and the Victorian period has been largely successful in recuperating them from the sidelines of literary tradition in the past four decades. Yet, I contend that there is still a lot of ground to be covered for the retrospective reclamation of a vibrant, interactive literary community and for granting Elizabeth Barrett Browning, a figure who courted

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<sup>29</sup> Evy Varsamopoulou, *The Poetics of the Künstlerinroman and the Aesthetics of the Sublime* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2002).

with the title of the most famous woman poet of her time, the deserved position in literary history.

## **Chapter 1: Elizabeth Barrett Browning's Concept of the Role of the (Woman) Poet and Generic Innovation in *Aurora Leigh***

In this chapter I will set out to trace the trajectory of the figure of the poetess<sup>1</sup> during the late Romantic and the early Victorian period with a view to show how Elizabeth Barrett Browning has played a seminal role in the reformation of this literary construct. I will therefore investigate Elizabeth Barrett Browning's early and mid-career poetry and prose writing in order to elucidate her complex concept of the poet, which, I argue, reflects her fascination with both the Wordsworthian and the Byronic model. The coherence of her concept was constantly challenged through her confrontations with the construct of the poetess, which in my view constitutes the third factor informing her self-fashioning as a poet and theorist of the role of the poet. In proceeding in this manner, my investigation of her work will not strictly adhere to the chronology of its publication.

Stone, in her pioneering work on Elizabeth Barrett Browning, embraces Bloom's six stages of poetic progress, even as she rebukes his patriarchal framework.

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<sup>1</sup> Anne K. Mellor in 'The Female Poet and the Poetess: Two Traditions of British Women's Poetry, 1780-1830', *Studies in Romanticism* 36 (1997): 261-276, p. 265, also deploys the term "poetess" assigning it though a negative connotation with a view to underscoring her inferiority to the "female poet", whose work is associated with overtly political interests. She contends that the "female poet" "inaugurated a tradition of explicitly *feminist* poetry, a poetry that insisted on the equality of women with men and the right of women to speak publicly on subjects to which they could contribute a uniquely valid perspective and which had an impact on their daily lives." I don't embrace Mellor's pejorative usage of the term for, in my view, the aesthetics of the sentimental more often than not may reveal social and political concerns. I thus deploy the term poetess to refer specifically to the historical figure of the nineteenth century alluding to the constraints imposed on female literary creativity during the Romantic and Victorian period. In all other instances I use the term poet. Stephenson in her article 'Letitia Landon and the Victorian Improvisatrice: The Construction of L.E.L.', *Victorian Poetry* (1992): pp. 1-17, pp. 1-2, illuminates the historical construct of the "poetess" and argues that it imposed certain limitations on women poets' literary authority. She writes: 'the predominantly male critics who controlled the literary journals and magazines during the early nineteenth century had the power to define the nature of women's poetry; more importantly, they had the power to define the woman herself: the "poetess" was overtly assigned a number of the characteristics that more usually remained within the subtext of nineteenth-century constructions of "woman." To be a literary success she had to establish an audience: to establish an audience she had to win the approval of the critics; as a result, nineteenth-century women poets, as Marilyn Williamson notes, became 'the first to write against a definite ideology formulated by society for their literary activity.'

Specifically, she assigns *Aurora Leigh* to the ‘later phases of ‘poetic incarnation,’<sup>2</sup> thus identifying a linear trajectory in the progression of Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s poetics. In the same manner, Avery, in his 2011 monograph, though not adopting Bloom’s taxonomy, also documents a linear progress in Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s poetical development, albeit structuring his study on the shifting signification of the notion of ‘home’ in her struggle for spiritual, emotional and religious integration.

In order to designate the points of comparison and divergence from her immediate predecessors Felicia Hemans and L. E. L., I will investigate her engagement with them in an elegiac dialogue, which was inaugurated with Hemans poem to Mary Tighe and concluded with Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s elegy to L.E.L. Both Hemans and L.E.L., who were very prolific in the 1820s and 1830s, enjoyed the literary status of the poetess themselves, producing numerous poetical versions of the literary myth of Germaine de Staël’s *Corinne* which trades on the dynamics of public expressivity of women and negotiates their artistic development as an assertion of their individuality. Elizabeth Barrett Browning, whose poetry was generally read as more overtly political than that of Hemans’s and L.E.L.’s, attempted to differentiate her own position in relation to Hemans’s and L.E.L.’s sentimental legacies, despite the fact that she felt indebted to their poetics. In order to foreground Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s poetic anxieties, particularly those emanating from her encounters with the gendered mode of sentimental expression, I will focus on her elegies addressed to L.E.L. because they bring to light her commitment to pull free from excessive sorrow. Her oscillation between the sentimentality of the poetesses and the political outlook of the poetry of her male peers needs to be read anew as an index of her innovative contribution, not a symptom of her artistry’s shortcomings as it has often been read,<sup>3</sup> and in direct relation

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<sup>2</sup> Marjorie Stone, *Elizabeth Barrett Browning*, p. 93, 154.

<sup>3</sup> For instance William Irvine and Park Honan disparage Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s engagement with politics and dismiss her longest of political poems, ‘Casa Guidi Windows’, arguing that ‘the use of verse pumps Elizabeth up beyond any possibility of coherent and rational discussion ...’. Cited in Julia Markus,

to the emergence of the modern woman poet. While Mermin's statement that Elizabeth Barrett Browning belongs to the 'male Victorian line, with poets of comparable stature to her own' rather than alongside 'the popular poetesses who adorned the literary scene when she began to write'<sup>4</sup> might not explain Elizabeth Barrett Browning ambivalent status as a "poet", it does call to attention the fact that her encounters with the abiding sentimentality of the poetesses, reverential and confrontational at the same time, were and still are the primary reason why critics fail to classify her as a poet, either over-emphasizing the political aspect of her poetry or misunderstanding her embeddedness in the discourse of sentimentality. While I recognize the validity of Leighton's overarching argument of her book-length study of Victorian women poets' resistance to the sentimental, that the best Victorian women poets sought to keep a distance from this discourse as it gradually became more and more artistically restrictive,<sup>5</sup> yet in addressing the complexities entailed in Elizabeth Barrett Browning's agenda it is of pivotal importance to re-contextualize her engagement with sentimental poetry within a wider framework, that of Romanticism. In my view, her rootedness in Romantic ideologies of the role of the poet is what enables her to revisit and revise the conventions of the construct of the poetess, of the female *Künstlerinroman* and the myth of Corinne. Derek Furr in his comparative study of the elegiac discourse adopted by Hemans, L.E.L. and Elizabeth Barrett Browning notes that, 'the graveside conversation

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'Textual Notes,' in Elizabeth Barrett Browning, *Casa Guidi Windows* (New York: The Browning Institute, 1977), p. xix. In the same manner, her *Poems before Congress* incited vitriolic criticism. In a review entitled 'Poetic Aberrations' in *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine* (April 1860), pp. 490, 491, the volume was denounced and women's "interfer[ence] in politics was stridently condemned: 'We have just received a thin volume of verses-for we cannot call them poems-by one who we are proud otherwise to style as a real poetess, and to whose high merit we have before now borne most willing testimony-Elizabeth Barrett Browning; and very sincerely do we regret, for her sake, that she has fallen into the error of publishing anything so ineffably bad, if we regard it as poetical composition-so strangely blind, if we look upon it as a political confession of faith ... '. My position with regards to Elizabeth Barrett Browning's poetical status is subtended by the idea that her embeddedness in the sentimental discourse does not downplay the astute articulation of political concerns. Moreover, it opposes the perpetuation of criticism which makes use of essentializing terms and presents her as a sentimental figure whose work, to use an early twentieth century critic's words, was 'feeble ... inevitable in the case of a woman feeble in spirit as well as body.' Reference here is to Marjory A. Bald, *Women Writers of the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1923), p. 209.

<sup>4</sup> Dorothy Mermin, *Elizabeth Barrett Browning: The Origins of A New Poetry*, p. 1-2.

<sup>5</sup> Victorian Women Poets: *Writing Against the Heart*.

among these poets demonstrates [that] Hemans, Landon and Barrett were very different poets, though not radically different from each other. They are bound together, fundamentally, by their appreciation for a poetry of sentiment'.<sup>6</sup> Granting the deserved historical interest to Elizabeth Barrett Browning's reformatory contribution to the figure of the poetess and the poetics of sentimentality, performs, in my view, a crucial step towards a more nuanced understanding not only of 19<sup>th</sup> century women's poetry but of 19<sup>th</sup> century British literature as a whole.<sup>7</sup>

*Aurora Leigh*'s aesthetic considerations as well as its ruminations on women's role in society, love and the production of meaningful art may indeed lay similar claims to those voiced earlier by de Staël, Hemans and L.E.L. Yet, there's a fascinating aspect in Elizabeth Barrett Browning's *Aurora Leigh* that signposts an enormous shift of attitude and vision when the fate of the heroine comes into question. De Staël's Corinne first loses all her formidable creative talents and then dies of literally unspeakable grief, because 'she is not just rejecting a man, she is rejecting the world that approves of him'.<sup>8</sup> Hemans's heroines seek to triumphantly preserve and memorialize domestic ideals and sing themselves to death foregrounding what lies at the core of the feminine quest for self-definition, the heroine's self-sacrifice. L.E.L.'s female protagonists follow the same fate: they also die. Ironically though, because of their art. But this is not the case with Elizabeth Barrett Browning's Aurora. Not only does she not die, the climactic moment of her poetic experience launches an alternative model of female creativity marked by the rejection of the construct of the suffering poetess. Moreover, her novel-like union with the beloved signifies the apogee of her artistic genius and her

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<sup>6</sup> Derek Furr, 'Sentimental Confrontations: Hemans, Landon, and Elizabeth Barrett', *English Language Notes* 40.2 (2002): 29-46. p. 31.

<sup>7</sup> Margaret Morlier in 'Elizabeth Barrett Browning and Felicia Hemans: The "Poetess" Problem', *Studies in Browning and His Circle* 20.2 (1993): 70-79, p. 78, argues that 'the reviews of Barrett Browning's work in the nineteenth century indicate that she succeeded in reshaping the cultural image of the female poet from that of the passive delicate poetess who could only rise so far in literary respect'.

<sup>8</sup> Toril Moi, 'A Woman's Desire to Be Known: Expressivity and Silence in Corinne', *Bucknell Review* 45.2 (2002): 143-175. p. 171.

transformation into a triumphant visionary of a new age and a new society. My argument, thus, follows Linda H. Peterson's understanding of Elizabeth Barrett Browning's corrective intervention in the construct of the Romantic poetess, who claims that the retailoring of this female literary figure served the development of the Victorian woman poet.<sup>9</sup> While the indebtedness to de Staël's *Künstlerinroman*<sup>10</sup> has been widely acknowledged and rigorously investigated, especially during the last quarter of the twentieth century, *Aurora Leigh*'s happy ending in sustaining the eradication of the love / art dichotomy not only redefines the poetic experience of the female artist but also dramatizes an essential revision of the plot of the *Künstlerinroman*. Varsamopoulou is the first critic to alert us to Elizabeth Barrett Browning's contribution to the formation of the genre of the *Künstlerinroman*.<sup>11</sup> In her discussion of *Aurora Leigh*'s strong intertextual links with de Staël's *Künstlerinroman*, *Corinne*, she argues that this revision is operative within the *Künstlerinroman* plot and that Aurora 'avoids the fate of Corinne, whose public *Künstlerin* plot was undone by the private exchange of heterosexual gaze' (32). Linda Lewis also investigates Elizabeth Barrett Browning's

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<sup>9</sup> Linda H. Peterson, 'Rewriting A History of the Lyre: Letitia Landon, Elizabeth Barrett Browning and the (Re) Construction of the Nineteenth-Century Woman Poet', *Women's Poetry, Late Romantic to Late Victorian: Gender and Genre 1830-1900*, eds. Isobel Armstrong, Virginia Blain (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1999. pp. 115-32), p. 116.

<sup>10</sup> I deploy the term *Künstlerinroman* in accordance with Evy Varsamopoulou's theorization and historical contextualization of the genre in *The Poetics of the Künstlerinromane and the Aesthetics of the Sublime*. Varsamopoulou explains that 'the *Künstlerroman* was the narrative account of the formation, development, education, psychology of an artist, as a special type of individual ... The great poet who will save humanity from its present course of destruction by an aesthetic activity ... The *Künstlerroman* with a writer or poet protagonist discloses critical awareness of the metier of literary art, blurring the boundaries between fiction and criticism, as the novelist becomes critics of his/her own creative process or product. It is equally true though that the other half of the *Künstlerroman*'s genealogy comes from the aesthetic discourse of the sublime' (x-xi, xii). She informs us that 'the final break which established the *Künstlerroman* as a specifically Romantic genre came with Novalis's *Heinrich von Ofterdingen* (1802) [which] ... was composed in emulation to Tieck's *Franz Sternbald* [(1798)] and also as an 'anti-Meister' answer to Goethe's *Bildungsroman* [*Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship* (1795)] ... *Künstlerinromane* by women, however, began with Madame de Staël's *Corinne ou l' Italie* (1807), where the protagonist is already a recognised poet when she first appears in the narrative-though we are later given a retrospective narrative of her artistic prehistory' (xi, xiv). Varsamopoulou concludes her study arguing that to read female authored *Künstlerinromane* 'is to become aware of the formative role of their metafictional discourse on the sublime. This recognition directs us to an awareness of the intertextual network which connects these to previous *Künstler(in)romane* written by women and men in the history of a Romantic novelistic genre' (243).

<sup>11</sup> Varsamopoulou contends that 'as a manifesto for both female authorship and the significance of aesthetics in modern society, *Corinne* thus occasioned an equally ambitious response; the two texts [*Corinne* and *Aurora Leigh*] establish the *Künstlerinroman* in European literary history' (xv).

entanglement with the female fiction of development and engages in a comparative discussion of *Aurora Leigh* and George Sand's *Consuelo* and *La Comtesse de Rudolstadt*. She demonstrates that Aurora Leigh and George Sand's heroine, Consuelo, escape the tragic end of Corinne and her literary successors because they realize that self-definition and spiritual growth in art are accommodated in love. She states: 'among the literary quests ... , Sand and Barrett Browning are the exception in that they refuse to compromise art for love and insist that a great love perfects the artist's life and her work'.<sup>12</sup> For all its density in intertextual references and mixedness of generic conventions, I argue, *Aurora Leigh* comprises primarily the epitome of Elizabeth Barrett Browning's theories on the role of the poet.

### Adopting the Wordsworthian and the Byronic Poetical Models

At this point it would be fruitful to explore the identification with the masculine in order to contextualize the development of the woman poet in the wider debate on the role of the poet in the Romantic and the Victorian period. In a century as self-consciously transitional as the nineteenth, Elizabeth Barrett Browning's desire to reflect on political, intellectual and aesthetic debates of her time comes as no surprise. In line with this inherent desire, Elizabeth Barrett Browning herself and her protagonist, Aurora, produce a book of poetry, dealing with contemporary life, which is read and respected by men as well as women, in a genre which in English literary culture was still obdurately masculine. In 1845, twelve years before the publication of *Aurora Leigh* she writes to Robert Browning:

But my chief intention just now is the writing of a sort of a novel-poem-a poem as completely modern as 'Geraldine's Courtship,' running into the midst of our conventions, & rushing into drawing rooms & the like 'where angels fear to

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<sup>12</sup> Linda M. Lewis, *Germaine de Staél, George Sand, and the Victorian Woman Artist* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2003), p. 101.

tread';-& so, meeting face to face & without mask, the Humanity of the age, & speaking the truth as I conceive of it, out plainly. That is my intention.<sup>13</sup>

The persistent effort to assert the female voice in the domains of masculine agency resulted in an interiorized ambivalence towards femininity and the ethical role of a woman's art, which manifests itself not only on the level of the construction of Aurora's subjectivity and the workings of her imagination but in Elizabeth Barrett Browning's theorising of the role of the poet. The engagement with topical issues and discourses of the age and the exploitation of a hybrid technique comprise the sustained attempts to apply her concept of the poet in practice. Drawing amply on the tradition of the masculine genre of the epic and on the novel, which was regarded as the suitable genre for female expression and the site wherein female agency was restricted, Elizabeth Barrett Browning deploys a diverse set of conventions relating to the particular situation of the woman poet, Aurora Leigh, and exploits them to invoke her need for self-justification in the face of a male dominated society and literary marketplace. Therefore, this hybridisation defies widely accepted yet conservative theories of her times, regarding the role of the poet. With a view to understanding her theory of the role of the poet, I will set out to first; briefly present the poetic theories of her contemporaries; secondly, designate the models she inherits from the Romantics, thirdly, elucidate her position in relation to the two poetesses, Hemans and L.E.L. Finally, I will investigate how this complex concept of the poet becomes itself a subtext in *Aurora Leigh*.

Representative figures of the mainstream poetic theories of her time, John Stuart Mill and Matthew Arnold, raise a divide between genres, decrying thus any kind of textual hybridisation. Based on this premise they would have been very uncomfortable

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<sup>13</sup> Elizabeth Barrett Browning and Robert Browning, *The Brownings' Correspondence*, ed. Philip Kelley, Ronald Hudson, Scott Lewis, and Edward Hagan, 16 vols (Winfield, KS: Wedgestone Press, 1984), 10:102-3.

with accepting Elizabeth Barrett Browning's reformative enterprise on both the thematic and the generic level. For example, Mill would have certainly lamented the erasure of generic conventions inherent in cross-generic strategies since he strictly identifies two distinct projects for the poet and the practitioner of prose fiction.

The truth of poetry is to paint the human soul truly: the truth of fiction is to give a true picture of life ... Great poets are often proverbially ignorant of *life*. What they know has come by observation of themselves; they have found *there* one highly delicate, and sensitive, and refined specimen of human nature.<sup>14</sup>

Similarly, Arnold in his 1853 'Preface' to the first edition of *Poems* argues against the poet's entanglement with the realities of public life:

The Greeks felt, no doubt, with their exquisite sagacity of taste, that an action of present times was too near them, too much mixed up with what was accidental and passing, to form a sufficiently grand, detached, and self-subsistent object for a tragic poem. Such objects belonged to the domain of the comic poet and of the lighter kinds of poetry.<sup>15</sup>

W. E. Aytoun in his review of *Aurora Leigh* in *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*, shares the same sentiment with Mill and Arnold in arguing that, 'It is not the province of the poet to depict things as they are, but also to refine and purify as to purge out the grosser matter... The language is not that of common life, which belongs essentially to the domain of prose'.<sup>16</sup>

Book V of *Aurora Leigh* stridently inaugurates the aesthetic and, more specifically, the literary ideals of the text, by assigning an important role to the poet, as

<sup>14</sup> John Stuart Mill, 'What is Poetry?' [1833], *Poets, Poems and Poetics in 19<sup>th</sup> Century Literary Journals*, introd. John Vladimir Price (London: Routledge/Thoemmes Press, 1995), p. 62.

<sup>15</sup> Matthew Arnold, *Poetry and Criticism of Matthew Arnold*, ed. Dwight Culler (Boston, 1961), pp. 207-208.

<sup>16</sup> W. E. Aytoun, 'Mrs. Barrett Browning-Aurora Leigh', *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine* 81 (January 1857): 23-41, p. 34.

the chronicler of his or her time, a role then ascribed to the novelist. Aurora denounces the classical and medieval pasts fostered by Hemans, L.E.L., and Alfred Tennyson in their poetry. She holds that ‘To flinch from modern varnish, coat or flounce, / Cry out for togas and the picturesque, / Is fatal, -foolish too [...]’ (ll. 208-210). She maintains that the high-born and the chivalric are the culprits for still-born poetry:

I do distrust the poet who discerns  
No character or glory in his times,  
And trundles back his soul five hundred years,  
Past moat and drawbridge, into a castle court,  
To sing - oh not of lizard or of toad  
Alive i’ the ditch there,- ’t were excusable,  
But of some black chief, half knight, half sheep-lifter,  
Some beauteous dame, half chattel and half queen,  
As dead as must be, for the greater part,  
The poems made on their chivalric bones;  
And that’s no wonder: death inherits death.<sup>17</sup>

(V 189-199)

Rod Edmonds in his book *Affairs of the Hearth* investigates the romantic relationships in Tennyson’s *The Princess* and Arthur Clough’s *The Bothie*, and maintains that this passage is a critique targeting Tennyson’s medievalist romance *The Princess*, which embraces the model of the ‘helpmeet’ marriage that *Aurora Leigh* consciously rejects.<sup>18</sup>

However, it is important to read this passage not only for its critical overtone, but for its clear validation of the role of the poet as an artist of the ordinary. Such a declaration reveals Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s admiration for William Wordsworth’s commitment to investing poetry with ‘incidents and situations with common life’ and to

<sup>17</sup> All quotations from Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s poetry and prose writings are taken from *The Works of Elizabeth Barrett Browning*, ed. Sandra Donaldson, 5 vols (London: Pickering & Chatto, 2010), unless otherwise indicated in a footnote.

<sup>18</sup> Rod Edmonds, *Affairs of the Hearth* (London: Routledge, 1988), p. 162.

deploying ‘a selection of the language really spoken by men’.<sup>19</sup> Yet, it is also telling of one major departure from his line of argument regarding the role of the poet: Wordsworth celebrated nature as the source of benevolent spirituality, according to Jerome McGann, partly in reaction to the dreadful consequences of industrialization and the loss of political idealism.<sup>20</sup> Focusing on the simplicity of rural life, his attempts to rethink the everyday in adopting the pastoral mode, differ strikingly from Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s, who advocates entanglement with the complex realities of urban, middle-class, everyday life. Wordsworth’s emphasis on the simplicity of spoken language does though suggest his disenchantment with the sociopolitical implications of industrialization and a proclivity to a general concern with egalitarianism prevalent in the Romantic period. In understanding Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s set of moral values, fundamental disposition toward a vision of a new world, and conceptualization of the new woman poet, it is important to accept that Wordsworth’s Romantic egalitarianism exerted a certain appeal which was in concert with her political affiliations. Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s father and brothers were active members of the Whig party, which was committed to the dignity and freedom of the individual. Moreover, her letters bear evidence to her religious association with Congregationalism, a denomination which by principle allowed spiritual independence encouraging thus a proliferation of interpretations of the Bible.<sup>21</sup>

Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s celebration of Wordsworth as the poet-hero and poet-prophet, was also representative of her own desire to align herself with a general apprehension of the poet as politically active. In her essay on British poetry, published

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<sup>19</sup> William Wordsworth, ‘Preface’, *Lyrical Ballads* [1800/1802], ed. Martin Scofield (Ware, Hertfordshire: Wordsworth Editions, 2003), p. 7.

<sup>20</sup> Jerome McGann, *The Romantic Ideology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989).

<sup>21</sup> The poet’s diary and early correspondence informs us that she regularly participated in Congregationalist gatherings. However, her post-marriage statement that ‘There is nobody in the world with a stronger will & aspiration to escape from sectarianism in any sort of sense (*The Brownings’ Correspondence* 8:76); ‘[I am] a believer in Universal Christianity’ (*The Brownings’ Correspondence* 9:120) has led the readers of her correspondence to believe that she had gradually disavowed organized religion.

in the *Athenaeum* in 1842, she highlights Wordsworth's contribution 'as a hero-poet of a movement essential to the better being of poetry' and as the 'poet-prophet of utterances greater than those who first listened, and ... influences most vital and expansive'.<sup>22</sup> In the same year, with a sonnet entitled 'On a portrait of Wordsworth by B. R. Haydon' she provides us with yet another celebration of Wordsworth as a poet-priest:

WORDSWORTH upon Helvellyn! Let the cloud  
Ebb audibly along the mountain-wind  
Then break against the rock, and show behind  
The lowland valleys floating up to crowd  
The sense with beauty. He with forehead bowed  
And humble lidded-eyes, as one inclined  
Before the sovran thought of his own mind,  
And very meek with inspirations proud,  
Takes here his rightful place as poet priest  
By the high altar, singing prayer with prayer  
To the higher Heavens. A noble vision free  
Our Haydon's hand has flung out from the mist!  
No portrait this, with academic air!  
This is the poet and his poetry.

The sonnet adopts the imagery of Wordsworth's poetry. The description of this natural scenery is dynamic rather than static. It doesn't freeze the beautiful natural surroundings like the portrait freezes the likeness of the poet. The 'cloud' and the 'mountain wind' breaking against the rock and reappearing behind the 'lowland valleys' evoke movement. In line five, a description of Wordsworth's humble posture introduces at the sonnet's volta his celebration as a poet-priest, alluding to the idea that humbleness is inextricably bound with spirituality, 'noble vision'. Avery makes the same point in arguing that Elizabeth Barrett Browning regarded Wordsworth as a 'great prophetic

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<sup>22</sup> *The Complete Works of Elizabeth Barrett Browning*, eds. Charlotte Porter and Helen A. Clarke, 6 vols (New York: Cromwell, 1900; reprinted 1973), vol. 4, p. 510.

poet, the man at one with nature whose imagination was able to yield access to spiritual truth' (*Elizabeth Barrett Browning* 8).

If Wordsworth's underlying egalitarianism and spirituality stimulated Elizabeth Barrett Browning's vision, George Gordon, Lord Byron exerted even greater influence on her concept of the poet. As early as in her teens, in a letter to her uncle Samuel she appears entranced with his poetry in maintaining that *Childe Harold's* fourth canto condenses 'all the energy, all the sublimity of modern verse' (*The Brownings' Correspondence* 1:67). Elizabeth Barrett Browning's attraction to Lord Byron was due to his involvement with politics and his active participation in the Greek War of Independence, which began in 1821.<sup>23</sup> In *An Essay on the Mind and Other Poems*, Elizabeth Barrett Browning includes an elegy, which was initially published in *Globe and Traveller*, recounting the virtues of the poet-hero:

He *was*, and *is* not! Graecia's trembling shore,  
Sighing through all her palmy groves, shall tell  
That Harold's pilgrimage at last is o'er -  
Mute the impassioned tongue, and tuneful shell,  
That erst was wont in noblest strains to swell -  
Hush'd the proud shouts that rode Aegea's wave!  
For Io! The great Deliv'rer breathes farewell!  
Gives to the world his mem'ry and a grave -  
Expiring in the land he only lived to save!

.....

Britannia's Poet! Græcia's hero, sleeps!  
And Freedom, bending o'er the breathless clay,  
Lifts up her voice, and in her anguish weeps!  
For *us*, a night hath clouded o'er our day,

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<sup>23</sup> While there was an enormous intellectual movement across Europe for the support of the Greek effort to bring about national self-agency, Lord Byron actually went to Greece in 1823 to fight and died there within four months of his arrival.

And hush'd the lips that breath'd our fairest lay.  
Alas! And must the British lyre resound  
A requiem, while the spirit wings away  
Of him who on its strings such music found,  
And taught its startling chords to give so sweet a sound!

(ll. 1-9, 19-27)

Lord Byron certainly appears as the embodiment of the politically active poet and this is accentuated with the capitalized initial letter of the word Poet in the opening line of the second stanza. The allusions to mythological figures, Io and Aegea, serve to assign the poet the status of a mythical character so as to lay claim for the deserved elevated position in collective memory in the present and the future. The italicized verbs in the first stanza, *was*, *is*, not only operate in support of his representation as a mythologized figure, rather create a forceful impression on the eye, evoking graphically the disruption of Lord Byron's life. Enjambment in lines one, two and three invites a reading of this disruption within the context of his own Childe Harold. The personifications of Sighing Graecia and weeping Freedom are steeped in the legacy of sentimental expression and dramatize the silencing of the poet / singer.

### Confronting the Script of Sentimentality

Elizabeth Barrett Browning's poems on Wordsworth and Lord Byron draw our attention to an important development in her ideas on the role of the poet. Her preoccupation with the figure of the poet-politician in her poetry and writings of the 1820s reveal that Lord Byron's approach to the relations between poetry and politics exerted an impactful appeal, yet in later works her engagement with the poet-politician figure veers in a different direction. In the 1830s her poetry is dominated by biblical themes and broader mythical subjects and endorses a more refined treatment of politics invested in a greater range of discourses. One of her most important poems of the 1830s, *The Seraphim* (1838), presents two angels interrogating central religious

questions while watching the scene of the Crucifixion. The religious politics of *The Seraphim* are embedded in gender discourse. Christ, a figure of seminal importance, as I argue in the second chapter, is constructed on a feminized model of the archetypal rebel, Prometheus. Along with *The Seraphim* appeared another poem in the 1838 volume dealing explicitly with the figure of the poet, ‘The Poet’s Vow’. The poem narrates the story of an acclaimed poet who is not named and decides to withdraw from the world in an isolated mansion. He rejects any human interaction, turning his back on three Christians, a married couple and a playing child. When the poet is visited by his dead fiancée Rosalind, he is shaken because the words written on a scroll attached to her body scold him for having abandoned her and warn him of more terrifying consequences:

‘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.’

(ll. 450-456)

The betrothed’s message, as Helen Cooper notes, underscores ‘the sterility of [the poet’s] aesthetic’,<sup>24</sup> causing the poet such pain and grief upon realizing his failure that he dies. The result of the poet’s disengagement from the social world, his alienation from fellow men and women, as well as his flawed perception of spiritual existence is fatal. What Elizabeth Barrett Browning warns against is artistic solipsism. The poet cannot galvanize social change in isolation. The 1838 volume advocates a more

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<sup>24</sup> Helen Cooper, *Elizabeth Barrett Browning: Woman and Artist* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1988), p.42.

sophisticated mission for the poet, one that is both political and spiritual, and prefigures the celebration of Wordsworth as poet-priest in 1842.

In 1844 Elizabeth Barrett Browning publishes her second major volume of poetry, with the simple title *Poems*. This selection of poems, which established her at the forefront of the literary scene, conveys a renewed interest in social problems and debates of her time and a revitalized commitment to the political work of poetry. For example, ‘The Cry of the Children’ depicts the hardships of child labor and ‘The Cry of the Human’ addresses the problems that emerged with the Corn Laws. Yet, in *Poems*, Elizabeth Barrett Browning also opts for a fully-fledged interrogation of gender and the function of the poet, this time not with the reconstruction of an archetypal figure as in *The Seraphim*, but rather by externalizing her anxiety over her position in relation to her key predecessors, Hemans and L.E.L. In the poems addressed to the two poetesses, she puts forward her own concept of the woman poet by attempting to dissociate it from over-determined sentimentality and excessive sorrow, both elements extending into hopelessness in the work of Hemans and L.E.L.

In a letter to Mary Russell Mitford in July 1844, Elizabeth Barrett Browning criticizes Hemans on account of her narrow interest in humanity, her tolerance with the constraints of the domestic sphere and her preoccupation with projecting a feminine profile expected of female authors, three factors that eventually prevented her work from gaining an intellectual insight in political issues. She writes: ‘She was too conventionally a lady, to be a great poetess-she was bound fast in satin riband. Her delicacy restrained her sense of Beauty- and she had no reverence for Humanity, through the morbid narrowness of her sympathies’.<sup>25</sup> The key idea of this critique is that the political import of poetry trammels on gendered behavior, which eventually perpetuates the allotment of women to the domestic realm. Elizabeth Barrett Browning

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<sup>25</sup> Barrett to Mitford, 22 July 1844. *The Brownings' Correspondence* 9:62.

was drawn to Hemans's and L.E.L.'s massive success and confesses her admiration for Hemans's genius in terms of memory<sup>26</sup> and L.E.L.'s 'raw bare powers'.<sup>27</sup> Nonetheless, the mere possibility of ending up in the same literary slot with them was the source of discomfort. Elizabeth Barrett Browning wanted to define herself as a poet against their failure to negotiate their own position as poets within a gendered poetic economy. As Anne K. Mellor observes, both Hemans and L.E.L. 'self consciously embraced an aesthetic of the beautiful', and aligned themselves with an aesthetic of 'a specifically "feminine" poetry'.<sup>28</sup> Elizabeth Barrett Browning's disappointment emanates thus from deeming their poetry as less potentially subversive, in comparison to hers, of the structures dictating the elision of women from political life.

Despite the fact that Felicia Hemans, L.E.L. and Elizabeth Barrett Browning were not friends and never exchanged letters with one another, they engaged in an elegiac dialogue, which not only marked the contours of a poetic site of shared values, rather it became the primary tool to evaluate the poetic principles that bound them together or set them apart. Rosanna Warren in discussing the role of the elegy in the formation of poetic tradition, forcefully argues that 'a poet's elegy for another poet is somehow a translation of that poet or at least of a tradition, and involves some kind of transfer of powers, perhaps aggressively asserted by the survivor'.<sup>29</sup> This is precisely the reason why this circulation of sympathies becomes a serviceable means to further investigate Elizabeth Barrett Browning's disaffiliation from conventionally effusive

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<sup>26</sup> She writes: 'I admire her genius -love her memory- respect her piety & high moral tone. But she always seem to me a lady rather than woman, & so, much rather than a poetess'. Barrett to Mitford, *The Brownings' Correspondence* 6:165-166.

<sup>27</sup> Elizabeth Barrett Browning held L.E.L.'s genius in higher esteem and admitted that if she would have to choose she would choose L.E.L.'s. She states: 'the raw bare powers... I would choose Miss Landon's. I surmise that it was more elastic, more various, of a stronger web. I fancy it would have worked out better-had it been worked out-with the right moral & intellectual influences in application'. Barrett to Mitford, *The Brownings' Correspondence* 5:75.

<sup>28</sup> Anne K. Mellor, 'The Female Poet and the Poetess: Two Traditions of British Women's Poetry, 1780-1820', *Women's Poetry in the Enlightenment: The Making of a Canon*, eds. Isobel Armstrong and Virginia Blain (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1999), p. 82.

<sup>29</sup> Rosanna Warren, 'Sappho: Translation as Elegy', *The Art of Translation: Voices from the Field*, ed. R. Warren (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1989), p. 202.

verse and her inclination to view such effusiveness as a threatening impediment to her concept of the poet-politician. Regarding Elizabeth Barrett Browning's participation in this dialogue, Brandy Ryan insightfully remarks that she 'enters the discourse in a responsive elegy for Hemans that places her (at best) as a mediator of those values or (at worst) as the voice of traditions that challenge a feminine poetic economy'.<sup>30</sup>

The series of elegies is inaugurated by Hemans with the poem 'The Grave of a Poetess', which was published in her 1828 collection of poems *Records of Woman*. Her speaker, overwhelmed by the death of one of the gifted poetesses, Mary Tighe, laments her loss, and finds consolation in envisioning Tighe in a truly ideal realm: Heaven. Three poems in *Records of Woman*, 'Properzia Rossi', 'Arabella Stuart' and 'The Grave of the Poetess' revolve around the life of artistic women and constitute three different opportunities for Hemans to express the idea that the domestic sphere protects women artists. In the case of 'The Grave of the Poetess', heaven provides the comfort of the home.

I STOOD beside thy lowly grave;  
Spring-odours breath'd around,  
And music, in the river-wave,  
Pass'd with a lulling sound.

All happy things that love the sun,  
In the bright air glanc'd by,  
And a glad murmur seem'd to run  
Thro the soft azure sky.

Fresh leaves were on the ivy-bough  
That fring'd the ruins near;  
Young voices were abroad – but thou

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<sup>30</sup> Brandy Ryan, ““Echo and Reply”: The Elegies of Felicia Hemans, Letitia Landon, and Elizabeth Barrett”, *Victorian Poetry* 46.3 (2008): 249-277. p. 249.

Their sweetness couldst not hear.<sup>31</sup>

The idea that Tighe's earthly home is one of grief is consolidated by Hemans's description of the world after Tighe's death, which exhibits a sensory richness with 'spring-odours' and 'lulling sound' of the 'river-wave'. Nonetheless, the presence of 'ruins near' (ll. 2-10) evoke Tighe's displacement from this world into her 'lowly grave', a connection achieved by positioning 'lowly grave' and 'ruins near' at the end of the line in the same rhythmic position.

Unlike Hemans's elegy which leaves the addressed poetess unnamed, L.E.L.'s poem entitled 'Stanzas on the Death of Mrs. Hemans', not only names its subject but comprises a pastiche of one of Hemans's own poems, 'Bring Flowers'.<sup>32</sup> L.E.L.'s elegy was published in July 1835 in the *New Monthly Magazine* and represents Hemans as a victim of her own sentimentality and her public image and asks its readers to mourn the loss of the great poetess.

'Stanzas on the Death of Mrs. Hemans'<sup>33</sup> makes ample use of the language of Hemans's 'Bring Flowers'. I reproduce the relevant lines, first from Hemans's poem and then from L.E.L.'s.

Bring flowers, young flowers, for the festal board,  
To wreath the cup ere the wine is pour'd;

.....

Bring flowers to the captive's lonely cell,

.....

Bring flowers, for the bride to wear!

.....

Bring flowers, pale flowers, o'er the bier to shed,

(‘Bring Flowers’ ll. 1-2, 13, 19, 25)

<sup>31</sup> Felicia Hemans, 'The Grave of a Poetess', *Records of Woman with Other Poems* (Edinburgh: William Blackwood, 1828), pp. 160-161, ll.1-12.

<sup>32</sup> Felicia Hemans, 'Bring Flowers', *The Poetical Works of Mrs. Felicia Hemans* (New York: Evert Duyckinck, 1828).

<sup>33</sup> L.E.L., 'Stanzas on the Death of Mrs. Hemans', *New Monthly Magazine* (July 1835), ll. 1-4.

Bring flowers to crown the cup and lute,-  
Bring flowers, - the bride is near;  
Bring flowers to soothe the captive's cell,  
Bring flowers to strew the bier!

(‘Stanzas on the Death of Mrs. Hemans’ ll. 1-4)

The first stanza of ‘Stanzas on the Death of Mrs. Hemans’ is replete with images from Hemans’s poem. Yet, while in Hemans’s verses the imperative tone is reinforced in the opening lines of each stanza, L.E.L. renders immediately legible the intertextual density of her elegy to Hemans by summarising most of her commands in the first stanza.

In the middle of the poem L.E.L. becomes more engaged with praising the qualities of her work and delivers a description which epitomizes the essential characteristics of sentimental poetry:

A lofty strain of generous thoughts,  
And yet subdued and sweet,  
An angel's song, who sings of earth,  
Whose cares are at his feet.

(ll. 37-40)

L.E.L.’s reference to Hemans’s intellectual acumen reflects her high-mindedness. It is though undermined by the ensuing adjectives that foreground Hemans’s celebration of the domestic and mild tone and the angel figure. Derek Furr’s instructive reading of the angel metaphor identifies the shifting grammar and makes a strong argument for the underlying economy of feelings by utilizing a language of commercial exchange: He maintains that,

the ‘cares’ of the world lie at Hemans’s feet; she is a kind of Christ taking on our burdens. At the same time, the angel Hemans unburdens herself with song, *offering up her cares at her own feet- on display, as it were, like wares to be sold*. Of course, Landon now thinks not only of Hemans but of all suffering, angelic singers; for Landon, ‘his’ is the neutral

pronoun and the angel is any sentimental poet. *The relationship between a sentimental poet and his/her reader is mutually supportive*, and the motive for poetry is both sympathetic and indulgent (35 my emphasis).

Furr's reading of the angel metaphor is instrumental in locating the seeds of L.E.L.'s thought on the role of the female poet, whom she eventually situates in the confined space of gendered experience. Her aims do not serve a broader vision and her efficacy to bring about social change collapses in a circulation of sympathies between poet and readers: she cannot conceptualize the poet in terms alien to her personal poetic experience and thus proposes a function which is inextricably bound to the sentimental. Her concept of the poet, in direct antithesis to the one valued by Elizabeth Barrett Browning, is associated with female experience, suffering, and dependence upon her readers for the preservation of her confidence in her artistic vocation.

Aligning myself with Furr, I would like to expand his argument regarding the instrumentality of the angel metaphor in order to underline a number of factors which influenced both Hemans's and L.E.L.'s understanding of the role of the poet. In my view this set of parameters not only caused Elizabeth Barrett Browning's discomfort but also sheds light on the cross-currents, counter-currents and contradictions in the core of their concepts of the poet. The allusion to a culture of exchange and the display of 'cares' at the feet of the singing angel evokes Hemans's and L.E.L.'s inevitable interaction with, and consequent dependence upon, their readers and literary intermediaries and the demands and expectations of the literary marketplace in general. Elizabeth Barrett Browning had to deal with the same sort of anxieties but from a considerably less exposed position in so far as she was able to retain a relatively autonomous financial status and support herself with the fortune her mother bequeathed her after her death. On the contrary, familial monetary hardship spurred Felicia Hemans and L.E.L. into public careers in their teens, and forced them to exploit their profile as

infant prodigies and their femininity to boost their popularity and fame. Both Hemans and L.E.L. relied exclusively on the earnings from their careers as professional literary women to support their families and were thus very much preoccupied with delivering what was expected of them. It is therefore necessary to recognize that, in effect, they utilized their poetry, though in diverse ways, ‘to negotiate a space of public acceptance of feminine writing and a private desire to be a poet with the added negativity of assumed ambition and public exposure that such a role entails’ (“Echo and Reply” 250). The majority of critics accept that the poetry of Hemans and L.E.L. interiorizes these anxieties, and that their familial situation is culpable for not enhancing their poetic gift with what Elizabeth Barrett Browning called ‘moral and intellectual influences’. It is nonetheless important to bear in mind the impact of the enormous cultural and economical shifts of the post-Napoleonic years in order to understand why the female embodiment of the poetical vocation constituted a further aggravation to the deforming commodification of literary production. Contemporary scholarship advocates that authorship and the concomitant motives of a poet need to be interpreted in conjunction with the specific sociocultural and economical contingencies of his/her time. As Michael Newbury argues,

[authorship] must be interrogated ... within a broader history emphasizing varied and conflicting cultural paradigms embodied by particular forms of labor. Only in this way can we begin to grasp the complexities and anxieties about class, status, gender, and the place of an artistic self-identity that accompanied the emergence of authorship as a profession within an incipiently industrial capitalist economy.<sup>34</sup>

It has become a truism that the whole edifice of literary production in the late Romantic period and throughout the Victorian times was replicating the structure of a

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<sup>34</sup> Michael Newbury, *Figuring Authorship in Antebellum America* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997), p. 203.

greater cultural paradigm pivoting around commodities. Authorship was constructed interactively and various readerships imposed variegated aesthetic criteria on literary works. Poetry began to lose its primacy among literary genres. Changes in the techniques of book production and distribution revolutionized the relations between the author, the text, the readers and literary mediator, who replaced the patron or patroness of the literary salon. Finally, the numbers of published women authors rose at an unprecedentedly fast pace. In the midst of all these developments the literary vocation emerged, especially in the case of many women writers, as both a need and a desire, a progression that was met with certain uneasiness from male counterparts. Wordsworth's irritation is hardly concealed in the headnote to *Extempore Effusion*: 'Mrs. Hemans was unfortunate as a Poetess in being obliged by circumstances to write for money, and that so frequently and so much, that she was compelled ... to write as expeditiously as possible'.<sup>35</sup> While L.E.L. falls into the same category of the professional woman writer whose vocation addressed a need and a desire, Elizabeth Barrett Browning enjoyed financial security that spared her the pressure from dependencies her predecessors had to resolve. However, though she does not appear ignorant of the new framework of relations monitoring literary production, the seriousness of her tone testifies to a different understanding of the vocation of the poet, the role of the poet at large and the semantic baggage of the word, labor. In her 'Preface' to the 1844 volume *Poems*, she confesses publicly that writing poetry proved as challenging intellectually as a profession demanding skill and commitment. She writes:

Poetry has been as serious a thing to me as life itself; and life  
has been a very serious thing: there has been no playing at  
skittles for me in either. I never mistook pleasure for the final

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<sup>35</sup> Cited in Susan J. Wolfson, *Borderlines. The Shiftings of Gender in British Romanticism* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006), p. 50.

cause of poetry; nor leisure, for the hour of the poet. I have done my work, so far, as work... and as work I offer it to the public.<sup>36</sup>

Work seems to be associated more with intellectual labor, which might involve physical effort depending on one's dedication to perfect her / his skill. Any allusion to work requiring either intellectual and / or physical effort as the only means to earn a living is obscured. For Elizabeth Barrett Browning, poetry constitutes the reification of intellectual work. What is important to note, is that her concept of poetry is broad enough to imply both the intellectual labor and its result, the work of art which is made available for everyone to see. Evidently, Elizabeth Barrett Browning was aware of the potentially damaging effect of the image of the domestic lady and the scandalous singer of love fabricated around Hemans and L.E.L. respectively, and strove to imbue her public image as a female poet with elements of a masculine coded discourse, that of political economy. The letters and prose writings of Elizabeth Barrett Browning certainly tell us a great deal about her concept of the poet as a laboring intellectual and active politician, yet the most significant testimony to her divergence from the poetesses is contained in her two poems addressed to L.E.L. The first poem with ‘*Stanzas Addressed to Miss Landon, and Suggested by her “Stanzas on the Death of Mrs. Hemans”*’ is Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s response to L.E.L.’s elegy which was published in the *New Monthly Magazine* two months after L.E.L.’s. In this poem Elizabeth Barrett Browning attacks L.E.L.’s attempt to structure her elegy of Hemans on one of her poems.

In the critical dialogue begun by Hemans, Elizabeth Barrett Browning is the first one who does not make use of an epigraph allusion. Hemans’s elegy is framed by an uncredited quotation from de Staël’s *Corinne*, while L.E.L.’s elegy on Hemans opens with an epigraph from Hemans’s poem ‘The Nightingale’s Death-Song’ (*Lays of Many*

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<sup>36</sup> ‘Preface’ to *Poems. By Elizabeth Barrett Barrett* (2 vols. London: Edward Moxon, 1844), vol. 1. p. 5.

*Lands* [1825]). The voice of Hemans announces departure from the earthly world in the words of the nightingale. Elizabeth Barrett Browning interrupts this series of borrowings of literal tropes and refrains from immersing herself in the same mourning discourse. Addressing L.E.L., she exclaims:

Thou bay-crowned living One- who o'er the bay-crowned dead  
art bowing,  
And o'er the shadeless, moveless brow thy human shadow throwing;  
And o'er the sighless, songless lips the wail and music wedding,  
And dropping o'er the tranquil eyes, the tears not of their shedding! -<sup>37</sup>  
(‘Stanzas Addressed to Miss Landon’ ll. 1-5)

Ryan comments that Elizabeth Barrett Browning sets out to create a temporal distance from both poetesses, implying that their mode of poetry is outdated since the practice of rewarding a conqueror or a poet with a wreath from the leaves or springs of a bay tree faded out of use by the late 1700s. This temporal gap allows her to initiate her evaluation, which ultimately takes the form of a critique of the elegist and the elegized (267).

In my view, crowning both Hemans and L.E.L. indicates that Elizabeth Barrett Browning thought of them as poetesses of equal renown. Yet in the immediately ensuing lines, L.E.L.’s ‘vital’ shadow falling over Hemans’s ‘shadeless … brow’ *prima facie* hints at L.E.L.’s appropriation of Hemans’s voice and work. Elizabeth Barrett Browning stresses the sense of the vacuum created with Hemans’s departure by using alternating adjectives implying barenness, lack of movement, and silencing. The syllabic resemblance of ‘shadeless’, ‘moveless’, ‘sighless’, ‘songless’ suspends this sense of loss across two lines, betraying Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s intuition that L.E.L.’s ‘vital’ presence attempts to overshadow and deplete Hemans’s contribution to literary history.

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<sup>37</sup> References to ‘Stanzas Addressed to Miss Landon, and Suggested by her “Stanzas on the Death of Mrs. Hemans”’ are from *Elizabeth Barrett Browning: Selected Poems*, eds. Marjorie Stone and Beverly Taylor (Buffalo, New York: Broadview Press, 2009), pp.73-76. The poem was included in the 1844 *Poems* with the title ‘Felicia Hemans (To L.E.L., Referring to her Monody on the Poetess)’.

L.E.L.'s adoption of Hemans's lyric might be construed as a source of uneasiness for Elizabeth Barrett Browning who militantly advocated intellectual labor as a prerequisite for the development of any kind of poetical impulse and valued genuine expression as an index of higher thought. Furthermore, the opening lines of the poem, in my view, are demonstrative of Elizabeth Barrett Browning's fundamental problem with L.E.L.'s deployment of the elegiac mode and sorrowful language. The rhyming pair of 'wedding'/'shedding' forges a powerful link between two focal points around which Elizabeth Barrett Browning's critical view of the poetesses is organized: first, 'wail' is inextricably bound as suggested by 'wedding' to their 'music', a synecdoche for their poetic gift, and, second, the phrase 'the tears not of their shedding' underpins the degenerative effect of the conventional effusion of feeling on the work of the poetesses and highlights their alleged failure to express and evoke feeling not for itself but for its potential to convey sophisticated modes of thought.

In the lines that follow Elizabeth Barrett Browning advises L.E.L. to perform the role of the poetess as the singer of sentiments. She commands her:

Take music from the silent Dead, whose meaning is completer,<sup>38</sup>  
Reserve thy tears for leaving brows, where all such tears are meeter,  
And leave the violets in the grass, to brighten where thou treadst!  
No flowers for her! No need of flowers-albeit 'bring flowers'  
thou saidest.

(ll. 6-10 my emphasis)

The imperatives convey a sense of anger and express Elizabeth Barrett Browning's blatant demand that a certain distance between the elegist and the elegized has to be maintained in consonance with the masculine elegiac tradition of ordered and contained emotion. She also rebukes L.E.L.'s perplexing poetical ways of connecting to Hemans

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<sup>38</sup> The poem in its initial printings (1835, 1838) lacked the fourteeners. Instead, the lines were halved in more regular eight- and seven-syllable pattern. Also, in *Poems* (1850) Elizabeth Barrett Browning assumed a more positive stance towards L.E.L. and revised line six accordingly: 'Go! Take thy music from the dead, / whose silence is sweeter!'

because she senses that L.E.L. does not express sympathy with Hemans's grief in life ('Nor mourn, oh living one, because / Her part in life was mourning' (Stanzas, ll. 25-26), but rather engages in an empathic relationship with the dead poetess and exploits the elegiac mode to re-inscribe her own private fears on her reconstruction of Hemans. Ryan draws our attention to these commands and contends that they invite the readers to evaluate L.E.L.'s poetry, 'since we are put in the position of agreeing that she needs to 'Go' from the dead, 'Reserve' her tears for subjects more fitting and 'leave flowers' as ornaments rather than troping them as poetic tools' (271).

At this point it is fruitful to set the parameters against which Elizabeth Barrett Browning measures L.E.L.'s engagement with the elegy and empathic relationship to Hemans. Peter M. Sacks, in his foundational study of the elegiac genre, informs us that

one of the dangers besetting the mourner is the imprisonment of his affective energies, the locking up within himself of impulses previously directed toward the deceased ... the mourner must prevent a congealing of his own impulses' ... the objective of the elegy is, after all, to displace the urgent psychological currents of its work of mourning ... Though elegies may weep, they must do so formally. They may not 'break up their lines to weep' within that weeping.<sup>39</sup>

Elizabeth Barrett Browning, though not very experienced in the elegiac genre, was nonetheless familiar with its conventions. Her invocation of the figure of Io in the elegy to Lord Byron evidences her endeavor to endorse the myths of gestation, which recurrently appear in male practitioners of the elegy. Dryden, Spenser, Milton and Shelley had already established the conventional gestures and figures of mourning in interrogating the efficacy of weeping, advocating the self-privileging of the survivors,

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<sup>39</sup> Peter M. Sacks, *The English Elegy: Studies in the Genre from Spenser to Yeats* (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1985), pp. 22, 146.

and it is precisely their absence from L.E.L.'s work that Elizabeth Barrett Browning finds disconcerting.

The third stanza targets the appropriation of Hemans's 'Bring Flowers' on behalf of L.E.L. It suggests that bringing flowers to the dead Hemans is a naïve action. Instead Elizabeth Barrett Browning expects from L.E.L.'s 'flowers to crown the "cup and lute" since both may come to breaking' or 'to soothe the "captive's sight" (ll. 9 and 11). Bearing in mind, that in the penultimate stanza Elizabeth Barrett Browning represents Hemans as uniting with Christ in a heavenly repose, flowers gain a renewed symbolic currency: they no longer signify L.E.L.'s grief or the world's over Hemans's death rather they symbolize the world's need for L.E.L.'s poetic gift (and the contribution Hemans has left behind) in order to deal with the difficulties of life.

While Elizabeth Barrett Browning chastises L.E.L. for projecting her personal emotional state as she rewrites the sorrow of Hemans's life asking her 'bring not near the solemn corse, a type of human seeming' (l. 13), in the fifth and sixth stanza she engages in a defense of Hemans's sorrow. The use of the archaic corse instead of corpse not only binds Elizabeth Barrett Browning with the ancient masculine tradition of elegiac mode but it reinforces the idea that Hemans has already entered the ranks of literary history, belongs to the past and therefore the living poetess should rely on her 'vital' gift to address the contemporary challenges of life. Oddly, Elizabeth Barrett Browning's barrage of questions indulges in a somewhat empathic relation with the elegized as she displaces her own anxieties regarding the vocation of the woman poet onto Hemans:

Would she have lost the poet's fire for anguish of the burning-  
The minstrel harp, for the strained string? the tripod, for the afflated  
Woe? Or the vision, for those tears in which it shone dilated?

(ll. 18-20)

Line 18 operates as the organizing principle of her conception of the role of the female poet: for the female poet suffering is a source of inspiration. In this strange metaphor Hemans's eyes 'open' as the pupils dilate beneath her tears, suggesting thus that tears induced poetic vision. The rhetorical question begs the reader to speculate as to whether Hemans would have renounced her 'vision' in order to be spared the 'tears in which it shone dilated?' While she gives a negative answer, the ensuing stanza introduces a comment on Hemans's high-mindedness which, according to Elizabeth Barrett Browning, was marred by her failure to see that 'beauty' and 'love' can be derived from humanity and the earth. Hemans's 'mystic breath,' she writes, 'drew from rock, earth and man, abstractions high and moving / Beauty, if not the beautiful, and love, if not the loving' (ll. 23-24).

The poem comes full circle with the concluding lines addressed, like in the opening, directly to L.E.L.

Be happy, crowned and living one! And, as thy dust decayeth,  
May thine own England say for thee what now for her it sayth-  
"Albeit softly in our ears her silver song was ringing,  
The footfall of her parting soul is softer than her singing."

(ll. 29-32)

The final lines express the hope that L.E.L. receives posthumously the same praise as Hemans has. The emotional purport supplanting Elizabeth Barrett Browning's optimistic message to L.E.L. deflates and takes on pointed ironic significance in the light of L.E.L.'s mysterious death three years later. Ironically, the myth of the self-destructive, 'poor L.E.L.'<sup>40</sup> was perpetuated *ad infinitum*. L.E.L. was neither praised

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<sup>40</sup> William Howitt in *Homes and Haunts of the Most Eminent British Poets* (London: Richard Bentley, 1847, vol. II), p. 137, argues that L.E.L.'s self-destructive impulse was projected on her heroines, who were consumed by their art and unrequited love. He writes: 'Whether this melancholy belief in the tendency of the great theme of her writings, both in prose and poetry; this irresistible annunciation, like another Cassandra, of woe and destruction; this evolution of scenes and characters in her last work, bearing such resemblance to those of her own after experience; this *tendency, in all her plots, to a tragic catastrophe*, and this final tragedy itself,-whether these be all mere coincidences or not, they are still but parts of an unresolved

after her death nor was her public image rehabilitated: it had been irretrievably damaged by rumors of illicit affairs, over-exposure in the male dominated literary market, allegations of writing herself into the fatal plot of her works, and finally, suspicions of having committed suicide.

On January the 26<sup>th</sup>, 1839, Elizabeth Barrett Browning's 'L.E.L.'s Last Question' was published in *The Athenaeum*. The elegy, responding to the news of L.E.L.'s shocking death in West Africa, eschews the critical undertones of 'Stanzas Addressed to Miss Landon, and Suggested by her "Stanzas on the Death of Mrs. Hemans"' and presents L.E.L. as a humble, lonely individual. 'L.E.L.'s Last Question' appropriates and reformulates a line from one of L.E.L.'s last poems. 'Night at sea' was written in August 1838, while L.E.L. was travelling with her mismatched husband to West Africa and it was published posthumously in the *New Monthly Magazine* in January 1839. Almost all the stanzas of the poem feature the same concluding line: 'My friends, my absent friends! / Do you think of me as I think of you?' and it is this line that Elizabeth Barrett Browning chooses at the beginning of her elegy: 'Do you think of me as I think of you, / My friends, my friends?' Following L.E.L., she also closes most of the stanzas of her poem with this refrain. This compositional technique calls into mind L.E.L.'s troping of Hemans's 'flowers' and poses questions as regards to the motives of this choice. Did she want to pay homage to both L.E.L. and Hemans by activating a stronger connection with their legacy? Was she tearing down the divide she had erected with her previous elegy out of female solidarity because she felt that L.E.L.'s death would signal a shift in the aesthetics of female expression?

In my view, these questions, in demonstrating Elizabeth Barrett Browning's ambivalence towards her predecessors, justify equally ambiguous responses. It may be

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mystery'. (my emphasis) Recent critics, more often than not, seem to be siding with this treatment of L.E.L.'S public persona and work. Samantha Matthews, in her article 'Entombing the Woman Poet: Tributes to Elizabeth Barrett Browning', *Studies in Browning and his Circle* 24 (2001): 31-53, p. 35, also argues that 'For Landon in particular the fulfilment of the fantasy of the exile death and tragic neglect, a fantasy played out in 'L.E.L.'S' poetry, constructed a restrictingly biographical mythology'.

the case that in the light of L.E.L.'s death, the poet no longer felt the need to distinguish and distance herself from the poetesses, now that the latter's career ended. However, the more interesting and less speculative explanation arises from the form of the poem itself and its very publication. In conjunction with the fact that 'L.E.L.'s Last Question' displays stronger emotion, the metrical choice might serve as textual evidence that Elizabeth Barrett Browning's ambivalence towards L.E.L.'s poetics might have been partly resolved by 1839. In 'Stanzas Addressed to Miss Landon, and Suggested by her "Stanzas on the Death of Mrs. Hemans"' she had deployed a more unusual versification pattern with alternating eight- and seven-syllable lines whose rhythm, due to metrical imbalance, was not as natural as that of the commonly deployed iambic pentameter in 'L.E.L.'s Last Question'. The fact that Elizabeth Barrett Browning utilizes a regular and conventional meter signals a more relaxed attitude towards the more conventional poetics of L.E.L. Ultimately, the fact that she retracts from her harsh critique in her elegy to L.E.L. might arguably be apprehended as an apology for having chastised her in 'Stanzas Addressed to Miss Landon'. For a poet so self-consciously committed to the revision of poetic forms such as Elizabeth Barrett Browning, extensive intertextuality and the remodelling of structure is unlikely to be received as a mere coincidence. In my view, the appropriation of L.E.L.'s structure and thematic axis in 'The Last Question' shows a great deal about the poet's psychological attitude; first, that she was not impervious to L.E.L.'s misfortunes and mysterious death, and, second; that her moral grandeur was not compromised in view of her poetic superiority and fame. Rather, her choice to make public her incantation of L.E.L.'s laud evidences her understanding of her position as a poet participating in an interactive literary community.

Overall, the poems addressed to L.E.L. suggest that despite the fact that Elizabeth Barrett Browning engaged in an effort to revise and correct L.E.L.'s susceptibility to emotional excesses, she does not advocate a wholesale rejection of

sentimentalism. The driving force behind these revisions seems to have been primarily Elizabeth Barrett Browning's desire to position herself as both an intellectual poet of abstraction and as a poet-politician. In reconfiguring the margins of poetical wailing in the elegiac mode, Elizabeth Barrett Browning proves herself a skillful practitioner of religious poetics of transcendence: genuine consolation in the poem comes in reimagining Hemans's after-life next to God, relieved from earthly constraints and sorrows. She writes:

Such visionings have paled in sight; the Saviour she descrieth,  
And little recks *who* wreathed the brow which on His bosom lieth.  
The whiteness of His innocence o'er all her garments, flowing,  
There, learneth she the sweet 'new song', she will not mourn in  
knowing.

(ll. 25-29 )

On the contrary, L.E.L. more in line with Hemans's sad sense of Tighe's 'lowly grave' resists the traditional convention of elegiac *apotheosis* and imagines Hemans resting in 'mother-earth'. Elizabeth Barrett Browning imagines the after-life of Hemans in accordance with Christian morality while L.E.L. locates the cessation of suffering in 'the green, the quiet mother-earth' ('Stanzas on the death of Mrs. Hemans' l. 107). In this respect, Elizabeth Barrett Browning proves more conservative than L.E.L., as the return to Heaven reinforces the male traditional elegiac trope. Instead, L.E.L.'s return to 'mother-earth' disturbs this model, investing the end of sorrow of the female poet with feminine codification.

Substantiating Hemans's poetic value and lowering the tone of the critique against L.E.L.'s unremitting emotionalism are not mutually exclusive tasks. In my view, they reveal Elizabeth Barrett Browning's multifaceted engagement with the role of the poet and the contradictory nature of the constituent elements of her concept of poetical genius. In a strident critique of L.E.L.'s poetical gift she writes to Mitford that her talent was never fully realized because it lacked the intellectual and moral *stimuli* since 'the

strength of our feelings, often rises up out of our thought' and '[h]er genius was not strong enough to assert itself in truth.' (*The Browning's Correspondence* 3:194, 5:72). This articulation of the intrinsic relation binding intellectual rigor, strength of feeling and truth, anticipates Elizabeth Barrett Browning's mature treatment of the poetical genius in *Aurora Leigh*. Her description of L.E.L. in 'L.E.L.'s Last Question', profitably instructs us that Elizabeth Barrett Browning inflects 'truth' with a very specific meaning. In presenting her '[...] like a child that, sleeping with dropt head / upon the fairy-book he lately read,' (ll. 16-17) and that 'Whatever household noises round him move,' 'All sounds of life assumed one tune of love.' (ll. 18, 21), she displaces L.E.L. in a 'fairy', unreal world, implying her failure to assert her self into the 'real', adult sociopolitical sphere of human conduct. This 'unreal' fairy world becomes inevitably a gendered space wherein the evocation of feeling is constricted to a self-reflexive act. Elizabeth Barrett Browning not only brings together feeling and intellect in her notion of poetic genius, but she also persistently sets them in relation to, and at the service of, the realities of modern life.

Having exposed her concept of the poet in early writings and how it was challenged by the gendered discourse of the poetess, I will now focus on the poetics of *Aurora Leigh* because it weaves together innumerable ideological, generic and thematic threads, providing thus compelling reasons for reading it as a uniquely powerful intervention in the construction of the woman poet. *Aurora Leigh* qualifies tempers and enhances the concept of the poet through generic innovation. My task thus is to explain how the reconfiguration of the role of the poet is consummated in *Aurora Leigh* through the appropriation of the epic and the novel and the revision of the plot of de Staël's *Künstlerinroman Corinne*.

## **Generic Transgressions and the Reclamation of Poetic Authority in *Aurora Leigh***

Elizabeth Barrett Browning's revision of the fictional poetess in *Aurora Leigh* is carried out by way of multiple generic transgressions, which blur generic boundaries and fuse conventions mined from the epic and the novel. Moreover, her explorations of the potentialities of myths and symbolic figures of self-development address the anxiety about the production of meaning in a way that does not impose the slaying of the female heroine. Not abiding by the prescriptive poetical theories of her male peers, Elizabeth Barrett Browning gains poetic authority by ripping the traditionally male-authored epic out of context and glossing it according to her heroine's needs. At the same time, her choice of central theme and narrative structure, as well as subject matter and construction of character, invite comparison to female authored texts such as Germaine de Staël's *Künstlerinroman Corinne*, Hemans's poem 'Properzia Rossi', L.E.L.'s 'The Improvisatrice' and George Sand's *Consuelo* novels to name but a few.

Before embarking on a detailed analysis of Elizabeth Barrett Browning's cross-generic writing strategy a brief introduction to the plot of *Aurora Leigh* is required. *Aurora Leigh* is the story of a female poet who succeeds in transcending the rigidity of male-centered society. Aurora is a half-English half Italian young girl who moves to England when her mother and father die. Her initial disappointment is occasioned by her encounter with her austere aunt who is responsible for her upbringing and for the arrangement of a privileged marriage. Aurora, suffocating under her aunt's tutelage and England's gloomy skies aspires to become a poet. Aware of the limitations imposed on her artistic development by the constraints of the domestic sphere, she rejects her cousin's, Romney Leigh, proposal to marry him and heads to her homeland, Italy, where she pursues a promising career. Aurora's journey to self-realization is both challenging and difficult: She constantly ruminates upon what seem to her irreconcilable choices: art and love. Owing to the fact that she assumes a maternal role

when rescuing Marian, a destitute seamstress who is raped and impregnated, Aurora becomes herself the mouthpiece and the embodiment of Elizabeth Barrett Browning's idealized vision of social reform through poetic inspiration. Her cohabitation with Marian perfects Aurora's poetic education in a way that she is rendered spiritually and emotionally mature to recognize the fullness of even the grimmest truth and the overwhelming perceptibility of romantic love. When Romney comes to Italy, blind and having failed to implement his Fourierian socialist project, Aurora goes to the other extreme and unites with Romney in a final cathartic scene of recognition and confession.

The aesthetic and political constraints Elizabeth Barrett Browning was up against are readily evident in the plot: in a society that excluded women from public interaction and denied them access to the centers of decision-making in the political, ethical and aesthetic realms, Elizabeth Barrett Browning's Aurora had to be represented as not only extraordinarily talented, but also unquestionably geared to occupy a subject position in the public and private sphere. Published in 1857, half a century after *Corinne*, Aurora Leigh's protagonist negotiates her way out of the same pressing impasse to female self-definition. Like Corinne, Aurora is faced with an either/or choice because she is brought up in a society wherein womanhood and art emerge as mutually exclusive concepts. This is, in my view, also the reason why *Aurora Leigh* is an epic verse-novel of enormous literary and historical interest. While its prolonged critical neglect was closely associated with the suspicion against the sentimental, a surge of feminist criticism detecting a politics of feminist outlook has labored for its resuscitation, following Moers' pioneering work in 1976 and Kaplan's erudite 'Introduction' to the 1978 edition of the poem. Evidently, a woman of genius is still in our day Other, in a culture that has neither decidedly given up on predicated itself upon masculine terms nor has it decried essentializing conceptions of the individual and of

mankind as male. *Aurora Leigh* is deeply concerned with gender conflict, which turns out to be as relevant today as two hundred years ago, and throughout the poem its heroine acts upon its resolution not in the abstract but with her life choices. In the introduction to *Critical Essays on Elizabeth Barrett Browning*, Sandra Donaldson writes: ‘The story of a woman writer’s quest to reconcile work and love fit exactly the interests of readers, once freedom movements spread throughout the West starting in the mid 1960s’.<sup>41</sup>

The key factor motivating Elizabeth Barrett Browning in her revision of *Corinne*’s tragic plot is her desire to address her own fear, which has its roots in a fundamental disappointment with expression. Corinne and her literary successors are eventually powerless in relation to their expressivity and their demise is in one way or another connected with the projection of the fear of not being understood by others. Conversely, Aurora is transformed into a visionary poet precisely because her spiritual and artistic progress gradually annihilate the fear of inexpressivity, which translates into a fear of failure to produce meaningful art. She undoubtedly favors Italy over England, she finds herself caught in a constant battle between male and female asking us to think about what it takes to understand other human beings against a cluster of entrenched hierarchies of gender, social and national structures. Eventually, in resolving this existential predicament she offers a tangible and more optimistic alternative to the skepticism of her predecessors.

As Toril Moi argues, if Corinne is endowed with formidable talents and is capable of both public and private expressivity, it is because de Staël attempted to make men accept her as an individual, as a human being *like themselves*. At the same time she is very cautious not to have herself taken for a man. No matter how difficult this would

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<sup>41</sup> Sandra Donaldson, ‘Introduction’, *Critical Essays on Elizabeth Barrett Browning*, ed. Sandra Donaldson (New York: G. K. Hall, 1999), p. 10.

be to avoid in a male-centered society, de Staël goes to great lengths to overemphasize Corinne's public expressivity, femininity and excessive charm.<sup>42</sup>

In contradistinction to de Staël, Elizabeth Barrett Browning capitalizes upon Aurora's ambivalence towards femininity, which transmutes into identification with the masculine throughout the first half of the poem. This is not to claim that Aurora's divided self-consciousness cancels out her womanhood, rather that Aurora's self-awareness in comparison to Corinne's exhibits a more heightened sense of commitment to survive the heterodox nature of a woman's artistic career and this resolution manifests itself both in her actions and the poetic language she uses. The impact of this ambivalence will be further explained in the ensuing chapter wherein Aurora's deployment of figurative language and metaphors will be examined as a form of interiorization of the androgynous consciousness which manifests itself in the imaginative universe of the poet.

The desire for female literary authority by means of generic or formal revisions within the existing strictures of male-centered authorial expectations does not constitute an innovation of the Romantic or Victorian female writers. Catharine Randall, in her essay 'Positioning Herself: A Renaissance Reformation Diptych', discusses the position of female Renaissance women writers and their strategies of asserting an authoritative voice, and informs us that women writers who relied upon their own experience as an 'interpretative grid' also sought new structures of authority and that their work crystallized many cultural facets of the period. Looking closely at Hélisenne de Crennes's work *Les Angoisses Douloureuses qui Precedent d' Amours* (1538), Catharine Randall points out that she uses cross-dressing and musical composition as a means to enable some degree of expressivity for her protagonist. She concludes that she

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<sup>42</sup> Toril Moi, 'A Woman's Desire to Be Known: Expressivity and Silence in Corinne', *Bucknell Review* 45.2 (2002): 143-175. p. 157.

may not be thoroughly successful since the female character's own authentic voice is subsumed within her beloved's, yet some stylistic elements survive.<sup>43</sup>

By the time Elizabeth Barrett Browning was composing *Aurora Leigh*, the problematics for a space for female expressivity were magnified and the need for the woman poet to be intermeshed in the realities of the public domain and reflect upon them in her work became more pressing; therefore reformist interventions to the male literary tradition had to be militantly sought after.

A considerable volume of critical effort has been dedicated to proving the weaknesses of Elizabeth Barrett Browning's venture to fuse the conventions of the epic and the novel. All of these readings rely heavily on two assumptions which, to a greater or lesser degree, evoke the wider gender codes that permeate western culture. First, they assume that the marriage-end reinstates the ultimate stereotype of female decorum, surrendering thus the narrative to the norms of the Victorian novel and, second, they maintain that Aurora's artistic power, to use Deirdre David's words, 'performs a "service" for a patriarchal vision of apocalypse'.<sup>44</sup> Omer Ranen goes even further in arguing that the apocalyptic end signifies the loss of individual identity and renders art 'no longer necessary in Aurora's revolutionary vision because the function of the poet is only to mediate between humanity in its fallen condition and joyful obedience to a higher order'.<sup>45</sup> As the flouting of generic boundaries in *Aurora Leigh* has been reiterated in the wider discussion of heterosexual conflict, this strand of criticism, in corroborating its polemic against Elizabeth Barrett Browning's sexual politics, overlooks her intersecting explorations in Romantic theories and Victorian sage

<sup>43</sup> Catharine Randall, 'Positioning Herself: A Renaissance-Reformation Diptych'. *Attending to Early Modern Women*, eds. Susan D. Amussen and Adele F. Seeff (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1998, pp. 199-229), pp.199-200.

<sup>44</sup> Deirdre David, "‘Art’s a Service’": Social Wound, Sexual Politics, and *Aurora Leigh*', *BIS* 13 (1985): 113-136. Repr. in *Critical Essays on Elizabeth Barrett Browning*, ed. Sandra Donaldson (New York: G. K. Hall, 1999), p. 164.

<sup>45</sup> Omer Ranen, 'Elizabeth Barrett Browning and Apocalypse: The Unraveling of Poetic Autonomy', *TSSL* 39.2 (Summer 1997): 97-124, p.117.

discourse, which provided the philosophical underpinnings for the evolution of her concept of the poet from the poet politician-hero to an enhanced concept of the poet prophet.

In my view, Herbert Tucker proposes an approach to the formal pattern of *Aurora Leigh* as nested concentric rings, which is instrumental in recovering the submerged aspects of the text and enables their re-assessment as founding principles. Stone, on the other hand, investigating the features of sage writing, alludes to the same pattern in tracing ‘a movement from ‘inner’ to ‘outer’ in the genesis, form, and philosophy of *Aurora Leigh*’ (*Elizabeth Barrett Browning* 156). I therefore take the lead from Tucker and Stone with a view to showing that Elizabeth Barrett Browning gains poetic freedom through the text’s fluidity.<sup>46</sup> While Tucker structurally places the text within the epic tradition, and Stone aims to recuperate the text in sage tradition, I argue that it is essential to supplement this pattern with a third, equally important, ring to include the conventions of the novel, as it will powerfully foreground the influence of Romantic aesthetic principles. Though sage discourse was until recently thought of as a predominantly male field, the collection of essays included in *Victorian Sages and Cultural Discourse: Renegotiating Gender and Power*,<sup>47</sup> which was published in 1990, attests to the fact that sage discourse appealed to female writers as well.

While the constructions of respectable femininity, like the angel in the house, and acceptable modes of writing, namely sentimental verse, deterred women from participating in such authoritative and public discourse, Thaïs Morgan, the editor of the volume, maintains that women writers challenged the male dominated space of sage discourse by inserting themselves in ‘the ‘masculine’ world of socioeconomic conflict, theological polemic, and sexual politics’ (6). Surprisingly, Elizabeth Barrett Browning

<sup>46</sup> Herbert F. Tucker, ‘Aurora Leigh: Epic Solutions to Novel Ends’, *Famous Last Words: Changes in Gender and Narrative Closure*, ed. Alison Booth (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia. 1993), pp. 63-64.

<sup>47</sup> Thaïs E. Morgan ed., *Victorian Sages and Cultural Discourse: Renegotiating Gender and Power* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1990).

appears only in passing, nonetheless, the contributions on women writers such as Harriet Martineau, Charlotte Brontë and Christina Rossetti pave the way to the debunking of yet another male literary bastion. Margaret Reynolds corrects this oversight and goes to greater lengths than other critics to reclaim *Aurora Leigh's* embeddedness in sage discourse in arguing that *Aurora Leigh* is a ‘*Künstlerroman* generating the sage discourse that surrounds and completes it’,<sup>48</sup> an idea shared by Stone, who is the first to provide a chapter-length exploration of the key-elements of sage writing in *Aurora Leigh*. The following passage serves as a springboard to the discussion of how the extended version of Herbert’s pattern of concentric rings operates and at the same time qualifies Stone’s and Reynolds’s claims:

What’s this Aurora Leigh,  
You write so of the poets, and not laugh?  
Those virtuous liars, dreamers after dark,  
Exaggerators of the sun and moon,  
And soothsayers in a tea cup?

I write so  
Of the only truth-tellers now left to God,  
The only speakers of essential truth,  
Opposed to relative, comparative,  
And temporal truths; the only holders by  
His sun-skirts, through conventional gray glooms;  
The only teachers who instruct mankind  
From just a shadow on a charnel-wall  
To find man’s veritable stature out  
Erect, sublime, - the measure of man,  
And that’s the measure of an angel, says  
The apostle. [...]

(I 854-69)

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<sup>48</sup> Cited in Stone, *Elizabeth Barrett Browning*. p. 137.

This rumination on the concept of the poet appears in the first book of the poem and echoes Carlyle's *vates*. The deployment of parataxis, with alternating short sentences accelerating the tone of the passage, reveals the urgency for the emergence of a poet who is defined as God's emissary. He is described as a truth-telling power, the ultimate savior of a secular world. While the Romantics were advocating the divine inspiration of the poet and located his transformative power in the reimagining of a new world, the Victorian poet's duty is to teach society how to monitor the new realities of a highly industrialized and commercialized epoch. According to Elizabeth Barrett Browning the poet's function is greater than the scientist's or the philosopher's. Reminding her readers of the poet's divine inspiration she implicitly chastises the marginalization of poetry and reclaims for the poet an elevated position in the new framework organizing all realms of human conduct, capitalism.

Elizabeth Barrett Browning's poet reveals her entanglement with Victorian sage discourse and her alignment with its exponent Thomas Carlyle. Carlyle argued that Poet or Prophet, 'fundamentally ... are still the same; ... they have penetrated both of them into the sacred mystery of the Universe ... whoever might forget this divine mystery, the *Vates*, ... has penetrated into it; is a man sent hither to make it more impressively known to us'.<sup>49</sup> The figure of the poet as *vates* betrays Carlyle's rejection of societal values as cultural constructs. In reclaiming divine truth as the structuring power of a graduated hierarchy of orders Carlyle explodes the Romantic concept of the poet-politician. Unlike Shelley's 'unacknowledged legislators' who are part of their society, Carlyle's poets are raised above society, which may well compromise their agency. Yet, it can be argued that the intermediary role between God and secular world not only compensated for this tentative loss of agency, rather divine inspiration bestowed on the poet-*vates* unique capabilities to bring about social change.

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<sup>49</sup> Thomas Carlyle, 'The Hero as Poet', *On Heroes, Hero-Worship and the Heroic in History*, ed. and introd. Carl Niemeyer (Lincoln; London: University of Nebraska Press, 1966), p. 80-81.

The concept of *vates* as the mediator between the finite and the infinite realms proved somewhat problematic though because it established poetry as a discourse belonging to a different order. Chris Vanden Bossche forcefully illustrates the reason why the Romantics necessitated the separation of poetry from other discourses:

none of this would be of much concern to us if these writers had merely wanted to advocate a rigorous aestheticism, but the art for art's sake they promote was meant to have social effects. Their intention in advocating art for art's sake was to insist that art did not exist merely for the sake of entertainment or pleasure, but had a more profound role to play ... they felt that only a transcendental discourse could author(ise) a just social order superior to that constructed in competing discourses.<sup>50</sup>

The paradox belying the core of Romantic theories of the poet is prevalent both in Carlyle -who was the contemporary of Shelley and Keats-, and Elizabeth Barrett Browning's concept of the poet. Ultimately, the investment in the *vates* figure conveys the hope that in art alone can be found the authority for 'certain human values, capacities, energies, which the development of society towards an industrial civilization was felt to be threatening or destroying'.<sup>51</sup> Claiming once again the poet's central position in society, Elizabeth Barrett Browning capitalizes on his divine knowledge:

Ay, and while your common men  
Lay telegraphs, gauge railroads, reign, reap, dine,  
And dust the flaunty carpets of the world  
For kings and queens to walk on or our president,  
The poet suddenly will catch them up  
With his voice like thunder, - 'This soul,  
This life, this word is being said in heaven,  
Here's God down on us! What are you about?'

<sup>50</sup> Chris R. Vanden Bossche, *Carlyle and the Search for Authority* (Colombus: Ohio State University Press, 1991), p. vii.

<sup>51</sup> Raymond Williams, *Culture and Society 1780-1950* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983), p. 36.

How all those workers start amid their work,  
Look round, look up, and feel a moment's space.  
That carpet-dusting, though a pretty trade,  
Is not the imperative labour after all.

(I 869-80)

The anxious tone of the passage draws our attention to the overwhelming consequences of industrialism,<sup>52</sup> the establishment of the liberal economic model and the cognate shift of social values. The poet here speaks the divine truth and instructs the nation that work is not all there is to life. This excerpt exposes Elizabeth Barrett Browning's rendition of the transcendental poet, whose elevated position above the societal realm does not preclude her / him from addressing the practicalities, the materiality and the ignoble aspects of modern life. The poet effectively asserts his agency in making the workers pause their work to 'look around', 'look up' and 'feel a moment's space' (I 878). In this passage feeling is presented as a disruptive force opposing the mechanistic repetition associated with the movements of the workers. The poet privileges feeling over blunt industrialism as it creates space and time for the workers to hear the poet's admonitions.

As already pointed out, Victorian sage discourse is just one of the intersecting discourses in *Aurora Leigh*. In book V, Aurora's much quoted lines draw our attention not only to heroic epic poetry, rather more crucially to Elizabeth Barrett Browning's corrective to the aloofness of the *vates* figure as well as the authoritarian politics and religious utterances lurking behind it.

Never flinch,  
But still, unscrupulously epic, catch  
Upon the burning lava of a song  
The full-veined, heaving, double-breasted Age:

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<sup>52</sup> Coined in the 1830s, this multivalent term, according to Raymond Williams in *Culture and Society*, p.13 signifies the collective institutions and activities of manufacturing and production.

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.’

(V 213-22)

The imperative ‘Never flinch’ reveals Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s awareness of the dangers a writer might be faced with when transgressing the mainstream authorial expectations of his / her times. Exhorting the poet to be brave in the face of negative criticism, Elizabeth Barrett Browning seems to have a grasp of her own transgressive gestures in *Aurora Leigh*. Furthermore, this excerpt raises a number of questions pertaining to the composition of *Aurora Leigh* and poetics in general. How does the epic tradition accommodate this celebration of poetry in a language that is so explicitly connected with female experience? What is the semantic currency of the metaphor of the beating heart as ‘living poetry’ in the context of Bakhtin’s verdict that the epic is dying out? Judging with hindsight, I will argue that Elizabeth Barrett Browning –pace Bakhtin- is consciously celebrating the generic plasticity of the epic in response to the rising popularity of the novel. More crucially, can the personal story of one woman’s itinerary to self-definition be regarded as ‘epic’?<sup>53</sup>

Bakhtin’s famous dictum, ‘we encounter the epic as a genre that has not only long completed its development, but one that is already antiquated’,<sup>54</sup> deserves fuller treatment primarily because it is arguably contradicted by literary evidence that the epic flourished in the eighteenth and nineteenth century. In nineteenth century Britain many

<sup>53</sup> While the majority of critics accept that *Aurora Leigh* is an epic, the plot of the *Künstlerinroman* and the operation of certain tropes of the novel fuel a certain discomfort, which manifests itself in critical pronouncements such as Stephanie L. Johnson’s ‘*Aurora Leigh* achieves its epic scope at the expense of its ethics’, in ““Aurora Leigh’s” Radical Youth: Derridean Parergon and the Narrative Frame in “A Vision of Poets””, *Victorian Poetry* 44.4 (2006): 425-444. p. 442.

<sup>54</sup> Mikhail Bakhtin, ‘Epic and Novel’, *The Dialogic Imagination*, eds. and trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), p. 3.

long poems, such as, Lord Byron's *Don Juan* and *Childe Harold*, William Wordsworth's *The Prelude*, Tennyson's *Idylls of the King*, Edwin Arnold's *Indian Idyll*, Robert Browning's *The Ring and the Book* had laid claim to the tradition of the epic. Bakhtin's definition of the novel proves as fluid and flexible as to allow for the grouping of verse-novels such as Pushkin's *Eugene Onegin*, Byron's *Childe Harold* and Meredith's *Modern Love* as novelistic texts. Expounding on the enhanced capacities of the novel, he writes:

The novel has become the leading hero in the drama of literary development in our time precisely because it best of all reflects the tendencies of a world still in the making... In the process of becoming the dominant genre, the novel sparks the renovation of all other genres, it infects them with its spirit of process and inconclusiveness (*Dialogic Imagination* 7).

Consistent in spirit but not in the letter of his writings, Bakhtin theorizes the novel based on his dynamic model of language. The unity of language, according to this model, is constantly renegotiated as some of the uses of language are pulled towards the centre (centripetal), namely, the 'national language', and others are directed to the periphery (centrifugal), whereby class, social grouping and generation produce further diversification or, to use Bakhtin's word, *heteroglossia* within the national language. The preeminence of social, economic and political forces as determining factors of *heteroglossia* underscores Bakhtin's primary concern with language as a social construct on the one hand, yet on the other, the absence of gender as an organizing category of *heteroglossia* reveals a glaring oversight, which poses certain problems for Bakhtin's model in general.

More specifically, when his theory is applied with a view to tracing the trajectory of self-development of a female heroine who achieves self-realization at the interface of

dialogic relations, the explanatory power of *heteroglossia* would appear to dramatically diminish. Crudely put, it fails to account for women's contribution to literary history. One can only speculate on the reasons leading to this omission. Bearing in mind that from the late 1920's onwards he was politically suspect, certain omissions and repetitions might be accounted for in view of the fact that his style was less coherent and his analysis less systematic as he had no expectations to publish his work. Nonetheless, revising the set of parameters conduced to *heteroglossia* to introduce gender leads to the acknowledgement of *heteroglossia* as a concept that effectively challenges the authority of the singular discourse. This is what renders Bakhtin's theory useful to a literary analysis, which aspires to trace the various discourses intersecting the represented dialogical relations in a text whose plot revolves around gender conflict.

*Aurora Leigh* is epic not only in its proportions and deployment of Miltonic blank verse, but most importantly because its protagonist becomes a symbolic figure. Her personal story becomes emblematic of women artists' plight and the emphasis of the narrative is placed on Aurora Leigh's heroinism, since her life-choices and vision, describe, address and negotiate the particularities of a specific sociocultural moment. Aurora thus claims the voice of the epic poet, which according to C. M. Bowra is 'impersonal, objective and dramatic',<sup>55</sup> with a view to reassert it ever more powerfully in the female poet's struggle for self-affirmation. Yet, Aurora disclaims the aesthetics of political and cultural unity prevalent in the classical epic. Every bend of the road to self-definition is marked by her encounters with Romney and Marian, the representatives of heterogenous discourses. The radical heterogeneity of one voice in reference to another sustains the ethics and the scope of the text while, at the same time, it subverts classical formations of the epic poem. Indeed, the resolution of the narrative is carried out gradually through Aurora's arguments with Romney. Enacting the erasure of the

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<sup>55</sup> Cecil M. Bowra, *Heroic Poetry* (London: Macmillan, 1952), p. 31.

oppositional paradigms of love and art, woman and artist, and spirituality and materiality, total reconciliation is conducted with Romney's affirmation of the potency of her work:

For what had *I*, I thought, to do with *her*,  
Aurora .. Romney? But, in this last book,  
You showed me something separate from yourself,  
Beyond you, and I bore to take it in  
And let it draw me. You have shown me truths,  
O June-day friend, that help me now at night  
When June is over! Truths not yours, indeed,  
But set within my reach by means of you,  
Presented by your voice and verse the way  
To take them clearest. Verily I was wrong;

(VIII 604-613)

Romney, who so valiantly fought to diminish the value of Aurora's poetry, now hails her as the translator of 'essential' truth, paving the way for Aurora's psychic, spiritual and social reintegration.

David Carroll, shedding light on Bakhtin's critical pronouncements, provides us with a slightly more optimistic account and sets the criterion against which the epic's appeal should be measured. He writes:

*The sacred monumental text is dead in as much as it suppresses the dialogue and conflict of voices constituting it* and pretends to be totally present in the present, to control and capture life, to stand as an example of a closed linguistic rhetorical metasystem<sup>56</sup> (my emphasis).

Carroll is not running to the rescue of the epic, yet juxtaposing his ideas to Bakhtin's is instructive because he doesn't argue for a wholesale renunciation of the epic as vehemently as Bakhtin does. Bakhtin appears more militant about the epic's allegedly

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<sup>56</sup> David Carroll, 'The Alterity of Discourse Form, History and the Question of the Political in M. M. Bakhtin', *Diacritics* 13.2 (1983): 65-83. p. 62.

restricted representational capacities as a monologic genre: the objectifying voice of privileged forms of tradition, the establishment of a distanced representational space, and the replacement of present events within the context of the heroic past, hinder the representation of the multiple contexts and competing discourses that shape historical moments (*Dialogic Imagination* 15). Carroll is more flexible in that he associates the dwindling popularity of epic poetry with the degree to which it suppresses *heteroglossia*, opening up the possibilities for some epic poems which represent the construction of identity as a dynamically interactive process, to accommodate the authorial expectations of modernity. Seemingly, for Bakhtin it was a political decision to discuss the epic from a perspective that advocated the novel's capacity to rejuvenate the epic, rather than the epic's amenability as a representational apparatus of the sociopolitical formations of the early twentieth century. The fact that numerous long poems lay claim to the epic and aspire to be received as such despite their hybrid qualities evidences its salient position in the repertoire of literary genres. Ezra Pound's *Cantos* attests to the revival of the genre in the twentieth century, while H. D.'s *Helen in Egypt* continues the female reformist intervention in the epic tradition.

Bernard Schweizer contends that Elizabeth Barrett Browning's *Aurora Leigh* occupies a position within the transitional stage between two phases of the development of the female epic. While earlier practitioners of the female epic like Mary Wroth and Mary Tighe were 'wary to claim outright heroic stature for their heroines, ... the more recent epic women writers tend to offer more assertive models of agency and fortitude while simultaneously expounding straight forward anti-patriarchal critiques'.<sup>57</sup> Indeed, Aurora Leigh speaks from the central position of the male epic hero. Moreover, the construction of her character partakes in the tradition of the Romantic bard, who not only experiences, but rather becomes himself the embodiment of revelation. Her story,

<sup>57</sup> Bernard Schweizer, 'Muses With Pens', *Approaches to the Anglo and American Female Epic, 1621-1982*, ed. Bernard Schweizer (London: Ashgate, 2006), p. 14.

individual as it may be, may well stand for every woman's quest. While William Wordsworth's Romantic *Künstlerroman* *The Prelude* narrates the poet's investment in nature to bolster his confidence in becoming the artist he aspires to, *Aurora Leigh*, like all *Künstlerinromane*, self-consciously and insistently inculpates gender conflict for the imposition of serious constraints on the development of the woman poet. Elizabeth Barrett Browning, in adopting the subject matter of the *Künstlerinroman*, the woman artist's quest for self-definition in a hostile, male dominated culture, reverses the conventions of the traditional epic by situating the woman right in the center of action. Elizabeth Barrett Browning could have written a novel, yet by structuring the narrative on the Miltonic epic model, which deploys blank verse, she is able to break more ground and claim a renewed role for the woman writer. As Meg Tasker put it, 'the poet who has written *Aurora Leigh* also gets to have it all generically, by adopting a novelized, modern form of poetry in which to create her image of the new woman poet'.<sup>58</sup> Aurora expounds on the embodiment of theme in form in the following passage from Book V.

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 imprison spirit  
And not embody. Inward evermore  
To outward, - so in life, and so in art,  
Which still is life.

(V 223-229)

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<sup>58</sup> Meg Tasker, 'Aurora Leigh: Elizabeth Barrett Browning's Novel Approach to the Woman Poet', *Tradition and the Poetics of Self in Nineteenth-Century Women's Poetry*, ed. Barbara Garlick (Amsterdam, New York: Rodopi, 2002), p. 41. Marjorie Stone, Alison Case and recently Mary Mullen also discuss Elizabeth Barrett Browning's cross-generic poetics. Stone relates generic transgressions to gender inversions while Case and Mullen focus on modes of narration. See Marjorie Stone, 'Genre Subversion and Gender Inversion: "The Princess" and "Aurora Leigh"', *Victorian Poetry* (1987): 101-127; Alison Case, 'Gender and Narration in "Aurora Leigh"', *Victorian poetry* (1991): 17-32 and Mary Mullen, 'Two Clocks: *Aurora Leigh*, Poetic Form, and the Politics of Timeliness', *Victorian Poetry* 51.1 (2013): 63-80.

In this passage Aurora advocates the enhanced potentials of cross-generic writing and subverts the relation between the poet and authority. Undoubtedly, the figures of the *vates*, the Romantic bard and the epic poet predicated as they are upon divine authority, work interchangeably towards the construction of an omniscient narrator. Susan Stanford Friedman highlights the importance of the lyric ‘I’ in *Aurora Leigh* and argues that it is due to its assertion that she managed to break through the gender barriers erected by intersecting gender and genre norms. Bearing female codification, the lyric ‘I’ celebrates the ‘subjective’, the ‘personal’, the ‘private’ and the ‘emotional’, and undermines the omniscience of the *vates*, the Romantic bard and the epic poet, only to enhance, in my view, the potentiality of Aurora’s transformative vision of the intersubjective experience of love and egalitarian society. Friedman’s identification of the lyric ‘I’ in *Aurora Leigh* resets the fusion of the confessional mode of the lyric which bears feminine codification with the voice of the epic poet, who is thought of as the masculine poetic subject *par excellence*, in more intelligible terms, allowing the female protagonist’s digression in self-reflexive ruminations. In this case, she explains, ‘the speaker may well reflect the ethos of the age, but the intimacy of the form heightens the presence of the individual self … lyric genre codes tolerate, even at times celebrate the idiosyncratic, the abnormal, the alienated, or the different’ (205). Bakhtin seems to be alluding to the same excesses of individuality in identifying a ‘surplus’ of humanity, which cannot be accounted for within the strict confines of any of the existing genres. Despite the fact that he acknowledges a certain epistemological worth in the novel, in so far as it actively endorses and intervenes in the *heteroglossia* in which it is enfolded, in a key passage in ‘Epic and Novel’, he refrains from reducing the characters of the novel to mere reflections of socio-cultural structures. He states:

An individual cannot be completely incarnated into the flesh  
of existing sociohistorical categories. There is no mere form

that would be able to incarnate once and forever all of his human possibilities and needs, no form in which he could exhaust himself down to the last word, like the tragic or epic hero; no form that he could fill to the very brim, and yet at the same time not splash over the brim (*Dialogic Imagination* 37).

Interestingly, Bakhtin recognizes that even the novel may fall short in representing the protagonists' excessive individuality. This unaccounted humanism of the characters might be tackled to some extent only if we accept that individuality is born at the interface of multiple, competing social forces. Simon Dentith, commenting on this excerpt, argues that Bakhtin does not wholeheartedly embrace the reductive thinking of other Marxist critics, like Georg Lukacs, who insisted on the rigid typicality of the characters of the novel. He writes:

The truth of the character cannot be exhausted by such sociohistorical location – there is always some surplus, some element of their humanity which is not to be finally explained and which thus permits their orientation towards the future. ... Once again we meet the ethical stress on the irreducibility of the individual and the recognition of the complex social determinations that make the individual unique.<sup>59</sup>

Amongst *Aurora Leigh's* novelistic qualities, it is precisely this unremitting effort to intervene in the social and conceptual categories without compromising the individuality of the characters that adds to the construction of Aurora's subjectivity a Bakhtinian slant. At odds with his insistence not to surrender the individual to socio-historical explanation, is Bakhtin's ambivalence towards the lyric. Bakhtin is uneasy with the fact that subjective expression is direct and not infiltrated through the social/dialogised obliqueness of the novel. Thus he states in 'Discourse and the Novel':

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<sup>59</sup> Simon Dentith, *Bakhtinian Thought. An Introductory Reader* (London and New York: Routledge, 1995), p. 63.

'All direct meanings and direct expressions are false, and this is especially true of emotional meanings and expressions' (*Dialogic Imagination* 401). Yet, as already pointed out, the lyric does enjoy a more privileged position on his axis of distinctions, one nearer to an unmarked generic contrast. According to Bakhtin, the lyric can survive within the novel emerging as one voice among others.

Ultimately, accepting the presence of the lyric 'I' is part of what is required of Aurora in order to 'witness' 'God's undivided work'. The revalidation of the lyric 'I' takes place towards the end of the text when she tells Romney:

But I who saw the human nature broad  
At both sides, comprehending too the soul's,  
And all the high necessities of Art,  
Betrayed the thing I saw, and wronged my own life  
For which I pleaded. 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. [...]

(IX 641-649)

Nonetheless, self-division and suffering is what leads to the realization that the artist cannot distance him / herself from human intimacy. In book III, Aurora articulates Elizabeth Barrett Browning's ideas on the function of the poet as a worker at the service of his own intellect. Aurora cannot imagine herself as a true poet, unless she walks a path filled with obstacles, alienation and suffering. She recounts her London years: 'Day and night / I worked my rhythmic thought, and furrowed up / Both watch and slumber with long lines of life / Which did not suit their season. The rose fell / From either cheek, my eyes globed luminous / Through orbits of blue shadow, [...]' (271-276). In the book IV when Romney enquires on her health and asks her 'Aurora, you are changed-are ill?' she responds:

‘Not so, my cousin, - only not asleep!’  
I answered, smiling gently. ‘Let it be.  
You scarcely found the poet of Vaucluse  
As drowsy as the sheperds. What is art,  
But life upon the larger scale, the larger scale, the higher,  
When, graduating up in a spiral line  
Of still expanding and ascending gyres,  
It pushes toward the intense significance  
Of all things, hungry for the Infinite?  
Art’s life, - and where we live, we suffer and toil.’

(1148-1157)

Aurora’s response encapsulates her reverence for the Romantic tradition of the solitary poet. She deems herself above the masses. Presenting herself in the realm of the Infinite, Aurora claims the power of divine inspiration. In detaching herself from humanity Aurora perpetuates her self-division and suffering and becomes all the more absorbed with herself and her art. In both passages, she construes her art, in Diderotian terms,<sup>60</sup> in so far as her self-consciousness is eradicated in representing herself fixated ‘day and night’ and transfixed before her very own intellectual endeavor, her ‘rhythmic thought’. In book VII, Aurora provides a recollection of her entrancement in a state of self-debasement, and she describes the self-defeating consequences of a consuming, absorptive art:

I did not write, nor read, nor even think,  
But sate absorbed amid the quickening glooms,  
Most like some passive broken lump of salt  
Dropt in by chance to a bowl of œnomel,  
To spoil the drink a little and lose itself,  
Dissolving slowly, slowly, until lost.

(1306-1311)

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<sup>60</sup> Daniel Brewer in *The Discourse of Enlightenment in Eighteenth-Century France* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), p. 153, explains that Diderot’s aesthetics puts forward a ‘theory of spectatorship [which] makes absorption legible, as a pictorial technique for overcoming the self’s disjunction from the objects of his beholding’.

As Michael Fried argues in his study of Diderotian aesthetics, absorptive art encourages the beholder to forget that she / he is a beholder in order to ‘establish the fiction that no one is standing before the canvas’.<sup>61</sup> Aurora’s understanding of art here, exemplifies the very definition of absorption. Absorptive in its aesthetic considerations, Aurora’s art becomes synonymous with Aurora’s life. Nonetheless a paradox emanates from this equation: since Aurora’s life is constituted by a series of *tableaux* filled with suffering, then the creative process as the driving force to live, as well as its artistic product, becomes the source of more life-threatening suffering. As Aurora becomes absorbed by her art her poetic gift whittles away. Yet, as already discussed, Aurora will eventually retract from projecting a claustrophobic subjectivity, not only exploding her own concept of absorptive art and solitary poet but, most crucially, avoiding the fate of the suicidal Sappho or the self-consumptive poetess Corinne.<sup>62</sup>

Having exposed Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s appropriation and retailoring of the stereotypical figures of authorial power such as the *vates*, the epic poet and the romantic bard to suit the subject matter of the *Künstlerinroman*, what remains to be elucidated regarding the compelling discourse of this hybrid construction, is how it substitutes binary logic with a new kind of conjunction of opposing categories through the narratization of self. The text eventually achieves unity by patching together competing categories and allowing the cohabitation of conflicting discourses in one discursive plane: Aurora’s narrative of self-construction. Christine Chaney, in

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<sup>61</sup> Michael Fried, *Absorption and Theatricality: Painting and Beholder in the Age of Diderot* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), p. 108. Brewer in *The Discourse of Enlightenment in Eighteenth-Century France*, p. 153, in discussing Fried’s treatment of Diderot points out that ‘what Fried views in Diderot is a theory of viewing stemming from the need of both painters and viewers to involve themselves in scenes of absorption, scenes that amount to the pictorial quest for a means of “self-transcendence”. These scenes, as well as their understanding, would originate in the ontological *desire to locate oneself in and through a viewing, to find the desired and imaginary self in the image*’. (my emphasis) This clarification is particularly relevant to my argument that Aurora describes her situation deploying absorptive self-representational images. In view of her declining talent, Aurora is absorbed in herself because she imagines and desperately desires, seeks and labours towards self-integration. In a sense, Aurora becomes both the subject and the object of her absorptive art.

<sup>62</sup> For a detailed discussion of Diderotian aesthetics in *Corinne*, see Toril Moi’s ‘A Woman’s Desire to Be Known: Expressivity and Silence in *Corinne*’, p. 146-154.

describing the significance of self-narratization in *Aurora Leigh*, provides a succinct account of Elizabeth Barrett Browning's progressive poetics:

The rhetorical authority of this new gendered 'montage' model of language, thought, and being is gained through the confession of a single non-linear narrative of self – a life testimony that offers itself as the best argument and evidence for the truth of its claims.<sup>63</sup>

The idea that Aurora's struggle to artistic perfection is parallel to her quest for personal development for self-definition has been repeatedly discussed by critics such as Marjorie Stone, who contends that Aurora holds herself together through her art, through writing for a 'better self'. Aurora is actually calling into existence that 'better self' (*Elizabeth Barrett Browning* 188) when she manages to patch all the parts of herself together. This is precisely why Aurora's reintegration gains a symbolic value. As Peggy Dunn Bailey argues, she creates a self, which 'is more than the sum of its parts, just as her union with Romney is'.<sup>64</sup> As Aurora narrates the story of her self-development, to use Herbert Tucker's words, her identity, 'is presented as a dynamically interactive process rather than a free standing construction' (73), and we are reminded that this process reinforces the Romantic emphasis on the creative potential of the workings of imagination. Aurora's involvement with her art becomes an involvement with the art of self-making, entailing the 'rewriting and erasure of the self and the narratising [of] its own composition'.<sup>65</sup> This reflective process in identifying the *Künstlerinroman* as an essentially Romantic genre, also allows in a narrative of open-ended potentiality such as

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<sup>63</sup> Christine Chaney, 'The "Prophet-Poet's Book"', *SEL Studies in English Literature 1500-1900* 48.4 (2008): 791-799. p. 797.

<sup>64</sup> Peggy Dunn Bailey, 'Hear the Voice of the [Female] Bard': *Aurora Leigh* as a Female Romantic Epic', *Approaches to the Anglo and American Female Epic, 1621-1982*, ed. Bernard Schweizer (London: Ashgate, 2006), p. 131.

<sup>65</sup> Gail Turley Houston, 'Gender Construction and the Künstlerroman: *David Copperfield* and *Aurora Leigh*', *PQ* 72 (1993): 213-36. p. 213.

*Aurora Leigh* the ‘constructive power of the mind’<sup>66</sup> to take the lead in the inscription of meaning.

Dunn Bailey points out that the question plaguing Aurora throughout her reflexive narrative is ‘who am I becoming?’ and not ‘how did I become what I am?’ (131). Bailey is the first critic to allude to the importance of the ethics informing Aurora’s understanding of the self. Considering Aurora’s insistence on giving an account of herself, which will elucidate the conditions of the emergence of her selfhood, one might argue that she becomes a social thinker. Varsamopoulou, in line with Gail Houston, acknowledges the importance of the self-reflective structure in the *Künstlerinroman*, yet she adds that

the writer’s novel becomes the space for personal confessions and psychological introspection, social critique and cultural analysis, linguistic playfulness and narrative experimentation or theoretical digressions about art and creativity (xii).

Aurora’s struggle for self-definition reveals that her social theory is informed by an ethics of ‘the who’ and aims to establish a relational politics that embraces mutual recognition. My understanding of the ethics of ‘the who’ is informed by Hannah Arendt’s theorization of ‘the who’.<sup>67</sup> Arendt argues that individuality or ‘uniqueness’, to use her own term, is revealed through one person’s acts and speech. Consequently, Aurora, rejecting the Nietzschean proclamation that life is inextricably bound to

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<sup>66</sup> Northrop Frye, *A Study of English Romanticism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), p. 11.

<sup>67</sup> Arendt in *The Human Condition* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1957), p. 181, writes: ‘who somebody is or was we can know only by knowing the story of which he is himself the hero-his biography in other words’. I am however introducing Andriana Cavarero’s theory because she elaborates the Arendtian concept in a way that facilitates my reading of Aurora Leigh’s construction of selfhood. Apart from regarding self-exposure as cognate with the political mode of being, she adds that each of us is ‘narratable’ by the other, namely that we rely upon the other for the narration of our life-story. Cavarero’s concept of the narratable self resonates with Aurora’s need to attain Romney’s consent regarding her efficacy to produce meaningful art. In *Giving an Account of Oneself*, Judith Butler holds that Cavarero ‘ground[s] herself in an Arendtian conception of the social, which she mines for its *ethical import*’ and that she ‘argues that Arendt focuses on a politics of “the who” in order to establish a relational politics’. (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005), p. 31, my emphasis. In agreement with Butler’s observations regarding Cavarero’s treatment of Arendtian concepts, I use the term ‘ethics of “the who”’ to highlight Cavarero’s focus on ethical / moral accountability.

suffering and death, puts forward a progressive politics of the self and a revolutionary poetics that is founded on self-narratisation.

Andriana Cavarero, in her book *Relating Narratives. Storytelling and Selfhood*,<sup>68</sup> locates the construction of the self within a matrix of sociocultural norms, yet she argues that the organizing principle of a theory of recognition is grounded primarily in dyadic relations and not sociality as Hegel proposed in *Phenomenology of Spirit*. Deploying a limpidly Arendtian parlance, Cavarero asserts that self-exposure and self-narratisation announce the uniqueness of the individual and moderate the substitutability of the self to the degree that is required to make oneself recognizable. She writes:

Someone's life story always results from an existence, which from the beginning, has exposed her to the world – revealing her uniqueness... The existent is the exposable and the narratable: neither exposability nor narratability, which together constitute this peculiarly human uniqueness can be taken away... the self is thus also able to recuperate the constitutive worldly and relational identity from which the story itself resulted (36).

Exposability and narratability make up the two registers through which Aurora pursues and eventually achieves understanding of herself, her vocation and her position in society. Inevitably, Aurora's struggle for self-definition reveals her conception of the self as the 'I' that exists in a sense for [a] you, and by virtue of [a] you. In this respect, Aurora's question 'Who am I becoming?' is addressed simultaneously to herself, Romney and Marian and ultimately us, the readers. Reynolds also alludes to this dyadic relation upon which, as I have argued, Aurora's subjectivity is constructed. She states: 'In embarking upon the composition of her autobiography, Aurora undertakes the dual

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<sup>68</sup> Adriana Cavarero, *Relating Narratives: Storytelling and Selfhood* (London and New York: Routledge, 2014), p. 36.

task of explaining herself to herself by examining the factors which have influenced her identity, and of explaining herself to the lover who will ‘read’ this portrait’ (9).

## Conclusion

Aurora’s identificatory model in being sustained through language and representation, justifies Warwick Slinn’s argument for the increased importance of discourse in Victorian selfhood. Slinn, combining the networks of representation and relationship, which are situated within the subjective self by idealist phenomenology and within discourse by structuralism and post-structuralism, forcefully argues for the prevalence of a Victorian discourse of the self. He writes:

Victorian poetry already demonstrates the problematics entailed in the shift of emphasis from self to discourse: specifically the poetry displays the psychological drama which follows from the sense that the self is inseparable from language (that is, from representation). My concern is with both subject and language, with the interplay through which they constitute each other and without which, conceptually speaking, neither would exist.<sup>69</sup>

In the first book Aurora inserts the vocation of the poet in the androgynous discourse arguing that when she took up writing her ‘heart beat in [her] brain’ (961). This image can be unsettling in its allusion to the heart being contained in the brain in so far as it evokes a scene of imprisonment and entrapment, especially if one ignores Aurora’s journey to self-realization and innovative inspiration model. Margot K. Louis has forcefully shown that Aurora’s heart was eventually enlarged so as to accommodate her brain but also to embrace Marian and Romney.<sup>70</sup>

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<sup>69</sup> Warwick E. Slinn, *The Discourse of Self in Victorian Poetry* (Charlottesville and London: University of Virginia Press, 1991), p. 5.

<sup>70</sup> Margot K. Louis, ‘Enlarging the Heart: LEL’s “The Improvisatrice,” Hemans’s “Properzia Rossi,” and Barrett Browning’s “Aurora Leigh”’, *Victorian Literature and Culture* 26.01 (1998): 1-17. p. 3.

In this chapter I have argued that Elizabeth Barrett Browning's engagement with the script of the sentimental was both confrontational and reverential and that her cross-bred poetic strategies advocated the conflation of the voices of the Romantic bard and the *vates* as well as the simultaneous assertion of a strong lyric 'I'. What will be shown in the following chapter is that her reiterated interest in the figure of Prometheus and Aurora Leigh's androgyny and progressive model of inspiration are not only underwritten by the idea that discourse and selfhood are viscerally bound, but they also betray a deep-seated concern with the fusion of masculine and feminine qualities. While Prometheus had been a major source of inspiration for the Romantics who were drawn to this mythical figure because it symbolized a defiant force to any kind of authoritarian structures and violence, the poet self-consciously proposes a remodelling of traditional representations of the hero by deploying the discourse of the sentimental. Her two translations of Aeschylus' classical tragedy *Prometheus Bound* as well as her treatment of a feminised figure of Christ in 'The Seraphim' explore the potentiality of a new discourse that recognises and respects the alterity of sexual difference allowing both women and men to be represented within it.

## **Chapter 2: Androgynous Imagination and Prometheanism in Elizabeth Barrett Browning's poetry of the 1830s and *Aurora Leigh***

In her long essay *A Room of One's Own*, Woolf asserts that there are differences between masculine and feminine orientations, but seeks to reconcile them into a harmonious whole in the ideal of the androgynous mind. The loosening of boundaries between genders and the merging of the opposite sexes into one whole is almost photographically captured in the sight of a man and a woman meeting to share a taxi.

One has a profound, if irrational, instinct in favour of the theory that the union of man and woman makes for the greatest satisfaction, the most complete happiness. But the sight of the two people getting into the taxi and the satisfaction it gave me made me also ask whether there are two sexes in the mind corresponding to the two sexes of the body, and whether they also require to be united in order to get complete satisfaction and happiness? ... The normal and comfortable state of being is that when the two live in harmony together, spiritually cooperating. If one is a man, still the woman part of his brain must have effect; and a woman must also have intercourse with the man in her. Coleridge perhaps meant this when he said a great mind is androgynous. It is when this fusion takes place that the mind is fully fertilized and uses all his faculties ... But it would be well to test what is meant by man-womanly and conversely by woman-manly.<sup>1</sup>

Almost a hundred years after the Romantic period in Britain (1780-1830), Woolf masterfully rearticulates in this passage both the possibilities and the impossibilities of an androgynous ideal posited by Coleridge, promising to reconcile the masculine with

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<sup>1</sup> Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own. Three Guineas* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), pp. 101-102.

the feminine. As in the art of all ages, the androgynous symbol she refers to was associated with a state of original perfection and represented the whole of humanity as an individual. The myth of origins in *Genesis* informs us that before God took Adam's rib to form Eve, he was androgynous, potentially both male and female. Therefore, in Judaeo-Christian tradition, the androgyne not only symbolizes our common roots -the origins of both men and women- but reminds us of the possibility of a perfect, unified being which in time experienced its disintegration into sexes.

In nineteenth century male-authored texts the androgyne symbol prevails as the ultimate symbolic code signalling a cultural shift which necessitated the reclamation of the domestic sphere as a moral center. As John Lukacs explains, the socioeconomic instability of a tumultuous era marked by the rise of capitalism and industrialism as well as political revolution accounts for the 'Romantic bourgeois interiority', which he understands as the Romantics' impulse to 'domesticate not only the external world but the internal one as well'.<sup>2</sup> Lukacs's concept of 'Romantic bourgeois interiority' directs our attention to the merger of traditionally separate spheres, yet the dynamics of this venture is far more complex than those exposed in Woolf's reading of Coleridge's union of difference.<sup>3</sup>

The failure to sustain a symmetrical distribution of power and agency to both sexes informs Mary Wollstonecraft's social critique throughout *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*. The profusion of questions sets the inquiring tone of the excerpts aptly illustrating Wollstonecraft's uncertainty on the matter. She writes:

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<sup>2</sup> John Lukacs, 'The Bourgeois Interior', *AS* 39 (1970): 625-626.

<sup>3</sup> Coleridge's union of difference is advocated in his famous definition of poetry as resting upon the mental powers at play in the process of composition or synthesis: 'What is poetry? is so nearly the question with what is a poet? (...). The poet, described in ideal perfection, brings the hole of the soul of man into activity... He diffuses a tone and spirit of unity, that blends, and (as it were) fuses, each into each, by that synthetic magical power, to which we have exclusively appropriated the name of imagination. This power... reveals itself in the balance or reconciliation of opposite or discordant qualities...' in *Biographia Literaria or Biographical Sketches of my Literary Life and Opinions* (1817), ed. James Engell and W. Jackson Bate, 2 vols (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983), 2:16-17. Virginia Woolf's meditation on Coleridge's generative model of imagination was overwritten by the metaphor of sexual difference.

I have been led to imagine that the few extraordinary women who have rushed in eccentric directions out of the orbit prescribed to their sex, were male spirits, confined by mistake in female frames. But [is it] philosophical to think of sex when the soul is mentioned [?] ... the love of pleasure may be said to govern [the lives of most women]; does this prove that there is a sex in souls?<sup>4</sup>

While it is clear that she affirmatively draws a direct connection between extraordinary intellectual achievement and masculinity, she is less inclined to consent to the polarizing biogender dichotomy when it comes to the exclusive appropriation of the soul. Introducing the multiple contradictions in the theorisation and the literary fashioning of the androgynous symbol by women, Wollstonecraft's ideas claimed a firm hold in the formation of the ensuing generations of women writers.

Elizabeth Barrett Browning's two sonnets, 'To George Sand. A Desire' and 'To George Sand. A Recognition'<sup>5</sup> in her 1844 *Poems*, not only betray her infatuation with the famous cross-dresser, but they constitute an eloquent celebration of Sand's androgyny bearing Wollstonecraftian echoes. The first sonnet extols Sand's androgyny by metonymically conflating symbolic images demarcating masculine and feminine qualities which eventually unite after the sonnet's volta in the sexless figures of the angel and the child. Sand's soul 'moans defiance' (l. 3) 'amid the lions' (l. 2), her '[...] woman's claim, / And man's might' st join beside the angel's grace' (ll. 10-11), and her genius '[...] sanctified from blame,- / Till child and maiden pressed to [her] embrace, / To kiss upon [her] lips a stainless fame.' (l. 12-14). The opening lines of 'A Desire', in my view, most effectively reiterate the implications of Wollstonecraft's understanding of the development of female genius as transgression into male reserves and her

<sup>4</sup> Mary Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, ed. Carol H. Poston (New York: Norton, 1988), pp. 35, 60.

<sup>5</sup> Quotations from the sonnets to Sand are from *The Complete Works of Elizabeth Barrett Browning*.

resistance to gendering the heart. Elizabeth Barrett Browning while combining the qualities usually allotted separately by gender to men and women, inverses the stereotypical model. She addresses Sand as a '[...] large-brained woman and a large-hearted man' (l. 1), yet the image of the defiant heart amid lions, clearly reinstates Wollstonecraft's assertion that female intellectual achievement requires both the transgression and the appropriation of male territory. Clare Broome Saunders also links the emergence of female genius with the desire to actively challenge societal restrictions and expectations, and has recently traced a recourse to medievalism by pointing out that Jeanne D' Arc's defiant 'spirituality and passion' has inspired Elizabeth Barrett Browning's construction of Sand.<sup>6</sup>

One vexing difficulty emerging from Romantic representations of the androgynous is that it cannot be dissociated from the Romantic poets' subscription to an ideology of the feminine that determined their representations of women. This ideology was, of course, a by-product of the traditional male dominated sociocultural reality which denied women equal space in society and confined them to the domestic realm. Diane Hoeveler, in her study *Romantic Androgyny: The Women Within*, contends that the merging of the masculine with the feminine in nineteenth century literature was predicated on the valorization of appropriating feminine qualities by male heroes and ultimately the assimilation of the feminine by the masculine.<sup>7</sup> In my view, Hoeveler's account is valuable in comprehending the workings of the androgynous imagination of the Romantics. First, it takes into consideration the specific cultural complexities of the Romantic period and the limited role of women in the public domain; second, it aptly

<sup>6</sup> Clare Broome Saunders, "Judge no more what ladies do:" Elizabeth Barrett Browning's Active Medievalism, the Female Troubadour, and Joan of Arc', *Victorian Poetry* 44.4 (2006): 585-597. pp. 591-592. For detailed discussions of Elizabeth Barrett Browning's version of Sand in relation to concepts of heroism see also Amy Billone's "Thy woman's hair, my sister, all unshorn:" EBB's Sonnets to George Sand', *Victorian Poetry* 48.4 (2010): 577-593 and Margaret Morlier's 'The Hero and the Sage: Elizabeth Barrett's Sonnets' To George Sand in Victorian Context', *Victorian Poetry* 41.3 (2003): 319-332.

<sup>7</sup> Diane Hoeveler Long, *Romantic Androgyny: The Women Within* (University Park and London: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1990).

demonstrates that Romantic canonical poets despite regarding the androgynous symbol as the epitome of primordial oneness created out of opposing forces, during the merging of those forces the masculine principle claimed dominance over the feminine by assimilating it. Most importantly, Hoeveler's understanding of Romantic androgynous imagination proves a serviceable means to interpret the androgynous imagination of a woman writer (especially when through the inversion of roles, the female subject assumes masculine characteristics), and test the woman poet's capacity to revise and re-envision the androgynous symbol posited by her male peers. Kari Weil's *Androgyny and the Denial of Difference* brought to my attention the importance of Luce Irigaray's theory of sexual difference in approaching women writers' efforts to become agents in a patriarchal society. Starting from Irigaray's theory, Weil argues that to understand the concept of the androgynous means to realise the silencing of the female figure from the androgynous rhetoric and its assimilation by the male. Weil points out that to 'bring this other figure onto the scene of representation, is to subvert the text's structure of opposition and its use as a paradigm for the creation of meaning and hierarchy'.<sup>8</sup>

Having demonstrated how Elizabeth Barrett Browning's *Aurora Leigh*, in all its generic mixedness exceeds the expectations surrounding the Romantic *Künstlerinoman* in eventually refraining from the representation of a self-consumptive heroine, in this chapter I will flesh out my analysis showing that *Aurora Leigh* might be read as a radical text as it champions a progressive sexual politics which allows equal agency in an androgynous union.

But before embarking on the analysis of Elizabeth Barrett Browning's androgynous imagination, it is important to situate the discussion in the context of her feminist criticism so as to clarify the ideas from which this enquiry departs.<sup>9</sup> It is

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<sup>8</sup> Kari Weil, *Androgyny and the Denial of Difference* (Charlottesville and London: University Press of Virginia, 1992), p. 11.

<sup>9</sup> As pointed out in the Introduction and Chapter 1, Elizabeth Barrett Browning's poetry attracted renewed critical attention in the 1980s and was thus rescued from a century of neglect. Notable contributions are Cora

important to point out at the outset that in this study it is claimed that the androgynous ideal proposed in her poetry of the 1830s and *Aurora Leigh* does not ultimately undermine the feminist interests of the poem nor does it subordinate the female to the strictures of masculine traditional structures as many have argued. In regard to the ending of *Aurora Leigh*, which allegedly reproduces the romance ending of the Victorian female novel, Maureen Thum offers us a clear idea of why its feminist critical reception veered in a negative direction:

In assessing Aurora's unconventional stance, critics have been consistently troubled by her marriage to her cousin Romney at the conclusion of the narrative. It is viewed as a conventional happy ending and as a capitulation, if not an abject self-abnegation by a formerly heroic protagonist who at the last minute relinquishes all she has gained in order to reinsert herself into patriarchy.<sup>10</sup>

In depicting Aurora as subordinated to male ideology, feminist critics charge Elizabeth Barrett Browning with a failure to articulate a feminist vision yet none of them tries to provide an alternative reading of her 'divided attitude toward being a woman'.<sup>11</sup> Leighton puts forward the argument of Elizabeth Barrett Browning's alleged unconscious anti-feminism and hatred of woman in explaining that her 'profound

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Kaplan's introduction to her edition, *Aurora Leigh and Other Poems*; Sandra Donaldson's "Motherhood's Advent in Power:" Elizabeth Barrett Browning's Poems about Motherhood', *Victorian Poetry* 18 (Spring 1980): 51-60; Barbara Gelpi's "Aurora Leigh": The Vocation of the Woman Poet', *Victorian Poetry* 19 (Spring 1981): 35-48; Virginia Steinmetz's 'Beyond the Sun: Patriarchal Images in *Aurora Leigh*', *Studies in Browning and His Circle* 9 (Winter 1981): 8-41, and 'Images of Mother Want in Elizabeth Barrett Browning's "Aurora Leigh"', *Victorian Poetry* 21 (Winter 1983): 361-367; Sandra Gilbert's analysis in *The Madwoman and the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1979) as well as her 'From Patria to Matria: Elizabeth Barrett Browning's Risorgimento', *PMLA* 99 (March 1984): 194-209; and Dolores Rosenblum's 'Elizabeth Barrett Browning's "Aurora Leigh." Face to Face with the Nineteenth-Century Poets', *Victorian Studies* 26 (Spring 1983): 321-338.

<sup>10</sup> Maureen Thum, 'Challenging Traditionalist Gender Roles: The Exotic Woman as Critical Observer in Elizabeth Barrett Browning's *Aurora Leigh*', *The Foreign Woman in British Literature: Exotics, Aliens, and Outsiders*, eds. Marilyn Button and Toni Reed (Westport: Greenwood Publishing Group, 1999, pp. 79-94), pp. 90.

<sup>11</sup> Barbara C. Gelpi, "Aurora Leigh": Vocation of the Woman Poet', *Victorian Poetry* 19.1 (Spring 1981): 35-48. p. 41.

anxiety of womanliness'<sup>12</sup> leads her to denounce her femininity and to see women in antifeminist terms and posit them in a disempowering position. In taking up the polemic against Elizabeth Barrett Browning's venture to reaffirm the 'womanliness' of her protagonist in accordance with a feminist vision, Virginia Steinmetz, goes as far as to state that her narrative depicts 'her unsuccessful 'quest' to unite the painfully divided self into an integrated whole'.<sup>13</sup>

It is exactly from this position that my investigation departs, in claiming that Elizabeth Barrett Browning's major achievement in *Aurora Leigh* is the assertion of Aurora's womanhood in the context of an androgynous ideal which allows the modelling of poetical inspiration and self-realization of the woman poet upon a concept of an integrated whole of feminine and masculine qualities. As I have already explained in the previous chapter, these readings ignore the revolutionary impulse which is owed to the Romantic genealogy of the text. In this chapter though, what will be addressed is the reiterated claim for equality which is asserted through androgynous imagination. G. K. Chesterton was among the first of Elizabeth Barrett Browning's critics to point out in the 1850s that she did not 'fit' with the customary assumptions about gender: 'She was too strong and too weak, or (as a false sex philosophy would express it) too masculine and too feminine'.<sup>14</sup> Contemporary commentators such as Thum and Tucker, are also exempted from the aforementioned strand of criticism by reinforcing Stephenson's argument that Aurora's marriage provides an alternative model 'replacing the socially and culturally established form of the male-female relationship'.<sup>15</sup> Stephenson and Thum certainly do not seem eager to align themselves with the scholars who speak so negatively of Elizabeth Barrett Browning's treatment of femininity in *Aurora Leigh*, but Tucker more clearly makes the allusion that this alternative model

<sup>12</sup> Angela Leighton, *Elizabeth Barrett Browning*, p. 121.

<sup>13</sup> Virginia Steinmetz, 'Images of "Mother-Want" in Elizabeth Barrett Browning's *Aurora Leigh*', p. 353.

<sup>14</sup> G. K. Chesterton, *The Victorian Age in Literature* (London: Oxford University Press, 1955), p. 110.

<sup>15</sup> Glennis Stephenson, *Elizabeth Barrett Browning and the Poetry of Love*, p. 116.

may be a product of androgynous imagination as he sees ‘Aurora’s selfhood having been dissolved, diffused and suspended for a kind of re-creation,’ and the revisionary words of the poem’s end ‘crowning an epic given to the ... *gender-solvent* fluency of love’.<sup>16</sup> Taking into account the critical considerations of *Aurora Leigh* pointing to Aurora’s poetical and personal development as part and parcel of Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s progressive gender politics, what will be argued in this chapter, is that Aurora’s inspiration is reinforced by androgynous imagination. In other words, Aurora’s androgynous ideal presupposes the acceptance of difference and not its dissolution.

### Feminising Prometheus in *Prometheus Unbound* and Burkean Aesthetics in ‘The Tempest’

*Aurora Leigh* was not Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s only work to elaborate an androgynous ideal. As early as the 1830s Elizabeth Barrett Browning was preoccupied with inflecting the concept of ‘man’ and ‘humanity’, so often seen as the inscription of a male culture in the Romantic period, with an imaginative androgyny that questioned rigid gender identities. In 1833 she publishes anonymously the first of her two translations of *Prometheus Unbound*,<sup>17</sup> where Prometheus, the archetype of the powerful, masculine rebel is ascribed feminine characteristics, capitalizing thus on the idea that social change cannot take place unless a harmonisation between opposing principles such as the feminine and the masculine, occurs. In 1838 the volume *The Seraphim and Other Poems*<sup>18</sup> appears under her name. In ‘The Seraphim’, Prometheus becomes Christ, and the allegorical reading of the Crucifixion allows the poet to declare

<sup>16</sup> Herbert F. Tucker, ‘*Aurora Leigh*. Epic Solutions to Novel Ends’, *Famous Last Words. Changes in Gender and Narrative Closures*, ed. Alison Booth (Charlottesville and London: University Press of Virginia, 1993), pp. 62-85. p. 80 (my emphasis).

<sup>17</sup> All references to the 1833 version are to *Prometheus Bound and Other Poems*, intro. Alice Meynell (London: Ward, Lock and Bowden, 1895). References to the 1850 version are to *The Complete Works of Elizabeth Barrett Browning*.

<sup>18</sup> All subsequent quotations from the ‘The Seraphim’ and from the ‘Preface’ to ‘The Seraphim’ are taken from *The Complete Works of Elizabeth Barrett Browning*.

her belief that even in a moment of humiliation the individual's agency is not invalidated but the capacity to produce meaningful action is retained.

Before looking at evidence in the poetry itself, it is fruitful to take a look at a climactic event in Elizabeth Barrett Browning's biography and its significance in the formulation of her androgynous ideal: her marriage to Robert Browning. Aware as she was of the limitations of being female from a very young age, she admitted to Mary Russell Mitford that 'through the whole course of my childhood, I had a steady indignation against Nature who made me a woman, & a determinate resolution to dress up in men's clothes as soon as ever I was free of the nursery, & go into the world 'to seek my fortune'<sup>19</sup> Such a statement alone may account for the negative stance of Elizabeth Barrett Browning's numerous feminist critics who capitalize on her so-called denial of feminine nature. Yet, it only marks the beginning of her personal journey of coming to terms with her femininity. Having carved out a masculine identity for herself as a reader of poetry in her youth and setting out to make more political poetic interventions in her mature poetry, her marriage to Robert Browning seems to have been an important turning point in recognizing and accepting her womanhood and in developing the mechanisms which alleviated her understanding of gender differences from strict binary divisions. The discourse of the harmonious cohabitation of opposing elements is expressed in the way she used to see herself and Robert as poets: 'You & I seem to meet in mild contrarious harmony. As in the 'si.. no.. si.. no' of an Italian duet',<sup>20</sup> Elizabeth wrote to Robert in 1845. As Jane Stabler notes, 'their dialogues in the courtship correspondence established a mental realm of unending debate that was

<sup>19</sup> Elizabeth Barrett Browning, *Letters of Elizabeth Barrett Browning to Mary Russell Mitford, 1836-1864*, eds. Meredith B. Raymond and Mary Rose Sullivan, 3 vols (Winfield: Wedgestone, 1983), II:7. I will hereafter use the abbreviation EBB-MRM to quote from this edition.

<sup>20</sup> Elizabeth Barrett Browning and Robert Browning, *The Brownings' Correspondence*, eds. Philip Kelley, Ronald Hudson, Scott Lewis, Edward Hagan, 16 vols (Winfield: Wedgestone, 1984 – 2007), 10:134.

simultaneously erotic and *genderless*'.<sup>21</sup> Her persistent anxiety regarding her place in the male dominated literary marketplace and society in general began to abate upon her union with Robert. The consequent acceptance of her womanhood through her relationship with him was to a great extent fuelled also by her contention that the role of the poet was that of 'analyzing humanity back into its elements' (*The Brownings' Correspondence* 10:101). In attributing such a role to the poet, Elizabeth Barrett Browning also designated the ultimate goal of poetry. Since analyzing humanity into its elements meant returning to the original state of universal harmony, which according to the Judaeo – Christian tradition was disrupted by 'original sin', the poet's task is to deploy the androgynous unification which symbolized freedom in all realms that cannot come about if the sexes remain polarised in a subject-object relationship.

In the art of nineteenth-century England, artists and poets have perceived the symbol of the androgyne as the representation of humanity in a unified whole, combining masculine and feminine principles. Androgynous imagination thus proved a serviceable means to express what the Romantics had internalised as a transformative vision for humanity which would lead towards perfection through the effacement of the tension generated by the clash of opposing forces. In this context the androgyne was not only treated as a reminiscence of a prior state of harmony but it gradually represented the goal, the ultimate reunification of opposites toward which humanity continues to evolve. The myth of the androgyne, Patrick Bizzaro claims, 'as it occurs in literature is important not as a specific occurrence in a single poem, but in its use throughout all art as a manifestation of the social and economic realities to which people are subjected'.<sup>22</sup>

In this sense, in order to understand the androgyne symbol in Elizabeth Barrett

<sup>21</sup> Jane Stabler, 'Romantic and Victorian Conversations: Elizabeth Barrett and Robert Browning in Dialogue with Byron and Shelley', *Fellow Romantics. Male and Female British Writers, 1790-1835*, ed. Beth Lau (Farnham, Surrey: Ashgate, 2009), p. 232 (my emphasis).

<sup>22</sup> Patrick Bizzarro, 'The Symbol of the Androgyne in Blake's "The Four Zoas" and Shelley's "Prometheus Unbound": Marital Status Among the Romantic Poets', *Joinings and Disjoinings: The Significance of the Marital Status in Literature*, eds. Joanna Stephens Mink, Janet Doubler Ward (Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1991. pp. 36-52), p. 36.

Browning's poetry, one needs to bear in mind three parameters: first, that it mirrors a union that is the goal both of the individual and of all humanity simultaneously, and second, that love lies at the very heart of her androgynous discourse, as at once reconciling and creative and as the eternal link between the self and the world, the self and God. As Carolyn Heilbrun insists, 'our future salvation lies in a movement away from sexual polarization and the prison of gender toward a world in which individual roles and the modes of personal behaviour can be freely chosen'.<sup>23</sup> I will argue here that at her visionary best Elizabeth Barrett Browning was aware of this. Third, the androgynous discourse she adopts may be further elucidated by the socio-economic contingency of her time.

Politically engaged from a very young age, like her father and her eldest brother, she was a fervent supporter of the Whigs, the party of opposition whose political philosophy proclaimed a deep concern with the legal, civil and religious rights of the individual –rights for which she herself would spend most of her life advocating. It is possible to read her transformative vision for humanity as a call for the dismantling of all power structures and systems of control and their substitution with a re-configured socio-political formation that would grant the individual freedom of choice.

Abuse of power and the possibilities of redemptive religion became major stands of much of her poetics in the 1830s and especially in her translation of *Prometheus Bound*, published in 1833. Given her preoccupation with power structures and the promises of the political opposition for change, *Prometheus Bound* was an apt text for the poet to choose, for Aeschylus' text records the fate of the archetypal rebel who steals fire from the heavens and gives it to humankind, and who is then horrifically punished at the hands of Jove and his henchmen. Chained on a '[...] tempest-riven precipice' at the '[...] utmost bounds of the earth' (ll.15,1), Prometheus is forced to

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<sup>23</sup> Carolyn Heilbrun, *Towards a Recognition of Androgyny* (New York: Norton, 1982), p. ix-x.

occupy one of those liminal spaces which are crucial to Elizabeth Barrett Browning's androgynous discourse as an image of exile. Like earlier Romantic artists, such as Byron, the Shelleys and Coleridge, she was seemingly attracted to Prometheus' anti-establishment rebellion and his subversion of Jove's power.<sup>24</sup> Numerous critics, such as Helen Cooper,<sup>25</sup> Stone<sup>26</sup> and Mermin,<sup>27</sup> have explained her attraction to the Promethean myth by drawing a direct analogy between the role of Prometheus as a passive victim of patriarchal volition and the traditional status assigned to the nineteenth-century middle-class woman. Yet, as Prometheus is capable of such an act of defiance because of his knowing Jove's fate, Prometheus/woman is able to resist the patriarchal tyranny. Avery on the other hand, relates Elizabeth Barrett Browning's use of *Prometheus Bound* to specific political events taking place while she was translating the text. 'The poet was working in the midst of the heated debates leading to the Great Reform Bill of 1832 ... which is seen by many as a key move in the extension of fundamental civil rights'.<sup>28</sup> He explains that as she was greatly influenced by the political situation, the myth of Prometheus was very apt in performing her political critique.

Reading her choice of the myth of *Prometheus Bound* in political terms, in my view, Avery paves the way for the contextualization of her translation within her androgynous discourse and her vision of a transformed society. He also highlights her oscillation between a 'masculine Romanticism' and 'feminine Romanticism' as theorized by Anne K. Mellor in her *Romanticism and Gender*<sup>29</sup> who associates 'masculine' Romanticism with tropes of revolution, the isolated ego, imaginative transcendence and powerful nature, while 'female Romanticism' is regarded as

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<sup>24</sup> According to Linda M. Lewis, Aeschylus' classical tragedy *Prometheus Bound* can be seen as the 'Ur-myth of the romantic age'. *Elizabeth Barrett Browning's Spiritual Progress*, p.20.

<sup>25</sup> Helen Cooper, *Elizabeth Barrett Browning: Woman and Artist*, p. 15.

<sup>26</sup> Marjorie Stone, *Elizabeth Barrett Browning*, p. 72.

<sup>27</sup> Dorothy, Mermin, *Elizabeth Barrett Browning: The Origins of a New Poetry*, p. 51.

<sup>28</sup> Simon Avery, 'Telling it Slant: Promethean, Whig and Dissenting Politics in Elizabeth Barrett's Poetry of the 1830s', *Victorian Poetry* 44.4 (Winter 2006): 405-424. p. 409.

<sup>29</sup> Anne K. Mellor, *Romanticism and Gender* (New York: Routledge, 1993), p. 3.

realigning the female with rationality and emphasising the ethics of love and solidarity for the sake of the common good. While my reading is deeply indebted to Avery's account, I will not deploy Mellor's dichotomy but instead I will try to show how the androgynous ideal in Elizabeth Barrett Browning's early poetry was put forward in an interplay of certain concepts regarding gender and political power that bear an echo of the Burkean categories of the 'sublime' and the 'beautiful'. Mellor offers a valuable and insightful exploration of the special nature of a women's tradition and her theory of two distinct gendered strands in Romantic poetry pays generous attention to the interests of women poets that do not fully conform to the intertextual framework of their male peers, yet it precludes the investigation of continuities between male canonical and lesser known female poets as regards the intellectual debates they are concerned with. As it is often hard to situate women poets in a set of diverse historical discourses and systems of relations, I believe that elaborating on Mellor's bifurcation may signal a relapse into entrenched dualistic oppositions and confine Elizabeth Barrett Browning's poetry to a narrowly feminine space.

Elizabeth Barrett Browning had read Edmund Burke's influential *Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful*<sup>30</sup> and in *An Essay on the Mind*<sup>31</sup> she referred to him as the 'poet-reasoner' who possesses a 'glowing style of energetic grace' (ll. 789-790). Moreover, it is likely that she was inclined to think of him highly as he was a very important figure in the history of the Whig party. Burke's account is largely emotive and empirical in so far as it associates the sublime with terror, awe, grandeur and the uncontrollable and the beautiful with the regularly pleasing, delicate and containable. The result of this typology, as Keith E. Welsh claims, is that Burke's categories become both gendered and politicised: 'the sublime is

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<sup>30</sup> Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful and Other Pre-Revolutionary Writings*, ed. David Wormsley (London: Penguin, 1998).

<sup>31</sup> Elizabeth Barrett Browning, *An Essay on the Mind and Other Poems* (1826).

necessarily masculine and is associated with dominance and the beautiful is feminine and associated with submission (and hence the domestic and sexual)'.<sup>32</sup> Elizabeth Barrett Browning was attracted to the sublime because it implied change. As Burke phrased it, 'I know of nothing sublime which is not some modification of power' (*Enquiry* 107). Within the wider framework of her androgynous ideal, this great transformative potential led her to employ scenes and motifs of the sublime, with a view to achieving an equilibrium of powers in accordance with her vision for humanity.

In her *Prometheus Bound* translation of 1833, a work which is expressive of the belief in the transformative powers of man, Elizabeth Barrett Browning used many of the typical tropes associated with the sublime. This Man, Prometheus, embodies power through suffering, however. His suffering from the oppressive paternal authority and the daily torture of his ever-regenerative liver being eaten by an eagle makes him weak.

In her *Essay On the Mind* she imagines Prometheus weeping for others and in her 1833 preface to her translation she depicts him as a self-abnegating figure for the sake of humanity, taking thus an essential step towards identifying him with Christ. In 1850 she will engage with *Prometheus Bound* again, in an attempt to translate it for a second time. But eight years earlier she will declare once again that the Promethean figure embodies both the struggles of humanity for improvement and the transformative work required for such a cause. Regarding the Prometheus symbol she writes to Mary Russell Mitford: 'Surely he is the sign of this great ruined humanity, arising through the agony & the ruin to the renovation & the spiritual empire. I can't consent to desecrate him with the badge of a lower symbol' (EBB-MRM I: 342).

The following passages taken from the translations of 1833 and 1850 are indicative of the trajectory of the androgynous imagination which in 1833 depicts a hero whose 'unbending mind' has done good to humanity while in 1850 reaches its apogee

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<sup>32</sup> Keith E. Welsh, 'Edmund Burke', *British Philosophers, 1500-1799*, eds. Philip B. Dematteis, Peter S. Fosl (Detroit: Gale Group, 2002), p. 90.

with the presentation of a ‘free-souled’ hero overflowing with love, and suffering out of compassion for humanity, in her attempt to develop a Christianized version of Prometheus.

1833

[...] because  
Thou didst not tremble at Jove’s laws;  
But gavest, with unbending mind,  
Too much weal to human kind.

(537-540)

1850

And all because thou, who are fearless  
now  
Of Zeus above,  
Didst overflow for mankind below,  
With a free-souled, reverent love.

(622-625)

In the first passage Prometheus’ beneficiary gesture is associated with power stemming from his ‘unbending mind’. The allusion to the power of intellect which is codified as masculine suggests masculine agency and absence of passionate feeling as compared to the ‘overflow’ of love in the second passage. Moreover, the word ‘weal’ is archaic and has a somewhat alienating effect indicating that Prometheus’ benevolence and contribution to mankind’s welfare is objective and does not invoke intense emotional involvement. On the contrary, in the second passage, the word ‘love’ has a highly immediate appeal to which anybody would respond and by using the verb ‘overflow’, whose imagery suggests a strongly emotional reaction, the poet invokes overwhelming feeling. The adjective ‘reverent’ reinforces the invocation of overwhelming feeling as it connotes adoration. In the 1850 translation the poet does not concentrate on Prometheus’ intellect but diverts her attention to his soul, stressing thus the emotive dimension of Prometheus’ gesture. The construction of a hero who is overflowing with

'free-souled reverent love' may be easily understood within the context of the feminine discourse of the sentimental while the language deployed echoes the effusive verse of the poetesses. Nevertheless, in my view the ascription of feminine characteristics to Prometheus in the second translation does not call for interpretation in the context of a narrowly feminine discourse nor does it reduce the impact of his beneficial act. Rather, their appropriation subverts traditionally gendered assumptions about power and agency by positing love's seminal role in acts of benevolence. Armstrong in her book article, 'The Gush of the Feminine', while discussing the strategies women poets deployed to deal with the problem of the codification of affective discourse as feminine, argues: 'Many women poets ... challenged the male philosophical traditions that led to a demeaning discourse of feminine experience and remade those traditions'.<sup>33</sup>

In understanding the signification of Prometheus in the context of the androgyne, the hero described in the 1850 translation is ultimately relieved of every tension his conflict with paternal power had generated, he has come to terms with his dual nature as a masculine hero of action able to procure change and sympathise with the predicaments of humanity and he has reconciled within himself his masculine side with his newly articulated feminine side of compassion and love. His achievement is therefore the dissolution of oppositional binaries in gender and sites of power (paternal / filial, high / divine – low / human, dominant / oppressed) through love. Ultimately, the second version of Prometheus projects a more consistent androgyne symbol wherein masculine and feminine characteristics are viscerally bound to each other by the sentiment of love.

The alternate utilization of tropes of the sublime and the beautiful evident in her second translation reflects her intent to recast Prometheus in accordance with her

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<sup>33</sup> Isobel Armstrong, 'The Gush of the Feminine', *Romantic Women Writers. Voices and Countervoices*, eds. Paula R. Feldman and Theresa M. Kelley (Hanover and London: University Press of New England, 1995), pp. 15-16.

changed view of Aeschylus. She writes to Robert: ‘And tell me too, if Aeschylus is not the divinest of all the divine Greek souls? People say after Quintilian, that he is savage & rude; a sort of a poetic Orson, with his locks all wild. But I will not hear it of my master!- He is as strong as Zeus is -& not as a boxer- and tender as Power itself; which always is tenderest’ (*The Brownings’ Correspondence* 1:34). Here, the conjunction of the adjectives strong and tender implies that Zeus, Aeschylus and Prometheus were simultaneously informing the workings of Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s androgynous imagination.

Cooper, providing an alternative reading of the poet’s Prometheanism, neither acknowledges the androgynous signification in Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s Prometheuses, nor does she read her complex strategies of the simultaneous appropriation of the categories of the sublime and the beautiful. Instead, she maintains that simple identification with masculine rebellion disables the development of a strong woman’s voice, alluding to the poet’s alleged incapability to assert her womanhood. She writes: ‘the woman’s act of writing is a disobedience as profound as Prometheus’ theft of fire from the Gods’.<sup>34</sup> The problem with such an approach is that the symbol of Prometheus is decontextualized from the literary discourse of the Romantics, who linked the transformative powers it embodies with the project of reforming humanity through the reconciliation of opposing forces. Finally, one needs to remember that canonical Romantic poets, such as Shelley and Byron consented to Prometheus’ valorization as an archetypal androgynous symbol.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Helen Cooper, *Elizabeth Barrett Browning: A Theory of Women’s Poetry* (Diss. Rutgers, 1982), p. 53.

<sup>35</sup> Byron seizes on the intermingling of power and passivity in the symbol of Prometheus when he alludes to his ‘suffering, and intense ... patient energy’. The reference is to George Gordon Lord Byron, ‘Prometheus’ in the *Complete Poetical Works*, ed. Jerome McGann, 7 vols (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980-1993), p. 6, 40. In Shelley’s *Prometheus Unbound* the androgynous ideology informing the symbol of Prometheus and the mingling of masculine and feminine characteristics is evident throughout the text. For example, Prometheus’ mother reminds her son in Act I that he is ‘more than God / Being wise and kind’. The reference is to Percy Bysshe Shelley, *Prometheus Unbound: A Lyrical Drama* (London: Bibliobazaar, 2008), I. 144-145.

At this point I shall turn to the first of the ‘Miscellaneous Poems’ appended to her 1833 *Prometheus Bound*, ‘The Tempest’.<sup>36</sup> What is of interest in this poem is the depiction of a genderless speaker being called away from the domestic, therefore ‘beautiful’, space by the ‘sublime’ ‘Titans’ of the forest (l. 8) and mountains so as to join the rest of nature in anticipating the upcoming storm.

The forest made my home - the voiceful streams  
My minstrel throng: the everlasting hills, -  
Which marry with the firmament, and cry  
Unto the brazen thunder, ‘Come away,  
Come from thy secret place and try our strength, -  
(ll. 1-5)

The scenery introduces a promethean theme and the thunder and lightning with which Zeus threatens Prometheus appear as storm attacking nature, ‘As if to interpose between Heaven’s wrath / And Earth’s despair. Interposition brief!’ (ll. 32-33). The depiction of opposing forces of Heaven and Earth encapsulates the cluster of defining terms of her androgynous imagination. Heaven, lightning, thunder as ‘martial’ (l. 24), energy, wrath and power are codified as masculine, while Earth, Nature as ‘All dumb’ (l. 21), passivity, despair, stooping, death, are associated with the feminine. Mermin acknowledges the operation of antithetical pairs such as male / female, power / weakness, the Olympian Gods / the doomed, Titans, yet, paradoxically enough, does not see how their encounters delineate an androgynous imagination. Regarding Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s Prometheanism, she states: ‘The attraction to Prometheus must have been that despite his affiliation of the weak or female side of this pattern of oppositions he embodies unyielding Titanic power; and in ‘The Tempest’ *the boundary blurs and disappears*’ (*Origins* 51, my emphasis).

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<sup>36</sup> References to the ‘The Tempest’ are to *The Complete Works of Elizabeth Barrett Browning*.

But there are instances in the poem attesting to the speaker's double identity: while he / she sympathises with Earth she also exults in the destructive fury of the thunder and hails the lightning, which makes 'the face of heav'n to show like hell' (54). The speaker alludes to this doubleness in lines 115-117:

Contrary spirits; sympathy with power,  
And stooping unto power; - the energy  
And passiveness, -the thunder and the death!

When the satanic face of heaven suddenly reveals at her feet a dead man whom she recognises as a familiar enemy, the speaker's anxiety in the burial scene expresses his/her female side which is manifested in the pulsating heart, accentuating the contrast to his/her brave decision to abandon his / her secluded space and align with the Titans' rebellion against the raging thunder / Zeus:

I shrunk not - spake not - sprang not from the ground!  
But felt my lips shake without cry or breath,  
And mine heart wrestle in my breast to still  
The tossing of its pulses; and a cold,  
Instead of living blood, o'ercreep my brow.  
Albeit such darkness brooded all around,

(ll. 80-85)

At the beginning the speaker is overwhelmed by 'The footsteps of the martial thunder sound / Over the mountain battlements; [...]' (ll. 24-25). However, rather than being afraid and therefore align himself / herself with the dispossessed and the powerless, she / he rushes into the heart of the storm activity, exulting at the possibility of merging with 'The riding Tempest' (l. 42).

Was not my spirit gladden'd, as with wine,  
To hear the iron rain, and view the mark  
Of battle on the banner of the clouds?  
Did I not hearken for the battle-cry,

And rush along the bowing woods to meet  
The riding Tempest - skyey cataracts  
Hissing around him with rebellion vain?  
Yea! and I lifted up my glorying voice  
In an ‘All Hail;’ when, wildly resonant,  
As brazen chariots rushing from the war,  
As passion’d waters gushing from the rock,  
As thousand crashèd woods, the thunder cried:

(ll. 37-48)

The thunder does not intimidate, but inspires speech equal to its own and ‘the elevated address “All Hail” mimics the moment of inspiration in the Romantic ode when collaboration with some external power proves inner imaginative potential. Both elements are expressive of the category of the sublime. Avery detects the switch into the category of the beautiful in the ensuing burial scene, not only in the language of the heart but in the image of the speaker lifting the body up and holding it in a position reminiscent of a Renaissance Pieta (*Telling it Slant*’ 413).

Mermin and Leighton provide insightful readings of the poem, directly connecting though the rebellion of the speaker to leave his ‘sacred place’ with the personal and literary drama of Elizabeth Barrett Browning. Leighton explains the lifting of the speaker’s voice to an ‘All Hail’ as the assertion of the female poet’s voice who, equipped with self-will, rebels against a dominant father and a traditional male literary marketplace. In the beginning of her analysis of the poem she argues that in ‘The Tempest’ Elizabeth Barrett Browning ‘both acknowledges and repudiates the heritage of her fathers –her real father and her Romantic “grandfathers”’ (*Elizabeth Barrett Browning* 47), and that ‘it is impossible to separate the poem’s intriguingly private and autobiographical elements from its public and literary ostentation’ (*Elizabeth Barrett Browning* 47). Mermin, on the other hand reads the enactment of the poet’s personal drama in the speaker’s flawed assertion of power, which is eventually sustained by the

death of the familiar enemy / paternal dominion: ‘She discovers that resistance to power is in itself aggressive and yields the tainted pleasure of asserting power. More than that, the poem suggests that there is no escape from terms of power: dominance or submission ... are the only and inevitable choices’ (*Origins* 52). Mermin’s reading places Elizabeth Barrett Browning in a dead-end situation and does not take into consideration the poem’s ending, which, as I will show, indicates that subjectivity and agency do not emerge in the context of the dominance / subjection binary opposition but in positing human feeling as the main determinant in the discourse of self.

While Mermin, and Leighton to a lesser degree, see the interchange of the categories of the sublime and the beautiful, both their readings depend highly on the autobiographical significance of the poem. My argument is that all these conflicting elements are not simply indices of a pattern of simultaneous acknowledgement and repudiation of the poet’s Romantic ‘grandfathers’. Instead, I propose that the dialectical relation of the beautiful and the sublime in this poem rides exuberantly on an androgynous ideal. One needs to pay attention to the poem’s closure and the final words of the speaker:

Mine heart is arméd not in panoply  
Of the old Roman iron, nor assumes  
The Stoic valour.’Tis a human heart,  
And so confesses, with a human fear; -

(ll. 188-191)

Mermin’s argument that all forms of power assertion are flawed is crucial to her reading of the closure. ‘This discovery quickly leads the speaker to a violent revulsion’ (*Origins* 52), she notes. The speaker thus addresses his hopes for peace with God beyond the ‘reptile moods’ of living flesh (l. 201). In my view, the call for peace with God, is a call for a new redemptive reality that will resolve the speaker’s dilemma. The speaker expects that life, even after death, will reveal alternative possibilities to dominance and /

or submission. That is why in the very end the speaker both discards the masculine, martial power implied by the Roman iron panoply and declines to assume the Stoic valour, which is associated with the feminine. He wishes no longer to dominate, nor to yield, instead he recognises that his human heart is the determinant factor of his acts. The privileging of emotion over masculine physical power and feminine passivity suggested by the ‘panoply of the Roman iron’ and by ‘Stoic valour’ respectively in this poem reminds us that Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s venture was to develop a Christianised version of Prometheus in the 1850 translation of *Prometheus Bound*. Yet, here the androgynous symbol is not predicated on the feeling of love but on the feeling of fear. That is precisely why the speaker in ‘The Tempest’ cannot be described as effeminate as compared to Prometheus in the 1850 translation. By repeating the adjective ‘human’ the speaker also makes the point that what is valuable to him / her is his / her human side, which is sustained by the feeling of fear, and overrides both his masculine and feminine characteristics. According to Burke, ‘... fear being an apprehension of pain or death, it operates in a manner that resembles actual pain. Whatever therefore is terrible ... is sublime too’ (133). The sublime / masculine connotations of the feeling of fear invoked in the concluding stanza lose their gendered resonance with the repetition of the adjective ‘human’. The genderless speaker is thus both the cause and the effect of the oscillation between the sublime and the beautiful. Burke, claims that it is possible that the sublime / masculine and the beautiful / feminine coexist in one entity but warns us that the capacity of both principles to make an emotional impact will suffer.

If the qualities of the sublime and the beautiful are sometimes found united, does this prove, that they are any way allied, does it prove even that they are not opposite and contradictory? Black and white may soften, may blend, but they are not therefore the same. Nor when they are so

softened and blended with each other, or with different colours, is the power of black as black, or white as white, so strong as when each stands uniformed and distinguished (140).

Ultimately, the speaker becomes the androgynous symbol of the poet's imagination as the ebbing of his Titanic power is not followed by his return to his 'sacred place'. The space he occupies by the end of the poem is neutral, genderless and thus, human. Elizabeth Barrett Browning's construction of the androgynous ideal in this poem relies on her reversal of the power politics invested in Burkes' categories and the reallocation of agency to a speaker whom we have seen as both masculine and feminine but above all human.

### Christianising Prometheus in 'The Seraphim'

Elizabeth Barrett Browning's Prometheanism was refashioned in the ensuing years and her intention to interrogate the relations between the powerful and the weak was accommodated in the appropriation of a Christian theme, the Crucifixion. *The Seraphim and Other Poems* was published in 1838 and the title poem of the volume, 'The Seraphim' is arguably Elizabeth Barrett Browning's most detailed exploration of religion. Yet, while a study of the crucifixion, 'The Seraphim' was inspired by her work on *Prometheus Bound*. In her 'Preface' to the volume she speculates that had Aeschylus lived beyond his time he would have turned to Christ's passion as his subject rather than the Promethean myth, 'to the Victim, whose sustaining thought beneath an unexampled agony was not the titanic 'I can revenge', but the celestial 'I can forgive'.

In part I, the younger seraph, 'Zerah the Bright One', hangs back at heaven's gate before going to view the Crucifixion, because he fears the evil that shadows the Earth. 'Ador the Strong' convinces him to come by promising that Zerah will find the Son there. When in Part II they arrive 'mid-air, above Judaea', Zerah refuses at first to

look down, then fails to recognise the Son when he does. When he finally witnesses the Crucifixion, he and Ador wonder at the Son's love, discuss the event's potential consequences, express indignation at the Son's treatment, and end their portion of the poem by rejoicing when the Son finishes his work through death.

Many contemporary critics have expressed their reservations regarding Elizabeth Barrett Browning's religious / devotional poetry because they fear that 'sacred subjects' could limit the female writer. For example, Mermin argues when Elizabeth Barrett Browning has 'God assert his primacy as subject, God return[s] the woman poet once again to the position of silence'.<sup>37</sup> But how does this silencing of the female poet take place? And does it mean that the poet is assimilated into masculine centred religious discourse? Bearing in mind the redemptive overtones of most of the closures of Elizabeth Barrett Browning's poems, one might argue that divine solutions to poetical endings harness the poetical imagination, or seek the collaboration with an external authority in order to resolve the issues addressed in the poem. I propose that in 'The Seraphim', as in 'The Tempest', the recourse to divine redemption is not to be regarded as a corrective of the poet's inadequacy, and it has to be perceived with reference to the poet's capacity to subvert two-termed systems, like, for instance, the categories of the sublime and the beautiful. Moreover, what will give us an insightful idea of the poet's intentions lies in distinguishing the strategies when this subversion is enacted poetically.

In 'The Seraphim', Elizabeth Barrett Browning's angels refer to Jesus as 'Creator' and the 'master-Word' that initiated all other voices (II:638-633, 771), calling to mind Derrida's 'transcendental signified', which he describes as 'an invariable presence', 'a fixed origin at the centre of structure'.<sup>38</sup> Derrida, following F. de

<sup>37</sup> Dorothy Mermin, "'The fruitful feud of hers and his:' Sameness, Difference and Gender in Victorian Poetry', *Victorian Poetry* 33 (1995): 149-168, p. 151. Also, for further discussion of the difficulties in Elizabeth Barrett Browning's religious poetry see Linda Lewis' *Elizabeth Barrett Browning's Spiritual Progress: Face to Face with God*, pp. 3, 4.

<sup>38</sup> Jacques Derrida, 'Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences', *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), pp. 279, 278.

Saussure,<sup>39</sup> perceives language as a chain of signification in which every signifier refers to other signifiers, but he maintains that we seek a ‘transcendental signified’, which possesses meaning in itself. He also argues that ‘logocentrism’ constitutes an ‘exigent, powerful, systematic and irrepressible desire for such a signified’.<sup>40</sup> Whereas Derrida argues for the absence of such a transcendental signified, Moi demonstrates that the Christian tradition provides such a signified. She states: ‘An obvious example of such a ‘transcendental signified’ would be the Christian concept of God as Alpha and Omega, the origin of meaning and the end of the world’.<sup>41</sup> The most serious difficulty in accepting Moi’s conceptualization of God rests on the fact that it reinforces the assumption that the dominant terms of hierarchical categories bear masculine demarcations.

Yet the poet’s Christianised Prometheanism undercuts binary oppositions by explicitly attributing to the ‘transcendental signified’, namely Jesus, feminine characteristics. While confirming Jesus’ supremacy, the Crucifixion is a crucial moment where supremacy is sustained through the relinquishing of a superior position to an inferior. Zerah trying to reaffirm that Jesus’ humiliation has not threatened the Deity, cries: ‘[...] My undiminished / And undiminishable God! – my God!’ (II:632-633). This motif is reaffirmed throughout the poem, with the presentation of the reactions to the scene of Crucifixion. Heaven and angels watch the passion of Christ ‘Their songful lips divorcèd from all sound,’ (I:352) in contrast to the moaning Earth. The two-term system

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<sup>39</sup> Saussure, in his *Course in General Linguistics*, emphasises the synchronic and systematic dimension of language (*langue*), arguing that a word can be ‘exchanged’ for something similar -another word, a synonym- or for something dissimilar- an idea, for example. In both cases, it is the system itself which creates value, and sets up the ways that exchanges can be made. A signifier, such as a word, when considered alone, has only a limited relation to its own signified; when considered as part of a system, a signifier has multiple relations to other signifiers in the system. The most important relation between signifiers in a system, the relation that creates value, is the idea of difference. One signifier has meaning within a system, not because it is connected to a particular signified, but because it is not connected to any of the other signifiers in the system. He states: ‘No sign makes sense on its own but only in relation to other signs’. Reference is to: Ferdinand de Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*, trans. Roy Harris (London: Duckworth, 1983), p. 118.

<sup>40</sup> Jacques Derrida, *On Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1998), p. 49.

<sup>41</sup> Toril Moi, *Sexual/Textual Politics* (New York: Routledge, 1985), p. 106.

traversing the whole poem is constructed upon the oppositional connotations of the Heaven / Earth antithetical pair. Heaven is occupied by the two seraphims and marks an elevated, masculine position which is claimed by their male voice. Their powerful position is symbolised by their ‘heavenly seats’, ‘pomp angelical’ and crowns (I:17, 18, 292). Zerah and Ador not only share an inability to fear or weep (I:294, 295), but they repeatedly call one another ‘brother’ (I:3, 88, II:341, 408). Earth, on the other hand, is described with feminine pronouns and possessives (e.g ‘Earth to her earthly moan. / *Voice of all things*. Is there no moan but hers? II:367-8, 438), and Earth presents herself as a maternal model having heard the cries of her children (II:818, 823, 824). The angels call the Earth ‘weak’ and a place of death (I:148, 165).

The poet deploys two strategies to resolve the tension between this set of polarities. First, as in *Prometheus Bound* she has her Christ / Prometheus weeping and, even more importantly, silent, thus radically disrupting the structure of the ‘transcendental signified’. Second, the operation of the ‘*Voice of all things*’ (I:367) on a structural level is ambivalent. As, Julie Straight argues, ‘it presumably includes both male and female voices’.<sup>42</sup> Zerah, in rebuking Earth because her many voices continue while Jesus, the ‘Creator’ of all, submits to death in silence, exclaims:

That the Master-word should lie  
A mere silence, while his own  
Processive harmony,  
The faintest echo of his lightest tone,  
Is sweeping in a choral triumph by?

(II:771-775)

Silence, bearing feminine demarcations, most dramatically accentuates Jesus’s relinquishing of his position as Logos, ‘Master-word’. Nevertheless as Jesus’s deity remains unquestionable, the conflation of the oppositions informing the masculine /

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<sup>42</sup> Julie Straight, “‘Neither keeping either under’: Gender and Voice in Elizabeth Barrett’s ‘The Seraphim’”, *Victorian Poetry* 38:2 (Summer 2000): 269-288. p. 279.

feminine binary is inevitable. Taking the cue from Straight, I argue that in this instance, Elizabeth Barrett Browning's treatment of the figure of Christ refuses the logic that demands the opposed hierarchical dichotomies that organise the discursive foundations of western ideas, values and systems of belief. This in turn, calls into mind Irigaray's 'sensible transcendental'. Irigaray's 'sensible transcendental' advocates the validation of the alterity of sexual difference and creates the space for the entrance of women in discourse on equal terms, acknowledging thus their potential as transcendent beings.

In *An Ethics of Sexual Difference*, Irigaray argues that the neglect of the human body is not only responsible for split subjectivities, but it also perpetuates the alienation between self and other. With a view to repudiating the disdain of the body ingrained in Western metaphysics, she asks: 'Why do we assume that God must always remain an inaccessible transcendence rather than a realization - here and now - through the body?'<sup>43</sup> The 'sensible transcendental', Irigaray maintains, should enable women who find themselves outside the existing male symbolic order in Western tradition to reclaim a position in relation to it. The recuperation of the human body will allow women to redefine their relation to God, for the 'sensible transcendental' encompasses both physical sensation and divinity. To this end, the modification of linguistic structures is the key to unmediated female transcendence. She states:

In all his creations, all his works, man always seems to neglect thinking of himself as flesh, as one who has received his body as that primary home ... which determines the possibility of his coming into the world and the potential opening of a horizon of thought ... that also includes god or gods (127-128).

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<sup>43</sup> Luce Irigaray, *An Ethics of Sexual Difference*, trans. Carolyn Burke and Gillian C. Gill (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993), p. 148.

In the following passage, Earth makes use of a modified linguistic discourse that permits a new relation between the masculine and the feminine. Zerah conceives Earth's 'choral triumph' as a radically subversive act against hierarchy. He challenges her to reject the gift of Jesus's self-abnegation, but Earth declines from doing that. Ultimately, the significance of his gift is praised with the utilization of a vocabulary advocating an androgynous discourse.

How can I say 'Depart'  
To that Atoner making calm and free?  
Am I a God as He,  
To lay down peace and power as willingly?

(II:825-828)

Jesus is attributed here the qualities of the androgynous symbol: His gift is redemptive, it brings tranquility and freedom. While the calmness of Christ's gift is juxtaposed to power, it is not implied that they are mutually exclusive qualities. On the contrary, Jesus is capable of restoring peace by asserting his power and his supremacy even with an act of humiliation. The cross for Earth reveals Jesus' love, and love empowers him to endure Crucifixion out of compassion for humanity –just like Elizabeth Barrett Browning's 1850 Prometheus. His passion is a gesture with transformative power: It aims to transform humanity toward the better. Therefore, the symbol of Christ in 'The Seraphim' can be perceived as prefiguring the reworking of the *Prometheus Bound* in 1850 upon a Christianised model. Alice Falk, offers an insightful commentary on the revision of the symbol of Prometheus' in the poet's translations:

Prometheus is presented as a great teacher, and figures of teaching and learning in positive and negative senses (e.g. schooling / breaking a colt) run through the play. But in the second version, he makes the mortals 'true in aim of soul' (514; 1833, p. 33: mind-possessive). In a significant minor change, the 'anointive' remedy (1833, p. 34) he gives them

becomes a healing ‘chrism’ (550)-an ecclesiastical word with redemptive overtones.<sup>44</sup>

The interpretative value of Irigaray’s ‘sensible transcendental’ is immense in understanding Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s engagement with religion, which in this poem might be arguably more progressive than previously suggested. With the symbol of Christ and ‘The voice of all things’, she manages to establish not new oppositions in which the female takes the superior position, but the levelling of male and female voices. ‘Neither keeping either under,’ (II:996) together may fulfil her androgynous ideal. The ‘voice of all things’ is described in both masculine and feminine terms, drawing our attention to a conceptual proximity to Irigaray’s ‘sensible transcendental’.

Margaret Whitford introduces a broad definition of Irigaray’s term, which helps to elucidate the poet’s endeavour to bring together feminine and masculine qualities in the figure of Christ. She explains that the ‘sensible transcendental’

can been seen as the symbolic order in its possibilities of and for transformation, in other words, language as a field of enunciation, process, response, and becoming, but a field in which there are two poles if enunciation, so that the “I” may be “male” or “female,” and so may the “you,” so that the speaker may change positions, exchange with the other sex; it follows too, that the divine other must also be potentially of the female sex. And so we find the sensible transcendental is also referred to as God.<sup>45</sup>

Ador compares the ‘voice of all things’ to a lion shaking dew off its mane, conveying thus the voice’s power. He also describes it as the voice of a personified ‘universe’, which has masculine connotations.

#### Hearest thou the attestation

<sup>44</sup> Alice Falk, ‘Elizabeth Barrett Browning and Her Prometheuses: Self-Will and a Woman Poet’, *Tulsa Studies in Women’s Literature* 7 (1988): 69-85. p. 80.

<sup>45</sup> Margaret Whitford, *Luce Irigaray: Philosophy in the Feminine* (New York: Routledge, 1991), p. 47.

Of the rousèd universe,  
Like a desert lion shaking  
Dews of silence from its mane?  
With an irrepressive passion  
    Uprising at once,  
    Rising up, and forsaking  
    Its solemn state in the circle of suns,  
        To attest the pain  
    Of Him who stands (O patience sweet!)  
    In His own hand prints of creation,  
        With human feet?

(II:369-380)

Zerah, on the other hand, regards '*the Voice of all things*' inferior to him, and thus in highly feminised terms, invoking passivity.

O congregated matters! who inherit,  
    Instead of vital powers,  
    Impulsions God-supplied;  
    Instead of influent spirit,  
    A clear informing beauty;  
    Instead of creature-duty,  
    Submission calm as rest.

(II:384-390)

Finally, the androgynous ideal in 'The Seraphim' is forcefully rearticulated by Ador, a masculine voice, who right after Christ's death, describes the reactions of Earth and Heaven in the concluding stanzas:

And the earthquake and the thunder,  
Neither keeping either under,  
Roar and hurtle through the glooms!-

(II:995-997)

The Earthquake represents the Earth and so the feminine participates in the uproar at Christ's death along with Thunder, which represents Heaven. The hierarchical order is dislodged by the Crucifixion, as both voices are asserted with the same strength, 'Neither keeping either under'. The 'sensible transcendental' allows free expression for both, without one claiming dominance over the other. As pointed out before, the choice of Logos / Christ to align with the feminine side of the opposition erases the tension between male and female voices.

### Aurora Leigh's Androgyny

In the previous chapter I argued that the implications of Aurora's ambivalence towards femininity are coextensive to Elizabeth Barrett Browning's affiliation with the Byronic and Wordsworthian models of the poet-politician and poet prophet, as well as with Carlyle's *vates* figure. In this chapter, Aurora's concept of femininity will be brought to the spotlight because in all its fluidity it allows the development of various symbolic configurations of the androgyne, while her emergence as an inspired woman poet conduces a persistent subtext of androgynous unification of masculine and feminine qualities. Three determining factors inform Elizabeth Barrett Browning's androgynous ideology: First, the development of her artistic prowess through the appropriation of masculine characteristics; second, the interrogation of the male model of inspiration entailing the objectification / assimilation of the female muse; and third, her vision of the making of a whole new world where the oppositional forces will coexist in harmony which is viscerally connected to her union with Romney.

For the interpretation of the multiple facets of Elizabeth Barrett Browning's androgynous ideal I will adopt Irigaray's position as it is expressed *An Ethics of Sexual Difference*. Irigaray admits that language is indeed gendered and mirrors the monopoly of masculine discourse traversing all structures. Her call for a new relation between man and woman that would signal 'a different historical configuration' and a 'new horizon'

both culturally and politically reveals the goal of her theory, which is the decentering of ‘man’ from all discourses and the recognition of woman as the ‘other’, equal in the discursive process. Ultimately, her major achievement is that she avoids the reduction of the two to one, the ‘other’ as the ‘same’, but she clearly reinstates woman as the second player in a double-voiced inter-subjective discourse. Irigaray wonders: ‘Could this be the time when a meeting between the sexes becomes possible? For the fact that man and woman have not spoken to each other –not since the first garden- is expressed also through the extinction of voice in discourse, the forgetting of voice in language’ (140). According to Irigaray, the coming together of man and woman as equals can be achieved through the recognition of sexual difference, which will designate the beginning of ‘a new historic configuration’ and will be predicated on ‘reciprocal respect’, ‘autonomy’ and ‘reciprocal affection’.

In the opening stanza of the poem, the speaker, Aurora Leigh, a female poet, ruminates upon her motives for writing a poem, as follows:

OF writing many books there is no end;  
And I who have written much in prose and verse  
For others’ uses, will write now for mine, -  
Will write my story for my better self  
As when you paint your portrait for a friend,  
Who keeps it an a drawer and looks at it  
Long after he has ceased to love you, just  
To hold together what he was and is.

(I 1-8)

Aurora clearly reveals her desire to write for herself, constructing thus a coherent poetic self and a new vision of the female poet. This vision no longer accommodates masculine desire, but rather the female poet’s personal needs, desires and ideas. The new dimension promised in such a vision is the reconfiguration of the boundaries between the subject and the object of artistic inspiration and creativity. Aurora’s

proclamation that she is writing for herself confirms that her artistic endeavour is the differentiation between her readers and her self-actualization as a woman poet. At the same time the act of writing for her own self implies an act of withdrawal from the centre of relations of the literary marketplace and the relegation of its imperatives to the margins.

Pierre Bourdieu in his account of the organising principles of the nineteenth century Western-European avant-garde artistic *milieux*, addresses the issue of cultural marginality and cultural novelty, and treats the emergence of French Symbolism as a paradigmatic case so as to corroborate his argument that the realization of a cultural field is entailed in the preservation of the cultural outsider's voice. He states:

In the most perfectly autonomous sector of the field of cultural production ... the economy of practices is based as in a generalised game of 'loser wins,' on a systematic inversion of the fundamental principles of all ordinary economies: that of business (it excludes the pursuit of profit and does not guarantee any sort of correspondence between investments and monetary gains), that of power (it condemns honours and temporal greatness), and even that of institutionalized cultural authority (the absence of any academic training or consecration may be considered a virtue).<sup>46</sup>

The opening stanza of the poem does not provide us with an image or a metaphor of androgynous unification but it is very important because it lays claim to a desirable distance from the cultural establishment, which according to Bourdieu's theory, is required for the systematic inversion of all usual economies informing an artwork.

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<sup>46</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, *The Field of Cultural Production: Essays on Art and Literature*, ed. Randal Johnson (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), p. 39. Here I am quoting Bourdieu extensively, despite the fact that my argument relates Elizabeth Barrett Browning's androgynous imagination to an inversion of the cultural / literary institution. However, as my analysis progresses, what will come to the fore is that her poetics both reflect and attempt to dislodge the 'institutionalized cultural authority' which originates at the intersection of structures such as 'business', 'power', and 'gender'.

Bourdieu's artistic alienation accounts for Aurora's provocative androgynous imagination, but it also becomes a prerequisite if Aurora is to write better poetry.

What was it that the cultural / literary establishment was arguing for in the representations of a union of the masculine with the feminine, that Elizabeth Barrett Browning took issue with? Hoeveler illuminates us as regards to the distribution of power in canonical androgynous configurations in the Romantic period:

Male poets self-consciously employed the feminine as 'Other' and as an alternative source of value in order to engage in a fictional completion of their own psyches, and ... a large proportion of the 'women' in the poetry of the major Romantics cannot be understood apart from this radical metaphoric tradition of literary absorption / cannibalization.  
(‘Preface’, xvi)

The English Romantic poets subscribed to a sexual ideology that perpetuated the valorisation of the masculine as active and the demarcation of the feminine as passive, which led them, according to Hoeveler, to utilize androgyny as a poetic device that would allow the merging of the two in one being. This merger would entail the subordination or assimilation of the feminine in the masculine, namely, for the male poet to re-emerge as more creative being.

It is precisely against this background that Elizabeth Barrett Browning sets the dialogue of genders in *Aurora Leigh*. Stimulating the positioning of gender differences in a world where man is Man and woman is other she necessitates the questioning of cultural authority. In one of the most critical dialogues between Aurora and her cousin Romney in book II, Elizabeth Barrett Browning attributes to the female gender the capability for the artistic engendering of art. When Romney finds Aurora's book, he generalizes in tune with the traditional masculine perception of woman's art:

For just a moment, 'Here's a book I found!

No name writ on it – poems, by the form;  
Some Greek upon the margin, – lady's Greek  
Without the accents. Read it? Not a word.  
I saw at once the thing that had witchcraft in't,  
Whereof the reading calls up dangerous spirits:  
I rather bring it to the witch.'

'My book.

You found it' ...

'In the hollow by the stream  
That beech leans down into – of which you said  
The Oread in it has a Naiad's heart  
And pines for waters.'

'Thank you.'

'Thanks to you  
My cousin! That I have seen you not too much  
Witch, scholar, poet, dreamer, and the rest,  
To be a woman also.'

(II 74-87)

Romney, as the bearer of the traditional code of masculine misogyny, cannot come close to thinking of Aurora as a woman and a poet at the same time. He can only understand her by composing the profile of an androgynous being. In order to do that he treats Aurora as a fragmented self in gendered terms: first, he calls her a 'witch', a sign that he believes that she possesses some repulsive, magical power. The word choice here is telling of the intellectual devaluation of women by the male dominated cultural establishment. Susan Casteras informs us that 'personifications of positive feminine knowledge' became scarce in the images produced 'from the 1860s' onwards, displaced by 'the negative side of female sapientia or wisdom, namely witchcraft' (cited in Morgan 145).<sup>47</sup> Immediately, he restores her intellectual prominence by calling her

<sup>47</sup> Ironically, in *A Short History of Modern English Literature* Edmund Gosse spoke of Elizabeth Barrett Browning deploying the very same derogatory terms Romney had used to scorn Aurora's intellectual capacity. Gosse had connected Elizabeth Barrett Browning with Pythia, a mythic figure whose association with witchery and sorcery in late Victorian representations was very common. He argued that Elizabeth

'scholar' and her artistic gift by calling her 'poet', both names evoking masculine qualities only to mock her for trespassing a man's territory: knowledge. The desire for classical literacy evokes Aurora's ambition to become a woman of letters by male standards, as Greek was regarded essential in the formal education of young men throughout the Romantic and the Victorian period. The allusion to her intellectual inferiority reinforces thus traditional assumptions which situate women in the margins of the literary marketplace.<sup>48</sup>

This kind of artistic alienation is imposed by the cultural establishment on the woman poet, who is constrained by identity, while laying claim to distance in the opening passage constitutes a self-conscious gesture aiming at the inversion of economies of art. He capitalizes on this idea further down stating that 'Since even dreaming of the stone and bronze / Brings headaches, pretty cousin, and defiles / The clean white morning dresses.' (II 95-96). The symbolism of whiteness remarkably reveals Romney's denigrating ideas regarding womanhood. It conveys the virgin emptiness of women's mind, deprived of the pains of thought and creativity. Aurora confronts him with an alternative vision of womanhood, which is androgynous in outlook yet substitutes the obliqueness connoted in 'witchery' with purity in a sacralised image:

But learn this; I would rather take my part  
With God's Dead, who afford to walk in white

---

Barrett Browning's 'late work was formless, spasmodic and singularly toneless and harsh' and her readers 'were pleasurely [sic] excited by the choral tumult of Miss Barrett's verse, by her generous and humane enthusiasm, and by the spontaneous impulsiveness of emotion. They easily forgave the slipshot execution, the Pythian vagueness and the Pythian shriek'. Cited in Ann Thwaite, *Edmund Gosse: A Literary Landscape 1849-1928* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1984), p. 116.

<sup>48</sup> This is indeed a vexing moment not only because the insistent references to 'witchcraft' betray Romney's fearful realization that Aurora combines feminine and masculine characteristics, but also on account of Elizabeth Barrett Browning's self-mocking comment on her personal experience of learning Greek. Her prose writings inform us that learning Greek was her ambitious project throughout her youth. While she did not have access to formal education in the classical languages, she benefited from attending her brother's tutorials. In her essay 'Glimpses into My Life & Literary Character' she admits that learning Greek required daily effort: 'this is tormenting & sometime agitates me to a painful & almost painful degree', while she also remembers herself 'entangled in one of these perplexities crying very heartily for half an hour because I did not understand Greek!!!' (*The Brownings' Correspondence* 1:355).

Yet spread His glory, than keep quiet here  
And gather up my feet from even a step  
For fear to soil my gown in so much dust.  
I choose to walk at all risks. [...]

(II 101-106)

The metaphor of walking is deployed here to highlight Aurora's active position in life and in art. The new role projected delineates woman as a fearless independent thinker and a self-sufficient, responsible being. The choice of this metaphor is strategic as it calls to mind, to use Anne D. Wallace's phrase, 'the conventions of Wordsworthian peripatetic'.<sup>49</sup> Aurora appropriates thus the masculine labours of walking and writing, implying that a woman's creative work can have a material and artistic value. Moreover, walking enables Aurora to 'spread His glory', hence taking on a role of a woman writer as a poet-prophet. Moers in her book *Literary Women*, commenting on the function of walking in *Aurora Leigh* maintains that walking can be seen as an assertion of self, a physical effort that provides an outlet for otherwise repressed physicality and may signal the woman's struggle for personal independence (130, 40-41). In tune with Moers' argument, Wallace clarifies that the independence claimed in this metaphor is not merely physical but intellectual and economic. She explains: 'Barrett Browning's construction of Aurora's walking coincides with the writing of poetry; both walking and writing are figured as labor, materially and economically productive; both traditionally are identified with the masculine' (237-38). Indeed, the representation of Aurora as a peripatetic female poet, disturbs the gender distinctions implicit in walking while it situates her in the centre of the traditional masculine discourse of power and writing as material production.

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<sup>49</sup> Anne K. Wallace, "Nor in Fading Silks Compose:" Sewing, Walking, and Poetic Labour in *Aurora Leigh*', *English Literary History* 64.1 (1997): 223-256. p. 237.

Walking also offers a dimension of a different meaning: it allows Aurora to become a prophet or another compassionate Prometheus, to ‘spread His glory’ and instil in humanity the teachings and values of Christianity. In book II she states:

And I, incapable to loose the knot  
Of social questions, can approve, applaud  
August compassion, christian thoughts that shoot  
Beyond the vulgar white personal aims.  
Accept my reverence.

(II 339-343)

Aurora is willing to open the way for her self to enter discourse to become ‘I’, by assuming the voice of the *vates*. She can thus disseminate truth: cultural, political and religious. She posits the sustained practice in discursive relation to humanity and to the other through the postulation of the connection to God. Aurora’s opening up to God marks the beginning of a dialogue with a traditional patriarchal entity of supreme wisdom, which *prima facie* signifies the embeddedness of her proclaimed experimental discourse in the acknowledgement of the male’s higher entity of power, God. Yet, the adherence to Christian tradition allows her to revise its socio-epistemological significance for a woman by locating her at the centre of artistic meaning and value production. Ultimately, Aurora’s achievement in this respect is taking on a role culturally and traditionally prescribed for a male poet, thus claiming her rights as a legitimate creative force both in art and life.

In claiming a creative force for the woman poet which is equal to that of the male poet and in acknowledging that the role of the poet is to raise awareness about social issues, Aurora imagines a new reality where the tension between sexes will be resolved.

‘You misconceive the question like a man,  
Who sees a woman as a complement  
Of his sex merely. You forget too much  
That every creature, female as the male,

Stands single in responsible act and thought  
As also in birth and death. [...]

.....  
[...] Reform,  
Make trade a Christian possibility,  
And individual right no general wrong;  
Wipe out earth's furrows of the Thine and Mine,  
And leave one green for men to play at bowls  
With innings from them all!.. what then indeed,  
If mortals are not greater by the head  
Than any of their prosperities? what then,  
Unless the artist keep up open roads  
Betwixt the seen and unseen, – bursting through  
The best conventions with his best,  
The speakable, imaginable best  
God bids him speak, to prove what lies beyond  
Both speech and imagination? [...]

(II 434-439, 460-473)

For Aurora, it is the artist's imaginative and creative powers that enable her to build a bridge that will connect humanity with God. In this respect, exploring the female voice in language, Irigaray ponders:

Are women the guardians of the phonetics of language and sound? ... Whatever the deep significance of this enunciatory practice may be, women wish to achieve a praxis of meaning. They have taken over the word and thereby exposed the circularity of 'male' discourse, unmasked its rituals and failures. But this movement still encounters considerable resistance ... One reason may be that the woman finds herself with this choice: 'either you are a woman or you speak / think' (*Ethics* 138).

As Aurora tries to find her niche in male discourse she realizes that she is destined to exist on the fringes of a power-producing and power-validating site. Articulating thus

her thoughts as a woman poet becomes an important practice in declaring her self-dependency. Aurora certainly experiences the societal preconditioning and cognitive split Irigaray refers to, and strives for an alternative to the mutually exclusive prospects of being viewed either as a woman / silenced or as a poet / speaking. Her yearning for an alternative accounts for two striking examples of Aurora positing her self in the heart of the discourse of androgynous imagination.

In Book I, recalling her girlhood and her father teaching her the classical languages, she compares her self with Achilles whose mother dressed him in women's clothes to prevent him from going to the Trojan war.

And thus, as did the women formerly  
By young Achilles, when they pinned a veil  
Across the boy's audacious front, and swept  
With tuneful laughs the silver-fretted rocks,  
He wrapt his little daughter in his large  
Man's doublet, careless did it fit or no.

(I 723-728)

Here, Aurora identifies herself with Achilles in imagining herself in the same position as Achilles being dressed as a girl by his mother. Drawing on the discourse of cross-dressing, the indirect metaphorical substitution of Achilles bears different connotations for Aurora. While Achilles' mother dressed him as a girl to protect him, Aurora's cross-dressing exposed her to danger. Aurora recalls that her father wrapped her in a 'Man's doublet, *careless did it fit or no*' (I 728, my emphasis), alluding thus to the possibility that her father did not see that providing a masculine education to a young girl might have complex consequences in the making of her selfhood.

Barbara Gelpi reads Aurora's identification with Achilles in the context of her general observation that Aurora expresses her womanhood in a very inconsistent manner, especially in the first books. She states: 'the sense of her self as masculine,

which she feels she needs in order to think seriously of her self as poet, becomes the sense also which eats into the flesh of her self esteem. She is manlike (according to the culture's associations with masculinity) in some respects but not, after all, a man, just as Achilles was not a woman' (42). Gelpi explains the ambiguous womanhood of Aurora as deriving from her anxiety over betraying her role as mother by choosing to be an artist (38). In my view, it is not Aurora's preoccupation with failing to perform her maternal duties that is accountable for her ambivalence, but her awareness of the difficulties raised by her choice of vocation, especially those emanating from her willingness to prove that the woman poet is capable of true art. The following example of imaginative gender materialization, runs in support of such an assumption.

In Book V Aurora ruminates on her situation as a woman poet, whose vocation instead of exposing her to the public sphere, makes her feel sad and marginalised, exactly because of her awareness that her choice of vocation results in a deep cognitive and cultural split upon which her womanhood is predicated. She says:

But I am sad:  
I cannot thoroughly love a work of mine,  
Since none seems worthy of my thought and hope  
More highly mated. He has shot them down,  
My Phœbus Apollo, soul within my soul,  
Who judges, by the attempted, what's attained,  
And with the silver arrow from his height  
Has struck down all my works before my face  
While I said nothing. Is there aught to say?  
I called the artist but a greateened man.  
He may be childless also, like a man.

I laboured on alone. [...]

(410-421)

Meditating on her androgynous union with a male creative force in the same manner as the Romantics sought to unite with their Muse, Aurora projects her loneliness in real life onto her creative potentiality. Aurora while loyal to her choice to be a woman poet, comes up with yet another way to define her womanhood in relation to the other. Mating with Apollo certainly constitutes an appropriation of a male-constructed model of androgynous creativity as pointed out above, but the inversion of genders causes Aurora anxiety. Whereas the male poet would never worry that the Muse would overshadow his contribution to the artistic production, Aurora despite seeking such a mating, fears that such a union may have a detrimental effect on her gendered woman-centered imagination. However, this is a difficulty she will gradually overcome.

### **Innovation in Aurora Leigh's Models of Inspiration**

As Aurora explores a means to represent her insight on poetic inspiration she deploys the myths of Jove's mortal lovers. Her metaphors constitute a powerful interrogation of the tropes of inspiration in male Romantic poets insofar as they reject the assimilation of the feminine in the masculine. When Aurora discusses Victor Carrington's sketches of Danae she immediately identifies 'Two states of the recipient artist-soul' (III 139). In the classical tale of Danae's rape, her father King Acrisius incarcerates his daughter because he believes that she will bear a child who will kill him. Helpless Danae is overcome by Jove's golden rain conceiving thus his child. The sketches illustrate:

A tiptoe Danae, overbold and hot,  
Both arms a-flame to meet her wishing Jove  
Halfway, and burn him faster down; the face  
And breasts upturned and straining, the loose locks  
All glowing with anticipated gold.  
.....

She lies here - flat upon her prison-floor,

The long hair swathed about her to the heel  
Like wet sea-weed. You dimly see her through  
The glittering haze of that prodigious rain,  
Half blotted out of nature by a love  
As heavy as fate. [...]

(122-126, 128-133)

The first sketch is very provocative in representing the female body in a state of erotic euphoria. Aurora responds to the first image with some reservation. She cannot identify with the ‘one forward, personal, wanting reverence, / Because aspiring only [...]’ (III 140-141) maiden. On the contrary, the second scene depicts Danaë motionless, lying still on the ground, enveloped in Jove’s shower of gold. While many critics comment extensively on the eroticism of Carrington’s sketches, their readings of the passage diverge. Beverly Taylor argues that Aurora’s identification with the passive Danaë accentuates her failure to understand poetic inspiration as sexual possession and her insistence on ascribing meaning to the sketches in idealized terms. Culpable for this failure is Aurora’s divided selfhood and irrepressible desire to achieve self-definition as a woman and artist. She states:

By remaining blind to the erotic aspects of the image,  
Aurora avoids confronting its direct links to her own fear of  
marriage ... The connections to Jove’s blotting out Danaë  
as he inseminates her in a shower of gold would seem  
inescapable to anyone but Aurora, who so firmly divorces  
her conception of Danaë the artist from Danaë the woman.<sup>50</sup>

Taylor’s explication is indeed in accord with Aurora’s tormented trajectory to self-assertion and her lapse into self-absorption before eventually reclaiming reintegration through her union with Romney. Ultimately, the denunciation of sensuality does carry a

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<sup>50</sup> Beverly Taylor, “‘School-Miss Alfred’ and ‘Materfamilias’: Female Sexuality and Poetic Voice in The Princess and Aurora Leigh’, *Gender and Discourse in Victorian Literature and Art*. Eds. Antony Harrison and Beverly Taylor (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 1992), pp. 5-29. p. 19.

double bind within it. In identifying with the passive Danae, Aurora runs the risk of proving herself incapable to perform the honourable toil of the artistic vocation she has chosen for herself, while on the other hand overlooking the erotic element is cognate with her rejection of Romney's proposal.

Joyce Zonana observes an antithetical structure overriding the passage wherein the wanting '[...] Hot, / Both arms a-flame [...]'] (III 122-123). Danae is transfigured in a 'like wet sea-weed' (III 130) and calm Danae by Jove's golden rain. She opines that 'The Danae overcome by Jove is transformed; ... Divinity burns - and drowns – her, making her into a resonant image of the 'twofold world' Aurora wants her art to reveal'.<sup>51</sup> The lines ensuing immediately after the description of the two sketches are in tune with Zonana's remark. Accounting for her preference of the second sketch Aurora states that in that representation of the maiden '[...] Self is put away, / And calm with abdication. She is Jove, / And no more Danae – greater thus. [...]'] (III 135-137) and resumes her musing on the harmonising result of such a union: '[...] We 'll be calm, / And know that, when indeed our Joves come down / We all turn stiller than we have ever been.' (III 141-143). The fact that Aurora capitalizes on Danae's self-willingness to unite with Jove, and detects a self-aggrandising impulse in her eagerness to become herself a Goddess further problematizes the apprehension of the latter Danae as passive. On the contrary, Danae consents to lose her identity if only to become something greater, Jove.

Leslee Thorne-Murphy similarly argues that Aurora 'in essence rejects the male convention of relying on a female muse; instead, she envisions herself temporarily taking on the identity of the source of truth'.<sup>52</sup> In my view, this striking antithesis as pointed out by Zonana, and the figuration of Danae as Jove can potentially undermine

<sup>51</sup> Joyce Zonana, 'The Embodied Muse: Elizabeth Barrett Browning's *Aurora Leigh* and Feminist Poetics', *Victorian Women Poets: A Critical Reader*, pp. 53-74. pp. 66-67.

<sup>52</sup> Leslee Thorne Murphy, 'Prostitute Rescue, Rape, and Poetic Inspiration in Elizabeth Barrett Browning's *Aurora Leigh*', *Women's Writing* 12.2 (2005): 241-258. p. 245.

the assumption that Aurora understood the process of inspiration as a passive or solitary task, and at the same time introduces a kindred bond of masculine and feminine coded characteristics in an androgynous union that does not privilege the one over the other. Aurora's androgynous ideal responsible as it is for the decentering of man and the reinstating of woman as the equivalent other in the inspiration process, reconciles the subject / object dichotomy reinforced by the male poets' traditional envisioning of the muse as a passive female object and reminds us of Aurora's axiom that 'life develops from within. [...]’ (II 485). In the same vein, Marisa Palacios Knox pinpoints the dangers entailed in Coleridge's fusion of gendered perspectives and argues for Aurora's respect of sexual difference and flexibility of identification. She holds that '*Aurora Leigh* resists perfect fusion, and the sexual but static paradigm of creativity it denotes, in favour of representing woman's artistry through the 'woman's figure' of fluctuating gender identification, which is never fixed and thus never neutralized'.<sup>53</sup>

In Book VII, she will proclaim the radical reinvention of the role of art as a unifying principle, and she will argue that the peaceful cohabitation of conflicting elements relies upon the resolution of dualistic relations.

[...] Art's the witness of what Is

Behind this show. [...]

.....

- For we stand here, we,

If genuine artists, witnessing for God's  
Complete, consummate, undivided work;

.....

Thus is Art

Self-magnified in magnifying a truth  
Which, fully recognised, would change the world  
And shift its morals. If a man could feel,

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<sup>53</sup> Marisa Palacios Knox, 'Masculine Identification and Marital Dissolution in *Aurora Leigh*', *Victorian Poetry* 52.2 (2014): 277-300. pp. 294-295.

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 body as a man, -  
Which now he counts so vile, that all the towns  
Make offal of their daughters for its use,

(VII 834-835, 837-839, 854-866)

Aurora once again claims the voice of the *vates*, and the role of the saver and the teacher of the mankind. As the mediator between God and people, as the one who can access truth, she will disseminate it -as she had promised in Book II to disseminate the teachings of Christianity- to mankind and save it by teaching it its true self. Yet what is noteworthy about her effort to restore her visionary potential is that not only does it strike Romantic chords in its panvitalism, but it displays glaring similarities to contemporary ecofeminist critiques of patriarchy.

Michael E. Zimmermann brilliantly summarizes eco-feminist demands postulating that, ‘only by replacing those categories-including atomism, hierachalism, dualism, and androcentrism - can humanity learn to dwell in harmony with nonhuman beings’.<sup>54</sup> Aurora, in addressing the healing effect of her transformative programme to all people, men and their ‘daughters’ and all creatures of nature implicitly renews her critique of industrialism already discussed in the previous chapter, and provides us with a diatribe on her concept of inequality as the result of the mind-set of patriarchal hierarchy upon which the human society is structured. This mindset according to Elizabeth Barrett Browning not only victimises woman and forces her into prostitution for ‘the towns Make offal of their daughters’ but it is also responsible for the lack of

<sup>54</sup> Michael E. Zimmerman, ‘Feminism, Deep Ecology, and Environmental Ethics’, *Environmental Ethics* 9.1 (1987): 21-44. p. 21 (abstract).

reverence to nature. In consonance with her androgynous ideal which is premised on the acceptance of sexual difference, and which calls for Irigaray's 'meeting between the two sexes' (*Ethics* 140) on equal terms, Elizabeth Barrett Browning does not advocate the essentializing identification of nature with women (and feminism) driven by a separatist vision.<sup>55</sup> On the contrary, she strategizes the education of both men and women in order to resurrect together the severed humanity / nature connection. In avoiding claiming proximity to nature only on women's part, Aurora challenges the man-imposed 'atomism,' 'hierarchalism,' 'dualism', and 'androcentricism' which are coextensive to the humanity / nature schism. In effect, her androgynous ideal spurs a sense of femininity that does not regress into sexual stereotyping.<sup>56</sup> As the problematics of sexual stereotyping continue to hinder women's entrance to male outposts, Simone de Beauvoir, in a later re-articulation of her argument in *The Second Sex* was led to

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<sup>55</sup> While I am accepting that nature can be a central category in analysing her critique of industrialism, urbanization and the exploitation of women as well as animals, my reading of Elizabeth Barrett Browning's ecofeminist interest does not attempt to foreground a retrospective connectedness to any particular strand of feminism in any strict sense. Such a venture is beyond the scope of enquiry of this study. Yet, in my view her reluctance to celebrate the alignment to nature as a woman's exclusive trait and her vision of the New Jerusalem as the new spatial configuration which will accommodate sociogender differences without limiting the subset plurality by hierarchising or codifying them, make impossible any affiliation to radical cultural ecofeminism. According to Ynestra King, in 'Healing the Wounds: Feminism, Ecology, and the Nature/Culture Dualism', *Reweaving the World: The Emergence of Ecofeminism*, eds. Irene Diamond, Gloria Orenstein (San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1990), p.106-121, p.111, radical cultural feminists celebrate 'the life experience of the female 'ghetto', which they see as a source of female freedom rather than subordination' and 'they have attempted to articulate and even create a separate woman's culture'. Patrick D. Murphy in *Literature, Nature and Other: Ecofeminist Critiques* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995) performs an inspiring conjoining of ecology and feminism(s) with the aid of a Bakhtinian dialogical method and argues for the polyglot nature of diverging or overlapping feminist criticisms and feminist projects. He contends that 'Feminism means ... the orientation of feminist anchored practices, including political activism, women's studies, feminist critique and gynocriticism, and feminist theory; but recognizes that there is neither a monolithic 'feminism,' nor 'feminist theory,' and that much valuable feminist critical work is non- or anti theoretical' (177). Ultimately, Murphy's book creatively addresses the inherent diversity of feminist interests and offers a promising methodological approach as to how we may overcome the difficulty of accounting for Elizabeth Barrett Browning's ecofeminism and feminism in general.

<sup>56</sup> Lynne Dickson Bruckner in 'N/nature and the Difference 'She' Makes', *Ecofeminist Approaches to Early Modernity*, eds. Jennifer Munroe, and Rebecca Laroche (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), p. 25, similarly argues that 'celebrating the equation of women and nature undermines the valuable social ecofeminist critique of patriarchy-a critique that finds that 'feminising nature and naturalizing or animalising women has served as justification for the domination of women, animals, and the earth' ... We must be careful to avoid the essentialist (and radical ecofeminist) view that sees women as privileged repositories of ecological sensibility. This view is dangerous in its assumption (or at least implication) that men are incapable of such connectivity. Such a perspective comes very close to reinstating gender stereotypes (e.g., women as nurturing) that feminists have worked very hard to deconstruct; Moreover, it buys back into the very dichotomies ecofeminism claims to reject'.

deplore once again the valorisation of the woman / nature alignment. Her account is valuable in understanding Elizabeth Barrett Browning's reservation in embracing the exclusive identification of woman with nature. De Beauvoir reproached the emergence, to use her own words, of 'the new femininity' because she regarded it as

an enhanced status for traditional feminist values, such as woman and her rapport with nature, woman and her maternal instinct, woman and her physical being ... This renewed attempt to pin women down to their traditional role, together with a small effort to meet some of the demands made by women – that's the formula used to try and keep women quiet. Even women who call themselves feminists don't always see through it. Once again, women are being defined in terms of 'the other,' once again they are being made into the 'second sex' ... Why should women be more in favour of peace than men? I should think it a matter of equal concern for both! ... being a mother means being for peace. Equating ecology with feminism is something that irritates me. They are not automatically one and the same thing at all.<sup>57</sup>

In Aurora's fictionalising of social and cultural unity, the gap between artist and nature, nature and man will be bridged. Men and women will ultimately regain their spirituality which was lost to 'the hieroglyphic material shows'. Men and women will eventually return to the original state of harmony. Holly Laird, commenting on this passage notes that it conveys 'a poetics for everyone, feminist in that it sees everyone as gendered, and everyone as in need of re-education about women's capacities'.<sup>58</sup> It is therefore evident that for Aurora the realization of her ideal of true art is filtered through

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<sup>57</sup> Alice Schwarzer, *After the Second Sex: Conversations with Simone de Beauvoir* (New York: Pantheon, 1984), p. 103.

<sup>58</sup> Holly Laird, "Aurora Leigh": 'An Epical Ars Poetica', *Writing the Woman Artist. Essays in Poetics, Politics and Portraiture*, ed. Suzanne W. Jones (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1991), p. 362.

the assertion of the woman artist's capacity to induce change towards the better for all mankind.

Aurora's theory of true art and its harmonising role in society is of crucial significance, as it can be read as a metaphor of her individual journey to womanhood, which comes to a turning point when she meets Marian, a destitute seamstress. Aurora befriends Marian and starts to open up emotionally. Aurora decides to take on a motherly role instructing and educating Marian how to deal with the complexities of life, which gradually makes her accept her womanly side, nurturing, compassionate and loving. Aurora may be thus identified with art. Ironically, bearing in mind Gelpi's assumptions about Aurora's ambivalent womanhood, the more Aurora immerses herself in this maternal role and the more she approximates her ideal of true art, the more powerfully she becomes self-accepting and self-sufficient towards the solution of the narrative. It is in sympathising with Marian's plight that Aurora discovers that being vulnerable as a woman is not a weakness. In helping Marian, Aurora re-validates her confidence in art's harmonising function. Her maternal instinct inspires her for creative self-realization. In book five Aurora provides an early meditation on this possibility:

[...] - 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?

(14-18)

Aurora resorts to gendered metaphors of the female body to postulate that the woman artist, precisely because of her gender, is capable of realizing her true artistic talent, just like nature is full of creative power. The mother in her speaks the language of true creativity and exhibits a harmonising function within Aurora's self. Crucially, the incompatibility of her role as woman / silent and poet / speaking is thus eradicated.

Enjambment in lines 15 and 16 links sexual impulses with spiritual union, an otherwise strikingly antithetical pair, revealing a daring figuration of the cosmic feminine in a spiritual union of souls.

According to Tucker, the metaphors of the female body alongside with the maternal connotations do not imply the substitution of a patriarchal order with matriarchy, ‘which only changes the gender of this structure without dismantling its hierarchy’ (‘Epic Closures’ 72-73). Instead, he reads these metaphors with reference to lines 820, 822-823 of the first book: ‘He feels it quicken in the dark sometimes,’; ‘For such dumb motions of imperfect life / Are oracles of vital Deity’, and he states: ‘Barrett Browning’s *matrenteley* proposes … an oscillating continuum of being, ‘the body proving spirit’. In Aurora’s cosmos as in her narrative, the point of origination is always processive, working out an end that is never manifest, yet is perpetually present’ (‘Epic Closures’ 73). Tucker’s view may be disheartening to some of Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s radical feminist readers, but it nonetheless, reveals that her sphere of concern with the dialogue of genders broadened into an encompassing meditation on the acceptance of difference and the harmonious salving of masculine qualities with the feminine. Finally, what Tucker describes as *matrenteley*, I would argue that it is an androgynous ideal.

Aurora parlays the female body as a literal trope in arguing that true art captures the essence of

[...] the burning lava of a song  
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 our beating: this is living art,  
Which thus presents and thus records true life.’

For Aurora, truthful poetry, poetry which has a transformative power for humanity is equally women's poetry, for the woman poet and the age itself figuratively cohabit in the female body. Celebrating the acceptance of the female body as affirmation of sexual difference and equality, Elizabeth Barrett Browning highlights a woman's ability to be the voice of her times by representing the social and cultural reality truthfully in her art. Similarly, Irigaray argues:

However, since society is organised by and for men in our traditions, women are unable to work with plurals. Women have to constitute a social entity if love and cultural fecundity are to take place. This does not mean that it is entirely as men that women come into today's systems of power, but rather that women need to establish new values that correspond to their creative capacities. *Society, culture, discourse would thereby be recognised as sexuate and not as the monopoly on universal value of a single sex* –one that has no awareness of the way the body and its morphology are imprinted upon imaginary and symbolic creation (*Ethics* 68, my emphasis).

In this context, Aurora, with her theory of art and its function in society, introduces the constitution of a new socio-cultural configuration, where woman is posited as a powerful and active source of meaning in direct relation and / or contradiction to the traditional male signifier. Aurora proposes a sexuated discourse that will provoke the debasement of the male signifier from its supreme position and the de-monopolisation of discourse, opening the way for the voiceless to speak and for the revision of what has been already spoken.

Exploring the genealogy of the image of the 'burning lava' and the 'double-breasted Age' whose 'paps we have all sucked' is instrumental in situating Elizabeth Barrett Browning in a progressive ideological spectrum. While paying homage to Hemans's lyric 'The Image in Lava', it nonetheless turns the maternal metaphor on its

head. In ‘The Image in Lava’ Hemans’s response to the ‘impression of a woman’s form, with an infant clasped to the bosom, found at the uncovering of Herculaneum’,<sup>59</sup> trades on the symbolically loaded absence of the father, and memorializes the mother / child bond as the natural connection that survives natural disaster.<sup>60</sup> She exclaims: ‘Babe! wert thou brightly slumbering / Upon thy mother’s breast,

tomb

- 16 - Shaping each gendered house? (Hilts)

/ When suddenly

who hold that Hemans’s gender politics is generally far more complex than the face value of her response implies,<sup>61</sup> I argue that by privileging the mother / child bond, Hemans might be putting forward a notion of femininity which claims agency premised on the predisposition of the mother to provide protection. Elizabeth Barrett Browning introduces a whole new perspective in the construction of the lava and breast metaphor by investing it with the energy required from the men and women in order to keep up with the unprecedently fast pace of the epoch. The stillness of Hemans’s image may capture the diachronic symbolical load of the mother / child connection, yet Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s ‘burning lava’, ‘heaving Art’, ‘beating bosom’, bolster an alliance to the synchronic, true meaning of contemporary lived experience. Unsurprisingly, and in full accord with the ecofeminist vision into which her androgynous ideal stretches,

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<sup>59</sup> Felicia Hemans, *The Complete Poetical Works of Mrs. Felicia Hemans*, ed. William Michael Rossetti (London: Ward, Lock, 1873), p. 463. The phrase belongs to Hemans and it appears in an explanatory footnote to the poem.

<sup>60</sup> Kathleen Lundein in ‘When Life Becomes Art’ --on Hemans’s ‘Image in Lava’,

*Romanticism on the Net* 29-30 (2003): 1-16, web 20 November 2013,

<<http://www.erudit.org/revue/RON/2003/v/n29/007716ar.html?lettre=G>> brilliantly illustrates this point by stating that ‘the lava impression to Hemans is petrified proof that the central relationship in civilization is the one between the mother and child’. p. 5.

<sup>61</sup> My reading of Hemans’s poem and brief assessment of gender politics is indebted to the following critical works: Isobel Armstrong, ‘Natural and National Monuments—Felicia Hemans’s “The Image in Lava”: A Note’, *Felicia Hemans: Reimagining Poetry in the Nineteenth Century*, ed. Nanora Sweet and Julie Melnyk (London: Palgrave, 2001); Anthony John Harding, ‘Felicia Hemans and the Effacement of Woman’, *Romantic Women Writers: Voices and Countervoices*, ed. Paula R. Feldman and Theresa M. Kelley (Hanover and London: University Press of New England, 1995), pp. 138-149; Susan J. Wolfson, “Domestic Affections” and “The Spear of Minerva”: Felicia Hemans and the Dilemma of Gender’, *Re-Visioning Romanticism: British Women Writers, 1776-1837*, ed. Carol Shiner Wilson and Joel Haefner (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1994), pp. 128-166; Kathleen Lundein, ‘When Life Becomes Art’--on Hemans’s ‘Image in Lava’; Margot K. Louis, ‘Enlarging the Heart: LEL’s “The Improvisatrice,” Hemans’s “Properzia Rossi,” and Barrett Browning’s “Aurora Leigh”’, *Victorian Literature and Culture* 26.01 (1998): 1-17.

Elizabeth Barrett Browning makes the bosom available to both man and woman, in direct contrast to Hemans who intimates the indestructibility of the mother / child bond capitalizing on the absence of the father.

### The Androgynous Closure of *Aurora Leigh*

Interestingly enough, Stabler, exploring the extent to which Shelley and Byron influenced Elizabeth Barrett Browning's and Robert Browning's poetics, makes the general observation that they both attempted to realize Shelley's utopian dream in *Prometheus Unbound*, namely the union of masculine and feminine principles.<sup>62</sup> Within this context she argues that Aurora's image of 'the full veined, heaving, double breasted Age' 'hazards an elemental definition of humanity that partakes of both masculine and feminine experience' alluding thus, to the 'poet's capacity to imagine a world that is not polarized by gender but is androgynous' (243). What Elizabeth Barrett Browning finds irritating in the dialogue of genders is polarization, not difference. Ultimately, the metonymic weight of the image of '[...] the paps we all have sucked!' (V 215) becomes central in articulating her androgynous ideal as it signifies, to use Rosemary Radford Ruether's words, 'the full range of human psychic potential for intellect and feeling, activity and receptivity' from which 'each individual could shape a complex new whole'.<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>62</sup> Christine Buttersby in *Gender and Genius. Towards a Feminist Aesthetics* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1994), p. 36-37, challenges the idea that Shelley's *Prometheus Unbound* was effectively obliterating the polarization of genders. She forcefully argues that 'when Shelley wrote Prometheus, he did not go on to spell out the misogynistic implications of a mythology that made Woman (Pandora) part of the punishment meted out to male kind for Prometheus's presumption in stealing fire from the Gods. In a way appropriate to Mary Wollstonecraft's son-in-law, Shelley (quite consciously) tried to distance himself from the gender stereotyping of his time – and especially from his great hero, Rousseau. Shelley was revolutionary enough to dream of extending freedom and equality to women. But as McNiece remarks – thinking that this proves Shelley makes men and women 'transcendentally equal' – for Shelley the heroine is always the beloved counterpart, shadow, other self, and ideal support of the hero' [1969, p.180]. She has the instinctive knowledge of the truth... and her beauty (of spirit, as well as body) inspires the poetic hero to effective action. It is, however, always a *male* task to shape this truth into verse and, by so doing, to act as a charismatic leader of mankind'. In stark contrast to Shelley's promise for 'transcendental equality', Elizabeth Barrett Browning's construction of Aurora as an earthly muse, allows her to claim equality between genders which does not require transcendence to an infinite world.

<sup>63</sup> Rosemary Radford Ruether, *New Woman, New Earth: Sexist Ideologies and Human Liberation* (New York: Seabury Press, 1975), p. 210.

Aurora parlays this ‘full range of human psychic potential’ and resumes the celebration of her newly acquired status as a woman:

I would not be a woman like the rest,  
A simple woman who believes in love  
And owns the right in love because she loves,  
And, hearing she’s loved, is satisfied  
With what contents God: I must analyse,  
Confront and question; [...]

(IX 660-665)

The only option Aurora sees for herself is to dismantle all stereotypes codifying analytical thought and agency as male qualities. She thus rejects the traditional discourse requiring women to be confined in the house as helpmates of men. In refusing to perpetuate the old order of things Aurora imagines a new world where women can exist with plurality and not male constructed monopolies. This active position in the world is what necessitates Aurora’s spiritual, psychical and physical union with Romney:

I flung closer to his breast  
*As sword that, after battle, flings to sheath;*  
And, in that hurtle of united souls,  
The mystic motions which in common moods  
Are shut beyond our sense, broke in on us,

(IX 834-838, my emphasis)

Her mating with Apollo and putting herself in the same position with Achilles through the indirect metaphorical substitution in the discourse of cross-dressing, as I have shown before, brings forward Aurora’s split selfhood on a cognitive and emotional level in the most striking way. Now, her mating with Romney in real life coincides with the unequivocal declaration of a revised mode of being a woman. Aurora’s identification with the sword bearing masculine connotations, attests to Aurora’s self-assertion as a

woman and an active agent. Earlier in book III the sword alludes to true poetry as masculine achievement. Aurora expressing her disappointment in her poetry confesses in a self-mocking tone: ‘I played at art, made thrusts with a toy sword’ (240).

Crucially, the image invokes the English and Scottish folk ballad ‘The Sheath and the Knife’. It is highly likely that Elizabeth Barrett Browning was acquainted with a variant of the ballad. Ruth Perry argues that Thomas Percy’s essay ‘On the Ancient Metrical Romances’ which was included in the third volume of his *Reliques of Ancient Poetry*,<sup>64</sup> published in 1765, constitutes a seminally important recuperative effort in the course of English literary history. She argues that it ‘was the first literary collection of ballads in England and deeply influenced a whole generation of poets, including Coleridge and Wordsworth, who, significantly, named their first collection *Lyrical Ballads*'.<sup>65</sup> The central plot shared by variants of ‘The Sheath and Knife’ ballad narrates the incestuous affair of a brother and a sister and the subsequent killing of the sister when the signs of pregnancy begin to show. After the killing of the sister the brother on entering his father court hall is asked: “O Willie, O Willie, what makes thee in pain, / the brume blooms bonnie, etc. / I have lost a sheath and knife that I’ ll never see again”.<sup>66</sup> Perry in explaining the metonymic significance of the ‘sheath and knife’ image argues that when the brother ‘invokes the phallic imagery of the sheath and the knife, we know that he is speaking of his sister both as his lost sexual partner, unique among women and specially suited to him … but also as the carrier, the sheath of his child. The brother and sister are two parts of one whole; they could not be closer. Their bodies belong together as intimately as a fetal child within its mother’s womb’ (294). Aurora’s

<sup>64</sup>Percy Thomas ed., ‘On the Ancient Metrical Romances’, *Reliques of Ancient English Poetry: Consisting of Old Heroic Ballads, Songs, and Other Pieces of Our Earlier Poets, Together with Some Few of Later Date, and a Copious Glossary* (HC Bohn, 1845).

<sup>65</sup>Ruth Perry, ‘Brother Trouble: Incest Ballads of the British Isles’, *The Eighteenth Century* 47.2 (2006): 289-307, p. 289-290.

<sup>66</sup>I am reproducing the eighth stanza of the variant discussed in Ruth Perry’s ‘Brother Trouble: Incest Ballads of the British Isles’, p. 292. Perry informs us that ‘it was collected by William Motherwell from the recitation of Mrs. King of Kilbarchan parish in February 9, 1825, and appears in his *Minstrelsy: Ancient and Modern* (1827)’. p. 291.

union with Romney evokes the coming together of the brother with the sister in the ‘The Sheath and Knife’ ballad, yet it strikingly differs from it in one aspect: not only does it triumphantly defy the sexual victimisation and consequent supplication of the heroine at the end, but it promises both lovers a matrimonial destiny.<sup>67</sup>

Stephenson ably demonstrates that the romance-end of *Aurora Leigh* does not reinstate traditional patriarchal values. Instead, Elizabeth Barrett Browning portrays an exceptionally unconventional union that breaches the traditional conventions underlying the discourse of marriage in Victorian England. She states that Elizabeth Barrett Browning provides an alternative model of marriage replacing ‘the socially and culturally established form of male-female relationship with a new form of relationship which allows women to play a vital active role and which preserves female autonomy (*Elizabeth Barrett* 116). Stephenson’s argument is met with consensus by Thum and Bing Shao. Thum makes a similar point in maintaining that, ‘Barrett Browning is not a separatist. She insists on including love and even marriage in her view of the potentialities of male-female relations’ (90). Shao commenting on Aurora’s marriage to Romney, does not only see a reconfiguration of male-female relations but explains that this revision seemed all the more feasible as soon as the polarization of art and society was subverted. He states: ‘The happy union of Aurora and Romney at the end of the poem, though apparently not escaping the stereotyped happy endings of romantic stories, actually indicates, among other things, an ideal combination of art and life, artist and social reformer. The poem, in this way, transcends the seemingly melodramatic

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<sup>67</sup> Barbara Charlesworth Gelpi makes the point that it is significant to bear in mind that Aurora and Romney are cousins and that their physical resemblance is noticeable. Both Lady Waldemar (‘Your droop of eylid is the same as his’ (IX 163)) and Marian (‘Your cousin!-ah, most like you’ (IV 939)) comment on it. She argues that ‘remembering Barrett Browning’s love for her younger brother Edward, we might take cousinship to be both vehicle for and bar to fantasies of incest ... the resemblance of and relationship between them are significant in that they make Romney Aurora’s ‘alter ego’, her brother in her soul’. (41 my emphasis) The allusion to the ‘The Sheath and Knife’ ballad strengthens Gelpi’s argument, who considers physical resemblance as an index of spiritual and psychic kinship. If I were to indulge in a speculation, I wouldn’t go so far as to suggest that it reveals a fantasy of incest, but I would argue that it could strike a sensitive chord evoking Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s nostalgia for brotherly love.

romance that some critics have seen it as'.<sup>68</sup> In contrast, David argues in her book *Intellectual Women and Victorian Patriarchy* that Aurora eventually aligns with the laws of patriarchy:

As Aurora is married to Romney and female art wedded to male socialist politics, the novel poem *Aurora Leigh* becomes a form-giving epithalamium for the essentialist sexual politics formed primarily through Barrett Browning's very early apprenticeship to male modes of intellectual training and aesthetic practice. In this poem we hear a woman's voice speaking patriarchal discourse boldly, passionately, and without rancour.<sup>69</sup>

The critical reception of the closure of the poem varies, depending mainly on the ideological bias each critic assumes. It is important however, to appreciate this marriage dissociating it from the rhetoric of any particular strand of criticism and simply view it in the context of Aurora's coming to terms with her womanhood and Romney's eventual realization that a woman's art can induce social change. Admittedly, the narrative unfolds on a nexus whose two extremes delineate Aurora's trajectory to self-realization as a woman poet and Romney's philosophical shift from representing traditional masculine discourse to embracing Aurora's apocalyptic vision which allots to both women and men the right to speak. Where these trajectories impressively collide and converge is the end, and it is my view that this closing is in accord with Elizabeth Barrett Browning's ideal of androgynous union. Rachel Blau DuPlessis, in *Writing Beyond Ending*, argues that that all possible choices for a narrative ending may reflect to a certain degree the diverse issues addressed throughout the text. She states: 'Narrative outcome is one place visible ... Any artistic resolution ...can, with greater or lesser success, attempt an ideological solution to the fundamental contradictions that

<sup>68</sup> Shao Bing, 'Elizabeth Barrett Browning's *Aurora Leigh* – Her "Highest Convictions upon Life and Art"', *Studies in Browning and His Circle* 20 (1993): 106-114, p. 107.

<sup>69</sup> Deidre David, *Intellectual Women and Victorian Patriarchy: Harriet Martineau, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, George Elliot* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1987), p. 157.

animate the work. Any resolution can have traces of the conflicting material that have been processed within it'.<sup>70</sup>

The end of *Aurora Leigh* is marked not only by Romney's and Aurora's mutual declaration of love but by the apocalyptic vision of a new city, whose foundations Aurora aspires to lay with Romney. Romney insists that the time has come for this city to be built, because it will bring redemption to the soul of humans and re-organise the economies of all systems: institutional, religious, societal and economical.

[...] The world's old;  
But the old world waits the time to be renewed,  
Toward which, new hearts in individual growth  
Must quicken, and increase to multitude  
In new dynasties of the race of men;  
Developed whence, shall grow spontaneously  
New churches, new œconomies, new laws  
Admitting freedom, new societies  
Excluding falsehood: HE shall make all new.

(IX 941-949)

The appropriation of the apocalyptic discourse in this passage is somewhat puzzling, especially Romney's declaration 'HE shall make all new'. Taking into account Tina Pippin's assertion that we trace 'some of the early roots of misogyny in the history of the Christian Church'<sup>71</sup> one may wonder whether Elizabeth Barrett Browning's use of apocalyptic discourse overlooks or sidedly passes over this misogyny. This inherent sexist bias has urged Stone to describe it as 'phallocentric' (*Elizabeth Barrett Browning* 149). Since, in this chapter, *Aurora Leigh* has been considered as a text which assumes the revisionary task to re-envision culturally resonating institutions, it is uncertain whether the 'HE' is God, Romney, or the new arrangement between Romney and

<sup>70</sup> Rachel Blau DuPlessis, *Writing Beyond Ending: Narrative Strategies of Twentieth-Century Women Writers* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985), p. 3.

<sup>71</sup> Tina Pippin, *Death and Desire: The Rhetoric of Gender in the Apocalypse of John* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1992), p. 70.

Aurora based on work (for the improvement of humanity) and love. Nixon provides though an alternative: ‘Considering, too, the work of redemption Aurora effects, the ‘HE’ might well be an implied ‘S/HE’, the Aurora who rises from the ‘east’ to effectively usher in the New Jerusalem’.<sup>72</sup> Be it the case or not, admittedly this scenario does not probe Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s undeniable effort to turn stereotypical motifs on their heads.

But of course the new city encompasses all the transformative power Aurora had seen invested in a woman poet’s ideal art. It assumes a representational and symbolic function, in so far as it signifies Aurora’s successful journey to artistic and sexual self-affirmation. The new city is the result of Aurora’s struggle to reinstate the true powers of the woman poet’s art and her success in ‘educating’ Romney to appreciate it as such. It thus constitutes the spatial configuration wherein their union will be sanctioned, instructing humanity that harmony can be achieved between contesting forces. Ultimately, the city is identified with Aurora. As Tucker ably illustrates ‘She herself becomes, in heralding its emergence, the dawning New Jerusalem, the city that may be of God and man but *is* a woman. It is finally Aurora ‘who makes all new’, as she has done throughout the poem’ (*Epic Solutions* 70).

Joachim Von Der Thüsen, in his account of the metonymical function of city images in literature, supports that the city can be seen on a symbolic level, ‘as an image of something larger than the city itself ... the city often becomes ‘an image for the articulation of an encompassing ideal’.<sup>73</sup> Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s metaphor of the new city does not only imply the androgynous ideal as proposed above, but prophesises the beginning of a new era which will be marked by the assertion of woman as an agent in the public sphere and the establishment of an egalitarian state which will heal

<sup>72</sup> Jude V. Nixon, ‘[S]He Shall Make All New: “Aurora Leigh” and Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s Regendering of the Apocalypse’, *Studies in Browning and His Circle* 26 (September 2006):73-94, p. 88.

<sup>73</sup> Joachim Von Der Thüsen, ‘The City as Metaphor, Metonym and Symbol’, *Babylon or Jerusalem? Perceptions of the City in Literature*. Ed. Valeria Tinkler Villani. (Amsterdam, New York: Rodopi, 2005), p. 1.

humanity from the evils of material individualism. Von Der Thüsen argues that the city ‘on this symbolic level reveals through its form a more general truth. This does not always have to be an ideal; the city can represent a neutral entity as well. Thus, a particular city may be seen as the expression of a culture or of a phase of civilisation’ (2).

Interestingly enough, Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s vision of New Jerusalem is anticipated in her poem ‘The Island’, which was originally published in 1837 in the *Monthly Magazine* and reappeared in her 1838 volume. The poem depicts a fecund, beautiful island full ‘Of heavenly trees, and flowers and fruits’, ‘The fittest foliage for a dream’, with ‘[...] unnumbered hues’ and ‘all colours in disorder’ (ll. 24, 36 ,47, 56,) and hills- reminding us of Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s typical tropes of representing the female body. This feminised place is not governed by any form of authority (the stars are ‘the only watch’ here l. 21) and its subjects live in total harmony. On this island the speaker shares ‘caves’ (l. 100) with others who have also opted ‘For Nature’s stedfast sympathies’ (l. 114), leaving behind the systems of ‘Man’. The speaker is thus able to engage undistracted with poetry and a new language which ‘Sounds sweet as Hellas spake in youth’ (l. 147). The poem depicts a utopian and, at the same time, ecological version of society, requiring a radical break with the masculinist order and the establishment of a new system which allows its feminine subjects to assume an active role as implied in the adoption of a new language. Peaceful cohabitation in ‘The Island’ prefigures New Jerusalem in advocating an egalitarian state which allows agency to everyone, very similar to the one Aurora described in the concluding stanzas of *Aurora Leigh*.

In the final lines of the poem, when Romney has declared his love for Aurora and his faith in the power of art to transform the world, Aurora describes to Romney, who is blind, the most visionary and apocalyptic city of them all:

He stood a moment with erected brows  
In silence, as creature might who gazed, -  
Stood calm, and fed his blind, majestic eyes  
Upon the thought of perfect noon: and when  
I saw his soul saw, -'Jasper first,' I said,  
'And second sapphire; third chalcedony;  
The rest in order, -last, an amethyst.'

(IX 958-964)

These lines allude to the New Jerusalem, whose walls are set with twelve precious stones from jasper to chalcedony in the Book of Revelation.<sup>74</sup> Romney, having lost his sight, envisions the New Jerusalem through the apocalyptic language and words of Aurora. He transcends his physicality and enters a spiritual realm and by yielding to Aurora the prophetic voice becomes a poet / prophet himself. Critics do not agree on the semantic weight of such transcendence. For example, Gilbert and Gubar argue that 'Victorian readers might be more likely to accept the millenarian utterances from a male character',<sup>75</sup> while Nixon holds that Romney, 'summons her to trumpet apocalyptic climax, affirming as a result the female messiah and messianic he had earlier disavowed' (89).

The paradoxical appropriation of the discourse of apocalypse in the lyric conclusion of the poem, does not, in my view, bring into question Elizabeth Barrett Browning's capacity to re-write it but diverts our attention to the fact that the realisation of the vision of the New Jerusalem constitutes an experiment, which ultimately confirms Aurora's active agency. Thum, assuming an apologetic stance, explains that despite the implications of such a venture, Aurora's vision 'is not intended as a roadmap for a territory already explored and charted. It is, rather, the adumbration of a future

<sup>74</sup> See King James Bible, Revelation 21.19-20. 'And the foundations of the wall of the city were garnished with all manner of precious stones. The first foundation was jasper; the second, sapphire; the third, a chalcedony; the fourth, an emerald; / the fifth, sardonyx; the sixth, sardius; the seventh, chrysolite; the eighth, beryl; the ninth, a topaz; the tenth, a chrysoprasus; the eleventh, a jacinth; the twelfth, an amethyst.'

<sup>75</sup> Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination*, p. 579.

potentiality based on the author's personal experience that by contemporary standards and within a late-nineteenth-century patriarchal context was admittedly exceptional' (90).

## Conclusion

In recapitulation, in this chapter I have argued that in the poetry of the 1830s, Elizabeth Barrett Browning draws extensively on the myth of Prometheus because it appealed to her ideal for a transformed humanity. Prometheus for her signified a righteous individual, powerful and compassionate, masculine and feminine at the same time, which very early became for her an apt vehicle for the development of an androgynous symbol. Even in his powerless position as a victim of torture Prometheus exerts a unique attraction, as he becomes a symbol of resistance to divine supremacy, and a symbol of a transformed humanity. In suffering for a better humanity Prometheus is essentially and eventually Christianised, as Elizabeth Barrett Browning gradually begins to engage in a dialogue between the classic and Christian tradition. The most exemplary moment of this process is marked with the publication of her ambitious poem of Crucifixion 'The Seraphim' and later on with the reworking of her translation of the 1830 *Prometheus Bound* into a more Christianised version. Elizabeth Barrett Browning's Prometheanism has been supported by the dynamic interchange of images invoking the Burkean categories of the sublime/male and the beautiful / female and especially in 'The Seraphim', the principle that emotion (compassion) does not affect one's identity, with the crucified, suffering Christ serving as a primary example. In order to address the problems issuing from the appropriation of the religious discourse by a woman poet, and especially those pertaining to her capacity to produce poetry which will undercut the polarisation of genders entailed in Christian tradition, I have drawn on Derrida's and Moi's notions of the 'transcendental signified' to show that Elizabeth Barrett Browning, despite her aspiration for such a source of meaning, turns

its rhetoric on its head by presenting Christ practising silence, recalling Irigaray's 'sensible transcendental'.

Moving on to *Aurora Leigh*, the enquiry set out to explore the workings of the poet's androgynous imagination and representation of the heroine, through the appropriation or misappropriation of qualities ostensibly identified with the male poet, such as the 'peripatetic convention' and writing as a labour, prophesy. Through the unabashed declaration of an alternative, active role for women, Elizabeth Barrett Browning celebrates the inseparability of art and life and negotiates the conventional and artificial boundaries between the classes, between art and life, between the spiritual and the material, between nature and man, and most importantly, between genders by embracing all these dichotomous oppositions into one unified whole. Moreover, it has been shown that her identification with Achilles and Apollo as well as her deployment of the classical tale of Danae's rape challenge the traditional male model of inspiration through gender reversals and the eradication of the gendered subject / object dichotomy. Viewing androgyny as a confirmation of sexual difference, the poet discovers how the interplay between personal and professional identities of the heroine stimulates her self-making, her betrothal to Romney which is ratified as hierogamy in the context of the discourse of the apocalypse and the ultimately, founding of a new Jerusalem and the transfiguration of the world into an ideal state. In the same line, Hoeveler, provides an insightful account of the potential of such an androgynous union: 'Androgyny as hierogamy, mystical marriage, exists as a form of radical heterosexuality, a celebration of sexuality as a manifestation of a transforming religious power' (120). It is therefore, justifiable to assume that responsible for Aurora's new sense of womanhood which initiates the articulation of romantic sentiments, is Elizabeth Barrett Browning's ideological universe, according to which, the new self is the product of the power of love and the harmonisation of opposing qualities in a unified whole.

The following chapter explores Elizabeth Barrett Browning's engagement with the aesthetics and the ethics of love, with a view to foregrounding that Elizabeth Barrett Browning presents us with a concept of the self which is founded on the recognition of sexual difference already in the *Sonnets*. The empowerment of woman to negotiate the intricacies of stridently declaring her amorous sentiments to her suitor in the *Sonnets* stipulates a gender politics that allows for the re-imagination and the materialization of the performative qualities of transgressive gender practices and resonates with an economy of love as intersubjective experience.

## Chapter 3: Constructed Authenticity and (Inter)Subjectivity in the *Sonnets from the Portuguese*

Seven years after the publication of the *Sonnets from the Portuguese*<sup>1</sup> (1850)

Coventry Patmore found the sequence ‘lofty, simple and passionate-not at all the less passionate in being highly intellectual, and even metaphysical’.<sup>2</sup> The statement not only encapsulated the interpretative elasticity inspired by Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s famous amatory sequence but it anticipated the diverse reception with which it was met throughout its long presence in the history of literary criticism. As none of Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s poetical works has been more praised or blamed than the *Sonnets*, a new reading of the poems dictates a close look both at the reaction of its readership and the conditions informing it, and at the revisionary deployment of form manifest in the sequence. Although her work was widely read and admired by her contemporaries by the time the *Sonnets* saw print, the sequence had become the subject of much controversy and mixed reviews. Considering the fact that the political poetry she had published in the years flanking the publication of the *Sonnets* had incited scathing criticism,<sup>3</sup> one might posit that its investment in a politics of love is partly responsible for the critical disapproval of the *Sonnets*. Elizabeth Barrett Browning may invoke her readers’ disenchantment by adopting the discourse of exchange in the economy of heterosexual love, yet she nonetheless proves herself a formidable critic of the cultural and legal establishment informing conjugal dynamics.

In *Eminent Women of the Age* (1869), Edward Y. Hincks, alluding to the biographical overtones of the sequence and its allegedly authentic expression, exclaims:

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<sup>1</sup> ‘Sonnets from the Portuguese’, *Aurora Leigh and Other Poems*, eds. John R. Glorney Bolton and Julia Bolton Holloway (London: Penguin, 1995). All subsequent references are to this edition.

<sup>2</sup> *North British Review* 26 (February 1857): p. 447.

<sup>3</sup> I am referring to works such as ‘Casa Guidi Windows’, ‘The Runaway Slave at Pilgrim’s Point’, as well as *Last Poems* which was published post-humously, and which I discuss in detail in the ensuing chapters. For an overview of the critical trends in the reception history of the aforementioned poems see Chapter 4, p. 200, and Chapter 5, p. 261.

‘Whoever wishes to know Mrs. Browning should study carefully these beautiful and artless poems, which tell the most sacred feelings of a woman’s heart with such simplicity and truthfulness and freedom from false shame that the most fastidious taste cannot be offended by their recital’.<sup>4</sup>

After the turn of the century opinions became all the more divergent. While Irene Cooper Willis argues that ‘the appeal of the *Sonnets* lies chiefly... in their evident truthfulness’,<sup>5</sup> for Robert B. Heilman, Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s sonnet ‘How do I love thee’ (XLIII) with its ‘piling up of abstractions and generalizations... gives a positive effect of insincerity’.<sup>6</sup> Later critics, more often than not, charged the poet with a poorly veiled autobiographical narrative leading Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s biographer, Hayter to talk of a ‘peeping Tom sensation’ because in the sequence ‘she is dealing with an emotion too new and powerful for her to transmute ... into universally valid terms’.<sup>7</sup> Conversely, the *Sonnets* already owing much of their fame as a document of Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s late encounter with love, were hailed by popular culture as, to use Marianne Van Remoortel’s words, ‘a textbook example of a romanticised kind of Victorianism of crinolines and corsets, waiting women and conquering men, secret letters and stolen kisses’.<sup>8</sup>

It was not until the 1980s when critics began to engage in a colossal effort to rehabilitate and re-evaluate Victorian texts by women writers and poets, that the *Sonnets* started to attract renewed interest. Armstrong held that in the *Sonnets* we encounter the poet’s ambitious project to ‘discover a language to represent and go beyond the

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<sup>4</sup> James Parton et al., *Eminent Women of the Age. Being Narratives of the Lives and Deeds of the most Prominent Women of the Present Generation* (Chicago: Gibbs, 1868), pp. 234-5.

<sup>5</sup> Irene Cooper Willis, *Elizabeth Barrett Browning* (London: Gerald Howes, 1928), p. 86.

<sup>6</sup> Robert B. Heilman, ‘Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s Sonnets from the Portuguese XLIII,’ *Explicator* 4 (1945): Item 3.

<sup>7</sup> Alethea Hayter, *Mrs. Browning: A Poet’s Work and its Setting* (London: Faber, 1962), p. 105, 106, 107.

<sup>8</sup> Marianne Van Remoortel, ‘(Re)Gendering Petrarch: Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s “Sonnets from the Portuguese”’, *Tulsa Studies in Women’s Literature* 25:2 (Fall 2006): 247-266. p. 248.

structure of an unwilling master-slave relationship'.<sup>9</sup> Margaret Morlier reads the *Sonnets* in the critical context formed around Elizabeth Barrett Browning's *magnum opus*, *Aurora Leigh*. She maintains that the poet's 'carelessness' with rhyme and versification should direct us to a greater scheme, namely the assertion of a distinct woman poet's voice.<sup>10</sup>

While most of the feminist critics admit that our understanding of the *Sonnets* is to a great extent informed by an external biographical narrative charting the transformation of a grieving, isolated woman poet into a female subject claiming her right to say 'I love thee', Leighton in the late 1980s, is the first to offer a new insight on how to deal with the limitations of such readings. She argues that to 'overplay the sequence's autobiographical background is to miss the fundamental questions it raises about the *pitfalls of subjectivity and intersubjectivity* that the poet encounters when writing in a language as old and impenetrable as the language of love' (my emphasis).<sup>11</sup> Similarly, ten years later Alison Chapman in examining the construction of subjectivity under mesmeric influence, despite the fact that she resorts mainly to Elizabeth Barrett Browning's and Robert Browning's courtship letters for evidence, concludes her study by pointing out that the *Sonnets from the Portuguese* 'offers a model of psychic and poetic agency as dynamic, intersubjective, and circular'.<sup>12</sup> Picking up from where Leighton and Chapman left off, my task is to show how the highly complex notion of subjectivity in the *Sonnets* is responsible for the contesting currents in the reception of this sequence and the feelings of embarrassment that modern readers experience as they

<sup>9</sup> Isobel Armstrong, *Victorian Poetry: Poetry, Poetics and Politics* (London: Routledge, 1993), p. 356.

<sup>10</sup> Margaret M. Morlier, 'Sonnets from the Portuguese and the Politics of Rhyme', *Victorian Literature and Culture* 27.1 (1999): 97-112.

<sup>11</sup> Angela Leighton, 'Stirring a Dust of Figures: Elizabeth Barrett Browning and Love', *Browning Society Notes* 17 (1987-1988): 11-23.

<sup>12</sup> Alison Chapman, 'Mesmerism and Agency in the Courtship of Elizabeth Barrett and Robert Browning', *Victorian Literature and Culture* 26.2 (1998): 303-319. p. 310.

witness the subversion of the sonnet genre's long-established masculine conventions by a Victorian woman poet.<sup>13</sup>

Moreover, I will demonstrate the necessity to discuss the *Sonnets* anew, as a ground-breaking work in its capacity to lend itself to post-structuralist and interrelational approaches of subjectivity as, in my view, it suggests the materialization of subjectivity which is not predicated on entrenched hierarchies and is indissociable from discursive demarcations, which may lead to a blurring of gender boundaries, the proliferation of identities and intersubjective experience. To this end, I will attempt to demonstrate how Elizabeth Barrett Browning's choice to compose in the traditional form of the sonnet reveals a writerly impulse which was revisionary and playful in a specific literary and psychological sense in as much as it enabled her to procure role reversals and conflations which attribute to the female speaker of the sequence a strong voice and insert her in the discourse of love on equal terms with the beloved, who, in this exceptional case, is male. I do not mean to ponder the idea that Elizabeth Barrett Browning as a woman poet who lived in the Victorian period saw only cultural differences between the two genders, because it is unlikely that she was unaware of the heated debates that were taking place at the time. These advocated the cultural differences privileging men over women and were deeply rooted in the essentialist view that the primary difference between men and women was quintessentially biological. However, as I will show her poetics can tell a great deal about her stance against the gender ideology of the time: in my view she either believed it was possible to dismantle it because she thought it was already fluid or because she believed that the formation of subjectivity should allow the individual to retract from singularity. In this context, I believe it is quite safe to assume that Elizabeth Barrett Browning did not undermine the

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<sup>13</sup> I am summarising Mermin's view as it is developed in her frequently cited article 'The Female Poet and the Embarrassed Reader: Elizabeth Barrett Browning's *Sonnets from the Portuguese*', *ELH* 48.2 (Summer 1981): 351-357. Mermin has successfully proved that the feeling of embarrassment elicited by the *Sonnets* has contributed to the poor reputation of the sequence among literary critics.

biological differences which set the two genders on the very extremes of the axis but she might have taken sides with a gender discourse which relies upon the acknowledgement of difference, the repudiation of rupture, and the restoration to the other of something of the self. In this respect, she may be advocating a malleable notion of subjectivity which could be retrospectively connected with Judith Butler's conceptualization of gender as a series of stylized performances. Butler argues that the recognition of sexual difference is 'a *question* that prompts feminist inquiry',<sup>14</sup> which seems a reasonable concession to woman poets like Elizabeth Barrett Browning, who does not see biological and / or physical difference in essentializing terms. Avery, in his 2011 monograph on Elizabeth Barrett Browning draws our attention to this possible connection commenting on Aurora Leigh's resistance to oppressive systems and its crucial role in her subsequent subject formation (77). He intimates that

in the time before the household stirs, and to draw upon the theories of Judith Butler, prescribed social identities have to be performed, Aurora is able to "escape / as a soul from the body, out of doors" (I: 693-4), breaking the boundaries between inside and out, entrapment and liberation, and thereby "open[ing] wide / The window and my soul" (I: 663-4) (*Elizabeth Barrett Browning* 77).

Aligning myself with Avery's view and expanding the scope of his enquiry to include the *Sonnets*, I argue that the seeds of "resistance" are already evident in Elizabeth Barrett Browning's sonnet sequence and that her rendition of selfhood as it prevails in her ethics and sociology of love can be further elucidated deploying Butler's theory.

Having located the importance of the tropes of silence it is essential to bear in mind the implications arising from the fact that it was deployed on the premiss of a strict ascription of gender roles. In the amatory sonnet the lover / speaker is always male

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<sup>14</sup> Judith Butler, *Undoing Gender* (New York: Routledge. 2004), p. 178.

and the beloved is always the silent recipient of the lover's declarations of love. How are we then to account for the choice of women poets to compose amatory sonnets if the sonnet form is identified with prescriptive silence? And how are we to read the disturbance of such conventional strictures in the amatory sonnets by women poets who posit a female speaker and a male beloved? Can silence be attributed a different meaning to the one in which it is so deeply embedded?

In their discussion of the difficulties women poets were faced with upon entering the lyric tradition in the sixteenth century, Gilbert and Gubar claim that they were in fact 'silenced' as they did not enjoy an equal status with their male contemporaries in the literary scene on account of their lack of aesthetic models and formal education. As this idea becomes central for their reading of nineteenth-century women's poetry as well, its shortcomings come to surface when one reads the sonnets of Charlotte Smith, Elizabeth Barrett Browning and Christina Rossetti, whose exceptional preoccupation with issues of eroticism and poetic subjectivity from a perspective that emphasizes gender is also manifest on a structural level in the guise of radical formal revisions. Elizabeth Barrett Browning was amazingly prolific and had experimented in various genres. Nor was she silenced in the sense of remaining unnoticed or being permanently removed from literary history, because, despite the diverse reception of the *Sonnets* and the accusations of excessive sentimentalism, her amatory sequence has attracted increased critical attention, especially after the 1980s, which has gone to great lengths to dislodge it from its interpretative gridlock. As Tricia Lootens clarifies in *Lost Saints: Silence, Gender, and Victorian Literary Canonisation*, 'the silence around Barrett Browning -and around other poets- turned out not to be an absence'.<sup>15</sup> Elizabeth Barrett Browning's involvement with unspeakability and the challenge of calling attention to this socio-cultural construct in the *Sonnets* may be seen as inextricably bound to her

<sup>15</sup> Tricia Lootens, *Lost Saints. Silence, Gender, and Victorian Literary Canonisation* (Charlottesville and London: University Press of Virginia, 1996).

complex notion of subjectivity. What is at stake is to explore the ways she simultaneously posits eloquence and silence and, most importantly, to measure the signifying possibilities a concept such as that of intersubjectivity may invoke within the discourse of silence. Having explained why the amatory sonnet has been associated with silence and in what ways silence can inform the engagement of 16<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century women poets with the form, a brief survey of the English tradition of the sonnet reveals that the Romantic and Victorian women poets were not the first to indulge in its attractions.

### The Sonnet Tradition and the Wordsworthian Unitary Model

In order to be able to examine Elizabeth Barrett Browning's departures from this long-established male genre, a brief history of the sonnet will facilitate contextualizing her work and will shed light on her revisionary impulses both in terms of content and form. The sonnet made its first appearance between 1225 and 1230 in Italy, and drawing on the courtly love tradition its main theme revolved around the unattainability of a female beloved addressee. Conversely, the sonnet radically departed from the courtly love tradition as, according to Paul Oppenheimer, it comprised the first lyric form since the fall of the Roman Empire designed not for performance or singing but for silent reading. What is noteworthy is the fact that there is no consensus among critics regarding the musical structure of the sonnet as its etymology further complicates the effort to fully grasp the generic characteristics of the sonnet. In direct contrast to Oppenheimer, John Fuller extols the original connection between the sonnet and music by relying on lexicographical evidence suggesting that the word sonnet, deriving from the Italian *sonetto* and the Italian sound, *suono*, means 'little song'.<sup>16</sup> Oppenheimer questions understandings of the word sonnet similar to Fuller's by highlighting the diminutive suffix and by claiming that in Latin, *sonitus* can mean murmur, but usually

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<sup>16</sup> See John Fuller's, *The Sonnet* (London: Methuen, 1980).

conveys the idea ‘of noise as in empty sound, bombast, thunder’.<sup>17</sup> Additionally, Oppenheimer stresses the fact that the sonnet’s asymmetrical structure, developing around the formal and thematic disparity elicited between the octave and the sestet, evokes a radical departure from the musical lyrics of the troubadours. He argues that since no ‘musical settings for Petrarch’s sonnets can be assigned a date earlier than 1470, well over two centuries after Giacomo [da Lentino] wrote his first sonnets’, there simply may have been no prior attempt to fit the words to music (178).

In contrast to traditional courtly love lyrics, early sonnets do not exhibit any signs of reference, direct or implied, to an audience neither do they invest in multiple or dual personae. As a result, these sonnets do not seem to accommodate any kind of a discursive relationship with either an external audience or an internal addressee, rather it is safer to assume that they record an introspective rumination of the speaker. Moreover, the self-confrontation of the speaker might be construed as dialectical, since it elaborates on the dilemmas of love and desire, an assumption that could account for the sonnet’s divided structure and the final resolution of the speaker’s problem or thoughts in the couplet. The hypothesis that the sonnet was originally developed in a musical setting becomes weaker especially in the light of the discoveries of voluminous modern criticism, which demonstrates that the tropes of silence and distance or unattainability are essential constituents of the sonnet as genre. Oppenheimer aligns himself with this idea in proclaiming that it ‘heralds a departure from the tradition of lyrics as performed poems and introduces a new introspective, quieter mode, a mode that is to dominate the history of Western poetry for at least the next seven centuries’ (187).

The first sonnets in English were translations from the Italian of amatory sonnets from Petrarch’s *Rime Sparse* (1327-1368). Thomas Wyatt (1503-1542) and Henry Howard Earl of Surrey (1517-1547) had made available their translations to members of

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<sup>17</sup> Paul Oppenheimer, *The Birth of the Modern Mind: Self, Consciousness, and the Invention of the Sonnet* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), p. 181.

the Tudor court. The sonnet flourished under the reign of Elizabeth I, not only because she was a hospitable patroness of the arts but because her femininity inspired poets to imagine her as a sovereign monarch and a beloved Lady simultaneously. In 1591, nine years after Philip Sidney's death his famous amatory sequence *Astrophel and Stella* was published, sparking an overwhelming production of sonnets in the last decade of the sixteenth century. While the quality of the sonnet production of this decade may be disputable, more scepticism amongst critics was incited by the question of why the sonnet had become so popular during those ten years. Yet, noteworthy sequences written in the years ensuing the publication of *Astrophel and Stella* were Edmund Spenser's *Amoretti* (1595) and Shakespeare's *Sonnets* (1609). Interestingly enough, women had also written sonnets at the outset of the tradition in English. Rosalind Smith informs us that 'five sequences were published in England under the signatures of women between 1560 and 1621'.<sup>18</sup> Only the last of these, Mary Wroth's, *Pamphilia and Amphilanthus*, was amatory. The first studies of Wroth's sequence appear in the 1980s, the same period critical writings of feminist outlook on Elizabeth Barrett Browning proliferated at a very fast pace.

The sonnet's association with Petrarchism, and in particular the praise of a female sovereign ruler, is often blamed for casting the genre almost into obscurity upon the ascension of James VI to the throne. By the early seventeenth century John Donne's *Holy Sonnets* (1633) despite the fact that he wrote several love lyrics, were religious in theme, justifying the assumption that the sonnet had, by then, ceased to be popular in its capacity to express feelings of love. During the seventeenth century the most prominent sonnets were written by John Milton; all of religious content except for 'Sonnet XXIII: Methought I Saw my Late Espoused Saint', which was amatory in nature but elegiac in tone. All of his sonnets were written in the Italian or Petrarchan form. However, the

<sup>18</sup> Ann Rosalind Jones, *The Currency of Eros: Women's Love Lyric in Europe, 1540-1620* (Bloomington: Indiana, 1988), p. 12.

sonnet form had started to fall into disuse on account of multiple reasons. Stuart Curran states:

that the sonnet virtually disappeared from the British shores in the century after Milton's death is an oddity that could not be obfuscated by blandly defining it as 'not very suitable to the English language'. On the contrary, it is a symptom of the cultural distance the eighteenth century imposed between itself and the Elizabethans, who were commonly understood to have been barbaric, their example effaced by subsequent refinements in language, literary conception and versification.<sup>19</sup>

In 1775, four years after the death of its author, the great sonnet of the English Enlightenment was published. It was written by Thomas Gray and was entitled 'Sonnet on the death of Mr. Richard West'. The first descriptive meditative sonnets were written during the same period, including the first of many sonnets to figure a river as a site that triggers memory and emotional transformation, Thomas Wharton's 'To the River Lodon' (1777). Yet, Gray's elegiac sonnet, a 'suppressed record of his unfulfilled secret life' (Curran 30), inaugurated the Romantic revival of the form.

With the Romantics the sonnet was no longer merely regarded as suitable to accommodate religious ecstasy but it was recast as a monument to sorrow or an internal state of mind. It is no surprise that the revival of the sonnet coincides with the development of woman's literary activity and with the beginnings of Romanticism. Smith's *Elegiac Sonnets*, published in 1784, were embraced by popular culture despite the fact that they had received mixed reviews from the critical community. Smith's sonnets spurred numerous imitations and established the new mode of the sonnet in 'pensive contemplation,' 'mostly sorrowful,' 'revealing the author's sensibility' (Curran 30). Moreover, Smith was brave enough to discard the rhyme scheme of the Petrarchan

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<sup>19</sup> Stuart Curran, *Poetic Form and British Romanticism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), p. 29.

sonnet for an English form that was ‘looser’ but equally difficult to carve out. Two of Smith’s contemporaries, Anna Seward (1742-1809) and Mary Robinson, (1758-1800) deploy the same rhyme scheme. Robinson famous for her novels of sensibility, composed one of the most elegant amatory sonnet sequences of the 1790s, entitled *Sappho and Phaon* (1796), which recasts Ovid’s epistle from the classic exemplar of a betrayed lover through a self-dramatisation that loosely concealed Robinson’s experience as ‘Perdita’, rejected mistress first of the Prince Regent and then of Colonel Banastre Tarleton, who is the prototype of her Phaon. What is important to bear in mind is that the new mode of the sonnet in its promise to express the author’s sensibility, implies a persistent preoccupation with authenticity of feeling and sincerity and raises complex issues which touch upon the extent to which the sonnet was regarded as a suitable vehicle for the revelation of truthful sentiments deriving from the author’s lived experiences.

Paradoxically enough, Smith’s follower, Lisle Bowles, enjoyed increased popularity on publishing the *Fourteen Sonnets, written chiefly on Picturesque Spots during a Tour* (1789), and laid claim to the pronounced authenticity of feeling associated with the sonnet. Of course Bowles, in direct contrast to Smith -whose husband was a wastrel and who raised her children alone- and Robinson, expressed sorrow that was not personal and spontaneous but fictional. Curran maintains that Bowles’s major contribution to the Romantic sonnet was that he managed to codify a formula within the Italian form, whereby the split of the octave and the sestet does not mark the disjunction of the self from the other, but a split within the mind itself (33). Bowles’s sonnets had a profound influence on Coleridge who in 1793 published seventeen sonnets in the first edition of his *Poems*, drew thirty-seven sonnets by himself, Charles Lamb and Charles Lloyd into the second edition, and gathered another twenty-eight, the majority his own and those of his friends, into a pamphlet to be bound

with the sonnets of Bowles. In the second edition he prefaced them with an ‘Introduction to the Sonnets’ wherein he reveals that he is disinclined to ‘discover either sense, nature or, or poetic fancy in Petrarch’s poems; they appear to me all one cold glitter of heavy conceits and metaphysical abstractions’.<sup>20</sup> Coleridge in his attempts to define the sonnet reverts to the examples of his contemporaries Bowles and Smith, a gesture signifying not only his aversion to the early tradition of the sonnet and the formal conventions associated with it, but the establishment of a new generic canon whose codification did not deter women from entering it, while it also acknowledged a woman poet’s contribution in its inauguration. Coleridge’s inclusion of Smith in his selection of sonneteers is qualified by the deployment of the language of sensibility in his definition of the sonnet by the end of the eighteenth century: ‘The Sonnet then is a small poem, in which some lonely feeling is developed’ (*Preface’ Sonnets* 71). Reflecting on how the unifying qualities of the sonnet are affected, he argues that ‘moral Sentiments, Affections, or Feelings, are deduced from a sweet and indissoluble union between the intellectual and the material world’.

Additionally, Coleridge was in support of a more fluid formulaic description of the sonnet: he believed that the fourteen lines are merely customary and that looser rhyme models are perfectly acceptable construing thus the sonnet in terms of a mode of thought rather than of a set of formal rules. Coleridge, therefore, advocates a sonnet of a meditative nature in which the exterior world restores balance to the mind. In other words, the psychic and spiritual equilibrium of the subject is consolidated upon the merging of the individual with the universal. I believe Coleridge’s definition of the sonnet conveys a lot about the deluge of sonnet-writing throughout the nineteenth century and it is no coincidence that along with Bowles, Smith is deemed to have played

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<sup>20</sup> The ‘Preface’, slightly revised and entitled ‘Introduction to the Sonnets,’ is to be found on pp. 71-74 of Coleridge’s *Poems, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., to which are now added Poems by Charles Lamb and Charles Lloyd* (Bristol: J. Cottle; London: Robinsons, 1797). Quotations from the ‘Preface’ refer to this edition. p. 71.

a seminal role in this generic development, which was carried out in the light of the burgeoning interest in subjectivity and emotion, a major characteristic of the age. Jennifer Ann Wagner, in her impressive study of the Romantic and Victorian sonneteers, *A Moment's Monument* maintains that, ‘what became a general obsession with the form throughout the nineteenth century is the record of these poets’ engagement with the problems of subjectivity, with the relationship of poetic form to temporality, and with the infiltration of aestheticist idealism into the literary ideology’.<sup>21</sup> Paradoxically, despite the fact that she clearly sees that issues of subjectivity had evoked serial validations of the sonnet form as a vehicle for the expression of feelings by both male and female poets, her book features a glaring omission, as no woman poet is discussed.<sup>22</sup>

It was not until 1820 that Wordsworth published *The River Duddon: A Series of Sonnets* furnishing thus the archetype for the descriptive-meditative sonnet, which unlike Bowles’s and Smith’s –and in direct contrast to Coleridge’s views on the sonnet– did not capitalize on self-division and grief but accentuated the function of the sonnet as an occasion of heightened consciousness. This innovation was procured both on the thematic and the structural level. To Wordsworth the sonnet could be concerned with nature and place, and by the end of his long career he would have added history and politics, religion, literature and criticism, personal life and philosophy, for he composed not only sonnets but sonnet sequences on all those subjects. Having learned his craftsmanship from Milton, Wordsworth attempted to erase the structural tensions inherent in the sonnet form. Both the Petrarchan form with the split between the octave

<sup>21</sup> Jennifer Ann Wagner, *A Moment's Monument. Revisionary Poetics and the Nineteenth-Century English Sonnet* (London: Associated University Presses, 1996), p. 13.

<sup>22</sup> The oversight has been corrected by the publication of Joseph Phelan’s book *The Nineteenth-Century Sonnet* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005) who in examining the thematic versatility of the form discusses both male and female poets throughout the century and Amy Billone’s *Little Songs: Women, Silence, and the Nineteenth Century Sonnet* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2007), which focuses on the gendered signification of silence in women sonneteers of what has been called the long nineteenth century. Finally, Marianne Van Remoortel’s more recent study, *Lives of the Sonnet, 1787-1895* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2011) is the first book-length attempt to produce gender-sensitive readings of sonnets and sequences written both by male and female poets in the long nineteenth century.

and the sestet and the later so-called Shakespearean form with its three-quatrains-plus-couplet structure accommodated a trajectory of thought from then to now, from premise to conclusion. Miltonic sonnets, according to Wordsworth, proposed a new model of form which was ‘spherical’ in its capacity to allow a ‘dualistic’ or ‘dialectical’ relation between quatrains and couplet but subordinated this oppositional relationship to a final assertion of completeness, which ultimately subsumed both the formal and the conceptual internal tensions.<sup>23</sup> This unitary model allows Wordsworth to gain not just a private voice of the solitary speaker, but also a public voice of a ‘man speaking to men’ (‘Preface’ to *Lyrical Ballads* 13).

Already in the ‘Preface’ to *Lyrical Ballads* in 1800, and long before he would make his personal contribution to the sonnet tradition, Wordsworth was adamant about the task of the poet as one which elicits personal feelings with a universal appeal or outlook. He states that the poet is an individual ‘who rejoices more than other men in the spirit of life that is in him; delighting to contemplate similar volitions and passions as manifested in the goings-on of the Universe, and habitually impelled to create them where he does not find them’ (13). It comes, thus, as no surprise that his revision of the sonnet would grant the form with the capacity to express large ambition. Therefore, what can be said about his self-conscious treatment of such a unitary conception of the sonnet form, is that the formal, thematic and tropological implications of such a venture are by-products of his expansive scope of the poet’s task. Wordsworth’s hesitance to launch a poetical theory in the ‘Preface’ in 1800 becomes more vexing, since twenty years after its publication he proves astonishingly consistent about the universal outlook of a poet’s expression of personal feelings, in his engagement with the sonnet, which he

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<sup>23</sup> For the term unitary (or spherical), I am indebted to M. Schlüter, who in *Sonnet* describes this model as ‘unitary, wherein no tension, no split occurs’ (my translation from the German original: ‘die monistische, bei der kein Gegensatz, keine Wendung vorliegt’), (Stuttgart: J. B. Metzlersche Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1979), p. 19.

ultimately reinstated as a form of potency, potentiality, expansive imaginative vision and not as a figure of constraint.

It is on these grounds that Elizabeth Barrett Browning stakes her claim, approaching the form as a suitable means to assert not only amorous sentiments but to explore the potential of reconfiguring the boundaries traditionally imposed on gender identities. Wagner asserts that Wordsworth is to be held responsible for the exclusion of Elizabeth Barrett Browning and Christina Rossetti's work from her discussion of the nineteenth-century sonnet because 'suppressing as he does the private, sentimental and supposedly 'feminine' mode in favour of that 'manly' and characteristically self-aggrandising deference to his own egotistical sublime' (17), he leaves no space for this alternate mode that was concurrently developing. At this point, I will not attempt to draw affinities between Wordsworth's and Elizabeth Barrett Browning's rhyme techniques and structural form or themes, but I want to ponder Wagner's position that the sonnet was in the nineteenth century being revised towards two separate directions that did not intersect. Although I am not raising objections against the distinction of two dominant traditions, the amatory and the descriptive-meditative, I believe that adherents to Wordsworth's unitary model, at least as far as the conceptual level is concerned, are to be found in both traditions of the nineteenth-century sonnet. Despite the fact that Wordsworth claims authority in the sonnet tradition drawing on Milton and not Petrarch or Shakespeare, the openness and infinite potentiality of his unitary model, is precisely what is at work in extending the scope of Elizabeth Barrett Browning's poetics in her *Sonnets*. How else might one account for the conflation of the lyric moment with subjective space, out of which springs the extreme self-referentiality of her *Sonnets*? For in Elizabeth Barrett Browning's sequence the oppressive formality of the sonnet does not bind subjectivity to its traditionally ascribed tethers; instead, self-reflexivity leads her to renegotiate her relation to the poetic form and the poetic vocation in general, and

finally allows her to enter a literary tradition whose formal limitations become the very strengths of her poetry.

Having briefly delineated the rich tradition of the sonnet, the impressive revision it underwent by the nineteenth century and the special connection of female sonneteers to the form, what comes to the fore is a cluster of poetical strategies, tropes and ideologies that need to be rethought if the *Sonnets* are to be eulogised for their progressive poetics. It is important thus to clarify, first, to what degree the authenticity of feeling expressed is determined by an extra-textual narrative, such as the legendary chronicle of Elizabeth Barrett Browning's and Robert Browning's romance, or intertextual references, such as those to their courtship letters. Second, in what ways does the self-reflexivity of the poems and the adoption of a unitary model similar to Wordsworth's with its frequent enjambments at the octave – sestet turn and its near rhymes, enable the poet to renegotiate spatial relations so as to substitute the trope of distance for tactility and to temper out not only the sonnet's internal conceptual tensions but also the conflictual relation of traditional gender roles. Third, to what extent can the overarching discourses of marriage and silence, as well as the argumentative structure overriding the sequence constitute the core of Elizabeth Barrett Browning's gender politics upon which her notions of the subjectivity and intersubjectivity are constructed?

### **Appropriating the Spanish and Portuguese Tradition and the Construction of Authenticity**

The first gesture authorising Elizabeth Barrett Browning's entry in the form was to adopt a literary cover that would discourage her readers from perceiving her sequence as transparently confessional. The title of the sequence linked the persona with Elizabeth Barrett Browning's identity as a poet and not as a woman. Having already published a sonnet in the voice of the Portuguese Caterina, entitled 'Catarina to Camoëns' and by indirectly referring to the *Sonnets* as 'translations' the poet directs the

attention of her readers to the sequence's literary status. The identification asks readers to perceive the sequence as a text already once removed from the original context and therefore guides them to an interpretation that does not merely reduce the *Sonnets* to the status of profound effusions of feelings. Mermin agrees that the title Elizabeth Barrett Browning gave to her forty-four love sonnets, 'was a disguise agreed on by the Brownings together' and that 'it suggests without actually saying so that the poem is a translation'.<sup>24</sup> Elizabeth Barrett Browning herself, shortly after the publication of the sequence, in a letter to her sister Arabella, dated January the 12<sup>th</sup> 1851, appears to be fully aware of the title's misleading meaning. She writes that the title was chosen 'after much consideration' and that it 'did not mean (as we understood the double meaning) 'from the Portuguese language'... though the public (who are very little versed in Portuguese literature) might take it as they pleased'.<sup>25</sup> In my view, this statement, despite the fact that the sequence was associated with the 'authentic' effusion of amorous feelings because of its direct association with the narrative of the Brownings' storybook romance, nonetheless represents both the poet's amatory passion and her passion for the poetical vocation.

That the *Sonnets from the Portuguese* is embedded in an old literary tradition of writing about love is also suggested by another resonance of the title: The appearance in 1678 of a series of five letters, the *Portuguese Letters* as they were known, allegedly written by a Portuguese nun to her unfaithful lover, which initiated the trend of writing *à la portuguaise*. This style entailed the enunciation of helplessness, despair and grief and formed the thematic inventory on which the literature of sensibility so consistently draws. Yet, it has been discovered that the letters were fictitious and not written by a nun at all. The dispute over the authorship of the letters did not stop them from

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<sup>24</sup> Dorothy Mermin, *Elizabeth Barrett Browning: The Origins of a New Poetry*, p. 105.

<sup>25</sup> Elizabeth Barrett Browning, *The Letters of Elizabeth Barrett Browning to Her Sister Arabella*, ed. Scott Lewis, 2 vols (Waco, Texas: Wedgestone Press, 2002), I: 368, 369.

becoming widely popular, a fact that points directly to a paradoxical trait of a literature in which feeling is elicited by fine words and truth is merely the effect of a convention.<sup>26</sup>

While Victorian criticism on the sonnet form lingers on the tension between sincerity and artifice,<sup>27</sup> a debate that was already evident in the juxtaposition of Bowles's affected grief and Smith's authentic sorrow, it is important to examine how the *Sonnets* challenge such an assumption of truthful reality by demonstrating that authenticity in a sonnet sequence is always constructed. The selection of the title was by no means a mere coincidence; on the contrary, it invites us to remember Elizabeth Barrett Browning's renowned scholarship in European literature, with her knowledge spanning from the classical texts of antiquity to those fine specimens of Renaissance and Baroque poetry and of course the writings of her immediate precursors, the Romantics. Narrowing down the scope of interest at this point, to Portuguese and Spanish literature, I will aim to show that Elizabeth Barrett Browning was in full control of a poetics which affected a complex structure requiring from the reader to discern the lineage of a figurative language that was undeniably indebted to Portuguese and Spanish poets of the sixteenth and seventeenth century, a fact that plays a seminal role in

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<sup>26</sup> The passionate letters in book form were a publishing sensation across Europe throughout the seventeenth century and set a precedent for sentimentalism in European culture through their translations in several European languages. Hack writers had exploited the letters' popularity publishing sequels and replies. Until the twentieth century they were ascribed to a seventeenth century Franciscan nun named in 1810 as Mariana Alcoforado (1640-1723) and the letters were said to have been written to her French lover Noel Bouton, Marquis de Chamilly (1635-1715) but recent critics agree that the letters were, in fact, a work of fiction by the Comte de Guillerauges. See Leighton's 'Stirring', p. 20.

<sup>27</sup> Clough's and Davies's reflections on the sonnet form are indicative of the conflict surrounding the nature of the sonnet form as either the epitome of poetic craftsmanship and constructedness or the sincere expression of one's own individual life. Clough in 'Sonnets in the Abstract', *Rugby Magazine* 2 (1837): pp. 270-274, reprinted in *Selected Works of Arthur Hugh Clough*, ed. Buckner B. Trawick (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1964), argued that 'the Sonnet is not a likely or usual medium for the expression of very strong present feeling, and this simply because it is the most artificial and elaborate of all stanzas or systems of verse ... passion would assuredly not naturally and at once frame -and still more assuredly would not pause to frame- the artful harmonies of the Sonnet. It is surely rather fitted to be the after-record of impressions for reflective and for meditative poetry' (49). In contrast, Davies in his article 'The Sonnet', published in the *Quarterly Review* 134, in January 1873, pp. 186-204, claims that 'after all that can be said about forms and manners, it is the thought which constitutes the right sonnet ... if it be the sincere, unaffected exposition of a just sentiment, rather blossoming out of life spontaneously than sought for its own sake intrinsically' (192).

appreciating the *Sonnets* as the background against which the private narrative of love transforms into a constructed commentary on a discourse of love which claims universal appeal.

Elizabeth Barrett Browning scholar Barbara Neri argues that the discovery of an unpublished seven-page journal list of fifty-eight representatives of the medieval, Renaissance and Baroque periods substantiates the poet's rigorous study of Portuguese and Spanish literature. Neri, having investigated the poets on Elizabeth Barrett Browning's list found first that the poet had made the list based on John Bowring's 1824 *Ancient Poetry and Romances of Spain*,<sup>28</sup> by noting the poets' names along with the titles of their poems. Second, she concludes that Camoëns was not the only one to exert such a powerful influence on Elizabeth Barrett Browning's poetics. Neri focuses her analysis on Soror Maria do Ceo<sup>29</sup> (1658-1753) and Luis de Góngora y Argote<sup>30</sup> (1561-1627) holding that it suggests 'the previously unappreciated rich aesthetic texture of her sonnet sequence' ('Cobridme' 572). Neri traces Elizabeth Barrett Browning's appropriations of at least three metaphors and one mythical plot: the flower metaphor, the breath metaphor, the knife metaphor and the narrative of Polypheme. I will rest on the first three metaphors detected by Neri, because I would like to discuss her findings with a view to shedding light on one very important aspect which Neri does not examine: The fact that the first three metaphors are deployed in an exceptional setting:

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<sup>28</sup> John Bowring introd. and trans., *Ancient Poetry and the Romances of Spain* (London: 1824). Barbara Neri in 'Cobridme de flores: (Un)Covering Flowers of Portuguese and Spanish Poets in *Sonnets from the Portuguese*', *Victorian Poetry* 44.4 (2006): pp. 571-83, informs us that 'EBB's list begins with the fifty-eight named poets and the titles of their poems and concludes with a few titles by the many anonymous poets included in Bowring's anthology ... Bowring's anthology is arranged alphabetically, with his "Anonymous" section placed earlier in his anthology' (581).

<sup>29</sup> Sister Maria do Ceo was a Carmelite nun of whom very little is known, but historians assume that she was familiar with St. Theresa's (1515-1582) life and works, as convent life offered opportunities for learning and spiritual explorations of the self. See Neri, 'Cobridme de flores: (Un)Covering Flowers of Portuguese and Spanish Poets in *Sonnets from the Portuguese*', p. 572, 573.

<sup>30</sup> Luis de Góngora y Argote was one of the finest poets of his age and it is widely acknowledged that he exerted powerful influence on his peers. He wrote sonnets, Castilian romances and *letrillas*. His complex intertextual allusions especially to texts of antiquity and his language innovations in his later works are responsible for the title of 'prince of darkness'. See Neri, 'Cobridme de flores: (Un)Covering Flowers of Portuguese and Spanish Poets in *Sonnets from the Portuguese*', p. 577.

In sonnet XXIV at work is the knife metaphor, which gains additional aesthetic value if it is reread with reference to the flower metaphor, while in the previous sonnet, the breath metaphor is elaborated upon the extreme self-referentiality of the particular sonnet. I believe that it would take Neri's analysis one step further to reread the metaphors bearing in mind how the self-reflexivity of the sonnet extends the signifying potential of the metaphor. Moreover, it amplifies the meaning produced at the crossroads of two metaphors, and opens the doors to a broader understanding of Elizabeth Barrett Browning's technique of constructed authenticity.

According to Neri, at the beginning of sonnet XXIV Elizabeth Barrett Browning deploys the knife metaphor calling into mind the Baroque poet Louis de Góngora, who is highly likely to have influenced do Ceo as well. As Góngora's name was contained in Elizabeth Barrett Browning's list, it is fairly safe for Neri to assume that the poet was familiar with Góngora's work, which was teeming with sensory imaging and acute antitheses modelled upon the period's reigning trope of *chiaroscuro*. Here is Góngora's 'Soneto XXIX' in English translation by Michael Smith, as it appears in Neri's article, followed by Elizabeth Barrett Browning's sonnet XXIV:

### Soneto XXIX

As the short weapon, sharp through healing,  
Strikes your white foot, you tint with gloom,  
Darling, my countenance, while yet  
You dye the snow with rosy pink.

I dread, as anyone should that loves,  
The mournful fate of her who lost  
Daylight, the unheeding foot she swung  
Red-bathed in blood and poison-chilled.

I dread that fate because its cure would cease  
Should sonorous Orpheus rob me

Of his noble voice and gentle strings.

But ah, were my lyre dumb, I know my voice  
Would call you back a thousand times,  
And just as often my desire would lose you.<sup>31</sup>

#### Sonnet XXIV

LET the world's sharpness, like a clasping knife  
Shut in upon itself and do no harm  
In this close hand of Love, now soft and warm,  
And let us hear no sound of human strife  
After the click of the shutting. Life to life -  
I lean upon thee, Dear, without alarm,  
And feel as safe as guarded by a charm  
Against the stab of worldlings, who if rife  
Are weak to injure. Very whitely still  
The lilies of our lives may reassure  
Their blossoms from their roots, accessible  
Alone to heavenly dews that drop not fewer;  
Growing straight, out of man's reach, on the hill.  
God only, who made us rich, can make us poor.

In Elizabeth Barrett Browning's sonnet XXIV 'the world's sharpness' is compared to 'a clasping knife', one which cannot inflict any harm on the speaker and the beloved because love's 'close hand', 'now soft and warm' protects them both. The cruelty of the world and the anxiety it causes the speaker over how it might affect her relationship with her beloved is also manifest in sonnet XXII, where she invites her beloved to join her in searching a remote place on earth to inhabit so as to protect their love from the 'contrarious moods of men'. It is only in sonnet XXIV though, that the poet engages in an extensive treatment of the issue by deploying Góngora's metaphor. However,

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<sup>31</sup> Luis de Góngora, *Luis de Góngora: Selected Shorter Poems*, ed. and introd. Michael Smith (London: Anvil Press Poetry, 1995), p. 139.

Góngora's sharp weapon strikes the beloved's foot and the uncertainty that her wound might lead to her death accompanies the reader until the very end of the sonnet. It is also worth noting that Elizabeth Barrett Browning's knife symbolises the cruelty of the external world from which both the speaker and the beloved retreat in favour of a very personal world created by their love. The sharpness of the world constitutes a threat to both parties and by the end of the sonnet there is no doubt that they both manage to escape it, whereas Góngora's weapon cuts through only the beloved's foot. The staging of the metaphor thus, leads us to assume that Góngora is telling a story of unrequited love, separation and death, powerful enough to annihilate the power of both love in general and his lyric in particular, whereas Elizabeth Barrett Browning stages love on a totally different ground: First, in clarifying that the danger is common to both lover and beloved she accentuates the reciprocity of feeling, implying thus equal responsibility in safeguarding the common space they inhabit which is derivative of reciprocal love. What we witness here is a destabilization of the Petrarchan tradition within which Góngora appears to feel perfectly comfortable, as he reproduces the same trope of distance and loss, which was a constituent of the Petrarchan sonnet.

Ultimately, in contrast to the meaning do Ceo invests in her flower metaphors, the figurative use of flowers in Elizabeth Barrett Browning's sonnet XXIV sustains the symbolic content she introduces already in sonnet XXIII, which as I will explain, signifies life, rootedness, stability, and the promising longevity of love.

To begin with the flower metaphor, I reproduce here the most recent translation of do Ceo's lyric Neri provides us with in her article:<sup>32</sup>

Cover me with flowers

<sup>32</sup> The previously unpublished translation of do Ceo's poem, 'Cobridme de flores' (1714), appears in Neri's article on pages 574-575 and belongs to Francisco Koetz Wildt, who emailed it to her on January 11, 2006. I reproduce the Portuguese original from Neri: Cobridme de flores / que muero de amores: / porque de mi aliento el ayre / no lleve el olor sublime / cobredme / sea porque todo es uno / aientos de amor, y olores / de flores / de asucenas, y jasmines / aqui la mortaja espero: / que muero. / Si me purgantaes de que? / resondo, en dulces rigors / de amores. Reference is to Madre Maria Do Ceo, *Enganos do bosque, desenganos do rio. Primera, e segunda parte* (Lisbon, 1741), p. 159.

For I am dying from love  
So that the air carries not  
The sublime scent of my breath away  
Cover me  
For all is a breath of love  
And scents of flowers  
Of white lilies and of jasmine  
Here I wait for my death robe  
For I die  
If you ask me, from what?  
I answer, from the sweet rigours  
of love.

Elizabeth Barrett Browning is found to deploy a figurative language which elaborates the effects of breath in sonnet XXIII:

IS it indeed so? If I lay here dead,  
Would'st thou miss any life in losing mine?  
And would the sun for thee more coldly shine,  
Because of grave-damps falling round my head?  
I marvelled, my Belovèd, when I read  
Thy thought so in the letter. I am thine -  
But .. so much to thee? Can I pour thy wine  
While my hands tremble? Then my soul, instead  
Of dreams of death, resumes life's lower range.  
Then, love me, Love! look on me .. breathe on me!  
As brighter 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!

Ostensibly, the metaphors of breath and flowers complement each other, but their function in Elizabeth Barrett Browning was defined anew, attesting to her motivation to distance herself from the Carmelite nun's treatment of female experience of love and its association of absence and death. For, in Elizabeth Barrett Browning's sonnet XXIII,

love's breath is what invigorates her in direct contradiction to do Ceo's speaker, who suffocates because the 'breath of love' carries away her own 'sublime smell of her breath'. Her lyric describes a suffocating atmosphere and the presence of death becomes all the more threatening in the scattered flowers that are meant to protect her own breath from vanishing. The fact that the agony of the speaker is not resolved by the end of the lyric may give the impression that the flowers, uprooted as they were, deprived of the nourishing elements earth provides them with, anticipate the death of the speaker.

On the contrary, Elizabeth Barrett Browning's use of breath instils life in the speaker and finally in the couplet we witness the subordination of the opposing feelings elicited by 'grave-damps', 'dreams of death' and 'breath of love' to a final assertion of completeness when the speaker chooses to inhabit earth with the beloved over the 'sweet view of Heaven' from the grave. Moreover, the identification of life with breath in Elizabeth Barrett Browning's sonnet, paves the way for another departure. As already explained above in sonnet XIV the flowers' rootedness is identified with the viability of the speaker's love whereas do Ceo's flower metaphor accentuates the deprivation of air and ultimately, the presence of death. As her speaker is dying from love, one is likely to notice the implications arising from the operation of the trope of loss and distance in a woman poet's lyric, and thus appreciate Elizabeth Barrett Browning's conceptual breakthrough, in her capacity to resist its repetition despite the influence do Ceo had exerted on her. The final resolution of the speaker's agony in the couplet of sonnet XXIII is prepared by enjambment which crucially overruns the split between the octave and the sestet. In discerning a form similar to Wordsworth's unitary model at work and in locating the revisions of do Ceo's flower metaphors, I believe the reader is provided with a context against which she / he can measure Elizabeth Barrett Browning's intellectual acumen. It is certain that Elizabeth Barrett Browning was intimately familiar with Wordsworthian poetics and as Catherine Shelton Shumadine argues, 'she is

perhaps more ambitious than many others in accepting, rejecting, extending and refining Wordsworth's ideas'.<sup>33</sup>

Interestingly enough, her turn to the sonnet form in 1842 coincided with her closeness to the poet. In September of the same year she receives from her cousin, John Kenyon, 'several little branches and buds from Wordsworth's garden'<sup>34</sup> and a month later, an unfinished portrait of the 'great poet' by Haydon. The portrait had impressed her so much that she wrote a sonnet in response to it. Wordsworth's poetics might have invited Elizabeth Barrett Browning's attention on two accounts: First, the engagement with a Wordsworthian model would augment the authority of her own poetical voice as Wordsworth was made poet Laureate in 1843 and enjoyed increasing fame and respect amongst literary circles, and, second, Wordsworth's idea of poetry and self-absorbed sentimentality translated well into Victorian poetics, and especially those of women poets, who were concerned with thought, sentiments, personal recollection and meditation. Amy Billone, reflecting on Elizabeth Barrett Browning's entry to the sonnet form, stresses the importance of Wordsworth's influence. She states that Elizabeth Barrett Browning, 'responded to the sonnet tradition primarily in the context of two approaches: the amatory model according to which poets drew from the absence or unattainability of a beloved addressee a source of lyrical potency, and alternatively, the Wordsworthian version (itself a recasting of Milton)'.<sup>35</sup> It is precisely in the simultaneous operation of these two models, where the vast knowledge of Spanish and Portuguese literature and the mastery of Elizabeth Barrett Browning's poetics prevail most strikingly. Undoubtedly, recording as they do moments from the poet's personal evolution from an isolated invalid into a loving wife, the *Sonnets* (having become

<sup>33</sup> Catherine Shelton Shumadine, "These Words Were Writ By a Living, Loving One:" Barrett Browning and Wordsworthian Romantic Poetics', *Studies in Browning and His Circle* 20 (1993): 39-47. p. 40.

<sup>34</sup> She describes the incident to her brother, George Barrett in a letter dated September 11, 1842, *Letters of the Brownings' to George Barrett*, ed. Paul Landis (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1958), p. 105.

<sup>35</sup> Billone Amy, "In Silence Like to Death:" Elizabeth Barrett's Sonnet Turn', *Victorian Poetry* 39.4 (Winter 2001): 533-50, p. 533.

famous for their alleged excessive sensibility) have cast a heavy shadow on the complex mechanisms upon which the constructedness of such effusion of feeling relies.

### Effecting the Literary ‘Mise en Abyme’

While the interplay between the breath metaphor and the unitary structure in sonnet XXIII consolidates the celebration of the poet’s love in the couplet, the reference to the courtship correspondence in lines five and six (‘I marvelled, my Belovèd, when I read / Thy thought so in the letter. I am thine -’) introduces the operation of another mechanism which not only reinforces the sonnet’s unitary model but becomes equally essential in affecting an aesthetically powerful couplet. Embedded within the sonnet, the letter here performs a mirroring function, allowing thus the dimensions of the enunciation of love to expand and to exchange places of origin. The vindication of love in the couplet can therefore be regarded as the result of a *mise en abyme* effect created by the incorporation of the letter. The letter thus becomes an important index of the *Sonnets*’ rich intertextuality as it is deployed both in sonnet XXIII and later in sonnet XXVIII, while the mirroring effect becomes more complex, gaining retroactive function in sonnet XLII, when the poet alluding to her beloved’s future declarations of love, exclaims ‘write me new my future’s epigraph’ (l. 10). The tropes of intertextuality and self-reflexivity in these sonnets provide a means of examining the relationship between structural form and the aesthetic evocation of space. Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s use of the *mise en abyme* effect claims the space for reciprocal love in the patriarchal Victorian ideology and defines her intellectual space on the scene of literary history by surpassing the impediments erected by the masculine codification of the sonnet, and by exploiting the constraints imposed by the brevity of the form.

The term *mise en abyme* applies for a fragment of a text that replicates on a smaller scale the structure of the text as a whole. Introduced by André Gide in a passage

of his *Journal*<sup>36</sup> in 1893, the phrase which he intended as a characterization of his own reduplicative techniques, had as its origin an ancient visual device -that of the miniature heraldic shield enclosed within another shield whose shape and inner divisions it repeats exactly. There had been, to be sure, earlier examples of interiorized mirror effects in painting and literature -Gide cites the literary instances of 'Hamlet', 'Wilhelm Meister', and the 'Fall of the House of Usher'. But in order to distinguish his own strategies from those of simple doubling, he felt the need to fashion a new critical term *-en abyme-* to describe the idea of multiple replication. From Gide's coinage in the *Journal*, it is only a small leap to the *mise en abyme* of post-structuralist theory, where we are invited to follow, in Derrida's words, 'a book in the book, an origin in the origin, a center in the center'<sup>37</sup> beyond the inmost bound of human thought. In short, the *mise en abyme* generated by Derrida's infinite difference unveils a frame within a frame in endless replication.

Lucien Dällenbach, in his classic study on the literary *mise en abyme*, interprets Gide's notion as involving 'any aspect enclosed within a work that shows a similarity with the work that contains it'.<sup>38</sup> Although that similarity may be traced in form, content, or process, literary *mise en abyme* is not just another phrase for self-reflexivity at large. *Mise en abyme* is achieved only when the work within the work is described in such a way as to replicate the conditions of production of the work that contains it. This replication entails a dynamic relationship between the author and the work within the literary work, for the work within the work reenacts the situation of the author writing the poem. In sonnet XXVIII Elizabeth Barrett Browning recounts four different instances whereby Browning declares his sentiments in writing:

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<sup>36</sup> André Gide, *Journal 1889-1939*, trans. J. O'Brien (London: Penguin, 1984), pp. 30-31.

<sup>37</sup> 'Ellipsis' in *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), p. 296.

<sup>38</sup> Lucien Dällenbach, *The Mirror in the Text*, trans. Jeremy Whiteley and Emma Hughes (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1989), p. 8, 189-190.

My letters! all dead paper,.. mute and white!-  
And yet they seem alive and quivering  
Against my tremulous hands which loose the string  
And let them drop down on my knee to-night.  
This said,.. he wished to have me in his sight  
Once, as a friend: this fixed a day in spring  
To come and touch my hand... a simple thing.  
Yes I wept for it! - this,.. the paper's light..  
Said, *Dear, I love thee*; and I sank and quailed  
As if God's future thundered on my past.  
This, said *I am thine* - and so its ink has paled  
With lying at my heart that beat too fast.  
And this... O Love, thy words have ill availed,  
If, what this said, I dared repeat at last.

The possessive ‘My’ in the opening line creates the impression that the speaker is referring to her own writings. It is only in the first line of the second quatrain that we are provided with the information that she reproduces the content of her beloved’s letters. As in sonnet XXIII the reproduction of the content of the letters reveals Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s situation when she was writing the particular sonnets. In sonnet XXIII the beginning of the second quatrain records her uplifted emotional state on reading her beloved’s letter, ‘I marvelled’, she exclaims. Her confessed excitement when she reads the letter augments her excitement when writing her declaration of love, the sonnet itself, enhancing thus the semantic baggage of the couplet where the death/love opposition is erased. In sonnet XXVIII the tension between death as silence and stillness and life as speech and movement is repeated but in a slightly different mode: the ‘mute and white papers’ become immediately alive as they evoke the physical presence of their author: In the second quatrain the poet provides a description of the content of the letter but in the beginning of the sestet the written words are here reproduced by the poet as if they were uttered by the beloved. This conceptual leap is

the result of the unitary model upon which the sonnet is composed, and sustains the effect of motion and emotion in the overturning of the octave-sestet split by enjambment. As the ‘mute and white letters’ become alive to elicit a message of love, silence instantiates a reverberation of the intensity of the speaker’s feelings which is generated by the description or recitation of the beloved’s words, and furnished by the animated language deployed to describe the palpitations of the heart and the state of excitement of the speaker.

It is not though the first time in the sequence that the poet rehearses silence as agency: In sonnet XIII, as if responding to the beloved’s hypothetical question ‘How much do you love me?’, the speaker answers ‘Nay, let the silence of my womanhood / Commend my woman-love to thy belief,-’. Critics like Margaret Reynolds<sup>39</sup> and James Hirsh<sup>40</sup> read Shakespearean influence in this sonnet and note that the speaker responds to a question -which is here omitted- fashioned after King Lear’s demand to measure the love of his daughters, while silence as agency is found to have been launched by the King’s youngest daughter Cordelia who answers to him ‘Love, and be silent’. To the eyes of the King his female daughters are worthy only in as far as they aggrandize him by loving him. The speaker’s silence, as in sonnet XXVIII is not the result of suppression. On the contrary, it signals the rejection of the ancient law of the father and

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<sup>39</sup> Margaret Reynolds in her article ‘Love’s Measurement in Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s “Sonnets from the Portuguese”’, *Studies in Browning and His Circle* 21 (1997): 53-67, p. 57, discusses the affinities between Shakespeare’s Cordelia and Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s speaker. In my view her argument is very powerful because she is simultaneously very careful with the meaning of silence in problematic passages, where it is often mistaken as the effect of suppression: She is very clear about how silence may gain alternative resonances as part of a negotiating tool in an age of unprecedented trade expansion. She therefore highlights that Elizabeth Barrett Browning, born in an age of commerce, ‘knew she was the raw material, but she wanted to be the dealer; and there weren’t going to be any middlemen in her transactions’.

<sup>40</sup> James Hirsh in his article ‘Covert Appropriations of Shakespeare: Three Case Studies’, *Papers on Language and Literature* 43.1 (2007): 45-67, provides an extensive discussion on how Elizabeth Barrett Browning redeployed raw material from Shakespearean works in a context radically different from their original. He launches a convincing comparison between Goneril’s speech in *King Lear* and Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s famous sonnet XLIII, where the speaker responds to a question posed by the addressee (How dost thou love me?) that paraphrases the question posed by Lear. He also notes that she is paraphrasing Cordelia in Sonnet XII. As I will explain later on, the speaker towards the end of the sequence no longer resists the measurement of her love and substitutes silence for a thorough account of her multifaceted sentiments, because after the exchange of locks in sonnet XVIII, it is clear that she trades her entrance in the discourse on equal terms with the beloved.

introduces a new gender politics whereby the woman can through her silence avoid objectification and eventually commodification. However, the idea of silence as agency is developed in a more sophisticated framework in sonnet XXVIII, where the *mise en abyme* effect created by the letters presents the speaker not as a mere trespasser of the masculine law but as a powerful trader in the stock-market of the economy of love: the speaker acknowledges that both subjects, each one in a distinctively personal way, lay an equal claim to the discursive space of matrimonial love. Irigaray in *The Sex Which Is Not One*, discusses the commodification of women in the economy of exchange of desire and points out that this economy is founded upon the subjection of women. In patriarchal societies trade is regarded as a man's business because the exchange takes place between masculine subjects, and it requires a plus-value added to the body of the commodity, a supplement which gives it a valuable form. Woman as commodity is divided into two irreconcilable 'bodies': her 'natural' body and her socially valued, exchangeable body, which is a particularly mimetic expression of masculine values. She writes: 'Woman is traditionally use-value for man, exchange-value among men. Merchandise then...Women are marked phallically by their fathers, husbands, procurers. This stamp[ing] determines their value in sexual commerce' (105). The *Sonnets* both adopt and adapt this economy as described above, since the speaker self-consciously and despite the precariousness of such a venture treats herself as a commodity not merely to work out her price but to usher a new sexual commerce, where she occupies both extremes of the binary as a commodity and an equal trader.

The vindication of love in this sonnet's couplet resides in the impact of the beloved's voice, which, allowing no questions to be raised regarding the truthfulness of his amorous feelings, perfectly reflects the emotional situation of the speaker, who in electing to stay silent simply validates the reciprocity of her own feelings in the beloved's words. The silence of the speaker does not signal the erasure of agency, but

rather the corporeal language ('my heart that beat too fast') deployed at the end of the sestet presents the speaker as an active lover. In the same line, C. C. Barfoot, argues that the speaker by deploying the 'abiding words [that] she has heard from his lips and possesses on paper, she is able to create or revive a sense of her erotic being'.<sup>41</sup> Finally, it is important to note that the lyric voice of the speaker is not subsumed by that of the beloved's because silence here gains a new resonance as the radical substitution of speech and the effect of the *mise en abyme* pattern which is mobilised by the reference to the letters. Dällenbach reflecting on the structure and the content of the work subjected to the *mise en abyme*, states:

Starting by limiting ourselves to the referential aspect of the utterance as a story of fiction narrated, it seems possible to define this sort of *mise en abyme* as an intertextual résumé or quotation of the content of a work. Inasmuch as it summarizes or quotes the content of a story, it is an utterance that refers to another utterance – and therefore belongs to the metalinguistic code; *inasmuch as it is an integral part of the fiction that it also summarizes, it generates the means to reflect back on the fiction and consequently gives rise to internal repetition*. It is therefore not surprising that the narrative function of what I shall call this 'fictional' *mise en abyme* is basically characterised by a combination of the usual properties of iteration and of *second-degree utterances*, namely *the capacity to give the work a strong structure, to underpin its meaning*, to provide a kind of internal dialogue and a means whereby the work can interpret itself (55 my emphasis).

Having shown how in the *mise en abyme* the letters serve as a model, a metaphor or analogue of the situation in which the reference prevails, or the container that

<sup>41</sup> C. C. Barfoot, "'In This Strange Labourinth How Shall I Turne?': Erotic Symmetry in Four Female Sonnet Sequences", 'And Never Know the Joy': *Sex and the Erotic in English Poetry*, ed. C. C. Barfoot (Amsterdam, Netherlands: Rodopi, 2006. 223-46, DQR: Studies in Literature 36, p. 241.

contains it whereby it may obscure the origins of agency, it would be fruitful to turn to another kind of reflection which occurs when the object within the poem replicates itself within the whole that it reflects. In the opening sonnet of the sequence, the *mise en abyme* does not merely reflect another work but it becomes the poetic process itself:

### Sonnet I

I THOUGHT once how Theocritus had sung  
Of the sweet years, the dear and wished for years,  
Who each one in a gracious hand appears  
To bear a gift for mortals, old or young:  
And, as I mused it in his own tongue,  
I saw, in gradual vision through my tears,  
The sweet, sad years, the melancholy years,  
Those of my own life, who by turns had flung  
A shadow across me. Straightway I was 'ware,  
So weeping, how a mystic Shape did move  
Behind me, and drew me backward by the hair,  
And a voice said in mastery, while I strove...  
'Guess now who holds thee?' - 'Death,' I said. But, there,  
The silver answer rang, - 'Not Death, but Love.'

The sonnet's first words stake the poem's claim to a status of a literary subject; *I thought*, defines the *I* as a poet and thinker, whose thoughts will be expressed in the sonnets. Mary Moore maintains that these first two words are important because they 'identify the speaker as a fictive author, as one whose words mirror not merely experience but also a writing of that experience . . . The literariness of the speaker's memories also suggests the extent to which the poems are literary rather than autobiographical artefacts'.<sup>42</sup> Moore's observation, in explicitly connecting the literariness of the first sonnet with the constructedness of authenticity directs our attention to the way the speaker attempts to define her subjectivity by fictionalizing

<sup>42</sup> Mary Moore, *Desiring Voices. Women Sonneteers and Petrarchism* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2000), p. 172.

herself. This fictionalization is the effect of a mirroring function attributed to literary history and the *mise en abyme* is carried out concurrently towards three directions: first, it displaces the speaker in another spatial and temporal realm belonging to the mythical past, second, it blurs the distinction between the speaker's poetical voice and the voice of Theocritus, and finally, it invests the sonnet with the themes of pastoral elegy.

The speaker appears to ruminate on her past life in terms of art. Life is presented as in Theocritus's Idyll 15 (II. 102-105). In the Idyll, the lines appear as part of a song that is sung by an accomplished female poet and contrast with the trivial discussion between the two women who stop to hear the song that both celebrates the return of Adonis to Aphrodite and laments his inevitable departure or death. Enjambment linking the first and second lines, along with the quick rhythm of the alternating sounds of *o* and *th*, dramatize the mirroring of each of the frames of reference into the other. Theocritus's song both initiates the speaker's narrative of love and frames the speaker's narrated reality: The verb 'mused' here, signifies a self-reflexive gesture, evoking the speaker's actual self-sufficient poetic power. Yet, reference to Theocritus's song reflects onto the musing speaker the qualities of the classical female Muse invoked in epic poetry and pastoral elegies. Therefore, the speaker here has a dual function: her role as voice and as inspirer at the same time.

Additionally, the speaker's seizure from behind by a 'mystic Shape' has been interpreted in various ways: Moore suggests that 'being pulled by the hair implies that kind of force common in rape' (173), Jerome Mazzaro maintains that 'the incident does seem to suggest what theologians call 'catabatic mysticism' (i. e., divinity's approaching the human)<sup>43</sup> and others like Charlotte Porter and Helen Clark identify the incident with Athena's action with Achilles in Book I of the *Iliad* (I: 197-98) boasting nonetheless a radical gender reversal, in which the desiring female speaker assumes the

<sup>43</sup> Jerome Mazzaro, 'Mapping Sublimity: Elizabeth Barrett Browning's "Sonnets from the Portuguese"', *Essays in Literature* 18.2 (1991): 166-179. p. 171.

position of the epic hero.<sup>44</sup> Margaret Morlier argues that ‘the allusion to Homer’s epic, as well as the heroic sonnet form, subtly suggests that there is something brave and heroic about this romantic engagement’ (‘Politics of Rhyme’ 100). Asserting such a proposition entails accepting that the voice of the speaker is displaced for a fourth time to the figure of the female muse, and that the *mise en abyme* in this sonnet marks an infinite regress, as the narrative is passed from the female Victorian speaker, to the female singer of the pastoral elegy, and eventually to the male epic hero. The voice shifts from the simple and the singular to the infinite when the image of the seizure from behind is concluded with the explicitly marked question of the speaker ‘Death?’, bearing witness to love’s anxiety of having been pre-empted by literature. Sonnet I, tells of the pitfalls of the language –and the nature- of romantic love.<sup>45</sup> As Leighton put it, ‘the language of romantic love, even when written in the heart, is a language likely to be foreign, strange, dead. It is written already, out of old codes, old conventions, old poems, perhaps. The difficulty of making it legible again is the constant anxiety of the poet lover’ (‘Stirring’ 22).

Ultimately, appreciating the *mise en abyme* effect in the *Sonnets* constitutes a new premise upon which we can posit our discussion of the structural potency of the poems, their rich signification and the internal dialogue of tropes supporting the

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<sup>44</sup> in *The Complete Works of Elizabeth Barrett Browning*.

<sup>45</sup> Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s sonnet I is structurally similar to Shelley’s sonnet ‘Ozymandias’ in the way it adopts the *mise en abyme*. In ‘Ozymandias’, one notices a regress: The speaker of the sonnet gives up his task, already in the first line to the ‘traveller from an antique land,’ who then describes the broken remains of the statue: ‘Two vast and trunkless legs of stone / Stand in the desert. Near them, on the sand, / Half sunk, a shattered visage lies.’ The meaning of that visage will, however, be explained through the sculptor who wrought the image: ‘... whose frown, / And wrinkled lip, and sneer of cold command, / Tell that its sculptor well those passions read / Which yet survive, stamped on these lifeless things, / The hand had mocked them and the heart that fed.’ The narrator has deferred to the traveller, the traveller to the sculptor and the sculptor to the tyrant himself: ‘My name is Ozymandias, king of kings: / Look on my works, ye Mighty, and despair!’ A shift from the simple to the universal is evident as the pharaoh’s pompous words ironically convey the reason of a tyrant’s fall: his arrogance. Though political in content, Shelley’s sonnet places the traveller’s account of the deserted site, the sculptor’s image of violence and the pharaoh’s arrogance *en abyme*, reflecting thus the meaning of the whole. It is almost paradoxical, but when reflexivity is concerned with content, as in Sonnet I and ‘Ozymandias’, the brevity of the sonnet is deliberately defied. As Elizabeth Barrett Browning, through the multiple displacements of the poetical voice, furnishes her preoccupation with the shortcomings of the language of love with a universal outlook, Shelley achieves his political critique by peering into a vast landscape which ignores the constraints of the sonnet, and invests his denunciation of tyrants with universal validity.

development of a revolutionary conceptualization of the self and of the conjugal dynamics traversing the sequence.

## (Inter)Subjectivity and the Economy of Love

Van Remoortel, in her book *Lives of the Sonnet, 1787-1895*, argues that in the *Sonnets* ‘every single strategy allegedly, even quite arguably used by the woman speaker to posit her subjectivity *vis-à-vis* her future poet husband and the amatory sonnet tradition loses its rebelliousness when read as a paradigm of Victorian courtship ritual and female authorship’ (89). In an earlier article, in order to consolidate her case as illustrated above, she reads the destabilisation of a number of Petrarchan tropes within a Victorian context with a view to accounting for the fact that positive and negative strands of reception were quoting the very same passages. Her study, systematically proves what a great number of critics have been implying for over 150 years and is enormously useful to anyone interested in deciphering Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s poetics in the *Sonnets*. Yet, I feel inclined to add that Van Remoortel’s proposition might prove invaluable to the modern reader of the *Sonnets*, if one does not constrain himself/herself to the strictly ideological realm of the text she directs our attention to -which is undeniably Victorian-, but rather he / she also takes into consideration two more very important frameworks underlying the sequence’s texture: First, the aesthetic effects emanating from the fact that the poet assumes a persona, and second, the instances whereby the radicalization of autonomous subjectivity evokes a disruptive anomaly in the lyrical logic of one voice speaking.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> The lyrical logic of one voice speaking is, of course, coterminous with the strict ascription of gender roles and is primarily dramatized, in the traditional male lyric, by the trope of distance. While the male lyric relies upon distance as a hurdle which is never actually overcome and frustrated amatory feelings are expressed with the use of the visual metaphor, the lyric which advocates consummated love, allows through the erasure of distance, for the lover and the beloved to experience moments of intimate bonding, suggesting that such a lyric depends upon closeness and tactility. Irigaray in *This Sex Which Is Not One*, trans. Catherine Porter with Carolyn Burke (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985), accounts for woman’s preference of the haptic over the visual as follows: ‘... the predominance of the visual, and of the discrimination and individualization of form, is particularly foreign to female eroticism. Woman takes pleasure more from touching than from looking, and her entry into a dominant scopic economy signifies, again, her consignment to passivity: she is

In acknowledging the assumption of a persona, one accepts a certain distance between the *Sonnets*' narrative and the poet's personal narrative, which allows an insight into the strategies of the poet upon which her reassessment of the function of the marriage plot is gradually reassessed. This new approach of conjugal dynamics does not capitalize on the traditional association of woman with the domestic nor does it signify the subordination of woman to man. Instead, what is projected is a new conceptualization of gender roles predicated on mutual respect which suggests the emergence of woman as an active agent in the matrimonial discourse.

Returning to the function of the persona, Stephenson points out that Elizabeth Barrett Browning is indeed playing a role. She states: 'To create this role she exploits many elements of her own character and situation, but it is no less a role for that; the elements are continually heightened, transformed, and skilfully exploited for specific dramatic effects'.<sup>47</sup> The persona is what enables Elizabeth Barrett Browning to reject consistently all the characteristics her male predecessors had attributed to the ideal figure of the beloved. Three characteristic specimens of her strategy are sonnets III, VIII and X.

### Sonnet III

UNLIKE are we, unlike, O princely Heart!  
Unlike our uses, and our destinies.  
Our ministering two angels look surprised  
On one another, as they strike athwart  
Their wings in passing. Thou, bethink thee, art  
A gages for queens to social pageantries,  
With gages from a hundred brighter eyes  
Than tears even can make mine, to ply thy part  
Of chief musician. What hast *thou* to do

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to be the beautiful object of contemplation. Ultimately, intersubjective experience in lyrics framed by conjugal dynamics enables both woman and man to re-enter the economy of desire on strikingly different terms to those suggested by Irigaray above.

<sup>47</sup> *Elizabeth Barrett Browning and the Poetry of Love*, p. 72.

With looking from the lattice-lights at me,  
A poor, tired, wandering singer,.. singing through  
The dark, and leaning up a cypress tree?  
The chrism is on thine head, - on mine, the dew, -  
And Death must dig the level where these agree.

This is a frequently cited passage in critical accounts which reject the *Sonnets* as overly deprecating. Certainly, the elevated status enjoyed by the beloved and the unflattering comparison the speaker makes with herself enlarges the distance between lover and beloved. The distance to be covered if they are to unite expands on two levels: first, there is social distance, implied in line one ‘Unlike are we, unlike, O princely Heart’ and line 11 where the speaker sets her self in a socially inferior position in informing us that she is ‘poor’. Second, the speaker maintains that a ‘wandering singer’s’ art such as hers, cannot be compared to the sophisticated craftsmanship of a ‘chief musician’. In this instance the persona is deployed to veil Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s true situation, who at the time the *Sonnets* were being written was a well-known and admired woman poet. The dramatic effect of the persona spurs a heightened notion of distance, which empowers the speaker to assume successfully the role of the inferior yet speaking lover, rather than the role of the superior but passive and mute beloved.

Natalie Houston argues that the artificial distance she imposes between the beloved and herself, inasmuch as it is associated with the courtly love tradition, accentuates ‘the differences between the two lovers -differences that have less to do with their actual poetic reputations rather than with Barrett Browning’s performance of emotional reluctance’<sup>48</sup>. However, the question ‘What hast thou to do / With looking from the lattice-lights at me’ is perplexing: Here Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s prioritization of roles is dubious because the ‘chief musician’ is a public figure and his

<sup>48</sup> Natalie M. Houston, ‘Affecting Authenticity: *Sonnets from the Portuguese* and Modern Love’, *Studies in the Literary Imagination* 35.2 (2002): 99-121. p. 107.

activity in the social realm might be associated with frivolity, while the female speaker is presented according to the archetype of the solitary Romantic poet, an interpreter of the sorrows of the heart. It is difficult to decide which role she considers superior. Yet, as Houston explains, the exaggeration of social difference, which is especially poignant in the penultimate line, ‘as a mark of emotional intensity is a key feature of the amatory sonnet tradition, which Barrett Browning uses here in naming herself the ‘wandering singer’’ (107). Furthermore, the description of herself as a ‘wandering singer’ immerses her in the lyrical tradition but the sonnet’s formal characteristics attests to her intimate engagement with the poetics which mark the renegotiation of that tradition. Although the *Sonnets* use a Petrarchan rhyme variant (abbaabbacdcd) whereby typically the subject is set forth in the first quatrain, illustrated in the second, confirmed by the first tercet and concluded in the second, Elizabeth Barrett Browning does not attempt to match the syntax to the form of the sonnet: Enjambment overruns the octave sestet split suggesting a unitary model, while at the same time the strict rhyme scheme is upset with near-rhymes (e.g. destinies / surprise, pageantries / eyes).

### Sonnet VIII

WHAT can I give thee back, O Liberal  
And princely giver, who has brought the gold  
And purple of thine heart, unstained, untold,  
And laid them on the outside of the wall  
For such as I take or leave withal,  
In unexpected largesse? am I cold,  
Ungrateful, that for these most manifold  
High gifts, I render nothing back at all?  
Not so; Not cold, – but very poor instead.  
Ask God who knows. For frequent tears have run  
The colours from my life, and left so dead  
And pale a stuff, it were not fitly done  
To give the same as pillow to thy head.

Go farther! Let it serve to trample on.

In sonnet VIII we witness the same strategy: the speaker directs extravagant compliments to her suitor for he is a ‘princely giver’ whose invaluable gifts reveal ‘the gold and purple of his heart’ whereas she is poor and unable to match his generosity. As the degree of exaggeration of his worth and her vulnerability is immeasurable, she becomes the visual object of her own as she enumerates all her alleged faults and finally, asks him to ‘go farther’ for she has nothing to give to him but a ‘pale stuff’. Social distance is marked here by a colour metaphor: His heart is purple because he is royal, the colours of her life have been ‘run’, faded by her frequent tears. The speaker will ask the beloved to leave her as she is unworthy of his love, an idea she dwells upon for the last time in the sequence in the ensuing sonnet:

### Sonnet IX

CAN it be right to give what I can give?

[...] We are not peers,  
So to be lovers; and I own, and grieve,  
That givers of such gifts as mine are, must  
Be counted with the ungenerous. Out, alas!  
I will not soil thy purple with my dust,  
Nor breathe my poison on thy Venice-glass,  
Nor give thee any love...which were unjust.  
Beloved, I only love thee! let it pass.

(ll. 1, 7-14)

Purple here suggests an allusion to Clytemnestra’s purple cloth in the *Agamemnon* and poisonous breath recalls the suffocating atmosphere elicited in do Ceo’s lyric. What is important to note, is that the rhetorical space of sonnets VII and IX becomes discursive because the questions raised by the speaker (e.g. ‘Can it be right to give what I can give?’) are presented as part of a private conversation with herself in her effort to

measure the social distance between the beloved and herself. Reynolds insightfully remarks that in these sonnets ‘the woman speaker takes up this question of worth and value, setting up a long quarrel designed to reckon up the possibilities of exchange between herself and the beloved’.<sup>49</sup> As the speaker’s doubts whether she is worthy or not of the beloved’s love vanish after this sonnet, some critics were inclined to discuss the *Sonnets* with reference to the structure of the overall narrative, and trace a trajectory from doubtful hesitation (I-IX), emotional empowerment (X-XXII) and fulfilled love (XXII-XLIII).<sup>50</sup>

Sonnet X is crucial not only because of its position in the sequence, but also because it presents the speaker as both the subject and the object of love. I quote here the whole sonnet so as to examine how the discourse of exchange underlies the speaker’s capacity to occupy both positions simultaneously.

YET, love, mere love, is beautiful indeed  
And worthy of acceptation. Fire is bright,  
Let temple burn, or flax! An equal light  
Leaps in the flame from cedar-plank or weed  
And love is fire; 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

<sup>49</sup> Margaret Reynolds, ‘Love’s Measurement in Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s “Sonnets from the Portuguese”’, *Studies in Browning and His Circle* 21 (1997): 53-67. p. 55.

<sup>50</sup> Phyllis Pearson Elmore in ‘Elizabeth Barrett Browning: Argumentative Discourse in “Sonnets from the Portuguese”’, *Studies in Browning and his Circle* 20 (November 1993): 95-105, p. 96, is the first to take the discussion of the Sonnet’s argumentative structure at great lengths. She pays serious attention to a structural and thematic reading of the sequence, which shows the poet’s argumentative stance and proves that it demonstrates a rhetorical integrity that conforms to classical argumentative arrangement. She argues that she uses the principle of argumentation to launch her self-analysis, which demonstrates a classical rhetorical disposition: ‘exordium, which comprises the initial three sonnets in the sequence; confutation, or confirmation, or the poet’s setting out her own arguments; confutation, or the presentation of opposing arguments; and the rebuttal of these arguments; and the epilogue, in which the poet restates her premises.’ According to Elmore’s schema, ‘Sonnets 1 and 2 portray the woman speaker as object of man, as a woman poet who is yet to become speaker and creator of her own discourse. Sonnets 4-22 record the speaker’s wavering between objectifying herself and claiming her own creative and sexual subjectivity. With one exception (Sonnet 35), Sonnets 23-44 displace the poet’s allegiance to conventions of male traditions and reveal her confidence in the voice which that subjectivity elicits. The second cluster of poems, the final two poems, Sonnets 43-44, present the epilogue, or restatement, wherein the poet culminates the sequence with a quintessential statement of her own newfound confidence, the right to speak of love in her own terms’ (97).

Out of my face toward thine. There's nothing low  
In love, when love the lowest: meanest creatures  
Who love God, God accepts while loving so.  
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.

In the second quatrain which extends its syntax for almost one line into the sestet, the speaker's voice becomes authoritative in the repetition of the phrase '*I love thee!* .. *I love thee!*' which along with the marked pauses introduces a new, unexpected rhythm in the sonnet. The female speaking subject is 'transfigured' by the gaze of the male beloved and the barrier between them dissolves as the female subject no longer appears humble and poor, but glorified and empowered. On the first impression, the source of power is of course the beloved's gaze, yet things become a lot more complex, because not only is the speaker rendered capable of experiencing love as the idealised male beloved, but most importantly, because she can become herself the origin of such power and radiate it back to the beloved (ll. 8-9). What is at stake here is a complex notion of subjectivity which is eventually performed through intersubjective experience. Bearing in mind that Elizabeth Barrett Browning did not construe gender difference in essentializing terms, intersubjectivity should be understood as concurrently dispelling the binary logic of self and other, and of gender hierarchies, in which male is privileged on its codification as active and speaking. Dispelling the binary logic of self and other translates into overcoming Cartesian transcendental solipsism,<sup>51</sup> a task taken up by

<sup>51</sup> Underlying the specifically gendered response to the interpersonal issues the amatory tradition interrogates, is the adherence to the notion of the autonomy of the self. Antony Harrison's reading of the *Sonnets* comprises a characteristic example of how such allegiances might inform even recent criticism. In his book *Victorian Poets and Romantic Poems: Intertextuality and Ideology* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1990), p. 141, in order to support his argument, that 'Browning had, in her *Sonnets from the Portuguese*, generated a paradigm of the sentimental and patriarchal amatory ideology of mid-Victorian England', quotes the following lines from Sonnet X: '...in thy sight / I stand transfigured, glorified aright / With conscience of the new rays that proceed / Out of my face toward thine'. He isolates them from the rest of the passage so as to be able to deny any agency to the female speaker. His reading of the sonnet is determined by the connotations of the conventional imagery and absolutely ignores the strong articulation of feeling on behalf of the speaker in the line immediately preceding his selection: 'I love thee...mark!... I love

Edmund Husserl in his critical reflections upon the Cartesian absolute basis of judgement of the ego.

Husserl sought to broaden this basis so as to account for achievements that are not in one's power alone to perform and are thus intelligible only as intersubjective achievements. If love might be understood as an intersubjective achievement, then the mutual exchange of love's transformative power between speaker and beloved suggests the Husserlian intersubjective constitution as 'pairing' of the ego with the alter ego, which is seen as a mutual pairing; and what is seen as 'transference' from me to the other is at the same time understood as transference from the other back to myself.

Husserl writes:

What is specifically peculiar to me as ego, my concrete being as a monad, purely in myself and for myself with an exclusive ownness, includes my every intentionality and therefore, in particular, the intentionality directed to what is other ... In this preeminent intentionality there becomes constituted for me the new existence-sense which goes beyond my monadic very-ownness; there becomes constituted an ego, not as 'I myself,' but as mirrored in my own Ego, in my monad. ... The 'Other', according to his own constituted sense, points to me myself; the other is a 'mirroring' of my own self and yet not a mirroring proper ... Accordingly, if as a first step, the ego in his peculiar ownness has been delimited ... in the way of accepted unities concretely inseparable from him- the question must then be asked: How can my ego, with his peculiar ownness, constitute under the name, 'experience of something other' ... something that is with a sense that excludes the

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'thee!'. By endowing the male beloved with all the transformative power, Harrison adopts traditional categorical thinking about selfhood and gender, and, ultimately, fails to address what happens in the field created between the two.

constituted from the concrete make-up of the sense constituting I-myself, as somehow the latter's analogue?<sup>52</sup>

Husserl's question reveals his preoccupation with preserving the original constituents of subjectivities during intersubjective experience, and he proposes that these can indeed be preserved. He maintains that 'the characteristic of being capable of mattering or not to each in his living and striving -a characteristic of all Objects belonging to the phenomenal world and the characteristic wherein their otherness consists- should not be overlooked but rather excluded abstractively' (139).

Husserl here understands abstractive exclusion as abstraction of all from what gives men their specific sense of Ego-like living beings, namely 'all determinations of the phenomenal world ... for example cultural predicates' (139). It is important to note that Husserl has not discussed intesubjectivity in the more specific context of gender discourse, but even so, by seeing that the balancing out of agencies or 'intentionalities', to use his own term, in an intersubjective experience requires abstraction from all cultural predicates, he paves the way for relational psychoanalysts to examine intersubjective experience anew whereby the recognition of sexual difference tackles essentializing conceptualizations of gender. His argument about intersubjective experience, in as much as it succeeds in proposing another mode of being which may incorporate what is allegedly 'alien' or 'other' and in acknowledging the importance of cultural determinants in his plea not to overlook them but to exclude them abstractively, arguably also sets the contours of post-structuralist gender theories, such as Butler's, which discusses the 'construal of 'sex' no longer as a bodily given on which the construct of gender is artificially imposed, but as a cultural norm which governs the materialization of bodies'.<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> Edmund Husserl, *The Essential Husserl*, ed. Donn Welton (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999), p. 138.

<sup>53</sup> Judith Butler, *Bodies that Matter* (New York and London: Routledge, 1993), pp. 2-3.

Therefore, in sonnet X, the female speaker articulates her amorous feelings in an authoritative voice whose emergence coincides with the description of a new identity which is materialized in an intersubjective experience of Husserlian outlook, which eventually becomes a process that calls in question the hegemonic force of the normative, masculine law. The accrued potency of the new self is generated in the articulation of sentiment and the prescriptiveness of the imperative ‘mark!’. Judith Butler in her treatment of subjectivity in *Bodies that Matter*, drawing on Foucault, advocates that sexual difference is a function marked and formed by discursive practices. In this context, she believes that subjectivity and ‘sex’ materialize in a regulatory process through a forcible reiteration of norms. In dissociating subjectivity from the notion of construction and defining it afresh in the dynamic context of materialization, Butler discusses the assertion of subjectivity as performativity. She writes: ‘Performativity must be understood not as a singular or deliberate “act” but, rather, as the reiterative and citational practice by which discourse produces the effects of what it names’ (*Bodies* 2). Butler’s notion of performativity, as a series of stylised acts repeated over time, opens up numerous possibilities in the distribution of gender roles and accounts for the fact that the speaker’s new identity in this sonnet is projected upon the repeated utterance of the declaration of love and of course her empowerment through the reiteration of the beloved’s gaze.

Claire Knowles, in her recent account of the poetics of sensibility from 1780 until 1860, also notes the explanatory force of Butler’s notion of performativity in assessing the poetical devices deployed by women in order to challenge traditional ideological configurations of femininity and female poetic production. She clarifies that

normative femininity in any historical context is inherently performative. But while Butler is primarily concerned with exploring this notion of performativity in relation to transgressive realizations of gender (embodied in cultural

practices such as drag and cross-dressing), I believe that it is equally useful to bring to light the performative qualities of that which comes to constitute *normative* gender practices.<sup>54</sup>

In agreement with Knowles, I argue that Elizabeth Barrett Browning's notion of intersubjectivity in the *Sonnets* presupposes a performance which not only recognises the power of gender-specific markers of behaviour, but in repressive contexts, it can also manipulate the potential of challenging them in numerous ways. Aligning my self with Knowles's recognition regarding the existence of multiple modes of female experience in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (11), I argue that in the *Sonnets* while performativity may occur within the framework of normative femaleness (and feminine experience) it allows for alternative and more progressive imaginings of female gender practices to materialize. Nonetheless it is worth noting that in *Aurora Leigh* we come across a paradigmatic employment of performativity in transgressive re-imaginings of gender codes. The androgynous imagination of the poet is evidenced, as already discussed in the previous chapter, in the scene when Aurora recalls her father's tutorials in the classical languages and recounts that she was 'wrapped' in a 'Man's doublet'. Identifying with Achilles being dressed as a girl by his mother (I 723-728) implies a performance which exemplifies, according to Knowles, Butler's primary concern with performativity and 'transgressive realizations of gender'.

Butler maintains that in order to be able to access the meaning of the materializations of the body and the assumption of gender roles it is required to reassess 'the process by which a bodily norm is assumed, appropriated, taken on as not, strictly speaking, undergone by a subject, but rather that the subject, the speaking 'I', is formed by virtue of having gone through such a process of assuming a sex' (*Bodies* 3). In this case it is plausible to assert that the speaker is neither fully subjected to the gaze of the beloved nor does she merely become its object. Agency is not subsumed, therefore the

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<sup>54</sup> Claire Knowles, *Sensibility and Female Poetic Tradition, 1780-1860*, p. 10.

speaker's in-betweeness might be explicated by the fact that performativity as reiteration of norm has simultaneously a regulatory and a destabilising function. Butler explains: 'As a sedimented effect of a reiterative or ritual practice, sex acquires its naturalised effect, and, yet, it is also by virtue of this reiteration that gaps and fissures are opened up as the constitutive instabilities of such constructions, as that which escapes or exceeds the norm, as that which cannot be wholly defined or fixed by the repetitive labour of that norm' (*Bodies* 10). Butler holds that those gaps and fissures comprise the site or the 'exclusionary matrix', to use her own term, whereby not only the materialization of subjectivity takes place, but at the same time the production of abject beings is initiated. The domain of abject beings is populated by beings which are not yet subjects due to the fact that during the repetition of that regulatory cultural norm (reiteration) the abject being did not successfully repudiate the gaps and fissures, an action required for the full identification with the heterosexual imperative. The zone of abjected beings thus becomes an 'unlivable' area against which the subject stakes its claim in autonomy.

However, in this instance the speaker might not be regarded as an abject being and this in-between position she occupies, does not merely designate the boundary against which the autonomy of the male beloved's subjectivity is sustained, rather both the speaker's and the beloved's subjective status is determined by the effects of an intersubjective experience. The speaker performs a gender role quite distinct from that of the male beloved's and, despite the fact that this performance takes place under the male beloved's gaze, her subjective status is not threatened in her capacity to become an agent in the process of exchange. Moreover, the discourse of exchange, facilitates the launch of a politics of sexual difference which does not exclude interaction between two distinct gender roles -as it would if the speaker was located within the domain of abject

beings- making thus the hypothesis of equal agency during intersubjective experience salient.

The interpretative value of Butler's notion of performativity is of seminal importance because it pays attention to the fact that performativity as reiteration of norm may create alternative spaces for beings that fail to fully comply with that norm or wish to challenge its repressive force. However, in this instance, the speaker does not fall a victim of what Butler has called an 'exclusionary matrix'; instead her performance takes place within a 'relational matrix' and progressively evolves into a balancing act - one needs to admit seemingly precarious- of contradictory imperatives between discreet selves. This is a fundamental claim made by relational analysts such as Robert Stolorow, George Atkins and Jessica Benjamin, who argue for the primary role of interpersonal attachments in a context of post-Cartesian critique of the solitary mind.<sup>55</sup> The complexity of attachments in such an interpersonal or intersubjective site is in some sense always defined by an 'intermediate' area: a threshold space between, but also of, self and the other. The speaker thus, stands 'transfigured' before the eyes of the male beloved, becomes an active agent in the discourse of love, and her agency is reflected back to him, because, according to Benjamin's theory, she has the capacity to identify with 'otherness' in a way that blurs the strict distinction between what is and what is not

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<sup>55</sup> The valorization of male experience in patriarchal cultures has led to the privileging of an absolutely autonomous ideal of subjectivity, as the anxiety the male experiences in attachment and affinity often entails the equation of any desire for interdependence or reciprocity that the male subject expresses with a desire for abjection or subjection on the level of interpretation. Relational psychoanalysts have engaged since the 1980s in a painstaking effort first, to posit an alternative understanding of the self which is formed at the interface of reciprocally interacting subjectivities and second, to debunk 'the myth of the isolated mind [which] ascribes to man a mode of being in which the individual exists separately from the world of physical nature and also from engagement with others', as Robert Stolorow and George Atkins claim in their book-length essay *Contexts of Being: The Intersubjective Foundations of Psychological Life* (New Jersey: The Analytic Press, 1992). As the intersubjective or 'relational' view of psychological development seeks to reclaim the intersubjective foundations of psychological life, it thus becomes a serviceable means to analyze the amatory sonnet sequence, as both the relational model and the amatory sonnet sequence elaborate on what happens in the field of self and other, not simply the interactions that establish difference.

like the self, because she recognises that, to use Benjamin's words, 'I both am and am not the thing with which I identify'.<sup>56</sup>

It is precisely this quality of in-betweenness inherent in the discourse of exchange that inflects Elizabeth Barrett Browning's depiction of subjectivity. This kind of juncture where different ontologies are made to touch is anticipated already in the sixth sonnet of the sequence which constitutes one of the most surprising textual moments of the poet:

GO from me. Yet I feel that I shall stand  
Henceforward in thy shadow. Nevermore  
Alone upon the threshold of my door  
Of individual life, I shall command  
The uses of my soul, nor lift my hand  
Serenely in the sunshine as before,  
Without the sense of that which I forebore...  
Thy touch upon the palm. The widest land  
Doom takes to part us, *leaves thy heart in mine*  
*With pulses that beat double.* What I do  
And what I dream include thee, as the wine  
Must taste of its own grapes. And when I sue  
God for myself, He hears that name of thine,  
And *sees within my eyes, the tears of two.*

(my emphasis)

The imperative 'Go from me' reinforces the rhetorical schema detected in the sequence since the first nine sonnets have been found to elicit the hesitance of the speaker to articulate her love, as well as her doubtful stance regarding the viability of the relationship. Yet, paradoxically, the sonnet provides a preview of how the poet will treat the issue of subjectivity in the rest of the sequence. Drawing on her belief that this relationship has not enjoyed the approval of her surroundings and most importantly that,

<sup>56</sup> Jessica Benjamin, *Shadow of the Other: Intersubjectivity and Gender in Psychoanalysis* (New York: Routledge, 1998), p. 61.

“‘Nay’ is worse / From God than from all others’ (sonnet II), she none the less implies that the reciprocity of feeling will shield their love against all threats. She capitalizes on this idea by deploying corporeal language -e.g. ‘leaves thy heart in mine / With pulses that beat double’-to create a site of intersubjective experience so as to expand and accentuate the dimensions of the amorous feeling. The traditional notion of Petrarchan love is thus significantly destabilized not because the poet reverses the roles of the speaker and the beloved in assuming the agency expected of the male beloved, but more crucially, because the renegotiation of the notion sets the discourse of love within the uneven terrain between subjectivities, claiming first, agency for both and, second, interaction between them. The threshold space between the speaker and the beloved is in this sonnet not only literally ('Nevermore / Alone upon the threshold of my door / Of individual life, I shall command') but metaphorically reclaimed, despite the seeming hesitation of the speaker at the beginning of the poem, and it is triumphantly cohabited by both throughout the sestet in three alternating synecdochical images: the heart within the palpitating heart, the inclusion of the beloved in the speaker's everyday life and dreams, and the ‘tears of two’ in the speaker's eyes.

Moreover, the conjunction of two that these images describe, is more powerfully illustrated in line ten, because the rhetorical doubling linking the speaker's and the beloved's hearts -they ‘beat double’- conjures up both an image and a sound, effectively highlighting thus the written and the rhythmic dynamism of the poem. The intersubjective area claimed in this sonnet requires a recognition of the on-going negotiation of difference between the two separate subjectivities. According to Benjamin, ‘recognition is that response from the other which makes meaningful the feelings, intentions, and actions of the self, however, it ‘can only come from an other

whom we, in turn recognise as a person in his or her own right'.<sup>57</sup> Thus, the aspects of differentiation involved in the formation of gender do not function as a setback for the speaker, who in this instance accepts, to use Benjamin's words, that 'I have to be able to accept the impossibility of incorporating otherness, but retain the ability to imagine it without being threatened or undone by it' (*Shadow of the Other* 64). In the same line, Alison Chapman, in examining the degree to which Robert Browning's alleged mesmeric control had overcome the poet, clearly states that despite the fact that she declares that 'I shall stand / Henceforward in thy shadow', she effectively stresses the agency of her choice to include him in what she does and dreams ('What I do / And what I dream include thee). She writes: 'Although the beloved is ostensibly in control ... , as the sonnet continues the speaker puts his agency into question as she claims he is part of her ... After all, although he has entranced her, she is the speaker of the sequence and in the position of the mesmeric poet that Browning sets up as his poetic ideal. But, in the sonnets, erotic mesmeric control is coterminous with both the dissolution of psychic boundaries and a feminine transference of sensibility between the lovers' ('Mesmerism' 312).

Finally, of equal importance is Rhian Williams's insightful remark, that if one reads the poem aloud, the words are elided as the 't' gives way to the 'd' and the phrase 'beat double' gains a renewed meaning as a result of the association with 'be double'. Bearing in mind that the *Sonnets* were written in anticipation of marriage, Elizabeth Barrett Browning's sequence in as far as it successfully introduces intersubjectivity breaks new ground regarding the potential of the lyrical voice. She states:

Inscribed in such a line is the shifting between tradition and subjectivity – the effect of the sonnet as lyric and of the marriage as both private and public promise. It speaks to the

<sup>57</sup> Jessica Benjamin, *The Bonds of Love: Psychoanalysis, Feminism and the Problem of Domination* (New York: Pantheon, 1988), p. 12.

heart of a sequence that will ‘beat double’ throughout, finding ways of segueing between the marital and the lyrical.

... By moving into a position of two-ness, the self’s confrontation with the world is radically altered and indeed, brings with it a creatively and politically effective dismantling of the self.<sup>58</sup>

Having seen how sonnet X demonstrates the operation of the discourse of trade as a metaphor of the interaction between subjectivities in a relational field predicated upon the primacy of inter-personal attachments, it is also important to note that it signals the speaker’s ascendance towards the elevated place of the beloved as the speaker exclaims: ‘Love, mere love, is beautiful indeed / And worthy of acceptation. [...]’ (ll. 1-2). By the end of the sonnet she discovers that ‘[...] There’s nothing low / In Love, when Love the lowest: meanest creatures / Who love God, God accepts while loving so’ (ll. 9-11). In sonnet XI she adds: ‘AND therefore if to love can be desert, / I am not all unworthy. [...]’ (ll. 1-2) and in the next sonnet she reaches the conclusion that offering her ‘mere’ love is valuable: ‘INDEED this very love which is my boast, / and which, when rising up from breast to brow, / Doth crown me with a ruby large enow / To draw men’s eyes and prove the inner cost,...’ (ll. 1-4). However it is not until sonnets XVIII and XIX that we witness the crucial moment of reified exchange. The speaker gives away her hair ‘I never gave a lock of hair away / To a man, Dearest, except this to thee, / I ring out to the full brown length and say / ‘Take it.’-My day of youth went yesterday’ (ll. 1, 2, 4, 5) but the rules of the exchange are set on equal terms as she demands one back again in the opening of the following sonnet: ‘The soul’s Rialto hath its merchandise; / I barter curl for curl upon that mart, / And from my poet’s forehead to my heart, / Receive this lock which outweighs argosies, -’ (ll. 1-5). The

<sup>58</sup> Rhian Williams, “Our Deep, Dear Silence:” Marriage and Lyricism in the “Sonnets from the Portuguese”, *Victorian Literature and Culture* 37.1 (2009): 85-102. p. 94.

allusion to the commercial activity taking place on Venice's Rialto bridge gains additional signifying value in evoking the association with the Shakespearean play *The Merchant of Venice*, and inserts the discourse of the soul right in the centre of the economy of exchange: Chapman, insightfully remarks that 'the exchange is overtly part of a circular symbolic, an intersubjectivity that defers the origin of agency' ('Mesmerism' 313). From here on, there is no doubt that the speaker's and beloved's gifts are equivalent and their trade is balanced out.

Sonnet XVIII calls our attention on another account: It anticipates a series of kisses in sonnet XXXVIII. Sonnet XVIII, actually records the poet speaking for the first time and her words are explicitly punctuated "Take it" she commands the beloved. The second time is in sonnet XXXVIII, upon receiving a series of kisses: 'The third upon my lips was folded down / In perfect, purple state; since when, indeed, / I have been proud and said, 'My Love, My own.' (l. 12-14). These rare encounters of the speaker actually speaking, not surprisingly, take place in two climactic events in the sequence, whereby physical distance is erased as speaker and beloved engage in actions of intimate bonding: first, the exchange of locks and second, the exchange of kisses. That these moments of speech prevail when bonding between the speaker and the beloved climaxes is no coincidence: In sonnet XVIII the speaker confesses that giving away a lock from her hair signals the end of her solitary youth, while in sonnet XXXVIII, reflecting on the kiss on her forehead she commands: 'That was the chrism of love, which love's own crown, / With sanctifying sweetness did precede' (ll. 10-11). The exchange of locks and the intimate kisses foreground the highly ritualized conventions of Victorian courtship leading many critics who support that the function of the persona in the *Sonnets* is fulsomely annihilated to quote both passages. As the language deployed in these instances reveals that the sequence pivots around the marital discourse

Williams's argument that these moments of speech 'act almost as the spoken vows of marriage' (92) is substantiated.

Admittedly, the Victorian discourse of marriage in being so closely associated with female silence becomes problematic for the female-authored sequence. The deployment of typical Victorian patriarchal metaphors of matrimonial discourse, does not make things any less complicated: Such a strategy justifies an association with Sir William Blackstone's influential definition of the *femme covert*, the woman who is by law protected by her husband. In *Commentaries on the Laws of England* (1765-69) he states: 'The husband and wife are one person in law: That is, the very being or legal existence of the woman is suspended during the marriage, or at least incorporated or consolidated into that of her husband, under whose wing, protection, and cover, she performs everything'.<sup>59</sup> In sonnet XVI the speaker asks the beloved: '[F]ling / Thy purple round me (ll. 3-4), in sonnet XXXV 'open thine heart wide, / and fold within, the wet wings of thy dove' (ll. 13-14). After her ship-wreck, she is 'safe in port (sonnet XXXVII l. 11), enclosed 'In this close hand of Love now soft and warm' (sonnet XXIV l. 3). Yet, I believe that the overarching metaphor of exchange, as it traverses the sequence's texture, neutralizes the semantic and the aesthetic effect of such moments. The idea of enclosure as protection neither prompts the prescriptiveness of a legal text, nor the realities of the typical Victorian marriage, rather it allows for the fulsome if not impetuous articulation of a new version of conjugal commerce where the speaker is an equal trader. As Mermin commenting on this image maintains that 'the reader may feel a bit claustrophobic, but the speaker usually imagines enclosure as protection rather than imprisonment' ('Embarrassed' 361).

It is worth noting that other intellectual women were receptive to the idea of protection in matrimony without necessarily undermining their critique of the wife's

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<sup>59</sup> William Blackstone, *Commentaries on the Laws of England*, 16<sup>th</sup> ed. (London, 1825), 1:441-442.

legally prescribed envelopment by her husband. In 1856, the same year that *Aurora Leigh* was published, Margaret Oliphant's essay on *The Laws Concerning Women* appears anonymously in *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*, renouncing the implications of coverture. Oliphant ridicules the possibility of woman being completely absorbed by her husband and advocates marriage as an equivalent merger of husband and wife. Yet, her description of the marriage sacrament evokes Elizabeth Barrett Browning's metaphor of the dove / woman contained in the man's heart. Assuming the male perspective of a husband, she asks: 'Which of us does not carry our wife's thoughts in our brain, and our wife's likings in our hearts, with the most innocent unconsciousness that they are not our own original poetry?'.<sup>60</sup>

Yet, additional evidence substantiating Williams's point about how the marked speech of the speaker functions as enunciation of conjugal devotion may be drawn from sonnets XXII and XXXVI. These two sonnets, the first appearing shortly after the exchange of locks, and the second shortly before the kissing, indicate that the speaker is advocating marriage as the site where a deeper longing for spiritual and physical union between two equal partners may be satisfied and not as the two-into-one action rolling out of the English legislative system, holding together the notions of dominance, erasure, and silencing that have been understood to inform the experience of female subjectivity -if not subjection.

### Sonnet XXII

*When our two souls stand up erect and strong,  
Face to face, silent drawing nigh and nigher  
Until the lengthening wings break into fire  
At either curvèd point, - what bitter wrong  
Can the earth do us, that we should not long  
Be here contented? Think! In mounting higher,  
The angels would press on us, and aspire*

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<sup>60</sup> [Margaret Oliphant], 'The Laws Concerning Women', *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine* 79 (1856), p. 13.  
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To drop some golden orb of perfect song  
Into *our deep, dear silence*. 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 rounding it.

(my emphasis)

The imagery of the two souls standing up erect and strong, face to face and silent and the ‘deep, dear silence’ between the speaker and the beloved are valorised by the speaker precisely because this time silence is mutual and consecrated in connoting Pauline love. The expression ‘face to face’ appears in Corinthians I after Paul’s description of love as the way in which one will see ‘But when that which is perfect is come, then that which is in part shall be done away’.<sup>61</sup> It also recalls the two angels standing face to face in the prescription for the construction of the ark of the covenant in Exodus.<sup>62</sup> Yet, this is indeed a vexing moment for many critics who question the metaphorical or subversive power of the speaker’s strategies of subjectivity and construe the poems as embodying the Victorian ideal of marriage which reinforces a sound / silence binary and marks women as sonically muted and legislatively unheard, especially if it is discussed in the context of sonnet XIII, where the silence of

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<sup>61</sup> ‘But when that which is perfect is come, then that which is in part shall be done away. / When I was a child, I spake as a child, I understood as a child, I thought as a child: but when I became a man, I put away childish things. / For now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face: now I know in part; but then shall I know even as also I am known. / And now abideth faith, hope, charity, these three; but the greatest of these [is] charity’. 1Corinthians 13.10-13. See Jerome Mazzaro p. 175.

<sup>62</sup> ‘And thou shalt make two cherubims of gold, of beaten work shalt thou make them, in the two ends of the mercy seat. / And make one cherub on the one end, and the other cherub on the other end: even of the mercy seat shall ye make the cherubims on the two ends thereof. / And the cherubims shall stretch forth *their* wings on high, covering the mercy seat with their wings, and their faces *shall look* one to another; toward the mercy seat shall the faces of the cherubims be’. Exodus 25.18-20. Jerome Mazzaro (p. 175) and Rhian Williams (p. 98) also identify the reference to Exodus. Robert M. Gay in ‘Elizabeth B. Browning’s *Sonnets from the Portuguese*’, *Explicator* 1 (December 1942): Item 24, argues that Elizabeth Barrett Browning may have been influenced by Dante, Shelley, Milton and Blake in her description of the angels’ ‘lengthening wings break[ing] into fire / At either curvèd point’, as her letters reveal that she was familiar with the works of the aforementioned poets, before the publication of the sequence. Also, he suggests that popular illustrations of angels may have contributed to that description.

‘womanhood’, more frequently than not has been interpreted as an effect of systematised suppression.

Sonnet XXXVI comprises another intriguing instance whereby the physical distance between subjectivities is erased and nearness is sustained with divine will. The idea that love is sustained with physical closeness betrays Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s increasing interest from the 1850s onwards in the writings of the Swedish philosopher Emanuel Swedenborg. Swedenborg explored the nature of Divine Love and Wisdom, the soul’s afterlife, and the closeness of the dead to the living. In *The Delights of Wisdom Pertaining to Conjugial Love*, Swedenborg celebrates matrimonial love as well as physical / sexual intimacy in marriage, as the result and the symbol of the Divine Love of God. Swedenborg’s view regarding eternal happiness reclaims the delights of marital love as deriving from the bodily senses and spirituality and posits that it is only within the matrimonial state that humans are themselves.<sup>63</sup> *Prima facie* Irigaray’s position with the ‘sensible transcendental’ shares a lot with Swedenborg’s in so far as they both locate divinity and carnality together. Yet, in Swedenborg’s ‘system of correspondences’ the husband is set in correspondence with the spiritual and the wife incapable to see into the ‘same sphere of light, and of viewing things with the same depth ...’<sup>64</sup> is allotted to the physical. The blatant reinforcement of gender binaries marks an unsettling moment in Swedenborgian philosophy. Yet, the Victorians were famous for their hypocritical stance against bodily functions and the widespread disdain of the human body, especially the female body. It comes as no surprise, that Swedenborg’s conjugal dynamics, in sanctifying both the spiritual and the carnal aspect of the marital union, and in presenting it as the outcome of the Divine Will was

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<sup>63</sup> Emanuel Swedenborg, *The Delights of Wisdom Pertaining to Conjugial Love, after which Follow the Pleasures of Insanity Pertaining to Scortatory Love*, trans. Samuel M. Warren; rev. Louis H. Tafel (New York: Swedenborg Foundation, 1928), p. 16, 156.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 175.

immensely appealing to Elizabeth Barrett Browning who played on the sidelines of respectable femininity with the mere publication of the *Sonnets*.

Hence, mutuality emerges not in silence but in the metaphorical connotations of the oath of love, which, as articulation of “consecrated promise”, according to Williams, is anticipated in the marked moments of speech in sonnet XVIII and reinforced in sonnet XXXVIII:

... I think that God has willed  
A still renewable fear... O Love, O troth  
Lest these enclasped hands should never hold,  
This mutual kiss drop down between us both  
As an unowned thing, once the lips being cold.  
And love be false! If *he*, to keep one oath,  
Must lose one joy by his life's s star foretold

(ll. 8-14)

Hayter and many others have argued that Elizabeth Barrett Browning's experiments with rhyming were not always successful, and she faulted the *Sonnets* for a lack of technical control, but more recent studies, depending on their motivation, tend to reassess her rhyming techniques in more positive terms.<sup>65</sup> The sestet of this sonnet however, modulates correct rhymes to accord with its theme: the promise of love as an intersubjective experience. The alternating *o* and *th* sounds of troth / both / oath create a musicality which reinforces the conceptual bond of the three words and highlights the convergence of meaning, as the three words bear similar cultural associations since they imply twoness. Yet, if twoness in marriage does not signify a bond of consummate patriarchy, if it is not synonymous with silence and ultimately if the exploitation of its

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<sup>65</sup> For instance, Glennis Stephenson considers the Sonnets as a ‘dramatization of desire’ (*Poetry of Love* 69); Angela Leighton a ‘literary performance’ (‘Stirring’ 13); and Jerome Mazzaro as poems crafted to convey the sublime (166-167). For a systematic analysis of Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s rhyme schemes in the *Sonnets* see Margaret Morlier’s study “‘Sonnets from the Portuguese’ and the Politics of Rhyme”, *Victorian Literature and Culture* 27.1 (1999): 97-112.

economic resonance is only capitalised upon to be attacked from within, then, what can it really mean for the speaker?

As the title of the *Sonnets* implies translation from an original text, allusion to Theocritus also suggests a deferral of voice into the mouth of some authoritative figure whose language the beloved is thought to share. For a woman to write about love in the context of an overwhelmingly masculine amatory tradition requires a process of translation. Derrida, in *Roundtable on Translation*, claims that any marital bond presupposes a double act of translation, ‘a promise, a marriage, a sacred alliance –can only take place, I would say, in translation, that is only if it is simultaneously uttered both in my tongue and the other’s’.<sup>66</sup> But how then, is the reciprocal feeling entailed in Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s conjugal dynamics articulated through a ‘double act of translation’? I believe instances like ‘our hearts beat double’, ‘When our two souls stand up erect and strong Face to face, silent ... Into our deep, dear silence, and the image of ‘enclasped hands’, do suggest what Derrida describes as the ‘double act of translation’. In the *Sonnets* it is performed due to the poet’s efficacy to draw the figures of the speaker and the beloved into an equivalent, mutual merger and it is sustained through the metaphorical and literal significance of oath, as described above.

The fundamental recalibration of the lyric logic of one voice speaking opens the way for a reconsideration of the sequence from Jackson and Prins’s ‘lyrical perspective’, which means ‘reading ... lyrics for their cultural pattern rather than their subjective expression’.<sup>67</sup> Interestingly enough, dwelling on the cultural aspect of the *Sonnets*, not only enables us to dismantle the association of silence and marriage, but it elucidates the materialization of subjectivity in the context of intersubjective experience

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<sup>66</sup> Cited in Yopie Prins, ‘Elizabeth Barrett, Robert Browning and the *Différance* of Translation’, *Victorian Poetry* 29 (1991): 435-451, p. 436.

<sup>67</sup> Virginia Jackson and Yopie Prince, ‘Lyrical Studies’, *Victorian Literature and Culture* (1999): 521-530. p. 529.

entailed in the conjugal dynamics posited by the poet. The discourse of exchange is the cultural pattern upon which the poet edifies her novel notion of marriage as intersubjective experience: What can be posited and exhibited in diverse theses that harmonise with each other, but that originate from different singular subjects, presupposes just such an intersubjectivity. Therefore, it comes as no surprise that in the penultimate sonnet, number XLIII, empowered by and in anticipation of such an intersubjective experience, the speaker finally does answer the question ‘How dost thou love me?’ that paraphrases the question posed by Lear and hypothetically precedes Sonnet XII. Only in this case she does not rehearse Cordelia’s silence but Goneril’s eloquent enunciation of love.

How do I love thee? Let me count the ways.  
I love thee to the depth and breadth and height  
My soul can reach, when feeling out of sight  
For the ends of Being and Ideal Grace.  
I love thee to the level of everyday's  
Most quiet need, by sun and candle light.  
I love thee freely, as men strive for Right;  
I love thee purely as they turn from Praise.  
I love thee with the passion put to use  
In my old griefs, and with my childhoods faith.  
I love thee with a love I seemed to lose  
With my lost saints, -I love thee with the breath,  
Smiles, tears, of all my life!-and, if God choose,  
I shall but love thee better after death.

While this sonnet is one of those few that theoretically can be divided into quatrain, octave and sestet the distribution of the eight ways the speaker loves is not balanced as the projection of the eighth manner in the middle of line 12 disrupts the rhythm. The emotional straight-forwardness of the speaker is thus reflected in tonal dissonance and the near rhymes ‘ways’ and ‘Grace,’ ‘use’ and ‘lose’ and ‘faith’ and ‘breath’. Also the

measuring activity framing the *Sonnets* is here, like marital oaths, sanctified as the opening bears Pauline echoes: It reminds us of Paul's prayer, where the faithful and grounded in love 'may be able to comprehend with all saints what *is* the breadth, and length, and depth, and height of Christ's love'.<sup>68</sup>

Every line of this sonnet measures the speaker's selfhood and represents her transformation into a speaking subject. Leighton remarks that the scope of this poem 'becomes that of her whole life, its ambitions and its banalities, its heights and its levels. This is a love so confident of its object that it no longer needs it'.<sup>69</sup> It is true that love here is presented as a transforming and inspiring power but not in the way we would expect it to unfold as a prerogative of the Petrarchan tradition. Thus, this kind of love, not meeting the expectations of distance and loss imposed by the masculine tradition, becomes transformative because it is constituted as an intersubjective experience, drawing together the speaker and the beloved.

Returning briefly to the discussion of Irigaray's 'sensible transcendental' in the previous chapter, it is worth noting that in her more recent works *The Way of Love*<sup>70</sup> and *I Love to You*<sup>71</sup>, Irigaray reiterates her argument regarding its implementation through the reconciliation of the divine with the carnal and adds that it operates in the framework of our relations with others, in the realm of intersubjectivity. In reformulating the everyday declaration 'I love you' as 'I love *to* you', she launches a new model of 'being two'. She explains that the *to* 'means I maintain a relation of indirection to you. I do not subjugate you or consume you ... The 'to' is the guarantor of indirection. The 'to' prevents the relation of transitivity, bereft of the other's irreducibility and potential reciprocity' (*I Love to You* 109). Irigaray expanding the phrase 'I love you' with the insertion of *to* signposts a conceptual and a discursive shift

<sup>68</sup> Ephesians 3.18.

<sup>69</sup> Angela Leighton, *Elizabeth Barrett Browning*, p. 103.

<sup>70</sup> Luce Irigaray, *The Way of Love*, trans. Heidi Bostic and Stephen Pluháček (London: Continuum, 2002).

<sup>71</sup> Luce Irigaray, *I Love To You: Sketch of a Possible Felicity in History*, trans. Alison Martin. (New York: Routledge, 1995).

in the manner we should relate to the other. Celebrating the recognition of the subjectivity of the other, the *to*, according to Agnes Bosanquet, denotes a genuine concern, with ‘my words to you and the place of ‘you’ in my words’.<sup>72</sup> The celebration of love’s self-sufficiency in this sonnet is not to be mistaken for a collateral effect of the straightforward assertion of the single poetic ‘I’, because twoness is what renders love a transformative power throughout the sequence. On the contrary, the speaker lays claim to unmediated transcendence and divinity in this sonnet precisely because she has accepted a new mode of being that embraces the other but does not erase its alterity.

## Conclusion

Finally, sonnet XLIV, provides a fitting conclusion of the sequence and a final recapitulation of how the poet imagines conjugal dynamics: In return for his gifts, the flowers he has brought into her room, she gives him the metaphorical blossoms of her heart, her poetry: ‘Beloved, thou hast brought me many flowers / So, in the like name of that love of ours, / Take back these thoughts, which here unfolded too’ (ll. 1, 5, 6). So what exactly can Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s insistence on intersubjective experience tell us about her poetics? I contend that her depictions of negotiation and her structural habit of dynamic process reveal a revisionary principle that attempts to dismantle categorical thinking about gendered, embodied and culturally conditioned selfhood. One of the most fascinating features of Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s notion of intersubjectivity is the fact that it depicts the female speaker and not the male beloved as able to spur the erasure of boundaries while simultaneously respecting separateness. In this sense she exhibits neither prejudice nor disregard for the fact of difference. She chooses to foreground a female speaker who skilfully plays out the role of the dealer

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<sup>72</sup> Agnes, Bosanquet. ‘Luce Irigaray’s “Sensible Transcendental:” Becoming Divine in the Body’. *Transformations* 11 (2005): n. pag. Web 10 October 2014. <[http://www.transformationsjournal.org/journal/issue\\_11/article\\_01.shtml](http://www.transformationsjournal.org/journal/issue_11/article_01.shtml)>.

without commodifying herself. The speaker, therefore, becomes not a mere troubler of the law, ultimately reinscribed into the law's hierarchical structures but she breaks down those hierarchies altogether and dismantles the very terms by which she and her male counterpart attempt to imagine themselves within the matrimonial discourse. The *Sonnets* may be regarded as a radical text precisely because female resistance to the hierarchical paradigms invoked both by the Petrarchan and the Victorian fields of reference is not consistently championed, rather it signposts the site where the materialization of the self is construed as the cause, the effect and the process of the destabilizing dynamics of intersubjective experience.

In this chapter, as well as in the previous chapters, my enquiry focused on speakers who address the challenges of finding their place in relation to the other through love and emotional engagement. In the ensuing chapter, I turn my attention to speakers, like the speaker of 'Casa Guidi Windows', who are concerned with the highly problematic ways of finding a place in the world. What will be shown is that their struggle to establish meaningful relationships with a liberal state inserts them in wider political debates and reveals the cosmopolitan perspective of their thought.

## **Chapter 4: The Cosmopolitan Ideal of Elizabeth Barrett Browning in 'Casa Guidi Windows', 'Napoleon III in Italy' and 'Italy in the World' from *Poems before Congress***

‘I’m a bad patriot, I believe. I care more for the world and humanity every year and less for local and national interests’.<sup>1</sup>

Elizabeth Barrett Browning

In her discussion of the multiple forms of detachment, Amanda Anderson emphasizes the variable roles the body may take on in a cosmopolitan environment: ‘Cosmopolitanism emphasises detached inquiry, focuses on the international over the domestic, and valorizes an outward looking disinterest over contemplation of inward subjectivities’.<sup>2</sup> Elizabeth Barrett Browning was famous for denouncing British national self-interest and inward-looking foreign policy in poems such as ‘Casa Guidi Windows’, ‘Napoleon III in Italy’ and ‘Italy and the World’, yet adopting a political discourse with a cosmopolitan perspective in the sense that Amanda Anderson designates, discomfited many of her contemporaries.

In this chapter I will show that Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s cosmopolitan poetics is not to be understood merely as the product of her enthusiasm with her adopted country, Italy, but as a conscious, systematic contribution to a cosmopolitan ideal which would allow the building of the Italian nationhood and Italy’s emancipation from foreign rule. One could argue that Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s inclination to cosmopolitanism is quite straight-forward in her engagement with the world and her disinterested stance against the English national character. Yet, the poetical strategies enabling such a cosmopolitan ideal to come into fruition expose a deeper complexity in her political thought. What will be argued here is that her cosmopolitan poetics is

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<sup>1</sup> *Letters of the Brownings to George Barrett*, p. 165.

<sup>2</sup> Amanda Anderson, *The Powers of Distance: Cosmopolitanism and the Power of Detachment* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2001), p. 7.

contiguous to a cross-dwelling subjectivity which allows her to move freely on multiple spatial and temporal planes triggering thus a dynamic relation between the different types of nationalistic devotion to Italy and detachment from Britain, and effecting a blurring of boundaries.

What I am aiming at is not a conclusive idea regarding the outcome of this venture but an exploration of the conflicting practices she deploys and the complex implications these may generate in reading her poetry. To this end, I will limit myself to a scrutiny of ‘Casa Guidi Windows’ and a selection of poems from *Poems before Congress*<sup>3</sup> because in my view these works constitute the most vociferous articulation of her cosmopolitan ideal. Yet, it is important to note that her cosmopolitan outlook informs both *Aurora Leigh* and other volumes such as *Last Poems*.<sup>4</sup>

‘Casa Guidi Windows’ constitutes Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s poetical response to the revolution which spread on the Italian peninsula in 1847. Written in two parts, the poem’s first part commemorates the events in Florence and exposes Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s hopes that the Grand Duke Leopold II of Tuscany and the supposedly progressive Pius IX will lead Italy to the long-awaited *libertà*. In Part II, which was written two years later, she meditates on the betrayal of those hopes when the revolts had been quelled by Austrian and Papal authority. Despite its political valence and cosmopolitan orientation, present day criticism<sup>5</sup> slides into a discussion that pivots around the relationship between Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s biography and the Italian *Risorgimento* and reads her entanglement in the Italian cause as a metaphor of her feminist rebellion and her emancipation from her father and British patriarchy in general, disabling thus the analysis of her cosmopolitan poetics. What I propose is that, in as much as it documents the *Risorgimento* events by an English woman poet, who

<sup>3</sup> Elizabeth Barrett Browning, *Poems before Congress* (1860); quotations from ‘Napoleon III in Italy’ and ‘Italy in the World’ follow this edition.

<sup>4</sup> Elizabeth Barrett Browning, *Last Poems* (1862).

<sup>5</sup> To varying degrees, Helen Cooper, Margaret Forster, Sandra Gilbert and Dorothy Mermin accept Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s championing of the Italian cause is coextensive of her personal situation.

was nonetheless very well aware of the aspirations of the people among she lived, ‘Casa Guidi Windows’, can be read as Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s resistance to Romantic idealizations of Italy. In *Poems before Congress* the poet presents us with her provocative notion of citizenship and the citizen-king and her rebuttal of English isolationism.

‘Casa Guidi Windows’ has received considerable critical attention, yet only in as much as it aptly served to probe the widespread idea that Victorian woman writers and especially travel writers typically denied being motivated by any wish to contribute to more masculinised domains of knowledge such as political philosophy or science.<sup>6</sup> It was not until Julia Markus’s introduction to the 1977 edition of ‘Casa Guidi Windows’ that the poem received critical appraisal for the deployment of complex visual technologies and its epistemological weight as a historical record. One recurrent element in more recent studies of ‘Casa Guidi Windows’ is that Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s engagement with the Italian cause has been treated as a climactic moment in her poetical development, signposting the assertion of female authorial agency which is conditioned by a fenestral viewpoint.<sup>7</sup> Moreover, the visual metaphors of the poem are said to accommodate Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s scheme to occupy and therefore speak from both positions. Helen Groth, in ‘A Different Look - Visual Technologies and the Making of History in Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s “Casa Guidi Windows”’ maintains that the visual technologies of the poem provide ‘an important discursive context for the aesthetic and political arguments of the poem structurally and

<sup>6</sup> See Maria Frawley’s *A Wider Range: Travel Writing by Women in Victorian England* (Rutherford, NJ: Farleigh Dickinson University Press, 1994), p. 52. Also Dorothy Mermin and Margaret Higgonet argue that the Victorian bias against political issues undertaken by a woman is what drives Elizabeth Barrett Browning, who was conscious of the charges that the poem was unsuitably provocative, to state in her ‘Advertisement’ for ‘Casa Guidi Windows’ that she was a ‘passive witness’ conveying her ‘impressions’. See Dorothy, Mermin, *Elizabeth Barrett Browning. The Origins of a New Poetry*, p. 166 and Margaret Randolph Higgonet, *British Women Poets of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century* (New York: Penguin, 1996), pp. xxi.

<sup>7</sup> I am referring to Steve Dillon and Katherine Frank’s ‘Defenestrations of the Eye: Flow, Fire, and Sacrifice in “Casa Guidi Windows”’, *Victorian Poetry* 35 (1997): 471-492 and Esther Schor’s ‘The Poetics of Politics: Barrett Browning’s “Casa Guidi Windows”’, *Tulsa Studies in Women’s Literature* 17:2 (Autumn 1998): 305-324.

experientially enacting the political argument that Italy should take possession of herself as a unified nation in the future'.<sup>8</sup> Groth certainly makes a strong point here, but I would like to expand it by arguing that the discursive context created by the frame of the window allows Elizabeth Barrett Browning to take up multiple subject positions. Her mobility allows her to either re-appropriate to opposite effect or vehemently attack all discourses impeding the enactment of her plea for Italy, which is part and parcel of her cosmopolitan ideal of international conviviality.

*Poems before Congress* was published in 1860 and includes eight poems of which seven address the Italian attempts at unification and England's disinterestedness in the cause. The volume closes with a poem protesting against American slavery which stirred very negative reactions amongst its commentators in Britain. The inclusion of 'A Curse for a Nation' led critics to believe that the curse was targeting Britain. In this study two poems will be looked at with a view to foregrounding the poet's lifelong commitment to the principles of liberty: 'Napoleon III in Italy', and 'Italy in the World'. The volume was deplored upon its publication for its investment in allegedly anti-English politics and continues to be one of the less frequently discussed works of the poet. This collection of poems was catalysed by Italy's stumbling advance towards self-definition and specifically the events that followed Austria's attack on the Italian nation states of Sardinia and Piedmont in April 1859. A central figure in this historical development was the French emperor Napoleon III, who in May 1859, attempted to liberate and unify the Italian nation-states. The poet's hopes as well as those of many prominent liberals' evaporated in July of the same year when Napoleon III surrendered to the Austrians with the Treaty of Villafranca. The title of the collection is misleading because it trades upon the ambiguity of the phrase 'before Congress' which denotes both the physical presence before Congress and the time that had elapsed from

<sup>8</sup> Helen Groth, 'A Different Look-Visual Technologies and the Making of History in Elizabeth Barrett Browning's "Casa Guidi Windows"', *Textual Practice* 14 (March 2000): 31-52. p. 33.

Napoleon's entrance in Italian states; the compilation of the volume and the cancellation of the Congress that had been planned to take place in early 1860. While the destiny of the Italian states was bartered among European leaders and the Congress was put off, the title of the volume remained the same, highlighting its political focus.

Katherine Montwieler convincingly argues that the dismissal of Elizabeth Barrett Browning's penultimate work might be explained by the fact that

the poems disturb because some of the politics the volume advocates are problematic today: for just as the championing of France was unpalatable to her mid-Victorian contemporaries, so too is the triumphant praise of an emperor distasteful to liberally minded critics in the late twentieth- and early twenty-first centuries.<sup>9</sup>

In 1913 G. K. Chesterton insisted that *Poems before Congress* should be reassessed because it enriches our historical knowledge. More interesting though is his observation that Elizabeth Barrett Browning offers an account of historical events, which reveals a deep-seated interest in cosmopolitanism. He writes:

These old political poems of [Barrett Browning's] are too little read today; they are amongst the most sincere documents on the history of the times, and many modern blunders could be corrected by the reading of them.... *She is by far the most European of all the English poets of that age; all of them, even her own much greater husband, look local beside her.*<sup>10</sup>

Henry James is considered to have written one of the most influential polemics against Elizabeth Barrett Browning's politicised poetry, whereby he challenges her 'disinterested' involvement with politics and speculates about its artistic implications. A lengthy passage on Elizabeth Barrett Browning appears in his late work, *William*

<sup>9</sup> Katherine Montwieler, 'Domestic Politics: Gender, Protest, and Elizabeth Barrett Browning's "Poems before Congress"', *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature* (2005): 291-317, p. 293.

<sup>10</sup> G. K. Chesterton, *The Victorian Age in Literature*, pp. 177-178 (my emphasis).

*Wetmore Story and his Friends: From Letters, Diaries, and Recollections*, the biography of an undistinguished American sculptor who became a very close friend of the Brownings in Florence. Alluding disapprovingly to her sympathy with the Libertarians and the *Risorgimento*, her rebellion in the personal domain, which according to James, originates in a psychological disturbance, is inevitably transposed onto ‘Casa Guidi Windows’ and *Poems before Congress*. James’s remarks imply that the adherence to the Italian cause became a psychologically and aesthetically damaging *idée fixe* to Elizabeth Barrett Browning, who is presented as hysterical if not compulsive in her political gestures and self-destructive in her poetical career, failing, according to his idea of the ‘great poet,’ to rise above the ‘local’ and the chaos of political contingencies. He writes:

The cause of Italy was, obviously, for Mrs Browning, as high aloft as any object of interest could be; but that was only because she had let down, as it were, her inspiration and her poetic pitch. They suffered for it sadly—the permission of which, conscious or unconscious, is on the part of the poet, on the part of the beautiful mind, ever to be judged (by any critic with any sense of the real) as the unpardonable sin.<sup>11</sup>

On the one hand, James charges her with the burden of fallacy for projecting her torments on *Risorgimento* Italy and, on the other, for seemingly contradicting reasons, he pronounces her an avowedly political poet who fails to rise above circumstances and acquaint herself with more general ideas and ideals. Although James was concentrating on the literary rather than the strictly political aspects of her poetry it is implied that her alleged failure to commit to a universal ideal was responsible for the disintegration of

<sup>11</sup> Henry James, *William Wetmore Story and his Friends: From Letters, Diaries and Recollections*, 2 vols (New York: Grove, 1957), vol II, p. 55. For a detailed account of Henry James’s views on Elizabeth Barrett Browning and her concern with the Italian Question see Frederick Wegener’s ‘Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Italian Independence, and the “Critical Reaction” of Henry James’, *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900* 37.4 (Autumn 1997): 741-761 and Paraic Finnerty’s ‘Rival Italies Emily Dickinson, John Ruskin and Henry James’, *Prose Studies* 31.2 (August 2009): 113-125.

her poetic acumen. Impressively enough, James's criticism collapses in light of a series of rehabilitative readings of the poem in the last three decades, acknowledging in Elizabeth Barrett Browning's political poetry, the woman poet's capacity to transcend the domestic and the local to ideals of a universal outlook.

## Cosmopolitanism, Kant and the Reclamation of the Italian Cultural Heritage

In tracing the trajectory of her cosmopolitan thought and poetics, I accept that she proposes a cosmopolitan ideal very much similar to Kant's, who in his *Toward Perpetual Peace: A Philosophical Project* (1796)<sup>12</sup> advocates that the human race must seek perpetual peace between nations through a federation of states, an account whose explanatory potential is crucial in understanding Elizabeth Barrett Browning's commitment to the formation of Italian nationhood.

My enquiry will begin with contextualizing her concept of cosmopolitanism with reference to the Kantian cosmopolitan model, with a view to investigating the moments it becomes entangled in contradictions that stem from the formation process and justification of the modern nation-state. At the same time, I will use concepts from modern critics in order to substantiate the hypothesis that her cosmopolitan politics may bear a lasting appeal in the contemporary understanding of cosmopolitanism. Next, I will move on to the explication of her cross-dwelling capacity by placing it within an anti-essentialist discussion that champions the acceptance of multiple worlds, so as to expose the multiple positions which allow the deployment of a diverse set of poetic strategies. My discussion will pivot around three aspects of her poetics: first, the re-

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<sup>12</sup> All subsequent references to Kant's *Toward Perpetual Peace: A Philosophical Project* are based upon Allen W. Wood's translations from the German text *Zum Ewigen Frieden: Ein Philosophischer Entwurf. Kants Gesammelte Schriften*. Ausgabe der Königlich preussischen Akademie der Wissenschaften (AK) 8:341-8:386, in his essay 'Kant's Project for Perpetual Peace', *Cosmopolitics: Thinking and Feeling Beyond the Nation*. I follow Woods in using the abbreviation AK volume:page number to indicate quotations from Kant and I also provide the relevant page number in Wood's essay.

appropriation of Italy's republican past, second the interrogation of Carlylean heroics, and third, the debunking of traditional feminised representations of Italy.

In the macronarrative of Western civilization everything imaginable began in Greek antiquity. Indeed, the antecedents of cosmopolitanism(s) may be traced to the cynics and Diogenes's self –designation as a *cosmopolites*, a citizen of the world. But since my target is to investigate the concrete historical, political and literary parameters of Elizabeth Barrett Browning's cosmopolitanism, in my engagement with the term I will navigate from recent literature on cosmopolitanism backwards to Kant and Victorian thinkers. Kant is chosen because his writings on the cosmopolitan ideal constitute a fine specimen of Enlightenment thought underlying Elizabeth Barrett Browning's cosmopolitan outlook, while the reference to her contemporaries will provide the context to draw fruitful conclusions about the complex manifestations of cosmopolitan poetics.

As was the case with Elizabeth Barrett Browning's own epoch, cosmopolitanism until nowadays remains a highly contested concept. In tune with recent theorizations of cosmopolitanism, this study will explore Elizabeth Barrett Browning's cosmopolitan ideal as a practice which enables subjectivities to cross-dwell in different spatial configurations, accounting thus for diverse forms of border-crossing. The wide spectrum of ideas embedded in such an understanding of cosmopolitanism, has been masterfully expressed in Steven Vertovec's and Robin Cohen's *Conceiving Cosmopolitanism*:

Cosmopolitanism suggests something that simultaneously:

- (a) transcends the seemingly exhausted nation-state model;
- (b) is able to mediate actions and ideals oriented both to the universal and the particular, the global and the local;
- (c) is culturally anti-essentialist; and
- (d) is capable of representing variously complex repertoires of allegiance, identity, and

interest. In these ways, cosmopolitanism seems to offer a mode of managing cultural and political multiplicities.<sup>13</sup>

One needs to be constantly aware of the dangers entailed in such a conceptualization of cosmopolitanism, which more often than not, has been connected with elitist forms of cosmopolitanism. What I am referring to, is a cosmopolitan attitude either highly dependent on one's economic capacity to travel abroad extensively or associated with the cultural forces exerted by the educated and the more 'civilized'. Frequently the two converge, as it will be shown later, both in the Enlightenment and Romantic period and Modernity. With Kant the perpetual peace among nations will be realized in an international federation where the leadership will be assigned to the more civilized nations, while with the Romantics the detachment from one's immediate environment is celebrated as a kind of heroism. Today, the post-colonial world is confronted with a number of conflicting cosmopolitanisms of a bluntly managerial orientation, which are constantly updated in accordance with the alternate faces of Modernity. Indeed, one could reasonably argue that Elizabeth Barrett Browning's cosmopolitanism is a by-product of her social standing in as much as it allowed her to finance travels to France and a long stay in Italy.

Bearing in mind the shortcomings of Vertovec's and Cohen's notion of cosmopolitanism, what will be argued for here is that Elizabeth Barrett Browning's cosmopolitanism is non-elitist as it stems from a mixture of pure love for justice and a true concern with the ambition and the fortune of Italian nationalism. The result of this mixture, as Christopher Keirstead elucidates, 'is an incompletely realized national internationalism: the hope that a united, cooperative Europe would emerge *sui generis* out of the fulfilment of individual national struggles'.<sup>14</sup> That her social status enabled

<sup>13</sup> Steven Vertovec and Robin Cohen eds., *Conceiving Cosmopolitanism: Theory, Context and Practice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), p. 4.

<sup>14</sup> Christopher M. Keirstead, A "Bad Patriot:" Elizabeth Barrett Browning and Cosmopolitanism',

her to have a first-hand experience of otherness outside England is true, but to accept that her treatment of Italian politics was imperial -therefore elitist- is highly unlikely, because her poetics attest to discourses quite different from those related with canonical Romantic poets and inward-looking Victorian nationalists. Kenneth Churchill, investigating the treatment of Italy in English Literature from the late eighteenth to the early twentieth century informs us that in Elizabeth Barrett Browning's poetry

in total contrast with the tendency of eighteenth century contemplation of Italy to feed a self-satisfied English sense of superiority to the rest of the world, and in defiance of the mercantilist doctrine of splendid isolation, Italy had become one of the focal points of the growing feeling of mutual dependence and responsibility, the recognition that no man or country can be truly free while another is in chains.<sup>15</sup>

What is important to note, is that the assertion of cultural power from the so-called hegemonic nations (e.g England, France) is not abnegated in the context of her cosmopolitan ideal. This assertion of power though takes place so long as it does not develop into a form of a totalizing, oppressing discourse that eradicates local elements. On the contrary, in my view, Elizabeth Barrett Browning is more in tune with Bruce Robbins' conceptualization of cosmopolitanism, which might be construed as 'an impulse to knowledge that is shared with others, a striving to transcend partiality that itself partial, but no more so than the similar cognitive strivings of many diverse peoples'.<sup>16</sup>

Kant was not the first to subscribe to the idea that peace between states should be achieved under a system of international law, a 'right of nations' (*ius gentium*) was

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*VIJ Victorians Institute Journal* 33 (2005): 69-95. p. 70.

<sup>15</sup> Kenneth Churchill, *Italy and English Literature, 1769-1930* (New Jersey: Barnes and Noble Books. 1980), p. 101.

<sup>16</sup> Bruce Robbins, 'Introduction Part I: Actually Existing Cosmopolitanism', *Cosmopolitics: Thinking and Feeling Beyond the Nation*, eds. Cheah Pheng and Bruce Robbins (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998), pp. 1-20. p. 14.

present even in the ancient world, nor was he the first to advocate a federation of states. But it was not until Kant that modern European cosmopolitan thinking achieves a sustained articulation. In *The Cosmopolitan Ideal in Enlightenment Thought*, Thomas Schlereth defines Enlightenment cosmopolitanism as follows:

First, it was an attitude of mind that attempted to transcend chauvinistic national loyalties or parochial prejudices in its intellectual interests and pursuits. In the ideal, the ‘cosmopolite’, ‘citizen of the world’, sought to be identified by an interest in, familiarity with, or appreciation of many parts and peoples of the world; he wished to be distinguished by a readiness to borrow from other lands or civilizations in the formation of his intellectual, cultural, and artistic patterns. Therefore, the typical Enlightenment cosmopolite aspired to be –although he did not always succeed in being– eclectic in his philosophical and scientific outlook, synergistic in his religious perspective and international in his economic and political thought.<sup>17</sup>

In the seventeenth century, both Leibniz and William Penn had advanced proposals for an international authority in Europe, which was to guarantee a lasting peace between the nations of Europe. Kant was directly influenced by the *Projet Pour Rendre la Paix Perpetuelle en Europe*<sup>18</sup> authored in 1713 by Charles Irénée - Castel Abbe de Saint-Pierre, and Jean-Jacques Rousseau. Kant provides us with his own account of international conviviality in his *Toward Perpetual Peace: A Philosophical Project* maintaining that ‘nations should achieve lasting peace through a federation of free states. Kant postulates that power corrupts the will of those who have it, and infers, with Rousseau, that the policies of absolute rulers are often opposed both to right and to the

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<sup>17</sup> Thomas Schlereth, *The Cosmopolitan Ideal in Enlightenment Thought* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1977), pp. xi-xii.

<sup>18</sup> Castel de Saint-Pierre; Charles Irénée, *Projet Pour Rendre la Paix Perpetuelle en Europe* (Paris: Fayard, 1986).

public good' (AK 8:345).<sup>19</sup> He holds that 'the constitution of every state should be republican not only in order that it may accord to the idea of right but also because decisions about war and peace ought to be made by representatives accountable to the people' (AK 8:349-53).<sup>20</sup> As if both Kant and Elizabeth Barrett Browning were trying to establish their ideas from a marginal position, they are very cautious about the implications of such a venture. Kant writing almost under stately surveillance and loyal to his promise to his sovereign Friedrich Wilhelm II not to write on religious issues, articulates his ideas of cosmopolitanism at the risk of being accused of being naïve or excessively optimistic about the nature of the human race. That is why he is very preoccupied with refuting these accusations by diverting his readers' attention to his own doctrine of the innate human propensity to evil, emphasising that 'evil will always make peace more difficult to achieve even between justly constituted states under politically favourable conditions' (AK 8:345, 355, 379, 380).<sup>21</sup>

Elizabeth Barrett Browning was faced with the same problem both because she was a woman speaking outside from the sphere of the domestic and because she had invested all her hopes for the solution of the Italian question first in Duke Leopold and later Louis Napoleon III, causing embarrassment among friends and family. Kant's perpetual peace addresses humanity in general; it expresses a cosmopolitan ideal that binds together all human beings with the protective force of international rights. Kant's project is purely philosophical and bears an unrestrictedly cosmopolitan mark yet it would be a mistake to overlook its historicity as it was articulated in response to a specific historical situation and it aspired to establish the foundations upon which the historical task of the coming age would be based. In this respect, Elizabeth Barrett Browning and Kant share much common ground: Despite the fact that her encounters

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<sup>19</sup> Woods, p. 61.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., p. 61.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., p. 61.

with history are registered poetically, one cannot easily claim that they merely belong to the imaginary realm as, especially in ‘Casa Guidi Windows’, her response to the historic events from a fenestral point of view sets the context within which her cosmopolitan ideal and poetics acquire a prescriptive character in urging the Italians to fulfil their historical duty by claiming their right for self-definition.

Kant condemns the practices of European peoples who looked upon all other parts of the world as ‘mere ownerless territories; for the native inhabitants were counted as nothing’ and argues that the ‘discovery’ and ‘visitations’ of other parts of the world have been equivalent to conquest. Yet Kant’s cosmopolitan project needs to be checked in relevance to his writings on race and nation where his thought takes an unexpected turn. He maintains that Amerindians and Hindus all shared an incapacity for moral maturity because of their common ineptitude and proximity to nature that impedes their education. Africans while completely the opposite of Amerindians, full of passion, because of their vanity can be educated only as slaves and servants. In line with the naturalist discourses of his time, he even reaches the generalising conclusion that peoples of the hottest zones are idle and lazy-qualities that are only correctable by government and force.<sup>22</sup>

In Part II of *Anthropology from a Pragmatic View*, Kant begins with a discussion of the character of the person, moves on to the characters of the sexes and then proceeds to the character of nations. What is striking is that in his consideration of the character of the nations he rehearses his support of separate national entities as seen before, but he embarks on a classification of nations according to their degree of civilizing powers. As the character of each nation varies and the cosmopolitan project aspiring to perpetual peace is directly dependant on the character of the nations and their success in constituting together a federal state, he notes that only France and England

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<sup>22</sup> See Antonello Gerbi, *La Disputa del Nuevo Mundo: Historia de Una Polemica 1750-1900*, trans. Antonio Alatorre (Mexico City: Fondo de Cultura Economica, 1982), pp. 414-418.

are ‘the two most civilized nations on earth’,<sup>23</sup> and the fact that they are constantly at war with each other does not undermine their determining role in the progress of civilization. Thus the French and the English are the primary national characters while the third national character is the Spanish. What is evident, is that his classification retains an imperial order: Spain the decaying empire and England and France the emerging imperial nations. Moreover, he sets the character of the nation in racial terms in relation to Europe itself – the South of Europe. With his account of the Spanish national character as a mixture of Spaniard and Moorish blood which resulted in laziness, obedience, cruelty and romantic quality of spirit, he performs a geopolitical division of Europe. As Walter Mignolo put it: ‘Kant contributed to drawing the imperial difference between the modern/North Europe (England, France, Germany) and the traditional / South Europe (Spain, Portugal, Italy)’.<sup>24</sup>

The division of Europe, as pointed out by Mignolo, may account for the multiple conceptualizations and paradoxes of cosmopolitanism. It is, therefore, intrinsically important to my discussion of Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s cosmopolitan ideal and poetics, to appreciate the lasting effect of this division throughout the nineteenth century on the Romantic and Victorian imaginary representations of Italy and to locate the moments she re-appropriates to opposite effect, or distances herself from, this discourse. Her unfailing support for Napoleon III, which, as said before, puzzled and embarrassed her circle, can be seen as partaking of that complex and constant rewriting of the British national identity. Claiming a position at the intersection of national identities, the British, the French and that of her adopted country, Italy, she upsets the oppositional binary North / South deriving from Kant’s pattern and exposes the fierce competition among supreme nations for domination.

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<sup>23</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View*, trans. Victor Lyle Dowdell (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University, [1797] 1996). p. 226.

<sup>24</sup> Walter Mignolo, ‘The Many Faces of the Cosmopolis: Border Thinking and Critical Cosmopolitanism’, *Public Culture* 12:3 (2000): 721-748. p. 735.

Elizabeth Barrett Browning's references to Milton show that republicanism and cosmopolitanism were not mutually exclusive positions. While she denounces feminine idealizations of Italy constructed by pioneering literary figures such as Milton and Byron, the allusions to Milton are to be connected with his republicanism. It is evident that the oscillation between the rejection of masculine tradition and its re-appropriation become the tactics upon which she consolidates her position that Italy is worthy of its independence and nationhood. Cosmopolitan comprises the discourse within which she sets out to reconfigure her position in the world by renegotiating her national identity so as to perform her critique of the English cultural imagination and politics with relation to Italy. Since her primary task is to lay claim to Italy's right for self-definition, I must define the background against which she sets out to launch her critique of traditionally aestheticised treatments of Italy.

The imaginings of Italy in mid-nineteenth-century English culture, were inspired by the impressively fecund land, its rich cultural / historical associations, the sublime landscapes and their dream-like beauty and the languid mood due to the Mediterranean climate. In Charles Dickens' *Little Dorrit*, Flora illustrates the country's importance in English culture:

the grapes and figs growing everywhere and lava necklaces and bracelets too that land of poetry with burning mountains picturesque beyond belief...and is she really in the favoured land with nothing but blue about her and dying gladiators and Belvederas.<sup>25</sup>

As the passage suggests, the Italian landscape had multiple connotations for the English. Ultimately, Italy was a *milieu* of pure beauty and Eden-like fecundity ('grapes and figs growing everywhere'). Italy personified all of the natural, historical contrasts that most captivated the English imagination about the South. In consequence, it was perhaps of

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<sup>25</sup> Charles Dickens, *Little Dorrit* (London: Penguin, 1994), p. 598.

all countries one of the most thoroughly personified as mother by the Italians and the British alike. But Italy, apart from an edenic place, was the treasury of European culture. As Byron had declared, Italy was ‘parent of our religion’ and ‘mother of Arts’. (*Childe Harold* Canto IV, 419, 417)<sup>26</sup> Romantic and Victorian travelers, on their arrival in the peninsula were so taken aback by the archaeological riches and the artistic setting that they often developed the impression that art came to the Italians with the spontaneity of nature. This idea was articulated in literature with de Staël’s *Corinne* and L. E. L.’s *L’Improvvisatrice*,<sup>27</sup> both celebrating the natural improvising gifts of their poet-heroines. Moreover, the tourists due to the absence of industrial or any other economic activity, found in Italy ‘the organic time’, ‘measured by the pleasures and labour of vital human life’.<sup>28</sup> For them, time in Italy was mythical and its past fused with its present. Finally, Italy was the place whose charms urged the wanderer to daydream, to forget the unpleasant and the real. Tennyson provides us with a brilliant articulation of this idea in his poem ‘The Daisy’:

And I forgot the clouded forth,  
The gloom that saddens Heaven and Earth,  
The bitter east, the misty summer  
And grey metropolis of the North  
Perchance, to lull the throbs of pain  
Perchance to charm the vacant brain,  
Perchance, to dream you still beside me,  
My fancy fled to South again.<sup>29</sup>

English travelers were thus too preoccupied with Italy’s physical beauty and cultural heritage to see beyond the appearances and perceptions that provoked their fancy.

<sup>26</sup> George Gordon Lord Byron, *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage* (Teddington: The Echo Library, 2006).

<sup>27</sup> Letitia Elizabeth Landon, *The Improvisatrice and Other Poems* (London: Bibliobazaar, 2009).

<sup>28</sup> Peter Bailey, *Popular Culture and Performance in the Victorian City* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), pp. 13-29.

<sup>29</sup> Alfred Tennyson, ‘The Daisy’, *Selected Poems* (London: Penguin, 2001), p. 266, ll. 3, 15, 27, 42, 62, 101-108.

Part I of ‘Casa Guidi Windows’ clearly implies that England owes Italy support for its freedom movement when the poet prompts ‘[...] all the far ends of the world’ (I:1101) and England in particular ‘To swell the Italian banner just unfurled.’ (I:1103) while a bit further down she points out the reason why Italy should expect England to be in favour of its emerging national identity in her allusion to England’s cultural / literary indebtedness to Italy:

While England claims, by trump of poetry,  
Verona, Venice, The Ravenna-shore,  
And dearer holds John Milton’s Fiesole  
Than Langland’s Malvern with the stars in flower.

(I:1125-28)

Julia Markus in her edition of ‘Casa Guidi Windows’ remarks that these locales are often associated with the works of Shakespeare, Byron, and Shelley.<sup>30</sup> However, Elizabeth Barrett Browning is inclined to draw a direct connection with Milton, creating thus a link between his republicanism and the *Risorgimento*. Underlying her selection of Milton is his famous conviction articulated in *The Second Defence of the People of England*, that England will spread liberty all over the world, ‘disseminating the blessings of civilization and freedom among cities, kingdoms, and nations’.<sup>31</sup> Milton claims that England, ‘celebrated for endless ages as a soil most genial to the growth of Liberty’ (*Second Defence* 819), is assigned with the task of spreading liberty abroad. What binds Elizabeth Barrett Browning to Milton is that they both believe that Italian Liberty will be promoted with the guardianship of Britain. Milton grounds himself in traditional understandings of the mission of the civilised nations, which was later exemplified in Kant’s theory of perpetual peace, according to which England would be

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<sup>30</sup> Elizabeth Barrett Browning, *Casa Guidi Windows*, ed. Julia Markus (New York: The Browning Institute, 1977), p. 95.

<sup>31</sup> John Milton, ‘Second Defence of the People of England’, *Complete Prose and Major Poems*, ed. Merritt Y. Hughes (New York: Macmillan, 1957), p. 819.

among those supreme nations whose active role in the international federation would be indispensable.

In Part I of ‘Casa Guidi Windows’ Elizabeth Barrett Browning makes a resounding plea that ‘[...] all the far ends of the world’, but especially England, ‘Breathe back the deep breath of their old delight,’ in order ‘To swell the Italian banner just unfurled’ (I:1101-03). This is a vexing moment of her appropriation of Milton’s view regarding the liberating role of England, because in inciting the Italians to fight for their right for self-definition she eradicates Kant’s North / South bifurcation. She no longer aligns herself with the idea that Italy, situated in the South of Europe is both passive and languid. She merely proposes that England should stand by the side of Italy in return for Italy’s lasting influence on the development of English culture. Italy is thus presented as a political entity and not an aesthetic one by ‘filtering British mythology about Italy, through Milton, whose republicanism links him politically with the *Risorgimento*'.<sup>32</sup>

But it is not only on the score of his republicanism that Elizabeth Barrett Browning draws on Milton. In highlighting England’s cultural indebtedness to Italy, Elizabeth Barrett Browning alludes to an oblique side of the Miltonic appropriation of Italian sights and landscapes such as Fiesole and Vallombrosa. Elizabeth Barrett Browning writes about Vallombrosa, the Miltonic garden of Eden in *Paradise Lost*:<sup>33</sup>

Your beauty and your glory helped to fill  
The cup of Milton’s soul so to the brink,  
He never more was thirsty, when God’s will  
Had shattered to his sense the last chain-link  
By which he had drawn from Nature’s visible  
The fresh well-water. Satisfied by this,  
He sang of Adam’s paradise and smiled,

<sup>32</sup> Leigh Coral Harris, ‘From Mythos to Logos: Political Aesthetics and Liminal Poetics in Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s “Casa Guidi Windows”’, *Victorian Literature and Culture* 28.1 (2000): 109-131. p. 114.

<sup>33</sup> John Milton, ‘Paradise Lost’, *Complete Prose and Major Poems*, ed. Merritt Y. Hughes (New York: Macmillan, 1957).

Remembering Vallombrosa. Therefore is

The place divine to English man and child-  
And pilgrims leave their souls here in a kiss.

(I:1155-1164)

The symbol of Vallombrosa introduces the reader to her critique against the ambivalent relationship between Britain and Italy. Exalting at the paradisiac atmosphere on contemplating Vallombrosa, the British forget the blight of Italy's suppression. The primary connotation emerging from Vallombrosa's elevation into a sacred, divine locale in English literary tradition, is owed to the fact that it has inspired one of her most prominent illuminaries, Milton. Yet, in as much as Miltonic paradise is stigmatized by the energies of Satan, the appropriation of Italian landscape and the manipulation of its cultural heritage by the British can be equalled to the preservation of the evil forces that torment *Risorgimento* Italy, by denying it its political dimension.

Returning to 'Milton's Fiesole' (I:1125-28), Elizabeth Barrett Browning claims the importance of the Tuscan town in British tradition which is of course filtered by Milton's description of Fiesole, as the springboard for one's explorations of neighbouring and faraway mysterious places 'At En'ning from the top of Fesole[sic], Or in Valdarno, to descry new Lands' (I:289-291). The allusion to Milton's Fiesole reminds us of Britain's tradition in expeditions and ultimately the idea of the 'Empire' and British patriarchy. Milton made the same connections in *Paradise Lost*, wherein Satan finds Paradise a 'fair' place (IV:379) and one nourishing his desire for 'Honor and Empire with revenge enlarg'd / By conquering this new World' (IV:390-391). Additionally, the allusion to the imperial prospect, may be understood as the aesthetic 'colonization' of Italy by the British, which leads, as pointed out above, to Italy's political suppression.

The reference to Milton serves a dual role. First, to claim Britain's duty to Italy as the geopolitical space out of which the British had been mining inspiration for their

cultural (and poetical) development, and second, to highlight that the aesthetic reduction of Italy does not lack political intent since those imaginings are largely responsible and demonstrative of both Britain's negligence to come to Italy's aid and its imperial self-interest in commercial expansion.

### The ‘Able-man’ and Civic Citizenship

A well-wrought articulation of Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s views regarding her adopted country’s struggle to cast off foreign rule is manifest in the reference to Dante. Mining Italian cultural heritage for alternative symbolic images of the formation of the Italian nationhood, she deploys the iconic figure of Dante, who used to spend his evenings on a chair in front of the church where the crowds were parading:

On the stone  
Called Dante’s, - a plain flat stone scarce discerned  
From others in the pavement,- whereupon  
He used to bring his quiet chair out, turned  
To Brunelleschi’s church, and pour alone  
The lava of his spirit when it burned.  
It is not cold to-day. O passionate  
Poor Dante, [...] a banished Florentine,  
.....  
For Dante sits in heaven, and ye stand here,  
*And more remains for doing, all must feel,*  
Than trysting on his stone from year to year  
To shift processions, civic toe to heel,  
The town’s thanks to the Pitti. Are ye freer  
For what was felt that day? A chariot-wheel  
May spin fast, yet the chariot never roll.  
But if that day suggested something good,  
And bettered, with one purpose, soul by soul,-  
*Better means freer. A land’s brotherhood*  
*Is most puissant: men, upon the whole,*  
*Are what they can be, - nations, what they would.*

The symbolic function of Dante is double-edged as it capitalizes both on the cultural weight of his literary legacy and his suffering due to his liberal political views. Dante, ranking among prominent literary figures such as Cicero, Boccaccio and Petrarch, is invested with the political and cultural power of the Carlylean hero. Elizabeth Barrett Browning, eschewing temporal / spatial barriers, inserts Dante right in the middle of action so as to claim for herself his ability to catalyse political change and cultural progress. She saw Dante's moral-political example as an integral component of her own political goals for Italy.

Andrea Ciccarelli maintains that Dante's cultural model was far more progressive than Petrarch's and offers an insightful explication of Dante's pre-eminence as a cultural icon in the nineteenth-century Italian culture of the *Risorgimento*:

Action is banned from Petrarch's poetics because it implies, epistemologically the exploration of new experiences and the production of new ways of understanding . . . . Dante's cultural lesson, on the other hand, implies precisely the opposite point of view. The metamorphic nature of reality is not avoided but rather pursued, notwithstanding the inevitably painful surprises which such pursuit brings with it . . . . In this universe, memory is not relegated to the task of endlessly recreating a fixed past, but it is dynamically projected toward the future. Hope, not desperation, motivates Dante's aesthetic vision, while action and exploration are its epistemological means.<sup>34</sup>

Dante's cultural paradigm is in full consonance with Elizabeth Barrett Browning's critique of ossifying representations of Italy, and emerges as a source of inspiration for modelling her polemic against her Romantic precursors' proclivity to enshroud Italy in

<sup>34</sup> Andrea Ciccarelli, 'Dante and the Culture of Risorgimento: Literary, Political or Ideological Icon?', *Making and Remaking Italy: The Cultivation of National Identity around the Risorgimento*, eds. Albert Russell Ascoli and Krystyna Clara von Henneberg (Oxford; New York: Berg, 2001. pp. 77-102), pp. 79-80.

the mythical past. ‘We do not serve the dead - the past is past!’ (I:217) ‘And I, a singer also, from my youth, / Prefer to sing with these who are awake,’ (I:155-156) exclaims the poet, anticipating her celebration of poetry’s contemporaneity in *Aurora Leigh*. Moreover, her choice to appropriate Dante’s dynamic cultural model over Petrarch’s, resonates with her confrontations with the Petrarchan sonnet form and reveals a revisionist drive and a consistent critical stance against the ingrained epistemological limitations of the Petrarchan cultural paradigm at large.

Adina Ciugureanu is right to point out that the poet endows Dante with the virtues of Carlyle’s ‘Able-man’ in accordance with the widespread Romantic and Victorian sentiment that the transformation of the world is in the hands of a charismatic leader who acts upon divine inspiration.<sup>35</sup> Carlyle envisages the ‘Able-man’ in his lecture the ‘The Hero as King’ as

the most important of Great Men... practically the summary  
... of *all* the various figures of heroism; Priest, Teacher,  
whatsoever of earthly or of spiritual dignity we can fancy to  
reside in a man, embodies itself here, to *command* over us, to  
furnish us with constant practical teaching, to tell us for the  
day and how what we are to do. He is called *Rex*, Regulator  
*Roi*: our own name is still better; King, *König*, which means  
Can-ning, Able man.<sup>36</sup>

The earthly work of the hero as a result of divine inspiration is implied in the antithetical pair flat stone (earth) / Brunelleschi’s church (heaven). While the same line of thought supplants Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s enthusiasm with Napoleon III in *Poems before Congress*, in my view it is worth problematizing the assumption that she was single-handedly resting all her hopes in the ‘Able-man’ because her belief in the

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<sup>35</sup> Adina Ciugureanu, ‘Italian Culture, English Heritage: “Casa Guidi Windows” and “Aurora Leigh”’. *TRANS. Internet-Zeitschrift für Kulturwissenschaften*. No. 17 (2008):n. pag, web 20 November 2013. <[http://www.inst.at/trans/17Nr/5-1/5-1\\_ciugureanu17.htm](http://www.inst.at/trans/17Nr/5-1/5-1_ciugureanu17.htm)>.

<sup>36</sup> Thomas Carlyle, ‘The Hero as King’, *On Heroes, Hero-Worship and the Heroic in History*, p. 196.

ideal leader is bolstered by her acceptance that political change comes about from collective endeavours. Interestingly enough, the reference to Dante spanning across almost sixty lines concludes with her argument for Italy's nascent nationhood. She exclaims: 'And more remains for doing, all must feel,' (I:650) and that '[...] A land's brotherhood / Is most puissant! Men, upon the whole, / Are what they can be, -nations, what they would.' (I:658-660).

The first poem of *Poems before Congress* 'Napoleon III in Italy' conjoins a similar notion of the able leader with the politically empowered people. It is an ode to the French Emperor comprised of nineteen stanzas, all of which except for three end with the words 'Emperor / Evermore'. Extolning Napoleon was a very brave if not blasphemous venture, bearing in mind the turbulent relations between England and France at the time. In the volume's 'Preface' she explains that she loves truth more than 'Dante and Dante's country, more even than Shakespeare and Shakespeare's country' (4.553) and argues that her motivation for writing the poems is not the love for a particular country but the love for justice, preparing her readers for the glorifying depiction of the French emperor and a political theory that oscillates between Carlylean heroics and an ardently favourable response to the French people's approbation of Louis Napoleon. In the first stanza, she clarifies that Napoleon derives his power and greatness from his people's support: 'Stood eight millions up and swore / By their manhood's right divine / So to elect and legislate,' (ll. 4-6). In the course of the poem she rebukes those who criticised Louis Napoleon arguing that the people's choice is all that matters:

Autocrat? Let them scoff,  
Who fail to comprehend  
That a ruler incarnate of  
The people, must transcend  
All common king-born kings.

.....  
The people's blood runs through him  
.....

And from this great beginning  
Evokes a greater end  
To justify and renew him -

Emperor  
Evermore.

(ll. 294-298, 302, 305-308)

What is at stake in this passage is the poet's urgent need to claim agency for both Louis Napoleon and the French people and she does so by meditating on the making of the ideal leader who must constantly prove himself worthy of the people's mandate. In my view, the poet implicitly draws an analogy between the quasi-democratic empowerment of Louis Napoleon by the French people and the active role of the Italian people in ratifying the ideal leader's heroism in 'Casa Guidi Windows'.

Cronin, in his trenchant discussion of Elizabeth Barrett Browning's concept of citizenship, contends that in 'Casa Guidi Windows' and *Poems before Congress* the poet proves herself immune to the effects of England's disillusionment with the idea of citizenship. It is true that, between the years of the Terror and the end of the Napoleonic wars, the idea that interest in the constitution was itself unpatriotic gained more ground while at the same time it stirred very negative feelings as it was apprehended as some kind of an obsession with constitution-making that was typical of the French. Cronin maintains that Elizabeth Barrett Browning not only sought to disown the politics of her predecessors, rather 'she was ready to insist that it was precisely in France that the civic ideal had its origin, and in France too under its new emperor, Louis Napoleon the citizen King, rather than in the constitutional monarchy in Britain, that it found its

strongest realization'.<sup>37</sup> 'This man should renew the line / Broken on a strain of fate / And leagued kings at Waterloo, / When the people's hands let go.' (ll. 7-10), exclaims the poet unflinchingly aligning herself with the French people's renewed commitment to an ideal of citizenship which had been defeated at Waterloo.

Siding with Cronin, I propose that the analogy she draws between the organic connection of the people with their leader and the impetus of the Italian awakened national identity is strengthened by the fact that in both instances in order to reclaim citizenship she deploys corporeal language. While in 'Napoleon III' 'The people's blood runs through him,' (l. 302), in 'Casa Guidi Windows', 'The first pulse of an even flow of blood, / [...] prove[s] the level of Italian veins' (I:468-469). This analogy is premised on an ethics of justice which supplants her idea of nation making and requires the movement beyond nationalistic boundaries. She fleshes out her vision in the following lines:

Great is he,  
Who uses his greatness for all.  
His name shall stand perpetually  
As a name to applaud and cherish,  
Not only within civic wall  
For the loyal, but also without  
For the generous and free.

(ll. 381-387)

Elaborating on the function of the able leader she holds that he 'uses his greatness for all.' Not only his own people are the beneficiaries of his work, rather he is expected to act upon a more general desired aim of international welfare. These lines echo her relentless critique of Britain's politicians in the 'Preface', which according to Chapman is successful in 'redefining patriotism in a brave condemnation of British foreign

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<sup>37</sup> Richard Cronin, 'Casa Guidi Windows: Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Italy and the Poetry of Citizenship', *Unfolding the South: Nineteenth-Century British Women Writers and Artists in Italy*, eds. Alison Chapman and Jane Stabler (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003. pp. 35-50), pp. 36-37.

policies'.<sup>38</sup> Lamenting the absence of a political leader who will speak out truths for the general good she argues:

I confess that I dream of the day when an English statesman shall arise with a heart too large for England, having courage in the face of his countrymen to assert of some suggested policy, - "This is good for your trade: this is necessary for your domination; but it will vex a people hard by; it will hurt people farther off; it will profit nothing to the general humanity: therefore, away with it!" (4.554).

In laying claim to the expression of a large heart Elizabeth Barrett Browning transposes the rhetoric of the heart to a cosmopolitan vision. At the same time, she entertains the idea that a sentimental poetics may boast political acuity, reminding us of Aurora Leigh's dictum that the poet's heart must be 'large rounded as the globe,' easily able to 'swell to a pair of nationalities' (V 1181, V 50-51). In direct contrast to Tennyson's ardent nationalism, Elizabeth Barrett Browning envisions an international federation of distinct nations, '[...] with [N]o more England nor France!' ('Italy and the World', l. 47) claiming dominance over other nations, allowing thus the emergence of 'National voices, distinct yet dependent, / Ensphering each other, as swallow does swallow' ('Italy and the World', ll. 127-128). Keirstead aptly summarizes the poet's cosmopolitan vision. He writes: 'Under this vision, each nation, in essence, remains distinct but cannot exist by itself. Barrett Browning does not advocate the obliteration of national identities but rather proposes that they can be crossed more freely' (84).

Taken at face value her insistence to mete out to the people the political power to catalyse transformation, either by supporting an ideal leader as in 'Napoleon III' or by asserting its national identity as in 'Casa Guidi Windows', draws our attention to yet another contradiction originating in the poet's cross-bred political / ideological

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<sup>38</sup> Alison Chapman, 'Risorgimenti: Spiritualism, Politics and Elizabeth Barrett Browning', *Unfolding the South: Nineteenth-Century British Women Writers and Artists in Italy*, p. 85.

allegiances, exposing at the same time a deeper artificial dichotomy which renders the project of the Enlightenment and that of the Romantics' mutually exclusive. Kant in a provocative passage attempts to sketch the dynamics of a cosmopolitan ideal reconciling the seemingly opposing purposes of the Enlightenment and Romanticism.

He states:

... we may hope that what strikes us in the actions of individuals as confused and fortuitous may be recognised, in the history of the entire species, as a steadily advancing but slow development of man's original capacities... Individual men and even entire nations little imagine that, while they are pursuing their own ends, each in his own way and often in opposition to others, they are unwittingly guided in their advance along a course intended by nature.<sup>39</sup>

Kant maintains that the establishment of an international federation of nations presupposes a historical, *natural* process and that the progress towards such an ideal should be perceived as the outcome of human capacities on a large scale and not the actions of the few enlightened individuals.

Bo Earle's insightful reading of Kantian cosmopolitanism deftly designates the common ideological ground I wish to claim for Kant and Elizabeth Barrett Browning. He clarifies that Kant's cosmopolitanism constitutes the political site wherein Enlightenment and empiricism, as a model of radical diversity, and Romanticism and imagination as autonomous "action of the mind upon object" do not necessarily find themselves at irremediable cross-purposes.<sup>40</sup> He explains that 'it is actually not *in spite* of its conflict with those ideals that the empirical world promises such redemption but *because* of that conflict' (210). It is thus fruitful to measure Elizabeth Barrett

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<sup>39</sup> Immanuel Kant, 'On the Concept of History with a Cosmopolitan Purpose', *Political Writings*, ed. Hans Reiss (New York: Hafner Press, 1991. pp. 41-53) p. 41.

<sup>40</sup> Bo Earle, 'World Legislation: The Form and Function of a Romantic Cosmopolitanism', *European Romantic Review* 16.2 (2005): 209-220. p. 209.

Browning's cosmopolitan ideal bearing in mind that her investment in cultural and political iconic figures of Carlylean mould and her effort to construct a new politically potent and culturally re-imagined Italian psyche, reveal strong affiliations with the Enlightenment and Romanticism and a political stance which does not buy into reductive thinking. The following passage rehearses the inspirational role of the 'Ableman' and the urgency for a collective national consciousness:

Whatever man (last peasant or first Pope  
Seeking to free his country!) shall appear,  
Teach, lead, strike fire into the masses, fill  
These empty bladders with fine air, insphere  
These wills into a unity of will,  
And make Italy a nation [...]

(I:835-840)

Her political theory and enmeshment in the Italian Question is grounded in a vision of a rationally ordered cosmopolitan outlook which acknowledges the contribution of the charismatic leader yet unfailingly posits the agency of the human species in aggregate as a prerequisite in transforming the world. Yet, there are moments when the strident revolutionary tone betrays the ineluctability of an existential experience of warfare brutishness:

The first torch of the Italian freedom, lit  
To toss in the next tiger's face who should  
Approach too near them in a greedy fit, -  
The first pulse of an even flow of blood,  
To prove the level of Italian veins

(I:465-469)

The poet views the establishment of the Florentine civic guard as a touchstone event of the *Risorgimento*. Her cautionary rhetoric warns potential enemies of the Italian struggle to recoil from squandering the hopes for Italy's unification which were sparked

by the progress that had been achieved in Florence. The burning fire of ‘the first torch of the Italian freedom,’ signifies both the explosive awakening of the Italians and the emergence of national consciousness as an uncontested reality. The corporeal language and image of ‘The first pulse of an even flow of blood, / To prove the level of Italian veins’ (I:468-9) deploy the discourse of the heart for affective ends. With the rushing of blood in the body, palpitation and flows, the poet asserts the shared will for the nation’s unity in the feminizing terms of sentimental discourse. Yet continuous movement evokes masculine impetuous activity / agency, attesting to the amenability of the sentimental to elicit political meaning.

Blair, in her discussion of a passage teeming with cardiac references,<sup>41</sup> clarifies that the poetic use of the ‘heart of man’ (I:451) ‘gives the people only one, united heart’ (127). She adds that ‘The first pulse of an even flow of blood’ ‘will permanently alter the people’s heart, leaving their weaker ‘beats’ behind’ (128). In tune with Blair I argue that the careful ordering of pulse, flow and veins in lines I:468-469 creates a powerful sense of organic unity, while at the same time, the plural ‘veins’ draws our attention to the fact that the newly claimed Italian national identity encompasses diverse characteristics. Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s vision promises to unite the politically fragmented Italy in one vital entity, a nation-state whose people is organically bound together on a spiritual level as well. I am quoting extensively from the closing stanza of Part I, so as to show how she makes a stock physicalized / bodily language disturbingly realistic and how she manipulates it to the extreme end to invoke life through death.

Behold, they shall not fail. The shouts ascend  
Above the shrieks, in Naples, and prevail.  
Rows of shot corpses, waiting for the end  
Of burial, seem to smile up straight and pale

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<sup>41</sup> [T]he heart of man beat higher / That day in Florence, flooding all her streets / And piazzas with a tumult and desire. / The people, with accumulated heats, / And faces turned one way, as if one fire / Both drew and flushed them, left their ancient beats, / And went up toward the palace-Pitti wall, (I:451-7).

Into the azure air and apprehend  
That final gun-flash from Palermo's coast,  
Which lightens their apocalypse of death.  
  
So let them die! The world shows nothing lost;  
Therefore, not blood, Above or underneath,  
What matter, brothers, if ye keep your post  
On duty's side? As sword returns to sheath,  
So dust to grave, but souls find place in Heaven.  
  
Heroic daring is the true success,  
The eucharistic bread requires no leaven;  
And though your ends were hopeless, we should bless  
Your cause as holy. Strive - and, having striven,  
Take, for God recompense, that righteousness!

(I:1203-219)

Bearing Kantian overtones, the lines above present us with the horrific consequences of warfare. The body is here substituted with the corpse. The harsh realism of the image of the unburied dead bodies is mitigated by the fact that they 'seem to smile up' implying the divine gratification of their sacrifice. As the poet exhorts the remaining living to 'Strive' she also reminds them that their cause is sacred '[...] for God recompense, that righteousness'. Blood signifies here not life but bloodshed / death. The static, morbid image of the corpses introduces Elizabeth Barrett Browning's political statement that bloodshed / death is inevitable if the politically subjugated Italy is to achieve nationhood. Yet, she argues that revolution or 'heroic daring is success', for the sacrifice of the human body for a holy cause redeems the soul in a heavenly repose and animates the spirit of the nation. In the same vein, Kant points out that the historical progress towards a cosmopolitan alliance of nations entails the natural resolution of a pre-existing tension, usually achieved through the experience of 'devastations' and 'upheavals'. He writes:

War, tense and unremitting military preparations, and the resultant distress which every state must eventually feel within itself, even in the midst of peace-these are the means by which nature drives nations to make initially imperfect attempts, but finally, after many devastations, upheavals and even complete inner exhaustion of their powers, to take the step which reason could have suggested to them even without so many sad experiences-that of abandoning a lawless state of savagery and entering a federation of peoples in which every state, even the smallest, could expect to derive its security and rights not from its own power or its own legal judgement, but solely from this great federation, from a united and the law-governed decisions of a united will (*Political Writings* 47-48).

How then, does Kant imagine the affairs between nations? He is certainly not proposing a single world-state. To him that would be a ‘graveyard of freedom’ (AK 8:367)<sup>42</sup> since the law would become weaker and weaker in the hands of an enormous state. He holds that the separation of peoples in independent states is necessary to safeguard individual liberty and social developments. But since he is very much interested in laying out the principles of the historical task of the coming age, Kant proposes that these independent states must comprise a federal union that will flourish on optimal communication, mutual self-interest and commercial bonds. Kant’s insistence on communication and commerce counters the widespread view that state security is ensured by the perpetual preparedness to go to war. As already said, on a state level he believes that liberal representative republicanism is the option that will secure peace among the nations of humanity. He justifies his assertion by acknowledging that the capacity of a nation to make war is far more dependent on the strength of its economy than on the competence of its soldiers, statesmen and generals.

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<sup>42</sup> Woods, p. 63.

The strength of modern states, in his view, relies on ‘the spirit of commerce’, which is ultimately incompatible with war (AK 8:368)<sup>43</sup> and a nation that gives priority to preparations for war deprives its people of well-being, but also puts its scientific, cultural and moral development at a halt. He also maintains that more liberal and just states will be economically more powerful and as more states depend for their prosperity on commerce and economy, decisions will be made less often by those who benefit from giving priority to military power and more often by those who will have to succumb to the heavy ramifications a war could procure on their economy. In this way states will be inclined to renounce war as a serviceable course of action and people will finally realize that national security is only to be achieved through joining other states in peaceful federation.

### **Rebuking Inward-Looking British Foreign Policy**

At this point, I will try to trace the seeds of Kantian thought regarding cosmopolitanism and perpetual peace among nations in Mill and Arnold, and their disavowal by an accomplished barrister and essayist, James Fitzjames Stephen, with a view to elucidating Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s contemporary cultural / political exigencies.

Admittedly, the majority of the Victorian intellectuals participating in the debate regarding the meaning of cosmopolitanism did so mostly on account of their heightened concern over the notion of nationalism or patriotism, as guarantors of unity and coherence of the English nation in particular. Mill immersed himself in the discussion of nationhood and patriotism several times. Regarding the importance of nationality as a stabilizing factor in political society, we come across a moment of exceptional clarity in his ‘System of Logic’, where he states that nationality is

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid., p. 64.

a strong and active principle of cohesion among the members of the same community or state. We need scarcely say that we do not mean nationality in the vulgar sense of the term; a senseless antipathy to foreigners; an indifference to the general welfare of the human race, or an unjust preference to the supposed interests of our own country; a cherishing of bad peculiarities because they are national or a refusal to adopt what has been found good by other countries. [Instead] we mean a principle of sympathy, not hostility; of union not separation.<sup>44</sup>

This passage does not only underpin the importance of nationhood in achieving conviviality among the members of a nation, rather what is striking is that in his discussion he posits the welfare of the human race as a primary concern and he advocates that the principle of nationhood has to work in its best in consonance with the general interests of humanity. He therefore insists that nationhood must not turn against foreigners, and that it should not constitute a biased privileging of national interests. Most importantly, it should not be the reason for denouncing ‘what has been found good by other countries’. This argument directly addresses Kant’s cosmopolitanism in so far as it proposes that the perpetual peace among nations will be safeguarded by an international federal state. What is noteworthy though, if we were to compare the two, in contrast to Kant, Mill is not observed to be preoccupied with the authenticity of nations in the sense that Kant is in his classification of nations, upon which he premises his argument that the national character of the English and the French is geared to allow both these nations to assume a leading role in this federal state. Admittedly, this paradox in Kant’s thought, points to the shortcomings of his cosmopolitan project which was predicated on the criterion of cultural power and the coherence of national character,

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<sup>44</sup> John Stuart Mill, ‘System of Logic’, *The Collected Works of John Stuart Mill*, ed. F. E. L Priestley and subsequently John M. Robson, 33 Vols (Toronto and London: University of Toronto Press. 1963, 1991), 8:923.

and thus partially flawed by his geopolitical division of Europe. One needs to remember that the Spanish are disqualified from the ranks of supreme nations on account of their diverse characteristics due to the mixture of Moorish and Spanish blood.

What is important to note here is that Mill may not proceed like Kant to an eloquent evaluation of national characters but he makes reference to the enhanced capacities of an educated nation to progress through a feeling of nationhood, which will be committed to an overarching cosmopolitan ideal. The implication of such a proposition in one respect hinges on Kant's privileging of civilised nations, yet it seems that Mill capitalizes on the love of the country because he believed that the less educated people, one could argue nations as well, would not easily preoccupy themselves with the welfare of humanity. They would be though more inclined to identify with a feeling of nationhood that would have a cosmopolitan outlook in as much as England's contribution to international welfare would cause a rarefied feeling of pride among its citizens. He states:

When we consider how ardent a sentiment, in *favourable circumstances of education*, the love of country has become, we cannot judge it impossible that the love of that larger country, the world, may be nursed into similar strength, both as a source of elevated emotion and as a principle of duty.

('System of Logic' 10:421, my emphasis)

Mill wanted his countrymen to develop a profound interest for the world through a nationalism that would not advocate British self-interest uncritically and at the expense of the rest of humanity. Instead, he apprehended this national mode of being as a chance for the people to feel proud of their country on account of its benevolent role in the world. Mill's reservations regarding the pitfalls of a nationalism which cultivates imperialistic aspirations resonate with Elizabeth Barrett Browning's 1853 statement that

she was ‘much tired of the self-deification of the English nation at the expense of all others’.<sup>45</sup>

Mill was not alone in fighting nationalism that took pride in military superiority, colonizing projects, imperial power and commercial supremacy: Arnold, also alluded to an international law that would judge his nation’s contribution in the international arena. Therefore, Arnold’s nationalism does not take for granted England’s greatness among other nations. He argues:

I should be sorry to be a Frenchman, a German, or American, or anything but an Englishman; but I know that this native instinct which other nations, too, have *does not prove one’s superiority*, but that one has to achieve this by undeniable, excellent performance.<sup>46</sup>

This ‘undeniable, excellent performance’ though, is not expected in military, colonization policies or commerce but in achievement acceptable by other nations and only as long as it is targeted at the amelioration of mankind. At this point, one notes a departure from Kant in both Arnold and Mill, as Kant, as shown before, despite condemning military prowess, invested a lot in commerce as a guarantor of perpetual peace.

But there is more common ground between Mill and Arnold: Arnold in the passage quoted above also speaks of England’s ‘superiority’ among other nations, hinting at an elevated position among the league of nations, on account of commendable achievement. Arnold’s cosmopolitanism presents the same limitations as Mill’s, in its association of man’s capacity for devotion to the international cause with education. On a larger scale, this association implies the incapacity of less educated or civilised nations to partake in this international union on equal terms. Last, but not least, by the selection

<sup>45</sup> Elizabeth Barrett Browning, *The Letters of Elizabeth Barrett Browning*, ed. F. G. Kenyon (New York: Echo Library, 2007), 11:113.

<sup>46</sup> Matthew Arnold, *The Complete Prose Works of Matthew Arnold*, ed. R. H. Super, 11 vols, (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1960, 1977), pp. 17-18, vol. 5, my emphasis.

of nations in his proclamation of patriotic feelings, Arnold, makes it clear that Britain's rivalries for supremacy in the world are nations of considerable cultural power, and most importantly nations that in Kant's classification have qualified for the first, most civilised type of national character.

Arnold and Mill, both in the kind of language they use -Mill, for example, in denouncing antipathy to 'foreigners' and Arnold speaking of the good for the 'world'- and their argument, are cosmopolitans, but on neither account did their engagement with cosmopolitanism advance into refined cosmopolitics, in direct contrast to the prescriptive character of Kant's project.

As I have already hinted, another kind of nationalism was gaining all the more wider appeal amongst Victorians. Mill and Arnold were vehemently criticised by a loyal supporter of militant nationalism, Stephen. A comparative reading of the three indicates that the fact that they were writing from diverging positions of Liberal allegiances did not prevent them from developing opposing ideas on both the mission of Liberalism and the concept of nationalism and cosmopolitanism.

Having already exposed the similarities between Arnold and Mill, I will briefly turn to the striking antithesis between their discussion of nationalism in cosmopolitan terms and Stephen's understanding of nationalism in the context of his own reconstruction of Liberalism. Stephen's understanding of the English national character is largely inflated with his concept of historical development, according to which the struggle to overcome hardship and danger assumes a leading role in the self-determination of a nation. In its difficulty, this perpetual encounter of the English people with a set of diverse, inimical forces constitutes the equivalent of a heroic act repeated 'at a minute's notice'. But heroism is a man's trait. One need only recall the patriarchal powers at play in this period, to understand why the attribution of manly traits to the English national character exercised such a hold over his contemporaries.

Stephens in his essay ‘Mr. Mill on Political Liberty’ published in 1859, argued that the English nation was destined for ‘greatness’ as it was predisposed to rise up against all adversities for self-improvement. Commenting on the response of the English people to the Indian Mutiny, he writes:

Hundreds of men and women thrown on their own unassisted resources to fight for their lives at a moment’s notice, displayed a degree of individual resource and energy, combine with an unflinching reliance, not on each other primarily, but on themselves which cannot be paralleled in the history of any other time or country.<sup>47</sup>

One of the very few contemporary critics of Stephen’s work, Julia Stapleton, underscoring the implications stemming from such a conservative redefinition of Liberalism and the inherent dangers in the association of the English national character with masculine ‘virtues’ as in the passage quoted above, maintains that Stephen ‘vehemently upheld the historic institutions and traditional class structure from which he deemed them inseparable’.<sup>48</sup> Stephen’s insistence on preserving the social *status quo* and his refusal to allot political power to any other class apart from aristocracy, is demonstrative of his conviction that the self-realization of the English national character would be monitored by the select few members of the privileged class. Stephen’s comment on the response of the English people is problematic: He talks of ‘men and women’ ready for action, but on the other hand he does not clarify that these men and women must belong to a certain class. Also, by referring to women, one wonders under what circumstances and in what ways were women inclined to take up such an active

<sup>47</sup> James Fitzjames Stephen, ‘Mr Mill on Political Liberty’, *Saturday Review* 7 (12 Feb.; 19 Feb. 1859): 186-187; 213-214. Rpt. *On Liberty: Contemporary Responses to John Stuart Mill*, ed. Andrew Pyle (Bristol: Thoemmes, 1994). pp. 1-24. p. 20.

<sup>48</sup> Julia Stapleton, ‘James Fitzjames Stephen: Liberalism, Patriotism, and English Liberty’, *Victorian Studies* (Winter 1998): 243-263. p. 245.

political role since the patriarchal system of the time had designated the home as the only suitable space for female agency.

His conservative politics and the resolute rejection of a cosmopolitan vision is made clear in his statement that, the most that could and should be expected of ‘the great mass of mankind’ was that they

recognis[e] the moral and intellectual superiority of the few who, in virtue of a happy combination of personal gifts with accidental advantages, ought to be regarded as their *natural leaders*, and *[follow] their guidance, not slavishly but willingly*, and with an intelligent co-operation ('Mr Mill' 80, my emphasis)

In ‘Preface’ to *Poems before Congress* Elizabeth Barrett Browning astutely opposes conservatism and she loudly proclaims an ideal of international peace which is inexorably bound to social justice within the nation itself:

So if patriotism be a virtue indeed, it cannot mean an exclusive devotion to one's country's interests, - for that is only another form of devotion to personal interests, family interests or provincial interests, all of which, if not driven past themselves, are vulgar and immoral objects (4.553).

In the penultimate poem of the *Poems before Congress*, ‘Italy and the World’, she publicly scolds England for the isolationist politics, and the militant promotion of nationalistic interests, alluding to the extremist reactions of prominent figures in Britain, which were occasioned by Louis Napoleon’s successful and widely supported by the French people *coup d’etat* on December 2, 1851. She writes:

I cry aloud in my poet passion,  
Viewing my England o'er Alp and sea  
I loved her more in her ancient fashion:  
*She carries her rifles too thick for me,*

Who spares them so in the cause of a brother.

(ll. 96-100, my emphasis)

In this poem the poet loudly asserts her poetic authority and situates herself right in the middle of the heated political debate regarding England's disinterestedness in Italian affairs. She criticises British foreign policy as it fails to come to the aid of a member of an international brotherhood, Italy. Exploring the personal tone of the passage introduced by the assertion of the poetic 'I' and the consequent conflation of the speaker's voice with the poet's voice, Elizabeth Woodworth maintains that 'in order to 'cry aloud' against its current course, she redefines her place as citizen from a nationalistic, geographical position within England to that of an internationally located critical voice'.<sup>49</sup> Indeed, in this passage it is hard to miss the reference to Patmore's 1852 letter to the *Times* calling on the British people to form rifle clubs, in order to make sure that their 'capabilities of self-defence may be increased',<sup>50</sup> and Tennyson's poetical response to his friend's proposition. While Tennyson had wrought a series of martial poems in support of Patmore's initiative, Elizabeth Woodworth highlights the 'inflammatory jingoism',<sup>51</sup> of the verses that appeared in one of his letters to Patmore, under the title 'Rifle-Clubs!!!' I am here reproducing one stanza from Tennyson's poetical register of the effort to contribute to the safety of England:

We thought them friends and we had them here,

But now the traitor and tyrant rules!

And Waterloo from year to year

Has rankled in the hearts of the fools.

We love peace but the French love storm,

Riflemen, form! Riflemen, form!

<sup>49</sup> Elizabeth D. Woodworth, "I Cry Aloud in my Poet – Passion:" Elizabeth Barrett Browning Claiming Political Place through "Poems before Congress", *Browning Society Notes* 32 (March 2007): 38-54. p. 46.

<sup>50</sup> Coventry Patmore, 'A Rifle Corps' in the *Times* (January 22, 1852), p. 3.

<sup>51</sup> Elizabeth Woodworth, 'Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Coventry Patmore, and Alfred Tennyson on Napoleon III: The Hero-Poet and Carlylean Heroics', *Victorian Poetry* 44.4 (2006): 543-560. p. 545.

Riflemen, riflemen, riflemen, form!<sup>52</sup>

While Kant, Arnold, and Mill, as shown before, alluded to the leading role of civilised nations in an international state that will ensure the progress of all member nations, they also set out to introduce regulating mechanisms monitoring the relations between nations; Patmore and Tennyson seem more preoccupied with the equilibrium of power between nations of equal ranking. Stephen, on the other hand, proposes something radically different: That the weaker nations have to accept this *a priori* supremacy of the more powerful nations as a natural law. It is obvious that he is neither concerned with specifying the conditions under which this co-operation will be beneficial for the weaker nations, nor does he believe that this supreme position must be earned through achievement. However, weaker nations in such a co-operation run the risk of being assaulted -if not subjugated- by the military prowess denoted in a supreme nation's 'masculine' character. Elizabeth Barrett Browning, sensing the dangers of such a nationalism and realizing Britain's idle role in the Italian national cause, declares: 'I class England amongst the most immoral nations in respect to her foreign policies. And her "National defence" cry fills me with disgust' (*The Letters of Elizabeth Barrett Browning* 11:359).

### 'Cross-dwelling' and Visual Poetics in 'Casa Guidi Windows'

While ideas with cosmopolitan outlook have been articulated since antiquity, the words *cosmopolitan* and *cosmopolitanism* entered the English language in the early nineteenth century. The usage of the word *cosmopolite*, however, appeared already in the sixteenth century. As the English terms of the discussion prevailed in the nineteenth century and despite the fact that cosmopolitan thought was more at home in the enlightened eighteenth century, most scholars have often defined cosmopolitanism

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<sup>52</sup> Alfred Tennyson, *The Letters of Alfred Lord Tennyson*, eds. Cecil Y. Lang and Edgar F. Shannon, Jr., (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1981). vol. 2, pp. 20-21, ll. 8-15.

either in relevance to the rampant individualism of the Romantics or in the context of the discourse of rising nationalism in the nineteenth century. In my exploration of Elizabeth Barrett Browning's cosmopolitan poetics, further on, I will argue that nationalism remains an important referent as long as it contributes to international peace –justifying thus that her conceptualization of cosmopolitanism owes a lot to Kant. As far as individuality is concerned, in my view, her treatment significantly diverges from that of other Victorians and the Romantics, for in her pursuit of a pragmatic cosmopolitan poetics, she devises strategies that seriously question Kantian and Victorian proclamations regarding the role of leading nations on the one hand, and on the other, she resolutely opposes Romantic cosmopolitanism's tendency to celebrate the imaginary. Moreover, the renegotiation of the borders of English and Italian character and the blurring of their limits undermines Mill's understanding of nationality as a source of coherence and is poetically enacted by the fenestral point of view which enables her to 'cross-dwell'. In exploring the visual poetics in 'Casa Guidi Windows', I will turn to her engagement with the issues of vision and poetic authority in the poem's 'Advertisement':

This poem contains the impressions of the writer upon the events in Tuscany of which she was a witness. 'From a window,' the critic may demur. She bows to the objection in the very title of her work. No continuous narrative nor exposition of political philosophy is attempted by her. It is a simple story of personal impressions, whose only value is in the intensity with which they were received, as proving her warm affection for a beautiful and unfortunate country, and the sincerity with which they are related, as indicating her own good faith and freedom from partisanship (2.491).

What is intriguing about Elizabeth Barrett Browning's cosmopolitanism is that it is set on a nexus of seemingly conflicting interests. The fact that she was born and

brought up in Britain, yet ardently fought for Italy's right for self-definition and at the same time criticized British attitudes towards Italy points to a dual identity. What is more, in her 'Advertisement' she makes it clear that in 'Casa Guidi Windows' she 'occupies one of those threshold positions which [she] constantly utilizes in her poetry... situating herself within the 'feminised domestic space but also on the edge of the 'masculinised' public / political space'.<sup>53</sup> While the window blurs the line between the interior space of the poet's home and the exterior public space, it also neutralizes the tension between subjective and objective accounts. The distanced vantage point is what allows the poet to synthesize a more vivid and cohesive record of the events, as it enables her to deploy a wider angle than if her representation entailed direct involvement in the events. The augmented potentiality for mobility created by the window-frame technique can be understood as what Charles Spinoza and Hubert Dreyfus have named 'cross-dwelling'. Linda Shires is the first to introduce the concept in Elizabeth Barrett Browning studies, and she uses the term in order to explicate the multiple layers of female agency in Elizabeth Barrett Browning's ambivalent position in the male dominated discourses, such as the publishing culture, of Victorian England.<sup>54</sup> I propose that 'cross-dwelling' as a practice of crossing boundaries accounts for the conceptual and physical engagement with Italian nationalism and the blurring of limits of the English and Italian national character.

Elizabeth Barrett Browning's cosmopolitan poetics managed to blend the characteristics of English nationality and attitude and the interest for the human race and Italy by superimposing the values of the second on the first. In this way, she can skilfully inhabit two identities at once. Spinoza and Dreyfus theorise cross-dwelling in the context of a 'plural-world', 'anti-essentialist' argument in their effort to show that

<sup>53</sup> Simon Avery, "Twixt Church and Palace of a Florence Street:" Elizabeth Barrett Browning and Italy', *Elizabeth Barrett Browning*, ed. Simon Avery and Rebecca Stott, p. 160.

<sup>54</sup> Linda Shires, 'Elizabeth Barrett Browning: Cross-dwelling and the Reworking of Female Poetic Authority', *Victorian Literature and Culture* 30 (2002): 327-343. p. 737.

One can have at the same time the different skills required for dwelling in several weakly incommensurate worlds and hence can occupy more than one identity at the time. Since we are able to have multiple identities by dwelling in different worlds, the stable distinctions of any world need not be seen as establishing dangerous exclusionary practices.<sup>55</sup>

These thinkers believe that a person is able to reside in two worlds or contexts simultaneously and achieve equal entanglement with the set of practices underlying both realms. What is more interesting and relevant to Elizabeth Barrett Browning's case is that Spinoza and Dreyfus not only refer to spatial displacement but they argue that the same possibilities exist for temporal discontinuities. Thus, Elizabeth Barrett Browning may occupy one position in the hegemonic structures and one in marginal discourses, while it is also possible that she is acquainted with the set of practices of various realities as their remainders continue to exist in later epochs. It is therefore arguable that Elizabeth Barrett Browning could cross-dwell in a world of poetry compatible with dominant structures and a world of politics that allowed her to develop her criticism against the traditional/patriarchal constructedness of codes and institutions. Cross-dwelling also made it possible for her to occupy a position in a world of domesticity as a wife and mother and in a world that granted her access to the public sphere. Similarly, Spinoza's and Dreyfus' declaration that 'the stable distinctions of any world need not be seen as establishing dangerous exclusionary practices' (742), points to an experience of the world through the filters of her national identity and, at the same time, to a position in a space that allowed her to adopt a cosmopolitan stance, which, as shown before, was irreconcilable with the 'masculine' character of the English national character.

Within the context of the feminist reconstruction of Elizabeth Barrett Browning's figure as a poetic 'grandmother', Dolores Rosenblum in 1985 maintained that the

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<sup>55</sup> Charles Spinoza and Hubert L. Dreyfus, 'Two kinds of Antiessentialism and their Consequences', *Critical Inquiry* 22:4 (1996): 736-765.

operation of Elizabeth Barrett Browning's window-frame is twofold: first, as it mediates the poet's vision it allows her to assume alternate ways of seeing that can transform the world of action, and second, the discursive space created by the mediation of the window constitutes the site wherein she contests 'the aesthetic and political actors in human history'.<sup>56</sup> From the window she can watch 'the processional of history in the making' and meditate upon it at the same time. The fenestral view-point becomes then instrumental in cross-dwelling in two worlds which are predicated on the change of angle, which Elizabeth Barrett Browning exploits to either break with the seductive though paralyzing mythology of Italy or re-appropriate heroic literary tradition to awaken the Italians. Also, Rosenblum argues that the window-view complements the double nature of the speaker which is evident in the fusion of the personae 'I-the poet' and 'I-the woman'. Considering though that cross-dwelling enables border-crossing on multiple planes, I argue that the window-frame does not only structurally complement the fusion of personae but it practically eradicates the limits in all realms of conduct. Therefore, Elizabeth Barrett Browning is not only able to claim the poetic authority and the credulity of a male poet, but she can negotiate her own position in the world and with the world. More specifically, she is thus able to negotiate her relation to England and her adopted country Italy, and criticize English policies which hinder the realization of international peace. Rosenblum does not see how the cross-dwelling identity of the poet can serve the articulation of a cosmopolitan ideal, yet she anticipates that 'in 'Casa Guidi Windows' a double vision simultaneously domesticates the processional of history, focusing on a lived experience in the present as opposed to a dead past, and places the lived moment within a *cosmic perspective on which the present unfolds a dynamic future*' (62, my emphasis). It is therefore arguable that this visual dynamics

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<sup>56</sup> Dolores Rosenblum, "‘Casa Guidi Windows’ and ‘Aurora Leigh.’ The Genesis of Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s Visionary Aesthetic”, *Tulsa Studies in Women’s Literature* 4.1 (1985): 61-68. p. 61.

allows the displacement of the cross-dwelling identity in space and time, justifying thus the cosmopolitan allegiances of Elizabeth Barrett Browning's poetics.

In a more recent sight-oriented reading of the poem, Armstrong also notes the discursive possibilities emerging from fenestral vision, but goes a step further in clarifying that the suitable circumstances for the confrontation of the self with the world demand from the self to engage in a dialogue with the world. Armstrong contends that, the double vision of the poem creates 'a stereoscopic space that turns both outward and inward, creating an enclosure for the self and providing a scene of reverie', enabling thus 'the dialogue between the self and the world, as the visual law of the window allowed the lyric subject to look down upon the street and up to the sky'.<sup>57</sup> Such a proposition explains how the self through the dialogue with the world will achieve the reconfiguration of the position one can occupy in the structures traversing the world and eventually, realize the possibilities of what Rosenblum named '*cosmic perspective*'.

### Subverting Feminised Poetic Figurations of Italy

In Part II of 'Casa Guidi Windows' Elizabeth Barrett Browning's concern with paradisiac imaginings of Italy as well as the British imperial desire to map and rule landscapes outside domestic territory as traced in the Miltonic appropriation of Vallombrosa and Fiesole, is renewed in her mocking stance against the European nations which retracted from coming to Italy's aid and now gather at the International Fair in the Crystal Palace.

But now, the word is busy; it has grown  
A Fair-going world. Imperial England draws  
The flowing ends of the earth, from Fez, Canton,  
Delhi and Stockholm, Athens and Madrid,  
The Russias and the vast Americas,  
As if a queen drew in her robes amid

<sup>57</sup> Isobel Armstrong, "'Casa Guidi Windows.' Spectacle and Politics in 1851', *Unfolding the South. Nineteenth Century British Women Writers and Artists in Italy*, p. 55.

Her golden cincture, - isles, peninsulas,  
Capes, continents, far inland countries hid  
By jasper-sands and hills of chrysopras,  
All trailing in their splendours through the door  
Of the gorgeous Crystal Palace. [...]

(II:577-87)

Through her critique of the Empire's commercial interest in foreign territories, mostly evident in the exaggerated descriptions of eastern clichéd sights, she supplements her reconstruction of Italy with a political connotation, for such cultural narratives can never be devoid of political meaning. As Maura O'Connor explains in *The Romance of Italy and the English Political Imagination*, 'neither high politics nor foreign policy may be viewed as domains separate from the cultural imagination and production'.<sup>58</sup> But in what way does she exploit her politicised narrative of Italy in rebuking English popular imagination? Leigh Coral Harris commenting on this passage argues:

Just as Barrett Browning implies that an imperial commercial economy glares behind the popular British idea of what is essentially eastern, she makes a similar point that 'poor Italia, baffled by mischance' (I 651) lies politically subjugated not only by the Austrian empire but by those dreams of mythic Italy ('From Mythos' 116).

David makes similar remarks, stating that this passage ushers a critique of 'mercantile colonialism' and further suggests that the cultural gestures of Imperial England, especially those responsible for the aestheticisation of Italy are never politically inert.<sup>59</sup> In the context of such readings, Elizabeth Barrett Browning's cosmopolitanism, in contrast to Kant's, does not favour commerce as a guarantor of peace but regards it as a very important source of conflict and suppression. The poet

<sup>58</sup> Maura O'Connor, *The Romance of Italy and the English Political Imagination* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1998), p. 1.

<sup>59</sup> Deirdre David, *Rule Britannia. Women, Empire, and Victorian Writing* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1995), p. 22.

mocks the commercial outlook of the international relations embodied in the Exhibition, which situates nations in antagonistic relations rather than in co-operative ones. More specifically, in British foreign policies determined by the nation's self-interest in commercial activity in foreign territories, Elizabeth Barrett Browning documents a political act that overrides any progress towards world peace and internationalism. She writes:

[...] Every nation,  
To every other nation strange of yore,  
Gives face to face the civic salutation,  
And holds up in a proud right hand before  
That congress, the best work which she can fashion  
By her best means. 'These corals, will you please  
To match against your oaks? [...]

(II:587-93)

While Elizabeth Barrett Browning's skills in cross-dwelling are revealed in her ingenious ways of attaining a position in masculine literary tradition and at the same time grounding herself in a space that allows her to attack idealising tropes of Italy, she also appears aware of the limitations of the poetic genre which had been manipulated by her male peers. As her effort to substantiate her cosmopolitan poetics and reconstruct Italian nationality is realised in the trajectory from 'mythos' to 'logos,' to use Harris's terms, the prophetic tone of 'Casa Guidi Windows' introduces the challenging of another male tradition, namely the elegiac response to Italy's misfortunes by substituting it with prophesy. In the following stanzas her strident tone is heightened, suggesting in the penultimate stanza that descriptions of idle Italians no longer reflect the truth, as they may be weak but they are awake:

Too many of such complaints! behold, instead,  
Void at Verona, Juliet's marble trough.  
As void as that is, are all images

Men set between themselves and actual wrong,  
To catch the weight of pity, meet the stress  
Of conscience, - since 'tis easier to gaze long  
On mournful masks, and sad effigies,  
Than on real, live, weak creatures crushed by strong.

(I:41-48)

Elizabeth Barrett Browning's purpose here is not to celebrate the aestheticised construction of Italy by poets and travelers but to urge English readers to join '[...] this great cause of Southern men [...]’ (1:1201). The shift of focus registers her movement from representing Italy as an overdetermined cultural signifier possessed by the world to portraying Italy as an articulate national space demanding recognition. Matthew Reynolds in his brilliant reading of this passage argues that

the triple rhyme which is kept up through the poem in combination with habitual enjambment and the general looseness of rhyme (e.g. stress-effigies) ... the heavy strike of the last line with its alliteration ('cr') [and] internal rhyme ('ea') produce a careering impetus.<sup>60</sup>

This ‘careering impetus’ of the verse exemplifies this shift of focus and works in support of Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s decision to substitute elegiac representations of Italy with a prophetic tone, so as to imbue the national struggle of the Italians with her confidence that soon their national expectations will be fulfilled.

What Elizabeth Barrett Browning achieves with this strategy is to claim, this time for herself, the status of the Carlylean ‘Prophet and Poet’. In his famous lecture *On Heroes*, Carlyle declared that ‘Prophet and Poet are fundamentally still the same’ in that they can immerse themselves in ‘that Divine Idea of the World’.<sup>61</sup> It is my view, that her choice of prophecy very well accommodates her cross-dwelling identity in that she can have a glimpse into a geopolitical configuration within which the British self-

<sup>60</sup> Matthew Reynolds, *The Realms of Verse 1830-1870* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), p. 88.

<sup>61</sup> Thomas Carlyle, ‘The Hero as Poet’, *On Heroes, Hero-Worship and the Heroic in History*, p. 80.

interest collides with the Italian reality, and, at the same time, make overarching cosmopolitan claims from an elevated position in the ‘Divine Idea of the World’. As prophecy, the poem should therefore be received as referring more to a concept of nation paying attention to the effacement of geopolitical and temporal boundaries. Consequently, the nation’s emergence cannot take place in a conceptual context other than the cosmopolitan ideal. This might sound contradictory in view of the historicity I claim for ‘Casa Guidi Windows’ in drawing the affinities between Kant and Elizabeth Barrett Browning, but one needs to be reminded that historicity is here treated in relevance to each intellectual’s capacity to propose a historical project and not his commitment to representing historical events objectively. ‘Casa Guidi Windows’ comprises such an endeavour since Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s explicit aim is to incite the Italians to fight for the right to self-definition and her English compatriots to assist them to that end.

Byron in *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage* bewails Italy’s blighted position and provides us with an elegiac indulgence of woe. He refers to Rome as the ‘Lone mother of dead Empires’ and the ‘Niobe of nations’ (*Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage*, canto 4, sts 78, 79). The opening of ‘Casa Guidi Windows’ denounces poetical expressions of elegiac feeling because they endorse the idea that Italians were not of adequately active character to claim their independence and that on this account one could only feel pity for them. Conversely, she chooses to incite the Italians towards this direction by making clear this revolutionary ambition through a prophetic tone that presents Italy in its capacity to move into self-realization in the future and not as the landscape of dream, art and memory. In this passage she targets Byron directly, whom she reprimands for creating a

Some personating Image, wherein woe  
Was wrapt in beauty from offending much,

They called it Cybele, or Niobe,  
Or laid it corpse-like on a bier for such,  
Where all the world might drop for Italy  
Those cadenced tears which burn not where they touch, -  
'Juliet of nations, canst thou die as we?'

(I:30-36)

The striking difference between Byron and Elizabeth Barrett Browning is that the personifications of Italy as Niobe and Juliet in 'Casa Guidi Windows' do not assume the currency of subjective, elegiac response. By contrast, the allusion to Byronic figurative language is instrumental in laying out her commentary against misconceptualised narratives of Italy, whose sensibility related connotations are epitomised in the personifications of Italy as Niobe or Juliet. Commenting on 19<sup>th</sup> century Italian politics, Harris proposes that Victorian women writers were more progressive than their male counterparts because they attempted to substitute the Romantic view of Italy with a 'non-mythic, recognisable modern and implicitly liberal view'. Hence, in Victorian women writers Italy was perceived as a political entity 'with legitimate claims to independence'.<sup>62</sup> It is beyond the scope of this study to test Harris's generalising argument, yet as far as Elizabeth Barrett Browning is concerned, in my view her reading gratifies the political aspirations of her Italian poems. On the contrary, I would argue that Gilbert's proposition that Victorian women writers deployed the Italian metaphor with a view to reducing it 'from a political state to a female state of mind' and 'from a problematic country in Europe to the problem condition of femaleness',<sup>63</sup> in so far as it might draw our attention to the potential identification of women writers with Italy's subjugation, also single-handedly disclaims their genuine preoccupation with politics.

<sup>62</sup> Leigh Coral Harris, *The Other Italian Question: Gender and the Figure of Modern Italy in Modern Culture, 1820-1940* (Michigan: Ann Arbor, 2001), p. 5.

<sup>63</sup> Sandra Gilbert, 'From *Patria* to *Matria*: Elizabeth Barrett Browning's Risorgimento', in *Victorian Women Poets*, p. 36.

In Part I, following the profusion of poetical representations of Italy, the poet portrays Italy as an ‘impassioned nympholept’ (I:190). The poet offers an explication of her selection of this word in a letter to John Ruskin: ‘it’s a word for a specific disease of mania among the ancients, that mystical passion for an invisible nymph... We all are nympholepts in running after our ideals’ (*The Letters Of Elizabeth Barrett Browning* 1:201). Thus, nympholepsy here alludes to Italy’s struggle to cast-off Austrian rule. Italy’s ideal nymph is freedom and nationhood. Similarly, Chapman offers a contextualised reading of the Greek reference, which trumps any possible assumption suggesting careless utilization of the word. She writes: ‘In the poem ... it is not the mythologisers of Italy who suffer from the ancient disease, but Italy itself’.<sup>64</sup> Nympholepsy here marks the objectives of the Italian struggle and not the objectifying configurations of Italy by Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s precursors.

Alas, this Italy has too long swept  
Heroic ashes up for hour-glass sand;  
Of her own past, impassioned nympholept!

.....

[...] So henceforth she would seem  
No nation, but the poet’s pensioner,  
With alms from every land of song and dream,  
While aye her pipers sweetly pipe of her,  
Until their proper breaths, in that extreme  
Of sighing, split the reed on which they played!  
Of which, no more. But never say ‘no more’  
To Italy’s life! Her memories undismayed  
Say rather ‘evermore’, [...]

(I:188-190, 206-214)

In the second excerpt the poet structures her scathing criticism of the excessive feminisation of Italy on yet another Greek metaphor. Italy is tapered off into a broken

<sup>64</sup> Alison Chapman, “‘In our own blood drenched the pen:’ Italy and Sensibility in Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s Last Poems (1862)”, *Women’s Writing* 10.2 (2003): 269-286. p. 272.

reed, evoking the myth of Pan and Syrinx, yet the distribution of agency is perplexing. While in line 206 it is stated that it was Italy's own choice to become the nymph chased after by the piper, in Markus's 1977 edition the line reads: 'So, henceforth, she would seem'. In my view the 1851 version most effectively captures the difficulty of understanding creativity and politics through the analytic category of gender. The consuming power of the pipers' sighs of pity leading to the destruction of the Syrinx they love perfectly corresponds to the damaging effect of Byronic elegiac representations of Italy. What is important to note regarding the deployment of the Pan and Syrinx myth is that it exposes creativity and politics in gendered terms and while the 1851 version assigns agency to the Syrinx who stands for Italy and the woman poet, at the same time, it is inferred that it is eventually tamed by the objectifying powers of Pan who represents foreign rule and the male poet. The tale of Pan and Syrinx is recounted by Mercury in Ovid's *Metamorphoses* and concerns the metamorphosis of the wood nymph, who is chased after by the goat-god Pan. Syrinx seeks refuge on the banks of the river Ladon asking the sisters of the stream to come to her aid. Pan eventually gets hold of her but she has already transformed into marsh reeds. As Pan stands by the side of the river he listens to the music produced by the wind blowing through the reeds: 'You and I shall always talk together so' he cried; then he took reeds of unequal length, and fastened them together with wax. These preserved the girl's name'.<sup>65</sup> The memorialization of Syrinx's name presupposes though her reduction into reeds which

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<sup>65</sup> 'A Musical Instrument' was initially published in Thackeray's Cornhill Magazine in July 1860. Chapman informs us that Elizabeth Barrett Browning sent the poem in April immediately after the publication of *Poems before Congress*. She premises her argument that the poem is an allegorical treatment of Italy's destiny based on the poet's commentary pertaining to the controversial reception of *Poems before Congress* and her decision to include it in her *Last Poems* (which was published posthumously) between two intensely political poems 'De Profundis' and 'First News from Villafranca'. Chapman brilliantly encapsulates her argument as follows: 'Situated alongside the architectural and literary double genealogies of Italy, and particularly Florence, 'A Musical Instrument maybe interpreted as poem about tyranny and power in the specific environment of its creation and dissemination ... and makes a powerful comment about the very function and mechanics of writing itself in such a historical moment' ('In our blood' 277). I am quoting from Chapman what the poet wrote to Isa Blagden about her contribution to Thackeray's magazine: 'Robert suggested that now he probably wants nothing from such profane hands. ... The poem is 'meek as a maid', tho to the last thing I wrote' ('In our blood' 275; Kenyon, *The Letters of Elizabeth Barrett Browning*, 2:377).

bound together as a pipe become the vehicle for the sonar expression of her predicament. This is precisely the reason why Elizabeth Barrett Browning was repeatedly attracted to Pan throughout her career.

Chapman makes a strong case about the rich symbolical texture and the Italian references of Elizabeth Barrett Browning's appropriation of the tale arguing that 'A Musical Instrument', her last Pan poem, is connected to the poet's engagement with Italian affairs. As it was published four months after *Poems before Congress* saw print, she argues that the selection of the natural theme is strategic in an attempt to appease the truculent critical reaction spurred by the political content of the volume. Chapman thus extrapolates that "“A Musical Instrument” though Hellenic in theme, refers directly to the ethic of Italy’s representations as a tragic feminine figure' ('In our blood' 275), and that 'the classical story is not only excavated as an intrinsic part of the Italian geography and psyche, but also seen to prejudice the nation’s future independence' ('In our blood' 276).

While for male Romantic poets the figure of Pan exerted a certain appeal in troping poetic inspiration as quest for the female muse, for Elizabeth Barrett Browning the sound created through the syrinx represents the constraints of female expressivity as ineluctably bound to wailing, loss and elegiac sentiments and the lyric 'I'. Margaret Morlier in her erudite study of Elizabeth Barrett Browning's Pan poems ('The Dead Pan', 'The Reed', 'Mountaineer and Poet' and 'A Musical Instrument'), pays generous attention to the ideological matrix surrounding Syrinx's transformation into reed and forcibly argues that the poet utilizes the story, turning the Romantic model of identification with the female muse on its head, in order to protest against the subjection of the feminine to the masculine. She notes that 'Barrett Browning not only gives voice to the reed, but also instead of complaining about the fate of Syrinx, proposes that the role of any poet should be like the reed, mediating moral reality rather than, like Pan,

presuming to create it'.<sup>66</sup> In my view Morlier's remark signposts the internalization of Greek mythology in figurative patterns pondering the issue of creativity, and at the same time it strangely jibes with a recurrent element in Elizabeth Barrett Browning's poetics: the deployment of the poet-prophet's authoritative voice. Indeed, her appropriation of the Pan and Syrinx myth in the face of Keats's famous fashioning of Pan as poetic muse in *Endymion* and 'Ode on a Grecian Urn' awkwardly illuminates the Carlylean mediatory role of a poet who is able to effect change as an emissary of divine truth and a representative of a higher moral order, and betrays her insistent anxiety about female creativity and sentimental expression. In my view, both Chapman and Morlier's readings do justice to my treatment of Elizabeth Barrett Browning's theory on the role of the poet, while they simultaneously challenge Gilbert's influential argument that the *Risorgimento* signifies the poet's disobedience to the tyrannical father and her elopement to Italy.<sup>67</sup> As discussed in the first chapter, her elegiac responses to the poetics of Hemans and L.E.L. betray her deep ambivalence towards the ideology of female creativity as expression of sensibility, while reclaiming authority for the female speaker more often than not entails the assumption of the voice of the prophet or *vates*.

Elizabeth Barrett Browning performs a radical break with feminised narratives of Italy by attacking the core of such imaginary constructions: In Part II she elaborates on yet another association of Italy with a masculine historical republican figure. With a view to moderating and renewing her condemnation of feminised representations of Italy, she devises a metaphor of Italy as Brutus:

When Marcus Brutus he conceived complete,  
And strove to hurl him out by blow on blow  
Upon the marble, at Art's thunderheat,

<sup>66</sup> Margaret M. Morlier, 'The Death of Pan: Elizabeth Barrett Browning and the Romantic Ego', *Browning Institute Studies* 18 (1990): 131-155.

<sup>67</sup> I am referring to Gilbert's argument in her article 'From Patria to Matria: Elizabeth Barrett Browning's Risorgimento', *Victorian Women Poets*, that the poet deploys female personifications / poetic figurations of Italy as metaphors for 'both the reality and fantasy of her own female / poetic revitalization', p. 26.

Till haply (some pre-shadow rising slow,  
Of what his Italy would fancy meet  
To be called BRUTUS) straight his plastic hand  
Fell back before his prophet-soul, and left  
A fragment, a maimed Brutus, - but more grand  
Than this, so named at Rome, was!

(II:557-565)

Brutus, in 44 BC assassinated Julius Caesar driven by his belief that the Republic would be saved if the tyrant were eliminated. In the course of the poem one encounters several times the image of Michelangelo looking at his Brutus' unfinished bust, which was never completed because the artist could not find a Brutus figure upon which to model his sculpture. The interest in Italy's republican past and the projection of Brutus as the republican hero *par excellence* has a twofold resonance. First, capitalising on republicanism's appeal to revolutionaries, which traverses Roman, Renaissance and *Risorgimento* Italy, she proposes that the temporal continuum justifies Italian assertions for national self-realization. Secondly, this temporal continuum gains more importance in the possibility that another Brutus may come into prominence and restore the Republic in *Risorgimento* Italy.

What is interesting about the Italy-as-Brutus metaphor is that radical diversion from dominant, feminised conceptualizations of Italy is marked by the main characteristic of the English nation, masculinity. Once more Elizabeth Barrett Browning manipulates this cross-dwelling tactic and creates an amalgam of connotations corresponding to her multiple subject positions as an English woman and as an expatriate cosmopolitan. A popular understanding of the English national character in Victorian times, as already shown with the case of James Fitzjames Stephen, was 'masculine'. What Elizabeth Barrett Browning does is to leave the imprint of the English national character on the nascent Italian nation, so as to provide a justification

of her adamant proclamations regarding Italy's capacity to become a nation. In the light of her cosmopolitan ideal, though, the virile virtues of the English national character are transposed on Italy by means of the Brutus figure, in the service of her liberating project for Italy. Assertion of power in the name of such a cause is acceptable for Elizabeth Barrett Browning, who is very well aware that bloodshed is inevitable in revolutions. Simon Avery makes this point in drawing an analogy between the *Risorgimento* and the nationalist uprisings in Africa against colonising forces: 'While Barrett Browning is clearly against brute force ... she certainly recognises that violence against the oppressive coloniser is necessary for liberation and purification to take place'.<sup>68</sup> Recalling her denunciation of Britain's imperial intentions and reliance on commercial expansion is crucial in making this distinction: Within the context of her cosmopolitan vision, masculinity is deployed to opposite effect and it is obvious that she could have never sided with Stephens's nationalism, whose masculine character is overtly connected with a set of policies (e.g. colonisation, blunt mercantilism) promoting the dominion of England over the 'weak'.

Elizabeth Barrett Browning's cosmopolitan poetics in as much as it re-appropriates the masculinity of the English national character and its capacity to inoculate Italy to the vigour of male activity, foregrounds the conceptual and physical possibilities generated by cross-dwelling. Chapman provides us with a brilliant insight on the dynamics of such a practice in her discussion of the reconstruction of the figure of the poetess which took place due to the entanglement of the expatriate poetesses with *Risorgimento* politics. According to her, their engagement with the Italian cause, not only marks the moment of their transcendence from the domestic to public sphere but points to a cultural shift which lead them to discard their professed Englishness and exploit the fissures of British identity as opportunities for more fluid connections to the

<sup>68</sup> Simon Avery, 'Twixt Church and Palace of a Florence Street': Elizabeth Barrett Browning and Italy', eds. Simon Avery and Rebecca Stott, p. 170.

nation. This shift carried further implications in the traditional definition of the poetess as the epitome of Englishness in the female literary production as it was deeply embedded in the discourses of domesticity and sensibility. Chapman insists that the enmeshment with *Risorgimento* politics both subverted the traditional understandings of the English national character and reconfigured the discourses with which the figure of the poetess was associated. She supports that the expatriate poetess emerges, indeed, as ‘a mobile category, always already in transit, signifying her patriotism paradoxically through devotion to nations not her own’,<sup>69</sup> With Elizabeth Barrett Browning –whom Chapman does not charge with the excessive sensibility of the poetess- no longer does the domestic oppose the public; and never before did Englishness emerge more enabling for wider a view of the world which became available to her from alternating angles provided by double vision. It is therefore evident that Elizabeth Barrett Browning comes to challenge even the redefined figure of the poetess which developed parallel to the cultivation of the Anglo-Italian identity, for her cross-dwelling pursues a cosmopolitanism dependent more on international peace and forms of international allegiance than national or even bicultural.

The following passage is telling of Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s conviction that one should give his first allegiance to no mere form of nation, no temporal power, but to the moral community made up by the humanity of all human beings.

[...] Is your courage spent  
In handwork only? Have you nothing best,  
Which generous souls may perfect and present,  
And He shall thank the givers for? no light  
Of teaching, liberal nations, for the poor,  
Who sit in darkness when it is not night?  
No cure for wicked children? Christ, - no cure!

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<sup>69</sup> Alison Chapman, ‘The Expatriate Poetess: Nationhood, Poetics and Politics’, *Victorian Women Poets*, ed. Alison Chapman (Cambridge: Brewer, 2003), p. 59.

No help for women, sobbing out of sight  
Because men made the laws? no brothel-lure  
Burnt out by popular lightnings? – Hast thou found  
No remedy, my England, for such woes?  
No outlet, Austria, for the scourged and bound,  
No entrance for the exiled? No repose,  
Russia, for knouted Poles worked underground,  
And gentle ladies bleached among the snows? -  
No mercy for the slave, America? -  
No hope for Rome, free France, chivalric France? -  
Alas, great nations have great shames, I say.  
No pity, O world, no tender utterance  
Of benediction, and prayers stretched this way  
For poor Italia, baffled by mischance?  
O gracious nations, give some ear to me!  
You all go to your Fair, and I am one  
Who at the roadside of humanity  
Beseech your alms, - God's justice to be done.

(II:631-55)

In the light of the competitive spirit of the Great Exhibition, Elizabeth Barrett Browning launches her polemic against the nations that fail to assist the weak. In this passage of social criticism what is important to notice is the shift of focus. Following the description of the exposed international goods, she recoils from the predicaments of destitute children, women and exiles, in order to underscore the consequences of the ill-natured international antagonisms and the need to subscribe to a cosmopolitan vision. Beverly Taylor argues that the antithesis between the international and the particular reaches a climax in the ‘evocation of an individual begging ‘at the roadside of humanity’ [which] re-orientates the imagery of international treasure, locating essential

value instead in the populace, the individual woman and children overlooked by nation-states that poured their resources into the Crystal Palace'.<sup>70</sup>

## Conclusion

In concluding my exploration of Elizabeth Barrett Browning's cosmopolitan ideal and poetics, I will turn my attention to a passage which, in my view, summarises the ideas discussed in this chapter. In total contrast to the tendency of the eighteenth and early nineteenth century English cultural imagination to define itself in relation to Italy's otherness, which also served to nourish the English egotistical sense of superiority to the rest of the world, and, in defiance to the mercantilist doctrine of splendid isolation and the imperial aspirations of England's foreign policies, Elizabeth Barrett Browning's Italy becomes the discursive site upon which the growing feeling of mutual dependence and responsibility and the recognition that no man or country can be truly free while another is in chains are promoted.

*I love no peace which is not fellowship,  
And which includes not mercy. I would have  
Rather, the raking of the guns across  
The world, and shrieks against Heaven's architrave;  
Rather, the struggle in the slippery fosse  
Of dying men and horses, and the wave  
Blood-bubbling .... Enough said! – by Christ's own cross,  
And by this faint heart of my womanhood,  
*Such things are better than the Peace that sits  
Beside a hearth in self-commended mood,*  
And takes no thought how wind and rain by fits  
Are howling out of doors against the good  
Of the poor wanderer. What! Your peace admits  
Of outside anguish while it keeps at home?  
I loathe to take its name upon my tongue.*

<sup>70</sup> Beverly Taylor, 'Elizabeth Barrett Browning and Transnationalism: People Diplomacy in a 'Fair-going World', *Victorian Review* 33.2 (Fall 2007): 59-84, p. 65.

'Tis nowise peace. 'Tis treason, stiff with doom, -

(II:399-414, my emphasis)

Although in this moment Elizabeth Barrett Browning whole-heartedly embraces Kant's vision of a peaceful co-operation among nations, she once more declares that she would rather accept the violence of a revolution than compromise with a flawed peace that neglects both 'poor' citizens and 'poor' nations. In this respect Elizabeth Barrett Browning's cosmopolitanism and her resounding plea for understanding among nations is in tune with Martha Nussbaum's proclamation that 'the task of world citizenship requires the-would be world citizen to become a more sensitive and emphatic interpreter'.<sup>71</sup> And this is exactly what Elizabeth Barrett Browning asks her compatriots to do: to reinterpret the cultural text of Italy with moral and epistemological vigilance, so as to recognise in the Italians what is especially fundamental about them, most worthy of respect and acknowledgement: their aspirations to justice and goodness and their capacities in reasoning in this connection in the context of an international cohabitation in the world with other nations.

A recent essay by Rebecca Walkowitz serves as a useful point of departure for appreciating Elizabeth Barrett Browning's commitment to cosmopolitanism. In 'Cosmopolitan Ethics: The Home and the World', she informs us that the diversity in understandings of cosmopolitanism tends to resolve itself into two primary schools of thought; first, a universalist one, committed to shared common values and to the discovery of commonalities. Opposed to this, is a vision that acknowledges the pluralities inherent in all would-be cosmopolitans, marked as they are by 'multiple attachments and particularisms'.<sup>72</sup> Walkowitz attempts to reconcile these impulses under the same scope of imagination: both the universalist and the particularist believe

<sup>71</sup> Nussbaum Martha, *Cultivating Humanity: A Classical Defense of Reform in Liberal Education* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997), p. 63.

<sup>72</sup> Rebecca Walkowitz, 'Cosmopolitan Ethics, The Home and the World', *The Turn to Ethics*, eds. Marjorie Garber, Beatrice Hannsen and Rebecca L. Walkowitz (New York and London: Routledge, 2000. pp. 221-230), p. 222.

in their attempt (ethical, of course) to connect to others, either because we are fundamentally alike (if only we could see it) or out of a respect for the fact of differences and distances. One is an understanding based on likeness, one is based in difference, but both can be understood as cosmopolitan. Deploying Walkowitz's terms, I would argue that 'Casa Guidi Windows', 'Napoleon III in Italy' and 'Italy and the World', successfully reconcile universalist and particularist outlooks, in so far as Elizabeth Barrett Browning aims to break down conceptual and geopolitical barriers and expose the commonalities which should be shared by all nations (right for self-definition, liberty, peace) and at the same time, she demonstrates how the cosmopolitan sensibility acknowledges that the pluralities, multiple attachments, and particularisms of the English and Italian cultures are constituted on permeable structures which allow subjectivities to transcend boundaries by cross-dwelling.

Elizabeth Barrett Browning's reiterated petition for the reinterpretation of Italy as a geopolitical entity requires what David Simpson has described as an 'extended concept of translation'.<sup>73</sup> According to Simpson, the dynamics of translation should move beyond 'the familiar phenomena of direct translations and imitation'. Rather, with a view to overcoming 'the impasse of blocked communication' (151), this extended concept of translation pays heed to the translatability of feeling, and seeks to address the irrepressible question 'can what is felt by one person be the same as what is felt by someone from a different place and time?' (151). At the same time, 'it would include also the forms of bearing across human bodies –for the lucky few the barouche but also the slave ships' (151). Berry Chevasco connects Elizabeth Barrett Browning's intellectual independence and her inclination to embrace foreign literatures and cultures with her talent in foreign languages and argues that as an avid reader of European literature she 'was able to see beyond the more limited cultural prejudices of her

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<sup>73</sup> David Simpson, 'The Limits of Cosmopolitanism and the Case for Translation', *European Romantic Review* 16.2 (2005): 141-152, p. 151.

country men'.<sup>74</sup> She goes so far as to point out that 'critics and admirers of her odes to George Sand, *Poems before Congress* or *Casa Guidi Windows* ... do not always consider the underlying activity of translation which informed these and so much else in her poetry' (210).

The following chapter reconstructs the biopolitical genealogy of Victorian policies and seeks to elucidate Elizabeth Barrett Browning's polemic against institutionalised surveillance and slavery. In 'The Runaway Slave at Pilgrim's Point' oppression is held accountable for a debased self but it also becomes the subtext of infanticide. Slavery, according to the poet, occludes the translatability of the feeling of belonging and manipulates the self-other distinctions to the extreme degree.

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<sup>74</sup> Berry Chevasco, “‘La Prude Angleterre’: Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s Cultural Relativism”, *Translators, Interpreters, Mediators: Women Writers 1700-1900*, ed. Dow Gillian (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2007. pp. 209-224), p. 221.

## Chapter 5: Biopolitics and Generic Implications in the ‘Runaway Slave at Pilgrim’s Point’

‘The Runaway slave at Pilgrim’s Point’<sup>1</sup> is still not one of the most commonly discussed poems of Elizabeth Barrett Browning, partly because it tackles the harshness of slavery and the (im)moral underpinnings of infanticide as protest against oppression. The poem, stretching the conventions of the dramatic monologue to the limits, features a black female fugitive slave speaker who smothers her offspring, the fruit of her violation by a white master, in order to ensure that he does not follow his mother’s destiny.

As is the case with almost all of her political works, ‘The Runaway Slave at Pilgrim’s Point’ has inspired at least two opposing strands of reception: one that focuses on the biographical significance of the poem and a second one that identifies the socio-political aspect. Within both strands though, a heated debate develops whether or not Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s poetics reinforces patriarchal values or is predisposed to merely register visionary ideals rather than to negotiate meaning. Biographies of Elizabeth Barrett Browning often make very brief references to ‘The Runaway Slave at Pilgrim’s Point’. Gardner Taplin in 1957, dismisses it as ‘too blunt and shocking to have any enduring artistic worth’.<sup>2</sup> In 1986, Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s biographer, Margaret Forster, highlighting the familial perspective, maintains that despite the fact that its author thought of the poem’s theme as anti-slavery it ‘reads more like anti-men.’<sup>3</sup> It wasn’t until 1988 with Ann Parry’s discussion of the ‘The Runaway Slave at Pilgrim’s Point’ that the poem began to attract critical interest. Her discussion is amongst the first attempting to shift attention from its psychological significance in the poet’s life to the

<sup>1</sup> ‘The Runaway Slave at Pilgrim’s Point’, *Aurora Leigh and Other Poems*, eds. John R. Glorney Bolton and Julia Bolton Holloway. All subsequent references to are to this edition.

<sup>2</sup> *The Life of Elizabeth Barrett Browning*, p. 194.

<sup>3</sup> Margaret Forster, *Elizabeth Barrett Browning* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1988), p. 203.

historical context of the poem.<sup>4</sup> Around the same period, in the late 1980s, Leighton<sup>5</sup> and Mermin<sup>6</sup> also assert that what underlies the poem is the poet's relationship with her father and that the description of the killing of the slave's child symbolizes her rebellion against his oppression by writing a political poem, knowing that her father opposed women writing political poetry. In 1992 Leighton<sup>7</sup> revisits the text with a new agenda, which prioritizes the investigation of the moral nature of good and evil.

In the 1990s critics emphasize the socio-political aspect more and explore the representation of infanticide and the political meaning of the interruption of the child-mother bond or the slave experience itself. Elizabeth Battles builds on the idea that the poet 'forces her reader to confront completely the horrific ramifications of human bondage by contracting the entire slave experience into the actions of one desperate mother'.<sup>8</sup> Sarah Brophy on the other hand, acknowledges the politicised aesthetics of the poem, but nevertheless rebukes the techniques deployed for she believes they fail to disavow patriarchal values.<sup>9</sup> From the beginning of the 2000s the poem admittedly began to see wider discussion amongst commentators. Stone provided three readings of the poem. In 2002 she explores the ethical dilemmas arising from the slave's entangled circumstances and attributes diachronic value to the slave's voice by pointing out that the complex moral and aesthetic challenges posed in 'The Runaway Slave at Pilgrim's Point' are addressed in Toni Morrison's novel *Beloved*, which was published a hundred and forty years later, in 1988. The following year in her book article entitled 'Elizabeth Barrett Browning and the Garrisonians: "The Runaway Slave Pilgrim's Point", the

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<sup>4</sup> Ann Parry, 'Sexual Exploitation and Freedom: Religion, Race, and Gender in Elizabeth Barrett Browning's "The Runaway Slave at Pilgrim's Point"', *Studies in Browning and His Circle* 16 (1988): 114-126.

<sup>5</sup> In her monograph *Elizabeth Barrett Browning*.

<sup>6</sup> In *Elizabeth Barrett Browning: The Origins of a New Poetry*.

<sup>7</sup> In *Victorian Women Poets: Writing Against the Heart*.

<sup>8</sup> Elizabeth H. Battles. 'Slavery Through the Eyes of a Mother: "The Runaway Slave at Pilgrim's Point"', *Studies in Browning and His Circle* 19 (1991): 93-100.

<sup>9</sup> Sarah Brophy, 'Elizabeth Barrett Browning's "The Runaway Slave at Pilgrim's Point" and the Politics of Interpretation', *Victorian Poetry* 36.3 (Fall 1998): 273-88.

Boston Female Anti-Slavery Society, and Abolitionist Discourse in the Liberty Bell,'<sup>10</sup> she attempts to reread the poem with a view to clarifying the circumstances under which it was published and contextualizes it in the intellectual and activist work that enabled anti-slavery women in the United States to move beyond the realm of domesticity. In 2005, Stone revisits the poem in a comparative analysis of the religious politics put forward in 'The Runaway Slave at Pilgrim's Point' and two other poems of explicitly religious themes, 'The Virgin Mary' and 'The Drama of Exile'.<sup>11</sup> She masterfully demonstrates how a poet with a less fixed religious identity, such as Elizabeth Barrett Browning, has a lot to say about the most important institutions of her time, precisely because she oscillates between traditional piety and modern doubt.

The years 2007 and 2008 are marked by two publications that closely examine the construction of subjectivity of the slave mother. While Marilyn Walker ingeniously identifies that the pre-existing geographical tensions in 1840s antebellum America shape both the narrative and the character of the speaker,<sup>12</sup> Debbie Bark, setting the contours of a more general articulation of the symbols that physically marked the slave body, offers a comparative perusal of 'The Runaway Slave at Pilgrim's Point', and of the autobiographical narratives of Frederick Douglass's *My Bondage and my Freedom* and Ann Hawkshaw's 'Why am I a slave?'.<sup>13</sup>

A brief survey of the more recent criticism informs us that many of the commentators were inclined to make generic remarks but only in passing. Marjorie Stone recognises the unconventionality of the poem as regards the dramatic presentation of the

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<sup>10</sup> Marjorie Stone, 'Elizabeth Barrett Browning and the Garrisonians: "The Runaway Slave at Pilgrim's Point," the Boston Female Anti-Slavery Society, and Abolitionist Discourse in the Liberty Bell', *Victorian Women Poets*, pp. 33-55.

<sup>11</sup> Marjorie Stone, 'A Heretic Believer: Victorian Religious Doubt and New Contexts for Elizabeth Barrett Browning's "A Drama of Exile," "The Virgin Mary" and "The Runaway Slave at Pilgrim's Point"', *Studies in Browning and His Circle* (2005): 7-40.

<sup>12</sup> Walker Marilyn, 'Loci of Limitation and Liberation: Spatial Subjectivity in "The Runaway Slave at Pilgrim's Point"'. *Nineteenth-Century Gender Studies* 3.2. (Summer 2007): 1-32. Web April 2014.  
<<http://www.ncgsjournal.com/issue32/walker.htm>>.

<sup>13</sup> Debbie Bark, 'Sight, Sound, and Silence: Representations of the Slave Body in Barrett Browning, Hawkshaw, and Douglass', *Victorian Newsletter* 114 (Fall 2008): 51-68.

consciousness of the speaker using techniques she had borrowed from her husband, Robert Browning, the acclaimed practitioner of the dramatic monologue.<sup>14</sup> The association of the poet's techniques with Robert Browning anticipates the ground for later investigations of the poem that seek to understand the poem's fitness to the genre. While Stone is not the only one to read the poem as a dramatic monologue, Sarah Brophy despite recognising that the poem exhibits the dramatic context apt for the dramatic monologue, by taking sides with the detractors of Elizabeth Barrett Browning's politicized poetry, refrains from examining the undeniable socio-political possibilities arising from the author's choice of genre and sets off to capitalize on the inscription of a melodramatic feminine voice within a patriarchal framework of reception. In thoroughly neutralizing the politics underlying the choice to represent the slave experience in a dramatic monologue, Sarah Brophy denies the speaker any agency other than the exercise of emotional influence over men, since change is thought to be effected by male figures. Melissa Schaub's adroit study of 'The Runaway Slave at Pilgrim's Point', is occasioned by her teaching experience and the widespread idea among her students that the narration is autobiographical, which leads her to investigate the hypothesis that in this poem 'the formula for the dramatic monologue is not 'a supposed person' but rather, 'suppose I were this person?'"<sup>15</sup> In contradistinction to Brophy's account, Schaub's exploration of the margins of the dramatic monologue constitutes the first eloquent repudiation of the charges against Elizabeth Barrett Browning's ability to conduct social critique, which explicitly recognises that the appropriation and violation of this literary convention generates the most subversive effects.

My reading of 'The Runaway Slave at Pilgrim's Point' is premised on the idea that it might be read as a metaphor of society, because the poem acts-out on multiple

<sup>14</sup> Marjorie Stone, 'Between Ethics and Anguish: Feminist Ethics, Feminist Aesthetics, and Representations of Infanticide in "The Runaway Slave at Pilgrim's Point" and *Beloved*', *Between Ethics and Aesthetics: Crossing the Boundaries*, eds. Stephen Boos and Dorota Glowacka (SUNY Press, 2002. pp. 131-158), p. 143.

<sup>15</sup> Melissa Schaub, 'The Margins of the Dramatic Monologue: Teaching Elizabeth Barrett Browning's "The Runaway Slave at Pilgrim's Point"', *Victorian Poetry* 49.4 (Winter 2011): 557-568. p. 558.

levels (syntactically and semantically) the new arrangements and possibilities for meaning which result from the destabilization of relations between forms, and particularly between literary forms and social formations. My target is therefore to foreground the cluster of social formations and literary forms at work, so as to map out the changes invoked by their interaction.

My argument is that the poem primarily ‘does’ what it ‘says’ *prima facie* on account of the generic implications it exhibits. Bearing in mind that the criticism influenced by the New Critics shares the axiomatic belief that a ‘good’ poem is a poem that ‘does’ what it ‘says’, I also argue that this poem is a ‘good’ poem in so far as its content deals with the full complexity of human life and that its form, more specifically the appropriation of genre, namely of the dramatic monologue, accommodates a re-enactment of this complexity. W. K. Wimsatt in his pioneering study *The Verbal Icon*, aligning himself with other New Critics, conceptualizes this notion of the ‘good’ poem as closing the gap between doing and saying<sup>16</sup> in stating that ‘Complexity of form is sophistication of content. The unity and maturity of good poems are two sides of the same thing.’<sup>17</sup> This idea of a ‘good’ poem, notwithstanding the demise of popularity of the New Critics, gains in my discussion a renewed meaning as it points to the pressing need to examine in what degree literary and social forms collide within literary texts and what political effects emanate from this encounter. This reading responds to the idea that ‘The Runaway Slave at Pilgrim’s Point’ can no longer be merely subsumed beneath a grid of feminism or biographical detail and that its participation in so many diverse discourses qualifies it for an approach that will bring to the fore the transformative power generated at the core of this collision of forms. Mermin speaks overtly of the ingrained

<sup>16</sup> The very same idea appears already in 1936 in *Scrutiny* in F. R Leavis’s essay ‘Milton’s Verse’ which was later included in *Revaluation: Tradition and Development in English Poetry* (London: Penguin, 1964) wherein he condemns Milton’s style because it was uniformly inflated and thus disabled the full realization of meaning in the verse, whereas in Donne’s poetry ‘the words seem to do what they say’.

<sup>17</sup> W. K. Wimsatt, *The Verbal Icon: Studies in the Meaning of Poetry* (Kentucky: University of Kentucky Press, 1954), p. 82.

rebelliousness of the fugitive slave as demonstrative of the poet's anger against her despotic father, Edward Moulton-Barrett who forbade his children to marry. She explains that

When she married she became in the eyes of her father and brothers a 'runaway' herself. Her belief that every adult had the right to free choice in marriage went squarely against her father's views, which are enacted in the poem as the killing of the slave speaker's lover. More generally, 'Runaway Slave at Pilgrim's Point' expresses her fury at a tyranny that presents itself, as her father did, in the guise of benevolence. (*Origins* 158)

There has been a long discussion over the fundamental question raised by critics regarding the ways literary forms relate to social formations. In advocating a new project for the field of Cultural Studies, Caroline Levine's crucial intervention proposes a new method, strategic formalism, a method whose name does not give immediate evidence of the innovative force it promises to unleash in the analysis of literary texts. Levine's strategic formalism is undoubtedly rooted in the legacy of Foucault and the New Historicist critics. It effectively endorses a claim, also articulated by Marxist critics, that literary forms both reflect and generate social structures, but underscores the fact that literary forms and social formations are causally linked in ways producing surprising and often unintentional effects in a way that has not been adopted by previous critical formulations. In introducing this methodological tool she points out that

It develops the idea that literary forms are socially and politically forceful but concludes that they do not derive their power from their *fit* with existing or emerging patterns of social life. Instead, literary forms participate in a destabilizing relation to social formations, often colliding with social hierarchies rather than reflecting or foreshadowing them.  
*Literary forms, that is, trouble and remake political*

*relationships in surprising, aleatory, and often confusingly disorderly ways* (my emphasis).<sup>18</sup>

When one is faced with the challenge of rereading a multi-layered poem such as ‘The Runaway Slave at Pilgrim’s Point’, the primary question that comes to mind is how to approach a text saturating major cultural-political categories such as gender and race especially if they compete, overlap and interlace both with each other and with discourses such as imperial expansion, slave-trading, infanticide. Written for a specific occasion in the American abolitionist campaign and first published in the *Liberty Bell*, the annual antislavery journal in 1848, ‘The Runaway Slave at Pilgrim’s Point’ is a dramatic monologue whose speaker, a female African slave, runs away from her master to escape the hardships of slavery. Pilgrim’s Point actually refers to Plymouth Rock, Massachusetts, where the Pilgrim Fathers landed in November 1620.<sup>19</sup> The slave carrying her white-faced child recounts in a first person narration how she had suffered from the extreme physical and sexual violence of her masters. The speaker’s rebellion against her overseers is repeatedly voiced in the rallying cries ‘I am black, I am black!’ (IX 57, XVI 106) and ‘I am not mad: I am black.’, (XXXII 218) asking us to consider dehumanising oppression as the cause of her infanticide.

Secondly, how does one account for the fact that consensus among literary critics has not been achieved as to which of all those discourses takes precedence over the other, despite the fact that the poem’s mission is to contribute to the causes of the Anti-Slavery Movement in the United States? The poem itself becomes a metaphor of society, a self-reflexive commentary, a site of contestation, wherein so many diverse ideologies and formations, in operating simultaneously, lose their power to impose order.<sup>20</sup> As the poem

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<sup>18</sup> Caroline Levine, ‘Strategic Formalism: Toward a New Method in Cultural Studies’, *Victorian Studies* 49.1 (Autumn 2006): 625-657. p. 626.

<sup>19</sup> Dorothy Hewlett, *Elizabeth Barrett Browning* (London: Cassell & Co. Ltd., 1953), p. 211.

<sup>20</sup> Elizabeth Barrett Browning wrote another poem on slavery in 1850, a sonnet entitled ‘Hiram Power’s Greek Slave’, which clearly inserts itself in a cultural debate about the moral limitations of representing the woman

fails to project a single discourse around which secondary ones are organised, the deployment of Levine's *strategic formalism* offers an alternative method to measure the artistic and socio-political currency of the text, which accepts that the power of each category or form fluctuates as it encounters other forms.

The dramatic monologue is very well adapted to Elizabeth Barrett Browning's wish to project an inverted moral order pondering the ethical dilemma emerging from the fugitive slave's infanticide. At the same time, it is amenable for mobilising a set of socio-political conclusions pertaining to the gendered experience of sexual violation, economic exploitation and institutionalised social surveillance. As the dramatic monologue lends itself to the structuring of a multi-faceted critique, the poet proves herself an astute social thinker. As Cornelia Pearsall notes, transgressiveness and subversiveness became almost immediately the hallmarks of the dramatic monologue. She states:

Frequently the newfound flexible conventions of this genre provided a forum for speakers who strain against the restrictions of societies that their monologues go far in representing. Thus in these poems the form's distance from convention is expressed on a thematic level as well as a generic one.<sup>21</sup>

In showing how the poet employed literary forms to disclose oppressive and corrupt social formations my discussion will also reveal how these are consolidated by the biopolitics of the sovereign state. What is at stake is to approach the poem anew so as to read her polemic against the totalizing oppression of slavery as an aspect of biopolitics. In this study biopolitics is understood as a politics that seeks to perpetuate life by setting in motion the structures of a state of exception and raises questions regarding the

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slave figure as a mute Grecian maiden, in direct contrast to the outspoken black rebel, slave of the 'Runaway Slave at Pilgrim's Point'.

<sup>21</sup> Cornelia Pearsall, 'The Dramatic Monologue', *The Cambridge Companion to Victorian Poetry*, ed. Joseph Bristow (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000. pp. 67-88), p. 73.

accountability of life in general and more specifically the construction of less privileged identities predicated upon the polarized sense of belonging.

## The Dramatic Monologue: The Critical Debate for a Unifying Principle

The term ‘dramatic monologue’ was first introduced in 1857, according to A. Dwight Culler, and first deployed to discuss Robert Browning’s poetry in 1859. Despite the fact that the form existed well before the coinage of the generic name, commentators agree that it flourished in Britain in the nineteenth century. While all would consent that the dramatic monologue blossomed in the Victorian period, precursors to the form can be found both in classical literature and in early English literature. According to Alan Sinfield, who defends a line of ‘historical continuity’, this poetic form ‘had an unprecedented importance for the Victorians’ and that ‘there is no single aspect of it that was not anticipated’.<sup>22</sup> He thus tries to show that Victorian dramatic monologue entails such features that a connection with earlier monologues justifies a linear development of the genre. He detects generic affinities between the complaints of Theocritus’, the complaint of Polyphemus (third century BC), and Shakespeare’s ‘A Lover’s Complaint’ (1609), the dramatic epistles from Ovid’s *Heroids* (c. first century BC) and Pope’s ‘Eloisa to Abelard’ (1717). Alan Sinfield, in placing the dramatic monologue in a long-standing tradition, assumes an inclusive position regarding the origins of the genre and contends that there is ‘no essential difference of form’ and thus we may ‘consider all first-person poems where the speaker is indicated not to be the poet as dramatic monologue’ (42).

While it is true that the complaint was one of the most popular forms of poems written in an assumed voice, it didn’t necessarily comprise a sincere expression of the poetic subject’s grief, but since it imitated the speech of an identified speaker, and despite

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<sup>22</sup> Sinfield Alan, *Dramatic Monologue* (London; New York: Barnes & Noble, 1977), p. 53.

the fact that it lacked the dramatic element, it might be taken as an early example of a dramatic monologue. What is important to note is that the complaint apart from being written in the first person, shares another common characteristic with the dramatic monologue: it attracts the sympathy of the reader as more often than not it has proved a serviceable means to articulate grief occasioned by death, love and unfair treatment. Complaints have been written throughout the Renaissance until well into the nineteenth century. Nevertheless, one generic grouping anticipates overtly political dramatic monologues which participate in the very same discourses –racial oppression and slavery– Elizabeth Barrett Browning is preoccupied with in the ‘The Runaway Slave at Pilgrim’s Point’. In the 1740s Joseph Wharton writes the ‘The Dying Indian’, in which the arrow stricken Indian laments the misfortune of his race. The late eighteenth century was marked by successive instances of socio-political commentary in the form of the complaint such as, ‘The Negro’s Complaint’ by William Cowper (1788), Wordsworth’s ‘Complaint for a Forsaken Indian Woman’ (1798), William Blake’s ‘The Chimney Sweeper’ (1789)<sup>23</sup>, and the ‘Little Black Boy’ (1789).

As Alan Sinfield clearly avoids delving into the problems of generic criticism, one is led to consider the enormous influence of the polemic against generic forms in the 1970s and early 1980s. Militantly advocated by Derrida, the demise of genre signalled the intolerance towards taxonomic approaches such as Ina Beth Sessions’s or the reader-based account of Robert Langbaum. However, their work right up to today exerts a diachronic appeal, and is frequently quoted as it simultaneously sets the contours of the on-going discussion of the dramatic monologue as well as the point of departure for contemporary critics.

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<sup>23</sup> I include ‘The Chimney Sweeper’ because child labour is a seminal discourse in the Victorian period, and a blunt manifestation of the biopolitical state, which was also addressed in Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s poem ‘The Cry of Children’.

Robert Langbaum's emblematic *The Poetry of Experience: Dramatic Monologue in Modern Literary Tradition*, puts forward the first fully-fledged articulation as to what constitutes the dramatic monologue, which discards the formalist outlook in favour of an analysis of its way of meaning, which he apprehends as 'the effect created by the tension between sympathy and moral judgement'.<sup>24</sup> Elsewhere he emphasises the sense of division of the lyrical voice, which he describes as encompassing two discernible voices: that of the poet and that of the speaker. He states: 'the meaning of the dramatic monologue is in disequilibrium with what the speaker reveals and understands ... we understand, if not more, at least something other than what the speaker understands' (146 my emphasis). The problem arising from such an assertion is that 'we' brings together an infinite number of readerly capacities for sympathy or judgement, revealing thus at least one serious shortcoming of his definition of the dramatic monologue. In failing to acknowledge that sympathy and judgement will always be externalised in accordance with the specificity of the reader's socio-cultural context and ideological universe, Langbaum implicitly argues for a normalising reading process and a canonised reception that requires an impossible uniformity across a wide range of reading agendas. One needs only to remember that his monograph does not incorporate the work of any woman poet in the canon to sense that what lurks behind this universalizing conceptualization of the ideal reader is a conservative gender politics that erases the contribution of female poets to the genre and occludes readings from readers of marginal status. What is innately problematic in Langbaum's account is that the production of meaning depends upon a fixed reader response.

Nonetheless, Langbaum is not the first of modern critics who attempts to codify the dramatic monologue as a genre. Already in 1947, Ina Beth Sessions attempts to compile a list of the characteristics of the dramatic monologue based on the analysis of a

<sup>24</sup> Robert Langbaum, *The Poetry of Experience: The Dramatic Monologue and the Modern Literary Tradition* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1957), p. 85.

‘perfect’ form embodied in Robert Browning’s ‘My Last Duchess’. She enlists seven definite characteristics: ‘speaker, audience, occasion, revelation of character, interplay between speaker and audience, dramatic action, and action which takes place in the present.’<sup>25</sup> The fact that Sessions herself extends her discussion by appending a set of ‘sub-classifications’, which include the ‘imperfect’, ‘the formal’ and the ‘approximate’ dramatic monologue, is demonstrative of a certain discomfort with her own codification of the genre. The rationalization of what it would mean to adhere to such reductive understandings of the poetical voice lead later critics such as M. H. Abrams to attempt a redefinition of the poetic expression of the speaking ‘I’. In proposing the ‘greater Romantic Lyric’ his effort proved only partially successful. According to Abrams, the ‘greater Romantic Lyric’ introduces

a determinate speaker in a particularised, and usually, a localized outdoor setting, whom we overhear as he carries on, in a fluent vernacular which rises easily to a more formal speech, a sustained colloquy, sometimes with himself or with the outer scene, a bit more frequently with a silent human auditor, present or absent.<sup>26</sup>

Evidently, his definition though responding to a wider discussion of the nature of the speaking ‘I’, has a lot in common with Sessions’s, both in its prescriptive tone and in its failure to address the inherent lack of a guiding voice in such a lyric. Robert Langbaum seems to be following the same path, since his view of the dramatic monologue as ‘poetry of experience’, rather than foregrounding the distinction between two voices, one of the Romantic speaker who often happens to be the poet as well, and one of the dramatic monologue’s speaker, who seeks to avoid subjective expression, conflates them. Eventually, what all three definitions fail to problematize is the relation between the

<sup>25</sup> Ina Beth Sessions, ‘The Dramatic Monologue’, *PMLA* 62 (1947): 503-16. p. 509.

<sup>26</sup> M. H. Abrams, ‘Structure and Style in the Greater Romantic Lyric’, *From Sensibility to Romanticism*, eds. F. W. Hilles and H. Bloom (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1965 pp. 527-60), p. 527-528.

voice of the poet and the speaker. As the failure to distinguish the different natures of the speaking ‘I’s, in the lyric and the dramatic monologue results in establishing a close -if not obscure- relation between the speaker and the figure of the poet of the dramatic monologue, the production of meaning becomes a daunting task.

Combining with the historical information framing ‘Runaway Slave at Pilgrim’s Point’ as contemporary to the poet and even more importantly, with the strongly expressive poetical language, the confusion of the speaking ‘I’s, not only perplexes the readers, but it also leads them to strong misreadings. At the same time, it suggests that a list of formal characteristics is highly likely to prove insufficient for the definition of the dramatic monologue in general.

This is precisely what Schaub highlights in her study of ‘The Runaway Slave at Pilgrim’s Point’, in accounting for the fact that her students often misread the poem as an autobiographical lyric. She explains:

Because ‘Runaway Slave’ is historically contemporaneous with the author rather than set in the dim past, the cues of setting that prevent confusing the author with the speaker are not as apparent in this poem as in other dramatic monologues like ‘My Last Duchess’ or ‘Ulysses’. An even more important factor, however, is the way that Barrett Browning stretches the conventions of the form in this poem ... If the poem succeeds politically, it does so by violating its own form, and it succeeds precisely because it is written so passionately that it exceeds the margins of fiction and begins to seem like a biography (558).

As the author of the dramatic monologue seeks to avoid the confessional mode of the Romantic ‘I’ and to escape the solipsism of the Romantic lyrical subject, the disjunction between author and speaker becomes glaring. However, this discrepancy might be in part overcome as sometimes the author of the dramatic monologue manages to make his

feelings or ideas audible through his speaker. Carol T. Christ, in her discussion of Browning's use of the persona, forcefully demonstrates that he / she might be using it not to avoid subjective expression as such, but rather to capitalise upon the distance it creates between himself and his speakers so as to explore the difficulties of several different modes of subjectivity. She states: 'He avoids presenting the problems of self-consciousness in his own voice, but he remains preoccupied with such problems in the voices he creates'.<sup>27</sup>

The year 1842 was a landmark for the history of the dramatic monologue as a genre. Robert Browning's 'My Last Duchess' and 'Soliloquy of the Spanish Cloister' appeared in his *Dramatic Lyrics* and Alfred Tennyson publishes his *Poems*, which included his dramatic monologues 'Ulysses' and 'St. Symeon Stylites'. While early endeavours to fix and canonise the dramatic monologue as a genre draw extensively on these emblematic works precisely because they were construed as satisfying the stringent set of criteria imposed, what they have eventually achieved is to ignore the contribution of minor Victorian poets and women to the genre due to their almost obsessive effort to justify the prescribing value of these conventions solely on evidence from Browning's and Tennyson's works.

The fact that the work of women poets has rarely been included in the general theoretical discussion of the dramatic monologue is no surprise and the failure to correct this omission could to a certain extent be explained in critics such as Sessions and Langbaum who were writing in the 1940s and 1950s respectively. However, one is taken aback that dramatic monologues written by women poets are still neglected by contemporary critics who have been in the privileged position of witnessing the resuscitation of women's poetry and the findings of voluminous criticism from the late

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<sup>27</sup> Carol T. Christ, *Victorian and Modern Poetics* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1984), p. 19.

1970s onwards. In *Victorian Poetry*'s<sup>28</sup> 1984 special issue on the 'dramatic 'I'' poem, there is no reference to any woman practitioner of the genre, except for Elizabeth Barrett Browning whose name appears in the volume on other accounts. In Elizabeth Howe's *The Dramatic Monologue*,<sup>29</sup> though following the chronological development of the genre, her chapter on the Victorians barely includes a page-long discussion of the 'tension between the rhythm of poetry and that of speech' in Christina Rossetti's dramatic monologue 'Maggie a Lady'.<sup>30</sup> In view of the fact that in Howe's study women poets are almost invisible, her choice of Rosetti's poem, a treatment of unfulfilled love that constricts the poetical voice in the sphere of the domestic, reinforces the elision of women poets from literary tradition.

David Shaw's *Origins of the Monologue: The Hidden God* traces the genealogy of the monologue to a subversive tradition within the socio-political context of the Victorian period which is often assumed to have adopted conservative values in every aspect of thought, and claims that 'Tennyson, Browning, and Morris are master subverters of the social discourse they borrow: as in Socrates's dialogues, there are few customs –moral, political, or religious- that their best monologues do not interrogate, turn inside out , or blaspheme'.<sup>31</sup> Taking into consideration his proclamation concerning the dramatic monologue's typical subversion of cultural authority, one is disappointed to find out that not only does he not engage in an examination of the considerable volume of women's writing in the genre but his selection of Elizabeth Barrett Browning's poems is not representative at all and does not do service to his argument. The glaring absence of the slightest allusion to 'The Runaway Slave at Pilgrim's Point' is puzzling. Ignoring a poem of amazing density as regards to its discursive embeddedness, cannot be

<sup>28</sup> Linda Shires, ed., 'The Dramatic "I" Poem', special issue, *Victorian Poetry* 22.2 (Summer 1984): 97-226.

<sup>29</sup> Elizabeth Howe, *The Dramatic Monologue* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1996).

<sup>30</sup> Christina Rossetti and William Michael Rossetti, 'Maggie A Lady', *The Poetical Works of Christina Georgina Rossetti*, London: Macmillan, 1904.

<sup>31</sup> David D. Shaw, *Origins of the Dramatic Monologue: The Hidden God* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1999), p. 4.

compensated by the four-page long discussion of intimacy and silence in three poems - 'Bertha in the Lane', 'The Lady's Yes', and 'Lady Geraldine's Courtship'- whose speakers waver between competing kinds of love and negotiate in much subtler, if not conspicuous, ways the politics of romantic love.

An exception to the rule of insistence on the exclusion of women poets from the discussion of the dramatic monologue is Byron's monograph on the topic. Published in 2003, her book-length account of the dramatic monologue paves the way to the adaptation of the generic grouping to incorporate women's poetry. Byron provides extensive readings of Elizabeth Barrett Browning's 'Runaway Slave at Pilgrim's Point' and Augusta Webster's 'A Castaway' with a view to showing how the speaking 'I' emerged as a gendered category that was viscerally entangled in the development of the dramatic monologue. Moreover, taking the lead from Kate Flint and Armstrong who suggest that poets like Hemans and L. E. L. who were writing monologues in the 1820s, might have played a significant role in the genre, she argues that the dramatic monologue would become a serviceable means to assert an authoritative poetical voice in the traditionally male dominated literary scene with the assumption of a persona. She clarifies however, that her aim is not to reclaim the origins of the dramatic monologue in the *oeuvre* of women poets, but to pinpoint the political undercurrents of such a generic choice. She elucidates:

The centrality of gender to women's use of the dramatic monologue does not place them within a 'different' tradition, I would argue, and certainly does not mean that there is any particular specimen of monologue that we might want to designate as 'womanly'. Rather the centrality of gender confirms something that becomes increasingly clear as more women's monologues are recovered: they work primarily in that line of development which centre on social critique, and

gender is an important, but not the only focus of their critique.<sup>32</sup>

## Biopolitics, Panopticism and the Effacement of the Self in Slavery

Cornelia Pearsall in her exposition of the elements of performance in the dramatic monologue foregrounds the rhetorical efficacy assumed by the speaker so as to achieve certain goals and proposes that ‘we must ask what each poem seeks to perform, what processes it seeks to set in motion or ends it seeks to attain’ (*Dramatic Monologue* 68). Similarly, Tucker maintains that ‘What... speakers say gains ascendancy over what they set out to mean’.<sup>33</sup> Joining them in this claim, I will show how Elizabeth Barrett Browning drew on an aggregate of traditions to achieve the speaker’s goals in ‘The Runaway Slave at Pilgrim’s Point’ through the medium of the dramatic monologue.

As the poem was commissioned by the Anti-Slavery Bazaar in Boston and appeared in the annual abolitionist publication of the *Liberty Bell* in 1848, it enforces militant anti-slavery feelings and its abolitionist outlook, as Stone informs us, fits perfectly well with the article immediately preceding it, ‘The Insurrection and its Hero’, celebrating the heroic black leader of a Southern slave uprising (‘Garrisonians’ 34). The contextualization of the poem in the history of abolitionist literature and the fact that Elizabeth Barrett Browning has the woman slave speaking for herself consolidate Pearsall’s and Tucker’s argument that the dramatic monologue is not only *per se* a performative act, but that it also becomes the stage of performance of the speaker’s subjectivity and goals. Consequently, if ‘The Runaway Slave at Pilgrim’s Point’ aims to raise awareness about the causes of the Anti-Slavery movement in the United States, and aspires to exert a transformative power on its readers, what is at stake is first, to construe the intriguing dynamics of the stage upon which a particular monologue is uttered, and secondly, to evaluate how the dynamics of stage inform the speaker’s negotiations of the

<sup>32</sup> Glennis Byron, *The Dramatic Monologue* (London and New York: Routledge, 2003), p. 82.

<sup>33</sup> Herbert F. Tucker, “From Monomania to Monologue: St. Simeon Stylites” and the Rise of the Victorian Dramatic Monologue’, *Victorian Poetry* 22 (1984): pp. 121-137. p. 123.

predominant discourses in the ‘The Runaway Slave at Pilgrim’s Point’, which as I have already pointed out, include slavery, infanticide and madness.

Having already discussed from the viewpoint of strategic formalism how the collision of social formations with literary forms generate unintentional reshuffling of relations, I argue that the scaffolding of panopticism is a pre-eminent proponent in the staging of the speaker’s monologue in ‘Runaway Slave at Pilgrim’s Place’. My reading of the poem’s structure builds upon the idea that the generic implications are effected at the interface of the performative with the transformative element. In ‘The Runaway Slave at Pilgrim’s Point’ the staging of the speaker and of the narrated events mimics the structure of the Benthamite and Foucaultian panopticon and actualizes the trope of biopolitics in order to perform a critique that foregrounds the unexpected ways the speaker exploits its misgivings. As Foucault claims in *Discipline and Punish*, the panopticon comprises the exemplification of a cluster of techniques devised in the eighteenth century that aspired to engineer the reconfiguration of society so as to wield power over its subjects through discipline rather than, as in the preceding period, sovereignty.

Before I go any further, the current usage of the term biopolitics needs to be elucidated and retrospectively contextualized within Benthamite utilitarianism, which informed Victorian radical reformist thought. While the term roots back to the early 1900s, in the last quarter of the twentieth century it was deployed to refer to a set of diverse political practices which overturn the traditional discussion of Aristotle’s account of politics as well as canonical elaborations such as Hannah Arendt’s, who in her book *The Human Condition*,<sup>34</sup> conceptualizes politics as the collective, non-coercive activity towards a just organization of society. Instead, biopolitics reverses the priorities of this political model by undermining collective deliberation and shifts its attention to the biological life of the community. Of the many, often divergent, articulations of

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<sup>34</sup> Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998).

biopolitics, the seminal account of Michel Foucault and its reinterpretation by Giorgio Agamben have been the most influential. Both Agamben and Foucault step out of a long-standing discussion of the human being differentiated by other animals on account of its capacity for politics and contend that the human being is ‘an animal whose politics places his existence as a living being in question’.<sup>35</sup>

Foucault, as is well known, traces the emergence of biopolitics to an older political model built on sovereignty and represents the relationship between sovereignty and biopolitics as contesting and causal. Sovereign power which emanates from a centre is ‘essentially a right of seizure: of things, time, bodies, and ultimately life itself’; biopower, which is exerted from multiple, interdispersed planes, works to ‘incite, reinforce, control, monitor, optimise, and organise the forces under it’ (*History* 136). If sovereignty can be summed up as ‘the right to take life or let live’, biopolitics prevails as ‘the power to ‘make’ live and ‘let’ die.<sup>36</sup> If biopolitical intervention in life carries in it the power of its precursor, the sovereign, to kill, despite the fact that it is subordinated to the project of making live, then interpreting Foucault, I would argue that biopolitics is no less a form of organised lethal politics. While killing in the name of the preservation of life constitutes the practical manifestation of the destructive potentiality innate in biopolitics, the power over death itself becomes unconstrained, revealing the fundamentally paradoxical mechanics of biopolitics: in so far as biopolitics aspire to perpetuate and ameliorate life, life itself is endangered under the yoke of the ever-expanding efficacy of politics and technology as means of destruction. Foucault himself explains this paradoxical ‘death-function in the economy of bio-power’ drawing on the paradigm of racism, which justifies ‘the death of a bad race’ as ‘something that will make life in general healthier: Healthier and purer’ (*Society* 254-55).

<sup>35</sup> Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley (London: Penguin 1978), p. 143.

<sup>36</sup> Michel Foucault, ‘*Society Must Be Defended*’: *Lectures at the Collège de France 1975-1976*, ed. Arnold I. Davidson, trans. David Macey (New York: Picador, 2003), p. 241.

Despite the fact that Foucault does not attempt to incorporate the institution of slavery as a side-effect of biopolitical governmentality, borrowing heavily on a set of conceptual resources provided by Agamben's work on biopolitics, I contend that slavery's inscription in the biopolitical in the very same way at once justifies, exacerbates and regulates the asymmetries between unconstrained power over death and biopower's control over life. Agamben's interpretation of Aristotle's definition of the Greek *polis* as not conditioned by the friend/enemy polarity but rather by the distinction between 'bare life' (*zoe*) and political existence (*bios*), paves the way for an understanding of politics that includes life in the politico-juridical order by means of its exclusion. Therefore, 'the originary relation of law to life is not application' but 'abandonment'.<sup>37</sup> 'Abandonment' is the common practice in a 'state of exception', through which the bare life of political subjects, having been abandoned by the law and stripped of their legal rights is exposed to unconstrained violence.

Agamben argues that the inclusive exclusion of life in the Greek *polis* signifies a biopolitical structure at work, and that in modernity 'bare life' has delineated a trajectory from the margins of political existence to the centre of political order.<sup>38</sup> He writes: 'The exception becomes the rule, and the difference between inside and outside, fact and law enter into a zone of irreducible distinction' (*Homo* 9). The exemplary figure of this 'abandonment' is the Roman figure of the *Homo Sacer*, '*who may be killed and yet not sacrificed*' (*Homo* 8). Excommunicated from the political order of the community and abandoned by law, he is unprotected in view of the loss of his political rights and legal protection, he can be killed with impunity, while at the same time, he cannot be sacrificed on account of his lack of politico-juridical representation. Magnus Fiskesjö argues that

<sup>37</sup> Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), p. 9.

<sup>38</sup> This is precisely where Agamben departs from Foucault. Foucault argues that biopolitics signals a particular moment in the development of modern governmentality which was marked by the interest in population, while Agamben believes that biopolitics was inherent in sovereign power, therefore, contemporary society differs from previous political forms only in the sense that it fueled the movement of 'bare life' from the margins towards the centre.

Agamben curiously does not embrace the ‘long familiar figures of socio-political inequality as the slave and the barbarian’<sup>39</sup> because the resurrection of the obscure figure *homo sacer* supplements his political theory with a transhistorically expandable outlook. The slave as a victim of the dehumanising processes set in motion by biopower which redefine people as objects of merciless economic exploitation and/or property, in my view justifies the designation as ‘bare life’. Both an outcast and an outlaw, Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s runaway slave is treated in this study as a historically paradigmatic representation of ‘bare life’. The system of slavery though not theorised by Agamben as such, prevails as just one dimension of a biopolitics mandating the reduction of political existence into ‘bare life’ and the reinforcement of political exclusion as a means of inclusion. If, as Eva Geulen argues, ‘for Agamben … sovereign politics is biopolitics and biopolitics is, at bottom, always a politics of death and killing’,<sup>40</sup> then African slavery can justifiably be understood as one of the fundamental biopolitical paradigms of the West.<sup>41</sup>

Paul Lovejoy’s definition of slavery encapsulates the biopolitical genealogy of the institution, echoing Agamben’s reinterpretation of ‘bare life’, a state which his *homo sacer* cannot escape on account of being denied all political rights. He writes:

Slavery was one form of exploitation. Its special characteristics included the idea that slaves were property: that they were outsiders who were alien by origin or who had been denied their heritage through judicial or other sanctions; that coercion could be used at will; that their labour power was at the complete disposal of a master; that they did not have the right

<sup>39</sup> Magnus Fiskesjö, ‘Outlaws, Barbarians, Slaves. Critical Reflections on Agamben’s *Homo Sacer*’, *HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory* 2.1 (2012): 161-180. p.161.

<sup>40</sup> Eva Geulen, ‘Response and Commentary’, *Romanticism and Biopolitics in A Romantic Circles PRAXIS Volume*. (2012): n. pag. Web 11 November 2013.

<[www.rc.umd.edu/praxis/biopolitics/HTML/praxis.2012.geulen.html](http://www.rc.umd.edu/praxis/biopolitics/HTML/praxis.2012.geulen.html)>.

<sup>41</sup> In *Transformations in Slavery: A History of Slavery in Africa* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), Paul Lovejoy argues that ‘whereas the demand for slaves in the non-African parts of the Islamic world had a relatively gradual but steady influence ..., the impact of the European market for slaves was more intense over a much shorter period ... Slave exports rose gradually during the first 150 years of the Atlantic trade, amounting to 409,000 slaves from 1450 to 1600. Thereafter, the trade was truly large, on a scale that dwarfed all previous exports from Africa. The total volume of the Atlantic trade [by 1900] reached 11,313,000 slaves’. pp. 18-9.

to their own sexuality and, by extension, to their own reproductive capacities; and that the slave status was inherited unless provision was made to ameliorate that status . . . As property slaves were chattel; which is to say they could be bought and sold. Slaves belonged to their masters, who at least theoretically had complete power over them. Religious institutions, kinship units, and other groups in the same society did not protect slaves as legal persons, even though the fact that slaves were also human beings was sometimes recognised (*Transformations* 1-2).

In a series of letters written in 1797, Jeremy Bentham, the godfather of utilitarianism, introduced his design of the *Panopticon* or the *Inspection House*. His architectural proposal aimed at the construction of penitentiaries, workhouses, madhouses, hospitals, factories and schools. Its geometric disposition both documented and helped towards the reinvention of the matrix of regulatory relations imposed by biopolitical policies. The paradigmatic building would be circular, with an inspector's tower at the centre. Between the centre and the circumference there would be void space. The solitary cells of prisoners, workers or inmates, would be allocated around the circumference, each divided from the other 'by partitions in the form of radii issuing from the circumference towards the center'.<sup>42</sup> The main advantage of this plan according to Bentham, is the '*apparent omnipresence* of the inspector ... combined with the extreme facility of his *real presence*' ('Panopticon' 45).

In stanza XXX, where the speaker narrates a climactic event, the moment of her capture by her hunters, the spatial configuration of the panopticon becomes the scene upon which the event unfolds and eventually shapes the experience of captivity:

Ah! - in their 'stead their hunter sons!

Ah, ah! they are on me - They form in a ring -

<sup>42</sup> Jeremy Bentham, 'Panopticon; or, The Inspection-House', *The Works of Jeremy Bentham*, ed. John Bowring, 4 vols (New York: Russell & Russell, 1962), p. 40.

Keep off! I brave you all at once -  
I throw off your eyes like snakes that sting!  
You have killed the black eagle at nest, I think.  
Did you never stand still in your triumph, and shrink  
From the stroke of her wounded wing?

XXX (204-210)

The image of the hunter sons encircling the woman slave seemingly disturbs the Benthamite model according to which people residing across the circumference are subjected to the disciplinary power and regulatory gaze of the inspector. Instead, the speaker occupies the central position attributed to the inspector suggesting a reversal of roles, which according to Foucault is not atypical in panopticism. As Foucault writes in *Discipline and Punish*, ‘he who is subjected to a field of visibility, and who knows it, assumes responsibility for the constraints of power...he inscribes in himself the power relation in which he simultaneously plays both roles; he becomes the principle of his own subjection’ (202-3). While the staging of the image of the woman slave’s captivity calls into mind the circular construct of the panopticon, whereby she finds herself at its very centre, one vexing question is raised regarding the panoptical dramaturgy of the poem.

Jeremy Bentham, in inaugurating a ‘new mode of obtaining power of mind over mind, in a quantity hitherto without example’, does not explore the blind spots of his edifice, which acquire significance and create effects within the relativized set of visual relations it generates. In this crucial moment the experience of captivity is further dramatized by the introduction of the second person in her speech. The imperative ‘Keep off! I brave you all at once-’ (XXX 206) is addressed to a group of interlocutors, her hunters. Her recollection of the event conveys that her audience is physically present the moment she addresses it; it might be consisted by silent auditors but still they are not simply imagined by the speaker and this furnishes the scene with an unarguably realistic dimension. Schaub forcefully demonstrates that it is precisely because of the presence of

such an audience that the poem violates its own form. Rebutting Langbaum's argument that one of the major effects of the dramatic monologue is the incitement of 'tension between sympathy and moral judgment', she surmises that the reader of the 'The Runaway Slave at Pilgrim's Point' does not feel inclined to judge the speaker's actions because 'the judgment function is assigned to the intradiegetic audience (first pilgrim-ghosts, then slave hunters), and the speaker herself preemptively closes off the possibility of judging her actions in her addresses to these audiences' (558). The speaker is aware of the established relation with her audience. She perceives the interchangeability of this position; she knows that this central position may be eventually occupied by everyone. She therefore seeks to become invisible and she states: 'I throw off your eyes like a snakes that sting' (XXX 207). Her claim to invisibility does not imply submissiveness because the retreat to the circumference of the stage will open up possibilities for the circulation of the call for the slaves' insurrection beyond the regulatory gaze of the hunters. Drawing on Schaub's observation regarding the significance of the intradiegetic audience, what is at stake when contextualized in the field of visibility of panopticism is the seminal role of speech as a transformative act. What allows the speaker to claim invisibility is the poet's choice to have her speaker address her audience within the relativized spatial configuration of panopticism.

In my view, this is an exemplary moment of Elizabeth Barrett Browning's poetical prowess, as her innovative poetic tactics correspond to the richness and complexity of the poem's content. Proving herself ahead of her times, her generic intervention in enacting and exposing the politics of surveillance ratifies the New Critics' axiom that 'complexity of form is sophistication of content' (*Verbal Icon* 82). At his point, it would be fruitful to juxtapose Elizabeth Barrett Browning's generic intervention to Mill's early engagement with aesthetics on two accounts. First, because his articulation of the role of the poet which precludes any agency in historical transformation

countenances Elizabeth Barrett Browning's aim to incur change by means of her poetics. Second, because this evident divergence is annihilated in the light of Mill's problematic distinction between poetry and eloquence, which is further complicated by the deployment of a theatrical metaphor, which reverberates the construct of panopticism. Mill, a renowned exponent and at the same time revisionist critic of liberal utilitarianism, in his essay 'What is Poetry?', which was published in 1833, engages in a strenuous effort to define poetry. His discussion is an elaboration of his take on the role of the poet who, in his view, is unable to usher social transformation as he exists in 'solitude' (65), unaware of an audience. He claims that all poetry is 'of the nature of soliloquy. It maybe said that, poetry, which is printed on hot pressed paper, and sold at a bookseller's shop, is a soliloquy in full dress, and upon the stage' (65). Avoiding the deployment of generic terms, he asserts that poetry may be construed as a mode of expression that derives from other genres as well, such as drama, the novel and narrative poetry, as well as other artistic forms such as music, painting, sculpture and architecture. He argues that poetry and eloquence may come under the same rubric as they both entail 'the expression or uttering forth of feeling' (64). Mill, in corroborating his distinction between the two modes of speech, states that where 'eloquence is *heard*, poetry is *overheard*' (64). 'Eloquence', he adds,

supposes an audience; the peculiarity of poetry appears to us to lie in the poet's utter unconsciousness of a listener. Poetry is feeling confessing itself to itself, in moments of solitude, and bodying itself forth in symbols which are the nearest possible representations of the feeling in the exact shape in which it exists in the poet's mind. Eloquence is feeling pouring itself forth to other minds, courting their sympathy, or endeavoring to influence their belief, or move them to passion or to action.

(64)

Elaborating on Schaub's observation that 'The Runaway Slave at Pilgrim's Point' succeeds politically because it performs the violation of its own form with the introduction of the intradiegetic audience, I propose that the relationship between this type of audience and the speaker neutralizes Mill's distinction between the two modes of expression, poetry and eloquence. As it is staged in the field of panopticism, it allows the emergence of one single authoritative voice that attempts to effect change and stir emotional response both in the intradiegetic audience and the readers. In this respect, Elizabeth Barrett Browning's poetics might be spared from dismissive criticism and reductive readings upholding that it 'indicates that change can only rightly be effected by male authority figures and that the moral and political role of women (the poem's female speaker but also Barrett Browning as author) is to exercise an emotional influence over men' (Brophy 277).

At this point, it is fruitful to go back to the discussion of panopticism. Despite the earlier divergence between Elizabeth Barrett Browning's poetics and Mill's poetic theory, another part of his *oeuvre* seems to concur with her ideas. There is a passage in Mill's essay *On Liberty* that suggests voice becomes the vehicle of utterances which circulate beyond the controlling eye of panopticism and have the power to interrupt its effective operation. He imagines the tenants of a panopticist structure as being controlled by custom:

From the highest class...down to the lowest, everyone lives as under the eye of a hostile and dreaded censorship. Not only in what concerns others, but in what concerns only themselves, the individual or the family do not ask themselves, what do I prefer? Or, What would suit my character and disposition?<sup>43</sup>

All the inhabitants of this construction are exposed to the gaze of the watchman or the eye of censorship, which seeks to diminish individualistic self-expression in favour of

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<sup>43</sup> John Stuart Mill, *On Liberty* (Boston: Tickner and Fields, 1863), p. 118.

dull uniformity. This exposure determines the kind of questions that get asked and at the same time silences any questions regarding individual preference or disposition. Hence, voice, or what is audible, serves as a means of disrupting visibility and in this respect might then be perceived as carrying a transformative power in as far as it can render the mechanics of the panoptical structure ineffectual. While Mill is exhaustive in his analysis of the regulatory force of the dynamics of seeing and being seen, he proves himself inconsequential in his assessment of the disruptive power of the dynamics of hearing and being heard. Moreover, this inconsistency reveals the shortcomings of his distinction between poetry and eloquence. In his theatrical metaphor, which brings to the fore a panoptical field of visibility, poetry is likened to a soliloquy, pointing to the subjective element and it implies a withdrawal from public sight. Yet, in the dynamics of seeing of his imagined panoptician structure, poetry borrows from eloquence the two essential characteristics upon which their distinction is edified: the presence of an audience and the objective aim which entails transformation. It might therefore be inferred that within this particular context of visibility poetry is invested with the qualities of eloquence.

Having shown how the institutional embodiment in the panoptician structure of the regulation of subject formation might be reproduced in the staging of a dramatic monologue that stretches its own generic limitations, I will now turn to two pivotal moments in the poem to demonstrate how Elizabeth Barrett Browning exploits the blind spots inherent in the panoptician field of visibility. First, I will discuss the moment of acquaintance of the two lovers and second the breach of the mother-child relationship and infanticide and finally her death.

In stanza IX, the speaker once again reasserts her racial identity, to heighten a contradiction she perceives between the impetus to feel romantic sentiments and the predicament of bondage, which has dehumanised her. She exclaims:

I am black, I am black! -

But, once, I laughed in girlish glee,  
For one of my colour stood in the track  
          Where the drivers drove, and looked at me,  
And tender and full was the look he gave -  
          Could a slave look *so* at another Slave, -  
          I look at the sky and the sea.

(IX 57-63)

The use of the exclamation mark as well as the italicised word, ‘*so*’ stress her surprise in the light of this encounter. In the three lines ensuing the refrain ‘I am black, I am black! -’ the speaker narrates the encounter and the descriptive mode is supported by two secondary clauses. Conversely, the shift in the pensive mode and the prevalent exaltation at the incitement of romantic sentiments are astutely introduced in paratactic syntax, drawing the attention to the psychological transformation of the speaker, rather than the course of events.

If romantic feeling is thought to urge the speaker to question the dehumanising dimension of a position of naturalized and predestined servitude, this is only made possible because the acquaintance takes place at a blind spot in the panopticist spatial configuration upon which the poem is structured. Marilyn Walker explains,

As the man takes notice of the enslaved woman, the surveillance of the overseer disappears. Although the slave does not elevate to the role of authority figure, the temporary erasure of ‘the drivers’ suggests that these looks of love momentarily liberate both individuals. In the couple’s mutual observation of each other, they prioritize personal desire. Thus the enslaved man’s attraction to the young woman implies that overseers and masters are not capable of controlling every aspect of the bondman’s life.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> Marilyn Walker, ‘Loci of Limitation and Liberation: Spatial Subjectivity in “The Runaway Slave at Pilgrim’s Point”’. *Nineteenth-Century Gender Studies* 3.2. (Summer 2007): 1-32, p. 3. Web April 2014. <<http://www.ncgsjournal.com/issue32/walker.htm>>.

The moment of acquaintance is immediately succeeded by the speaker's hopeful reinstatement of the transformative power of romantic love and the union is expounded upon in idealistic terms.

And from that hour our spirits grew  
As free as if unsold, unbought.  
Oh, strong enough, since we were two,  
To conquer the world, we thought!  
The drivers drove us day by day;  
We did not mind we went one way.  
And no better a freedom sought.

(X 64-70)

The idealization of love in this passage is uncontested yet it does not constitute sufficient evidence that the politics here is conservative. Detractors of Elizabeth Barrett Browning's progressive politics read the envisagement of liberation in denigrating terms as 'the speaker expresses nostalgia for a lost state of perfection in love, implying a belief that for a woman love can neutralize the negative effects of oppression on a female individual's consciousness, but without actually eliminating oppression' (Brophy 277). Such an explanation, in my view, overlooks the fact that the speaker's act of resistance has already taken place in the acknowledgement that a romantic connection is possible, outside the field of vision of her pursuers. The evocation of romantic feeling bears a transformative power in itself as it induces the reshaping of the speaker's consciousness, as for the first time her narration attains a hopeful tone. In this respect, the speaker in stating that 'We did not mind, we went one way. / And no better a freedom sought.' does not mark passive acceptance of servitude in the light of a romantic union in progress which will restore 'a state of perfection in love' (Brophy 277). On the contrary, intimacy and invisibility allows the speaker and her lover to perform an act of rebellion against the dehumanising realities of enslavement in reclaiming their self-worth. The disruption of

panopticist vision in this passage in augmenting the potentiality for the reinvention of the speaker's subjectivity, calls into mind Mill's visual dynamics in the watchtower-like construct. Similarly, the speaker's initial hesitation and surprise in finding out that 'Could a slave look *so* at another Slave?-' (IX 62) might be read as the result of her long-standing exposure to the regulatory gaze. As already pointed out, Mill re-imagines subject-formation in communal life as being regulated according to the directives of custom. Similarly, within the institution of slavery the perpetuation of bondage rests upon the unremitting assertion of regulatory power, which aims to fuel a sense of debased humanity in the slave. Hence, exposure to the gaze of the wathcman / master determines the kind of questions that get asked and at the same time censors any questions regarding individual preference or disposition, the visual dynamics of panopticism ensures that the effects of the hunters' surveillance are permanent. When the speaker questions her ability to look and be looked at in a romantic way, she objectifies herself in the very same way the vigilant eye of her hunters does. What is implied in the speaker's self-objectification is a major effect of the panopticon, which, to use Foucault's words, succeeds 'to induce ... a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power. So to arrange things that the surveillance is permanent in its effects even if it is discontinuous in its action' (*Discipline* 195).

Parry, in her discussion of the moment when two slaves exchange looks, also notes the dehumanising effects of slavery. Her insightful reading of the passage puts slavery and racism in relation to one another and points towards the totalising oppression achieved by the simultaneous operation of both discourses. However, and this is precisely where my reading diverges from hers, she overlooks both the ability and the choice of the woman slave to experience romantic love under these circumstances. She states:

the worst effect of the racist discourse on the negroes in the poem is that they come to see themselves in white terms –as

commodities. Even when the girl falls in love it is clear that her individuality and subjectivity are anaesthetised ... She is fully interpellated within the racist system so that the only freedom she sees lies in the anonymity of 'sky and the sea' (IX), and she and her lover accept that it is out of reach ('Sexual Exploitation' 124).

In my view, self-objectification here cannot be dissociated from the fact that the right to love becomes in the specificity of circumstances an act of dissent. As she immediately overcomes her hesitation and reclaims her dignity through love by exploiting the discontinuity of the visual field, objectification collapses in the face of the right to choose to love. The fact that she is able to choose for herself is nothing less than a rebellious act impregnated with lethal dangers because she does not know whether she would be spied upon at any one moment.

But how can these blind spots be accounted for? As panoptician visual dynamics conditions the formation of subjects not only when they are aware that they are being watched but also when the see / being seen dyad is dissociated from disciplinary power, it is surprising to realize that the limitations of such a conceptualization of visual power relations arise from the interaction of human nature with the mechanistic outlook of regulatory practices. Mill in *On Liberty* resists the idea of state education based on two recognitions: first, he recognises that the individual needs to be protected from the homogenising power of custom, which moulds people to look and think exactly like one another, and second, he grasps the complete conformation to an automaton apparatus as a utopian project. He argues:

Supposing it were possible to get houses built, corn grown, battles fought, causes tried, and even churches erected and prayers said by machinery – by automatons in human form – it would be a considerable loss to exchange for these automatons even the men and women who at present inhabit the more

civilised parts of the world, and who assuredly are but starved specimens of what nature can and will produce. *Human nature is not a machine to be built after a model, and set to do exactly the work prescribed for it*, but a tree, which requires to grow and develop itself on all sides, according to the tendency of the inward forces which make it a living thing (114 my emphasis).<sup>45</sup>

Hence, the speaker of ‘The Runaway Slave at Pilgrim’s Point’ does not become the embodiment of the Benthamite machine herself in so far as she is alert to discern and exploit the possibilities of dissent underlying the visual discontinuities in the panopticist field.

I will now turn to the enhanced potentiality of change which manifests itself as a rift in the area spreading from the center to the circumference and allows voice to become the medium through which communication with other subjects of the circumference is enabled. When the mother smothers the child she does it in hiding, she is invisible. The language there is expressive and the outpouring of feeling excessive, which accords with Mill’s statements.

### Infanticide as a Transformative Act

Right after the completion of the poem Elizabeth Barrett Browning wrote to her friend H. S. Boyd: ‘I am just sending off an anti-slavery poem for America, too ferocious perhaps for the Americans to publish: but they asked for a poem and shall have it’.<sup>46</sup> Indeed the poem was published almost two years after its submission, urging many critics to read behind this delay the editors’ befuddlement on encountering the crudeness of the

<sup>45</sup> Mill’s argument about education is quite straight-forward and emanates from his honest concern to rehabilitate feeling and individuality in communal life and to re-ascribe to the members of a community which is controlled by the gaze of custom and tradition, the right to self expression. For all its significance in reclaiming feeling and individual expression *vis à vis* machine-like regularity in human nature, it must be said that his denouncement of state education has been deplored. As Robin Gilmour put it in *The Victorian period. The Intellectual and Cultural Context of English Literature 1830-1890* (London and New York: Longman, 1994), p. 162, ‘a proposal so doctrinaire and despotic reveals a breathtaking ignorance of the reality of working-class life. One can only conclude that Mill’s consciousness of his own over-education left him with little awareness that under-education might be worse’.

<sup>46</sup> p. 315.

infanticidal scene in stanzas XVI to XXII.<sup>47</sup> Parry, in her effort to explain the symbolic function of the pilgrim-ghosts, and the connection the speaker is said to establish to the white fathers and the white God, claims that the poem needs to be read in relation to the form of the ballad on account of the poet's letter to Miss Mitford that she would respond to the Abolitionist's commission with a 'rather long ballad' (111). As the generic term dramatic monologue was introduced about a decade after Elizabeth Barrett Browning had written the poem, and assuming that the poet was experimenting with a new genre (which not only had it not been yet classified but right up to today defies the rigidness of taxonomic canonisation), adhering to the idea that 'the characteristics of the ballad form predicated certain ways in which the subject of the poem would be dealt' (120) imposes certain limitations on the scope of the analysis of the poem. In my view, the whole poem and particularly the scene of infanticide does exactly the opposite to what Parry suggests in inserting the poem in the balladic tradition, wherein 'circumstances and action are given baldly; cause and motivation are left to imagination. Interest is in the type and not the individual' (120). The poem as a dramatic monologue indeed renegotiates generic conceptions in some respects, primarily I argue, aligning myself with Schaub, by stripping its readers of the judgement function and the dramatic monologue of its essential organising principle, irony. According to Schaub, 'this is obviously a consequence of Barrett Browning's abolitionist agenda; if we judge the slave, we will not want as passionately to end slavery' (558). In the second stanza of the poem the speaker directly addresses the pilgrims, recognising them as her audience: 'O pilgrim-souls, I speak to you! / I see you come out proud and slow / From the land of Spirits pale as dew / And round me and round me ye go' (II 8-11).

At the same time, what warrants its firm hold in the dramatic monologue and not the ballad is the fact that the poem starkly capitalises on character portrayal and the

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<sup>47</sup> Parry, 116; Brophy, 275.

violent confrontation of adverse desires. Indeed, in dramatizing the slave experience with the agonising stanzas of the killing of the child, Elizabeth Barrett Browning strikes the chords of maternal love to propose that the consequences of slavery exceed rational, human bounds. The *Princeton* entry for ‘Ballad’ identifies a number of characteristics ‘which seem to hold for all genuine specimens’.<sup>48</sup> ‘The Runaway Slave at Pilgrim’s Point’ defies this taxonomy on many accounts. Ballads, according to the *Princeton*, are narrated impersonally and the narrator refrains from making personal judgements. The subjective point of view recedes in the face of the bias of the community, and there is little time for careful delineation of character or psychological exploration’. Moreover, in the ballads there is a sparsity of figures of speech.<sup>49</sup> In direct contrast to the conventions of the ballad, the cry of the fugitive slave ‘I am not mad: I am black.’ (XXXII 218) reveals highly subjective judgement. Similarly, the speaker’s meditation on the ethics and politics of love in stanza XIV: ‘We were black, we were black. / We had no claim to love and bliss,’ (92-93) and her scathing criticism ‘[...] of the Washington race’ (XXXII 221) and the racist policies of the ‘UNION’ which have set ‘Two kinds of men in adverse rows, / Each loathing each! [...]’ (XXXIV 233, 234-235) are loudly voiced, ushering a polemic against the racist bias of the white community. Tricia Lootens, in addressing the difficulty of engaging in a collective formal analysis of a poem saturated with ‘raw’ issues such as slavery, rape and infanticide, is forthright about the predominance of the lyric ‘I’, which she directly links with the legacy of sentimental poetics and underscores the poet’s attention to the construction of the speaker’s character. She argues that ‘The Runaway Slave at Pilgrim’s Point’

is a poem with palpable (even palpitating) designs on its readers. It exclaims and preaches; it deploys (and, I suspect, intensifies) that peculiar mixture of citationality,

<sup>48</sup> Alex Preminger and T. V. F. Brogan eds., *The New Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993), p. 116.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 118.

shamelessness, and corporeality which we associate with sentimental verse. And, in so doing, it touches both painfully and problematically, both on ‘irreducible resentments’ and on social and personal desires.<sup>50</sup>

Finally, the metaphor of the ‘master’s look’ of the child that used to fall on the slave mother’s ‘[...] soul like his lash’ (XXI 144-45) is so central in the poem that its ambiguity has spurred a wild debate amongst critics over the motives of the infanticide.

The scene of the infanticide is one of the most frequently discussed parts of the poem, evidently on account of the ferocity it entails. What is yet to be explored is how the staging of the event beyond the regulatory gaze allows for ‘a socially contradicted’ black female subject to launch a ‘sweeping critique’ of ‘racism as a political and discursive system’.<sup>51</sup> Aligning myself with numerous critics who read the moment as the ultimate act of defiance to the system of slavery, which was consolidated on racial discrimination, I argue that the infanticide, like the moment of acquaintance of the two lovers, takes place in a blind spot within the panoptician configuration. The staging of the infanticidal act, occasioned by the discontinuity of the visual field which spans from the central position of the inspector to the circumference, becomes a key element in the poet’s achievement in augmenting the impact of a repertoire of techniques she deploys to launch her social critique. The representation of infanticide in ‘Runaway Slave at Pilgrim’s Point’, in condensing in its multileveled quality numerous major discourses of its epoch in a single act, comprises, in my view, the literary moment *par excellence* whereby, to use Levine’s words, ‘literary forms participate in a destabilizing relation to social formations, often colliding with social hierarchies rather than reflecting or foreshadowing them’ (626). The act of infanticide resonates as an act of defiance, as already pointed out, in the context of

<sup>50</sup> Tricia A. Lootens, ‘Publishing and Reading Our EBB’: Editorial Pedagogy, Contemporary Culture, and “The Runaway Slave at Pilgrim’s Point”, *Victorian Poetry* 44.4 (2006): 487-505. p. 494.

<sup>51</sup> Susan Brown, “Black and White Slaves:” Discourses of Race in Victorian Feminism’, *Gender and Colonialism*, ed. Timothy P. Foley, Lionel Pilkington, et al. (Galway: Galway University Press, 1995), p. 124-138. p. 125.

panopticist relations, yet carries within it the very same socio-historical baggage it defies. This inherent contradiction is due to the fact that subjection to the regulatory gaze continues to be effective even when it has been interrupted. Therefore, the interplay between the various discourses belying the speaker's oppression progresses in two directions, one that reinforces and perpetuates her subjection and one that liberates her from it, if not physically in the end, at least spiritually. It is precisely the awareness of the degenerative force accumulated in the diverse set of discourses intersecting the act of infanticide that prevents the assumption of a critical stance on behalf of the readers.

Before embarking on the analysis of the infanticide with a view to untangle how an intricate set of political overtones interacts with literary form, a brief contextualization of the poem in abolitionist writing is required. Stone, in her article, 'A Heretic Believer: Victorian Religious Doubt and New Contexts for Elizabeth Barrett Browning's "A Drama of Exile," "The Virgin Mary" and "The Runaway Slave at Pilgrim's Point"', in analysing the 'persistent undercurrents of religious doubt' (31) in the aforementioned works, asserts that it is possible that during the composition of 'The Runaway Slave at Pilgrim's Point' Elizabeth Barrett Browning was aware of Frederick Douglass's *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave*, which was published in 1845. She comments that she might have been familiar with Douglass's *Narrative* because Douglass was giving speeches, much celebrated in the press, in London in May and August 1846. She, furthermore, introduces textual evidence of the possible influence of Douglass's theodicy from an early draft of the poem, now at Wellesley College Library. As Marjorie Stone informs us, this draft features 'a lengthy opening passage that does not appear in the fair copies or in its first published version, a passage portraying a

male (not a female) slave wrestling with questions about the nature of God, good, and evil' ('Heretic Believer' 29).<sup>52</sup>

'I am a slave. I will not say much / As that I am a man. And if indeed / God as the priests tell, ever made me such / I think he looked around after, taking heed / And smiled to all his angels that He God / Had used such base black clay to make a man / Then threw it dustward with a scorn & ban / Alas His bitter creatures... to be trod' (Cited in 'Heretic Believer' 29). In order to detect the affinities between Elizabeth Barrett Browning's questioning of divine benevolence and Douglass's theodicy, Stone juxtaposes this passage with stanza IV from 'The Runaway Slave at Pilgrim's Point': 'I am black-I am Black! / And yet God made me they say: / But if He did so, smiling back / He must have cast His work away / Under the feet of His white creatures, / With a look of scorn, that the dusky features / Might be trodden again to clay' (ll. 22-28). Leighton, in *Victorian Women Poets*, provides an insightful remark on the runaway slave's viewpoint and argues that 'it projects an extended apartheid of the imagination, back to the origins of creation and forwards to the end of time. Such an apparently God-given system, a colour imagery from which nothing, not even the colour of the earth's 'clay', goes free, reproduces the very net of ideology against which the poem itself is written' (100).

Allusions to infanticide are made directly or less explicitly in works published in the *Liberty Bell*, including the 1845 volume, which was one of the editions that Elizabeth Barrett Browning had received before she sent the requested contribution 'The Runaway Slave at Pilgrim's Point' in the 1848 annual.<sup>53</sup> One of the most compelling examples of indirect allusion to infanticide in the 1845 edition is a brief essay by Charlotte Coues, entitled 'an Appeal to mothers'. Coues recounts the story of a Jamaican slave woman

<sup>52</sup> While Stone's contribution to the revaluation of the religious aspect of Elizabeth Barrett Browning's poetry is colossal, especially with the new context forming around the poem in view of her recovery of the Wellesleyan draft, the analysis of the poet's oscillation between piety and doubt is beyond the scope of the current discussion which focuses on the biopolitical genealogy of systematic oppression informing the woman slave's infanticide.

<sup>53</sup> Stone, 'Garrisonians', p .45.

whose owner, after selling her children away, whips her for grieving for them. When the story ends, Coues sets out to invoke feelings of sympathy towards the woman slave and to make her readers identify with her anguish by urging them to imagine how excruciatingly painful it is to have your child abducted and sold if having it removed peacefully by God himself already causes ineffable pain. The argument put forward by Coues is that the separation of mother and child due to death is more tolerable than the child's removal by the violent hand of the white master.<sup>54</sup>

Allusion to infanticide and the idea of the death of the child as a preferable alternative to the child being sold away also appears in two works cited by Stone in her essay 'The Garrisonians': 'The Slave Mother' by Maria Lowell from the 1846 edition and 'Birth in the Slave's Hut' by Louisa Hall in the 1849 issue. Both narrate the stories of a slave mother who pray for their child's death in order to be saved from the misfortunes of slavery and more specifically the sexual harassment by white masters.

What is important to take into consideration is that the aforementioned works deploy the literary reconstruction of the wish for the child to die rather than be sold in a mediated manner. In the poems and tales that appeared in the *Liberty Bell*, more often than not, the voices of enslaved mothers were contained within the observations of a white narrator (Ficke 255). Elizabeth Barrett Browning's choice to have a slave woman speak for herself is a daring task that allows for the articulation of a sturdy critique of the slave system, by showcasing in an unprecedentedly direct way the internal conflict the woman experiences as she realizes that her actions are circumscribed by that system. While the poem in all its crude realism rebukes the binary opposition of white and black and its coextensive discursive code wherein the primacy of white is uncontested, having a black woman slave as the speaker is a precarious choice. Despite the fact that Elizabeth

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<sup>54</sup> Coues writes: 'think then what must be the agony of heart to one whose child is removed, not by the commands of a Father of infinite love, and by the still hand of death, but at the bidding of the fierce demon of avarice, acting through a master's hand' in 'An Appeal to Mothers', *The Liberty Bell*, ed. Maria Chapman (Boston: 1845), p. 6.

Barrett Browning repeatedly decried her family's slave-holding past, referring to it as a 'curse', she wrote to Robert in 1845 'cursed we are from generation to generation' (*The Brownings' Correspondence* 1:333), a fictional slave narrative authored by a writer whose family wealth came from slave plantations in Jamaica, might be indicted as a hubristic gesture. While it is not at all generalizable that white-authored abolitionist literature uncritically endorses racial hierarchies, Abdul JanMohamed underscores the dangers arising from the engagement of white-authored texts with racial polarities, arguing that 'narrative organisation based on racial / metaphysical oppositions'<sup>55</sup> -which he calls 'Manichean Allegory'- 'set in motion such strong currents that even a writer who is reluctant to acknowledge it and who may indeed be highly critical of imperialist exploitation is drawn into its vortex' (63).

In my view, 'The Runaway Slave at Pilgrim's Point' successfully overcomes JanMohamed's 'Manichean Allegory' in managing to penetrate more easily into the conflicted state of the mother than other abolitionist white-authored fictional narratives, and I argue that the emotional tension it expresses can be compared to that of Harriet Jacobs's autobiographical account. Harriet Jacobs was born into slavery in 1813 in North Carolina. In order to break free from her owner who repeatedly violated her, she slept with another white man, with whom she had two children. She managed to escape to the North in 1842 and became the first freedwoman to publish her autobiography, entitled *Incidents in The Life of a Slave Girl* in 1861. Jacobs expresses mixed feelings towards her first child because in the context of slavery maternal subjectivity is pathologised. The following passage is indicative of the psychological contradictions arising from the mother slave's entangled circumstances:

The little vine was taking deep root in my existence, though its  
clinging fondness excited a mixture of love and pain.

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<sup>55</sup> Abdul R. JanMohamed, 'The Economy of Manichean Allegory: The Function of Racial Difference in Colonialist Literature,' *Critical Inquiry* 12.1 (1985): 59-87. p. 61. Cited in Debbie Bark, p. 52.

Sometimes I wished that he might die in infancy. God tried me. My darling became very ill.... I had prayed for his death, but never so earnestly as now prayed for his life.... Alas, what mockery it is for a slave mother to try to pray back her dying child to life. Death is better than slavery.<sup>56</sup>

There is, however, a striking difference in the way the two women perceive the body of their child. Harriet Jacobs's death wish does not evolve into infanticide as in view of her child's illness she realizes the carnality of the baby's body: She feels that if it dies, the spiritual bond with her child will not compensate for the rupture of the physical mother-child bond. In 'The Runaway Slave at Pilgrim's Point' the mother states that the reconciliation with her child is complete after she buries it.

Jacobs's story owes its strong emotional impact not only to the credulity of the autobiographical narration, but also to its investment in the representation of the ramifications of slavery threatening the maternal bond. Elizabeth Barrett Browning's poem makes accommodation to the same discourse, a wish for the child to be dead, yet lays claim to powerful emotional impression with the description of the potent image of the infanticide. This poetical choice signposts a strong similarity between 'The Runaway Slave at Pilgrim's Point' and Toni Morrison's *Beloved*. Marjorie Stone discusses at length a number of features evoking strong links between the two works. Nonetheless her comparative project is indeed very sensitive to the 'divides' raised by 'racial heritage, historical context and generic traditions'.<sup>57</sup> While the key similarity relates to the transgression of aesthetic thresholds and the depiction of the psychological implications of the infanticidal act, Stone contends that a serious difficulty in juxtaposing the two works emanates from the fact that 'while Morrison's focus on infanticide was suggested

<sup>56</sup> Harriet A. Jacobs, *Incidents in The Life of a Slave Girl*, ed. Jean Fagin Yellin (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000), p. 62.

<sup>57</sup> Marjorie Stone, 'Between Ethics and Anguish: Feminist Ethics, Feminist Aesthetics, and Representations of Infanticide in "The Runaway Slave at Pilgrim's Point" and *Beloved*', *Between Ethics and Aesthetics: Crossing Boundaries*, eds. Dorota Glowacka and Stephen Boos (New York: State University of New York Press, 2002), p. 139.

by the appalling lived experience of the actual slave Margaret Garnet, Barrett Browning's was prompted by very different catalysts, some of them ethically suspect' (139). In contradistinction to Morrison who writes within the context of contemporary African-American literature, Elizabeth Barrett Browning's familial slave-holding past, gives Stone a strong reason to question the motivation of her contribution to the Anti-slavery cause and to reiterate a similar argument to the one put forward by JanMohamed in his discussion of the 'Manichean Allegory' and the ethical implications entailed in white-authored anti-slavery works.

As the scene of infanticide is narrated in stanzas XVIII to XXII, throughout the narration the erasure in the speaker's consciousness of the presence of an intradiegetic audience is glaring. The pilgrim-ghosts are addressed for the last time before the infanticide, in stanza XIV when the speaker laments the fate of the murdered lover. Moreover, reference to the hunters is made in the ensuing stanza when the speaker talks about the 'shame' they brought her, alluding to her violation. From the moment of the rape until the traumatizing encounter with the white-faced newborn, well through the smothering of the child and until stanza XXX when the hunters appear in the scene of capture, she provides only one indication that she had been seen wandering around carrying the dead child's body:

From the white man's house, and the black man's hut,  
I carried the little body on.  
The forest's arms did round us shut,  
And silence through the trees did run.  
They asked no questions as I went, -  
They stood too high for astonishment, -  
They could see God sit on his throne.

(XXV 169-175)

While the incessant pain of the mother during this long period of wandering with the dead child is enacted in the disproportionately lengthy opening line of the stanza, it is not made clear who exactly were the onlookers. One can deduce that they must have been either other fugitive slaves who sought their freedom in the North or/and local villagers. It is unlikely that these were her hunters because lines 180-181 anticipate their arrival and the image of encirclement is expressive of the ever-growing agony she experiences in the face of her entrapment. Most importantly though, the white hunters would not have censored themselves on encountering the spectacle of a runaway slave carrying around a dead white baby, nor would they have been able to imagine the black woman slave's predicament in the context of Christian morals, as suffering and sacrifice for the good of her child. While their presence on the stage is identified with the position occupied by the watchman in the panopticist construct, it is nonetheless important to remember that the watchman also 'inscribes in himself the power relation in which he simultaneously plays both roles; he becomes the principle of his own subjection' (*Discipline* 202-3). As subjects of the panopticist construct the watchmen, or in this case, the woman slave's hunters, subject themselves by internalising the capacity to regulate both themselves and others. The fact that they occupy the position of the watchman makes them no less susceptible to dehumanisation. Due to the fact that they are themselves dehumanised and therefore utterly anaesthetised to human pain, it is highly likely that they would probably waste no time in seizing her and have one more reason to brutalise her again or kill her on the spot because she had murdered a 'white' child.

Lines 173, 174 and 175 further complicate the scene as the reason for astonishment, the macabre sight of the woman carrying a dead baby, is said to evoke the image of God rising to his throne. Despite the fact that in lines 173 and 174 sentence structure does not flow onto the next line as it is markedly contained within line limits by a colon and a hyphen at the end, disqualifying thus a reading that would take into

consideration a ‘double syntax’ effect, the repetition of ‘They’ remedies the disjunction enacted by punctuation. As the beginning of each of the three lines creates a powerful connection between them, the petrifying astonishment experienced by onlookers emanates from the conflation of the vision of the mother and dead child with the vision of the ascending God. The onlookers cannot bring themselves to ask questions because the dead child embodies the martyrdom of the black slave mother. In this stanza the identification of the dead child with God is seminal in so far as it conveys that power relations in the field of a panoptician structure can be disturbed not only by the exploitation of blind spots, but also by human nature itself. Consequently, while the scene of infanticide exposes how an act of defiance might claim the invisibility of a blind spot, the sacralisation of the mother and the dead child in the imagination of onlookers conveys that human nature, as Mill pointed out, is geared to resist the homogenising regulatory power of the panoptician structure, which in the context of the system of slavery is asserted through a set of dehumanising processes.

The dramatic effectiveness of the description of the death of the baby is enormous not only because it requires thirty one lines of graphic detail of the event, but mainly because the anguish of the mother is suspended throughout this passage by elements that reveal that despite her traumatisation due to the child’s colour, the primal physical bond between mother and child develops, suggesting how excruciatingly painful it must have been for her to commit her own child’s murder.

I am black, I am black!  
I wore a child upon my breast...  
An amulet then hung too slack,  
And, in my unrest, could not rest.  
Thus we went moaning, child and mother,  
One to another, one to another,  
Until all ended for the best.

(XVI 106-112)

The physical closeness between the mother and the child is repeated in the climactic moment of the baby's suffocation, when the reference to the maternal breast is invested with violence. As the physical distance between mother and child is annihilated, the violent blow to the maternal breast, which connotes the nurturing ability of the mother, anticipates the violent break of the mother-child bond: 'He moaned and beat with his head and feet, / His little feet that never grew - / He struck them out, as it was meet, / Against my heart to break it through.' (XIX 126-129). Battles, commenting on the extremely powerful impact of this 'unspeakably painful' (96) scene when the child fights for his breath while the mother continues to suffocate him with her shawl, argues that the child 'kicks against his mother, beating her heart literally and figuratively' (97). Moreover, the rhyme scheme of the poem with the doubled sounds of the first four lines of each stanza, occurring always across the distance of an intervening line that belongs to a competing rhyme -ababccb- reinforces a sense of tension and suspense along with the imperfect rhyme of line two with line four ('grew' / 'through').

During the act of infanticide and while the baby was struggling, she says 'But I dared not sing to the white-faced child / The only song I knew.' (XIX 132-133), a song sung by slaves on the plantation, implying that her spiritual disjunction from the white baby renders the song unsuitable as a means of comfort and physical connection. It is only immediately after the burial when she comes to terms with her action that she sings to the baby, signalling their union in the spiritual realm:

Yet when it was all done aright,  
Earth, 'twixt me and my baby, strewed,  
All, changed to black earth... nothing white,  
A dark child in the dark! - ensued  
Some comfort, and my heart grew young.

(XXVII 183-186)

And thus we two were reconciled  
The white child and black mother, thus;  
For, as I sang it soft and wild,  
The same song, more melodious,  
Rose from the grave whereon I sate.  
It was the dead child singing that,  
To join the souls of both of us.

(XXVIII 190-196)

Singing is associated both with romantic and maternal love, as earlier in the poem she had expressed her love to her lover through a song ('I sang his name instead of a song, / Over and over I sang his name-') (XII 78-9) and after the infanticide, embittered she acknowledges the right of the white woman to comfort her children with a song as she 'May keep live babies on her knee, / And sing the song she likes the best.' (XXXI 216-7). Since for the speaker the song connotes intimacy and tender feelings, her choice to sing to the child when his whiteness has been eradicated in the darkness of 'black earth' is not only expressive of her absolute spiritual reconciliation with the infant, it is also instrumental in explaining the motives of her deed.

While racist discourse as the primary constituent of the system of slavery is ultimately inscribed on the woman slave's perception of the physicality of her child's body, leaving her no other choice but to construct the child through the visual signifier of colour, the elimination of the binary opposition of white and black in the burial of the child is what allows the mother to reclaim a connection to her child through the song. In presupposing a transgression of the racial boundaries imposed by the institution of slavery, the song emerges as both a performative and a transformative act.

J. L. Austin in his pioneering philosophical tract *How to Do Things with Words*, explores the relation between utterance and action, arguing that performative utterances do not describe our actions but rather announce that we indulge in them, indicating 'that

the issuing of the utterance *is* the performing of an action'.<sup>58</sup> Austin makes clear that the appropriateness of circumstances under which the words are uttered, and the actions that follow the utterance, more often than not, set the measure of success for the performance of the act:

the uttering of the words is, indeed, usually a, or even *the*, leading incident in the performance of the act ... , the performance of which is also the object of the utterance, but it is far from being usually, even if it is ever, the *sole* thing necessary if the act is to be deemed to have been performed. Speaking generally, it is always necessary that the *circumstances* in which the words are uttered should be in some way, or ways, appropriate, and it is very commonly necessary that either the speaker himself or other persons should also perform certain other actions (8).

Austin's concept of performative utterence is instructive in understanding the operation of the song of the slave mother. Taking into consideration the contingency of the fugitive slave and the staging of the poem as an analogy between the power structure of the scaffolding of the panopticon and the system of slavery as a system set to control, constrain and punish, the song might be apprehended as a performative utterance because it cracks open the visual field of a panopticist structure and lifts the racial barriers imposed by the regulatory eye of the white masters.

The song is also -just like the infanticide- an act of defiance which is transformative because it entails a transformation in the formation of the woman slave's subjectivity. Pearsall observes the experiential validity of the speaker's utterances and contends that the dramatic monologue may facilitate the speaker's self-authorization to effect change. She states:

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<sup>58</sup> John Langshaw Austin, *How to Do Things with Words* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1962), p.6.

Dramatic monologists are all engaged in ordering, in arranging or dictating various aspects of their experience. Each speaker brings a complex of ambitions to his or her discursive moment. A dramatic monologue works actively to accomplish something for its speakers, perhaps the something they are overtly seeking ... but also something infinitely subtle, some other kind of dramatic transformation of a situation or a self (72).

Pearsall observes that the enhanced transformative potential of Augusta Webster's 'Medea', Amy Levy's 'Medea', and Elizabeth Barrett Browning's 'The Runaway Slave at Pilgrim's Point', derive from a destructive act performed by the heroine. According to Pearsall, the speaker is

a creator destroying what she has herself generated and produced, [an act] of destruction constituting an act of responsive innovation... In such works we may trace the creative transformation of violence, as destructive acts mutate into inventive ones through the very medium of the monologue (80).

Pearsall's account illuminates the severing of the mother/child bond as not only contracting the dehumanising effects of servitude into the actions of one desperate mother, but rather as defying the perpetuation of institutionalised human bondage. Ultimately, infanticide liberates both the mother and the child from slavery.

The song is the vocal testimony and the audible evidence that the fugitive no longer constructs herself in relation to the fact that she is doubly brutalised: Only when she frees her self from the tortuous realization that her child would have to endure the ramifications of the black / white polarity, is she able to claim spiritual succour. For, if poetry in Mill's imagination of society as a panoptician structure 'is the medium of voice that circulates beyond the regulatory gaze of panopticism and has the potential to disrupt

its effective operation',<sup>59</sup> then the song of the slave mother is the medium of voice that circulates beyond the regulating eye of the slave masters and effects that disruption. Other critics, such as Ann Parry, have also seen the infanticide as 'a source of transformation', surprisingly enough though, which empowers the slave mother by consigning her at the other extreme end of the black-slave / white-master polarity, whereby the speaker 'herself attains mastery and radically inverts the existing racist and gender structure' (124). Such a reading reflects a chain of thinking that stems from the hesitance to acknowledge the complexity of Elizabeth Barrett Browning's poetics which, embedded as it were, in American abolitionist writing, fostered what would retrospectively prove a canonical expectation from this tradition: the deployment of infanticide as an act of maternal devotion.<sup>60</sup> It moreover fails to detect the echoes of British reform writing, which construed the shortcomings of the social and the legal system as the main culprits for infanticide amongst poor, unwed and 'fallen' women.<sup>61</sup>

Ficke and Battles put forward a similar argument to the one taken up in this discussion regarding the function of the song. Ficke, however, contends that through the song the mother-child bond is only partly reclaimed because the fact that she is able to sing to him only after the burial conveys that the mother privileges the child's soul over his body (257). Battles, on the other hand, who closely observes the trajectory of the mother slave's feelings from the moment she had suggested that the smothering of the child was '[...] for the best.' (XVI 112) until the very end, seems to be more in favour of a reading that accepts absolute reconciliation and perfect restoration of the maternal role.

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<sup>59</sup> Emily Sun, 'What is Poetry in the Theatre of Biopolitics?', *Romanticism and Biopolitics in A Romantic Circles PRAXIS Volume*. (2012): n. pag. Web 14 March 2014.

<[www.rc.umd.edu/praxis/HTML/praxis.2012.sun.>](http://www.rc.umd.edu/praxis/HTML/praxis.2012.sun.>)

<sup>60</sup> My argument is based on Ficke's observation that 'as opposed to non-abolitionist texts, infanticide in abolitionist works is almost universally limited to one motivation: overwhelming love for the child, which leads to a desire to keep it from suffering'. p. 252.

<sup>61</sup> In her article 'It Was Bone of her Bone, and Flesh of her Flesh, and She Has Killed It': Three Versions of Destructive Maternity in Victorian Fiction', Catherine Hancock argues that 'many Victorians believed that much of the blame for child murder should be placed not so much on the individual woman who committed the crime but on environmental conditions that gave little support to unwed mothers'. *Literature Interpretation Theory* 15:3 (2004): pp. 299-320. p. 303.

She writes: ‘The reconciliation is complete as the child joins in the song and serves to join the two souls. It is this moment in the poem that is jubilant, for the mother has found peace with her self in her action’ (98). Aligning myself with Battles’s approach, I would also argue that that the final lines of the poem are illuminating as regards to the motivation of this infanticide.

In the name of the white child waiting for me  
In the death-dark where we may kiss and agree,  
Whitemen, I leave you all curse-free  
In my broken heart’s disdain!

(XXXVI ll. 250-3)

The fact that she leaves the white men curse-free in the name of her child is revealing of the speaker’s character. Even in the context of her statement ‘I saw a look that made me mad! / The *master’s* look, that used to fall / On my soul like his lashor worse! - ’ (XXI 143-145), it is unlikely she would have been able to bring herself to suffocate an innocent child to death out of revenge, if she refrains from cursing her white hunters who are responsible for her successive misfortunes. As Battles suggests, ‘the slave mother dies defiant but broken hearted. Regardless, she admits in the end that she does not reject her child. Paradoxically, she has killed it in order to keep it’ (99).

It is important to point out that the common condemnation (refusal to understand) of infanticide was, from the end of the eighteenth century, both in Britain and the United States, predicated upon the widespread assumption that all women were naturally predisposed to nurture children and that the break of the mother-child bond subverted the traditionally ascribed role of women in society. While one has to be attentive to the conservative overtones of such a take on the role of women because it also implies that their confinement in the domestic sphere was ‘natural’, it is important to apprehend the representation of infanticide as an incisive commentary on the failure of various social institutions. As Ficke explains

infanticide narratives did provide compelling illustrations of the hypocrisy of social and legal systems that insisted on the one hand that women were formed to nurture children , and yet set up numerous restrictions and barriers that prevented women from being able to do just that. By appealing to conservative domestic values, infanticide narratives both in Britain and in America were able to question and destabilise oppressive social systems.<sup>62</sup>

Levine also highlights this point in her discussion of another poem written by Elizabeth Barrett Browning entitled ‘The Cry of the Children’<sup>63</sup>, which urges readers to react in response to the children’s suffering. ‘The Cry of the Children’ is a protest against another social problem, child labour. It depicts the alienation of children from the mothers, the ‘Fatherland’ and God. According to Avery and Stott, the publication of *Poems* in 1844 was a landmark in Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s artistic and social development which embraced the notion that poetry had the power to effect change; from 1844 on, her ‘engagement with contemporary debates’ grew, anticipating thus the militant attack on slavery in ‘The Runaway Slave at Pilgrim’s Point’.<sup>64</sup> The poem begins with the invocation of familial relations ‘Do ye hear the children weeping. O my brothers, / They are leaning their young heads against their mothers,’ (ll. 1, 3), ‘Do you ask them why they stand / Weeping sore before the bosoms of their mothers, / In our happy Fatherland?’ (ll. 22-24), suggesting that the children’s suffering is the result of the failure of the domestic sphere. However, the figure of the powerless mother is juxtaposed to a ‘Fatherland’, which is hypocritically ‘happy’ as it turns its back to the predicament of its own children. The hypocrisy of society is here highlighted, according to Levine, in ‘the oddity of Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s image’ which ‘mixes together the literal and

<sup>62</sup> Sarah H. Ficke, ‘Crafting Social Criticism: Infanticide in the “Runaway Slave at Pilgrim’s Point” and “Aurora Leigh”’, *Victorian Poetry* 51 (Summer 2013): 249-267, pp. 250-251.

<sup>63</sup> Quotations from ‘Cry of the Children’ are taken from *The Complete Works of Elizabeth Barrett Browning*.

<sup>64</sup> Simon Avery, ‘The Voice of a Decade: Elizabeth Barrett’s Political Writings of the 1840s’, *Elizabeth Barrett Browning*, eds. Simon Avery and Rebecca Stott, p. 88.

figurative registers. Literal mothers are unable to comfort their children, while at the same time the figurative father of the ‘Fatherland’ fails to care for the ‘children’ of the nation’ (641). The causal relation between the hypocrisy of society and the severed maternal role is powerfully illustrated by two more elements in the poem that elaborate upon the symbolic role of infanticide. First, in lines 37 to 52 the startling description of dead Alice invokes the responsibility of the ‘fathers’ in so far as they incapacitate mothers to nurture the children in the household, saving them from the stupefying fatigue of child-labour. “True,” say the young children, ‘it may happen / That we die before our time! / Little Alice died last year - her grave is shapen (ll. 37-39)’, ‘From the sleep wherein she lieth none will wake her, / Crying, ‘Get up little Alice! it is day.’ / If you listen by that grave, in sun and shower, / With your ear down, little Alice never cries.’ (ll. 43-46). Second, the poem is framed with an epigraph from Euripides’ Medea (431 BCE), a play whose dramatic plot escalates in the infanticide Medea commits out of vengeance because her husband took on another wife. The quote appearing as an epigraph contains the last words Medea addressed to her children before killing them: ‘Φευ, φευ, τί προσδέρκεσθέ μ’ ομμασιν τέκνα,’ which translates as ‘Alas, alas, my children, why do you look at me with your eyes?’.<sup>65</sup> Her choice to insert the poem in the tradition of the paradigmatic literary representation of infanticide of classical antiquity might seem at odds with her critique of the hypocrisy of the fathers and the public sphere which is held responsible for the failures of the domestic in stripping women of their maternal role. The implicit connection with Medea’s culpability, in so far as her infanticide constituted an act of retaliation, would be imperceptible to the majority of Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s female readership as they would not have been able to read Greek but also because, as Laura Berry argues, in the nineteenth century infanticide was dissociated from ‘a discourse of individual guilt and criminality and was invented instead as a widespread

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<sup>65</sup> I am reproducing Caroline Levine’s translation in *Strategic Formalism*, p. 642.

social problem'.<sup>66</sup> Conversely, as already shown, many contemporary critics of 'The Runaway Slave at Pilgrim's Point' would be more than willing to embrace this association despite the absence of such an epigraph, since they are inclined to undermine all indications that the infanticide was driven by love, and either discuss in disparaging terms the anger that the white-faced child incited in the slave mother, or explicitly recall 'Medean rage' (Bark 54) as a motivation. Addressing the epigraph to male readers only, the poet advocates the irresponsibility of the fathers as the cause of the deterioration of the domestic as a centre of morality and maternal comfort. As Levine put it,

to women readers, she offers an image of powerlessness, and to male readers she first offers them an image of the vengeful mother and then shifts responsibility from her to the negligent brothers who are failing to use their public power to protect and empower the domestic sphere (643).

Having shown Elizabeth Barrett Browning's complex method of dispelling culpability from the incapacitated mother and assigning responsibility to male dominated society in 'The Cry of the Children', the mother slave's infanticide is similarly accounted for by displacing responsibility from the mother onto the hunters:

(Man, drop that stone you dared to lift! - )

I wish you who stand there seven a-breast,  
Each, for his own wife's joy and gift,  
A little corpse as safely at rest,  
As mine in the mangos! - Yes, but she  
May keep live babies on her knee  
And sing the song she likes best.

I am not mad: I am black.

I see you staring in my face -  
I know you staring, shrinking back!

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<sup>66</sup> Laura Berry, *The Child, the State, and the Victorian Novel* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1999), p. 136.

Ye are born of the Washington-race.  
And this land is the free America.  
And this mark on my wrist.. (I prove what I say)  
Ropes tied me up here to the flogging-place.

(XXXI-XXXII 211-224)

Despite the fact that her poetics reflect an awareness of ‘the analogy between the middle-class marriage market and the slave trade’,<sup>67</sup> these stanzas show that the poet was sensitive to the differences between white female oppression and African Slavery. The poet dwells on the singularity of the slave’s experience by having her speaker recall one image of extreme physical brutality. While the slave’s subjection to the master is reinforced by punishment, tying her up and flogging her, the totalizing effect of oppression is literally inscribed on the slave’s body itself. The mark on the wrist and the carved back from the slaver’s whips become not only the evidence of her martyrdom but constant reminders that perpetuate and re-enforce her subjection. Ultimately, the marks on her body are intended to produce, in the context of slavery replicating the dynamics of a panoptician structure, self-regulation, even when the assertion of regulating power has been halted. The slave body itself becomes ‘a text- encoded with symbols of oppression that the slave could neither read nor escape’ (Bark 51).

While this image aims to showcase the extreme oppression of the system of slavery, it also aims to evoke feelings of guilt in the American readers because it is enveloped in a sarcastic tone. Sarcasm is the result of Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s politicised aesthetics of expression developing on an antithesis traversing the stanza that juxtaposes the speaker’s self-referenced blackness to ‘Washington-race’ and ‘free America’ to the ‘flogging place’.

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<sup>67</sup> Susan Brown, “‘Black and White Slaves’: Discourses of Race in Victorian Feminism”, *Gender and Colonialism*, eds. Timothy P. Foley, Lionel Pilkington, et al (Galway: Galway University Press, 1995), p. 125.

## Conclusion

In concluding the discussion of the poem, I argue that stanza XXXII is emblematic of the transformative potential entailed in the collision between the social formations and literary forms. The rallying cry ‘I am not mad: I am black.’ encapsulates the reflexiveness of a poetic genre, the dramatic monologue, and re-enacts this reflexiveness in a uniquely impactful way as it incorporates the tension created from the jostling of diverse political and historical settings. The evocation of insanity as a possible drive for infanticide reflects the tendency to associate the act with physical and psychical illness. The fact that ‘the growing reliance upon insanity defences in trials for new-born child murder from the 1830s ... resulted in psychological explanations coming to dominate society’s understanding of infanticide’,<sup>68</sup> mirrors a historical development in the study of the self with the emergence of a new school of mental science. While previously the human mind and feelings were construed as distinct from the body, in the first half of the nineteenth century mental pathology shifted to embrace both mind and body to account for abnormal states of mind.

Ekbert Faas in *Retreat Into the Mind. Victorian Poetry and the Rise Of Psychiatry* argues that the emergence of the dramatic monologue is viscerally related to the rise of the new school and that dramatic-psychological poetry draws heavily on a broadened understanding of insanity that brought together madness and morality. This new conceptualization of madness discussed aberration as a ‘morbid perversion of the feelings, affections, and active powers’ as often coexisting with ‘an apparently unimpaired state of the intellectual faculties’ (Prichard, cited in Faas 45). The blurring of boundaries between sanity and insanity fascinated many poets of the period and the excessive mind became a significant tradition as the genre developed. It is thus no coincidence that Browning’s first series of monologues were entitled ‘Madhouse Cells’,

<sup>68</sup> Anne Marie Kilday, *A History of Infanticide in Britain c. 1600 to the Present* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), p. 152.

but it also engendered the danger that the slightest indication of excess could easily be thought of as mental deviance. ‘Moral delinquency’, or ‘when a modest female acts in a ‘bold’ or ‘indecent manner’ (*Faas* 45) sufficed to call into mind mental or / and psychological instability. Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s speaker alludes to madness right before the infanticide. She says:

Why, in that single glance I had  
Of my child’s face, I tell you all,  
I saw a look that made me mad!  
  
The *master’s* look, that used to fall  
On my soul like his lash or worse! -  
And so, to save it from my curse,  
I twisted it round my shawl.

(XI 141-7)

The simile of ‘the master’s look falling on her soul like a lash’ invokes the systematic oppression of slave-holding practices, yet the meaning of the word ‘mad’ is here ambiguous because it may also connote anger. Ficke also notes this ambiguity (259), yet her general argument does not straightforwardly overrule madness as a motivation. She nonetheless admits that ‘madness (either anger or insanity) is just one of the several motivations that can be linked to her infanticide, but ultimately it cannot explain it’ (259). In my view, madness doesn’t even enter as a motivation for the infanticide, yet it tells us a great deal about the deliberation of Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s poetics. I propose that it can be construed as a reflexive re-enactment of one of the elemental generic characteristics of the dramatic monologue, which relates to the amenability of the form’s central dynamic of self and context for the dramatization of fragmented or excessive selfhood in the light of the emergence of the new movement in psychiatry. Moreover, the fugitive slave in exclaiming ‘I am not mad: I am black.’ loudly defends herself alluding to her blackness as the primary category informing her experience of femaleness. Her defence statement is thus instrumental in indicting African slavery as significantly more

severe a system of oppression in comparison to other systems, such as institutionalised oppression of white women and, hence, through it Elizabeth Barrett Browning raises a strong, clear voice for the abolition of slavery. The function of the rallying cry is further elucidated in view of the fact that the heading of an earlier draft of the poem was ‘Black and Mad at Pilgrim’s Point’. Deborah Logan, in explaining Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s decision to refrain from introducing insanity as the main characteristic of her speaker, explains that the change in title ‘shifts Barrett Browning’s emphasis from madness, which obscures the broader political issues being enacted here, to a phrase that highlights the conflict between freedom and captivity, appropriation and autonomy’.<sup>69</sup> Slinn’s remark on the statement, insightfully concludes that it showcases the compound of cultural conditions within which the dramatic monologue is immersed: ‘Poets’ he says

by choosing aberrant or excessive speakers, they kept poetry as a genre for passion, though no longer in the discredited terms of Romantic Lyricism; they also encouraged the reader to become an active participant and to contemplate the political as well as the psychological significance of the passion indulged: ‘I am not mad: I am black’ asserts Barrett Browning’s infanticidal mother.<sup>70</sup>

Finally, the allusion to infanticide in ‘The Cry of the Children’ and its direct association with the figure of the incapacitated woman and the negligent ‘fatherland’ attests to the fact that Elizabeth Barrett Browning was in general preoccupied with a polemic against a biopolitical society which was structured on binaries and not unities. As Leighton put it,

‘The Runaway Slave’ thus posits a stark choice: morality is either universal and totalitarian or it is historical and relative; it is either a matter of absolute black and white, fixed from the beginning, or it is a matter of white shading into black and one

<sup>69</sup> Deborah Logan, *Fallenness in Victorian Women’s Writing: Marry, Stitch, Die, or Do Worse* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1998), p. 183.

<sup>70</sup> Warwick E. Slinn, ‘Poetry’, *A companion to Victorian Literature*, ed. Herbert Tucker (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1999), p. 314.

thing becoming another. As in ‘The Cry of the Children,’ Barrett Browning imaginatively reproduces the first, setting up a linguistic equivalent of the grid of power which traps her speakers in order to issue a silent plea for the second: for history rather than doctrinaire myth, even where that myth consists of her own Christian beliefs.

(Elizabeth Barrett Browning 101)

While Leighton’s commentary substantiates Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s moral grandeur in highlighting her incisive commentary on social inequality, Slinn summarizes the guiding principle of my reading of her *oeuvre* in general; the astuteness of the politics of her poetics and the poetics of her politics.

## EPILOGUE

Outwardly, what is simpler than to write books? Outwardly, what obstacles are there for a woman rather than for a man? Inwardly, I think the case is very different; she has still many ghosts to fight, many prejudices to overcome.<sup>1</sup>

Virginia Woolf

In 1931 Virginia Woolf, one of Elizabeth Barrett Browning's most famous modern commentators, acknowledged the pre-eminence of a gender-complimentary model of literary production and illustrated the woman writer's duty in polemic terms. The woman writer has to fight ghosts and transcend cultural binds. Woolf, like Elizabeth Barrett Browning, understands women's writing as a performance of a dramatically assertive act in a hostile, gendered environment. The firm hold of such an idea in the critical assessment of female-authored texts of the Romantic and the Victorian period began to be challenged systematically with the recovery work of Romantic and Victorian writers, taking immense dimensions from the 1980s onwards. While the contribution of feminist critics who have been striving to resuscitate Romantic and Victorian women's texts is uncontested and ought never to be allowed to slip out of sight, as I have explained in the introduction, it is nonetheless important to stress that in detecting a proto-feminist outlook in thematic interests and revisionary compositional techniques they were most often claiming two distinct literary traditions, a female and a male one, in order to account for the markedly different orientations and strategies of women's writing. In my view, this division is nowadays deployed with deserved caution, as the study of until recently lesser known women authors has brought to the surface not only the points of divergence but also the thematic, rhetorical and generic continuities in the works of female and male Romantic and Victorian-era authors.

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<sup>1</sup> Virginia Woolf, [1931] 'Professions for Women', *Women and Writing* (London: The Women's Press, 1979).

While Elizabeth Barrett Browning owes her rehabilitated status as a major Victorian poet to feminist criticism, my study, in exposing key facets of her ideological universe and innovative revisions of poetic forms, has attempted to show that her work speaks to us and will continue to speak to future generations in new, more compelling ways. The aforementioned development in recent scholarship, has created more space for a broadly-based analysis of the coexistence of diverse ideologies, discourses, and forms within the same text. Armstrong has forcefully shown that, if we are to account for the encounters of women poets with male texts we have to bear in mind that ‘a formal, structural, and linguistic project is bound up with intellectual debate in women’s poetry and asks to be addressed’.<sup>2</sup> I have, therefore, attempted to penetrate her imaginative world, her complexity of thought and her drive for generic innovation, with the hope to make another step forward in the reconsideration of the cultural dynamics undergirding Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s texts. It is precisely to this space of extended potentiality that I have sought to relate my navigation in Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s world.

Moving beyond the recognition that the strident assertion of the gender-specific experience in conjunction with her enmeshment in the realities of the male dominated public sphere unsettles the stereotypical demarcation of women as culturally inferior, my study aspires to participate in the collective critical project underway to redefine the dynamics of the literary community,<sup>3</sup> as in my view, this paves the way for current and future generation of scholars, students and readers to get a better grasp of Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s *oeuvre* and Romantic and Victorian literature at large.

Foregrounding her progressive poetical strategies and setting her work in a direct dialogue with literary forefathers, foremothers -whom she declines to acknowledge in the

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<sup>3</sup> My approach is indebted to a number of more recent studies: Jerome McGann’s *The Poetics of Sensibility* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996); Judith Pascoe’s *Romantic Theatricality: Gender, Poetry, and Spectatorship* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997); Sarah Zimmerman’s *Romanticism, History and Lyricism* (New York: SUNY Press, 1999); Richard Cronin’s *Romantic Victorians: English Literature, 1824-1840*, but most heavily to Stephen Behrendt’s *British Women Poets and the Romantic Writing Community*.

frequently quoted excerpt from her letter to her editor Henry Chorley<sup>4</sup>- female and male peers, my reading of Elizabeth Barrett Browning's poetry, argues for the revalidation of an organic concept of the literary community which is pulled together by an intellectual connective tissue.

To provide a closure of the ideas discussed and the poems scrutinized it seems necessary to once again recapitulate the main conclusions reached in the process of the analysis. My interrogation of Elizabeth Barrett Browning's allegiances to the Wordsworthian and the Byronic models of the poet and the reconsideration of her position in the construct of the poetess as discussed in the first chapter have provided a sufficient background for the reassessment of two aspects of her work. First, the elegiac poems addressed to L.E.L. testify to a heightened self-awareness regarding her entanglement in the formation of a new tradition. In order to avoid though further subdivisions of Romantic and Victorian women's poetry, I have instead argued that Elizabeth Barrett Browning in containing L.E.L.'s effusive elegiac sentiments, establishes stronger connections with the male tradition of the genre. Kirstie Blair, drawing on *Aurora Leigh* and the *Sonnets* notes that 'the rhetoric of the heart as Barrett Browning repeatedly demonstrates, is difficult to separate from wider discourses of nationalism, politics, the gendered body in society, and the role of poetry' (118). My reading of the elegies to L.E.L., and particularly the more positive stance towards L.E.L.'s poetics in 'L.E.L.'s Last Question', reinforces Blair's position and contributes to the appreciation of Elizabeth Barrett Browning's engagement with the elegy as a major gesture towards the revalidation of sentimental aesthetics and the redefinition of the figure of the poetess. In

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<sup>4</sup> The poet's dialogue with Henry Fotherhill Chorley over the issue of female lineage in poetic tradition informs extensively their epistolary exchanges. While Elizabeth Barrett Browning proves herself familiar with earlier women poets she surmises that Joanna Baillie was the first "poetess". She writes: 'England has had many learned women, not merely readers, but writers of the learned languages in Elizabeth's time and afterwards – women of deeper acquirements than are common now on the great diffusion of letters, and yet where were the poetesses? The divine breath which seemed to come and go, and, ere it went, filled the land with that crowd of true poets who we call the old dramatists – why did it never pass, even in the lyrical form, over the lips of a woman? How strange! And can we deny that it was so? I looks everywhere for grandmothers and see none'. (*The Brownings' Correspondence* 10:9).

so far as the redefinition of a literary figure is sustained through this gesture, I have argued that it can be further re-evaluated as advocating a new rhetoric of feeling. Bearing more pronounced political overtones, it operates in accord with the progressive cultural politics entailed in the assertion of the woman speaker's right to say 'How I love thee' in the *Sonnets of the Portuguese* and *Aurora Leigh*'s final reconciliation of the love / art dichotomy. Furthermore, I have connected the development of Aurora's subjectivity with the novelized quality of the poem and the self-reflexive structure of the *Künstlerinroman* so as to be able to bring together three diverse yet in many instances overlapping rhetorical threads: the voice of the *vates*, the epic bard and the Romantic heroine. Bakhtin's theory of the novel and his concept of *heteroglossia* have captured the dynamics of Aurora's self-formation and self-affirmation. Bakhtin's language model proved a serviceable means in introducing Cavarero's notion of subjectivity, which premised as it is on narratability and exposability, helped me to understand afresh self-construction in *Aurora Leigh*.

The progressive gender politics not only constitutes a responsive framework to the formation of Aurora Leigh's subjectivity through narratability and exposability to the other, but it also becomes foundational for the poet's androgynous imagination in promulgating the acceptance of sexual difference. My analysis of her androgynous imagination has shown that her insistent interest in the symbol of Prometheus inserts her in the long list of Romantic male poets who were fascinated with the emancipatory force of Prometheus' rebellion as it conformed to a vision of a transformed society. Having exposed that Elizabeth Barrett Browning's Prometheus, Christ, and the speaker of the 'Tempest' embodied the union of masculine and feminine qualities, the symbol of the androgyne in her poetry sheds light on one ideological aspect of her general interest in a transformative project targeting the welfare of humanity: that change cannot come about unless the tension between opposing categories such as male / female, intellect / feeling,

sublime / beautiful is effaced. The alternating images, themes and motifs she deploys recall the Burkean categories of the sublime and the beautiful and reflect her impulse to reconcile opposing qualities in a whole which is creatively empowered to galvanize social change. Elizabeth Barrett Browning was attracted to the sublime because it implied change. Yet, the dialectical relation of the beautiful and the sublime in these poems rides exuberantly on an androgynous ideal as Prometheus' 'unbending mind' is paired with the overflow of love, paralleling thus the free expression of both masculine and feminine forces without one claiming dominance over the other in the representation of Christ as both powerful / masculine and humiliated / feminine in the moment of Crucifixion. Furthermore, I have shown that one of Elizabeth Barrett Browning's major achievements in *Aurora Leigh* is the assertion of Aurora's womanhood in the context of an androgynous ideal which allows the modelling of the self-realization of the woman poet upon a concept of an integrated whole of feminine and masculine qualities.

I read the novel-poem's dichotomy between power and gender in Aurora's androgynous myth-making of the self by deploying Irigaray's theory of sexual difference. Her identification with masculine figures, as I have shown, stimulates both the re-appropriation and the rhetorical dismantling of the stereotypes that sustain the masculine codes of agency, art, and selfhood. Moreover, the frequently discussed union-end of *Aurora Leigh* has been reclaimed in my study as the reinforcing of a progressive Romantic poetics which safeguards the life of the woman artist in the first chapter, and in the second, as marshalling a progressive sexual politics which guarantees equal agency in an androgynous union of the heroine with her suitor.

My reading of the *Sonnets from the Portuguese* is highly relevant to the framework I designate in discussing androgyny in *Aurora Leigh*. My contention is that the poet's respect for sexual difference was articulated years before the composition of *Aurora Leigh*. In agreement with Houston's argument that Elizabeth Barrett Browning's

entrance in the tradition of the amatory sonnet was marked by her effort to create a sense of constructed authenticity, I align myself with those critics who seek to correct the misapprehension that the *Sonnets* owes its popularity to its autobiographical content.<sup>5</sup> My argument that her appropriations of the flower and the breath metaphor are invested with more positive meaning than her Spanish and Portuguese predecessors were willing to elicit expands Neri's analysis by introducing the consummated love plot supplanting the sequence as a determining factor. In consonance with my argument that in *Aurora Leigh* inspiration and identification tropes are adapted for the purposes of her androgynous ideal and her progressive understanding of heterosexual relations, I have detected a similar tactic in the *Sonnets*; I hold that Elizabeth Barrett Browning exploits the enhanced signifying potential of Wordsworth's unitary model and substitutes the Petrarchan trope of distance for tactility, in order to assert her female speaker as a powerful trader in the stock-market of the economy of love. Yet, I argue that agency in the *Sonnets* is channelled through diverse vehicles. Silence as agency is the poet's practice not only in the *Sonnets* but also in her mid-career poem featuring a feminised Christ figure, 'The Seraphim'.

The reproduction of the beloved's writings as the aesthetic effect of Gide's and Dällenbach's *mise en abyme* alerted my attention to the speaker's acknowledgement that both subjects, each one in a distinctively personal way, lay an equal claim to the discursive space of matrimonial love. At the core of Elizabeth Barrett Browning's conjugal dynamics, I have thus traced a concept of intersubjectivity, which resonates with the poet's depictions of negotiation and exchange in the economy of love. My discussion of *The Sonnets* illuminates the poet's resistance to the categorical thinking traversing the Petrarchan and the Victorian fields of reference and redefines the critical framework

<sup>5</sup> A growing number of critics in the past two decades surmise that Elizabeth Barrett Browning's sexual politics in the *Sonnets* mounts a forthright critique of the prevailing nineteenth-century notions of love and heterosexual relations that has not enjoyed deserved appreciation by modern commentators. See Stephenson, *Elizabeth Barrett Browning and the Poetry of Love*, p. 92; Stone, *Elizabeth Barrett Browning*, chapter 3; Leighton, *Victorian Women's Poetry: Writing Against the Heart*, pp. 80-91.

within which we might grasp the materialization of self in the context of intersubjective experience. In the second section of the thesis I hold that the poet's speakers are equally concerned with critiquing the sociocultural establishment or fostering more productive political ideals upon which they predicate their position in the world.

Moving beyond the scope of dyadic relations and the confessional tone of the *Sonnets*, I deploy a wider angle to investigate Elizabeth Barrett Browning's overtly political poetry and I focus on her cosmopolitan ideal in her *Risorgimento* poems, 'Casa Guidi Windows', and 'Italy in the World' and 'Napoleon III in Italy' from her *Poems before Congress*. Having engaged in a speculative discussion of her divergences from Kant's theorization of cosmopolitanism, I have attempted to dissociate her cosmopolitan poetics from the assumption that it emanates from the enthusiasm with her adopted country, Italy. Rather, I have shown that it reveals her appeal to a cosmopolitan ideal which informs both her plea for the Italian people's right to an autonomous national destiny and her concept of civic citizenship which is constituted in the vital bond between a charismatic leader and an active populace. Furthermore, I have argued that the transposition of the rhetoric of the heart onto the political content of these poems heralds a reclamation of the political element in the discourse of the sentimental and aspires to dissociate it from the conventions of normative feminine markers.

While Elizabeth Barrett Browning's cosmopolitan ideal is similar in its outlook to Kant's concept of perpetual peace between nations, her vision bears a more powerful emancipatory potential based on the fact that she rejects the binary north; active / south; passive organizing axis of nations. Furthermore, by utilizing the theories of more recent critics, such as Mignolo, Pheng and Vertovic, I have substantiated the hypothesis that her cosmopolitan politics may bear a lasting appeal to the contemporary understanding of cosmopolitanism. My analysis of her cosmopolitan ideal has brought to the fore a poetics of selfhood that champions the concept of a cross-dwelling subjectivity, which lends to

her speaker extended freedom of mobility on multiple temporal / spatial zones. The notion of ‘cross-dwelling’ subjectivity coined by Spinoza and Dreyfus was initially introduced to Elizabeth Barrett Browning studies by Shires, whose argument I expanded by positing the availability of multiple subject positions as a prerequisite of the fenestral viewpoint of the speaker. Moreover, the fenestral viewpoint has been shown to be an ingenious poetic strategy that enables a more nuanced grasp of the intersecting types of nationalistic devotion to Italy and detachment from Britain. Her cosmopolitan imagination has been registered through her appropriation of republican figures. In the light of her appropriation of republicanism in ‘Casa Guidi Windows’, I argue that her reverential treatment of Dante’s dynamic cultural paradigm reverberates her confrontational encounters with the Petrarchan sonnet form and reveals a revisionist drive and a consistent critical stance against the fixed epistemological potential of the Petrarchan cultural paradigm in general. At the same time, it has been argued that debunking of traditionally feminized representations of Italy perpetuated by male precursors such as Lord Byron, constituted an important strategy in re-inserting Italy as a political entity.

Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s cosmopolitan vision has been shown to reclaim Italy’s reinstatement as a geopolitical entity and to promote the mutual understanding between nations through the translatability of a ‘feeling of belonging’. In the last chapter of the thesis, I argue that biopolitics and its by-product, slavery, in the name of imperialist expansionism irrevocably damages the ‘feeling of belonging’ and occludes the emergence of a political individual. With a view to tackling the ontological underpinnings of Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s critique, I demonstrate how her innovative use of the dramatic monologue in ‘The Runaway Slave at Pilgrim’s Point’ amplifies the representational capacities of the genre and allows the provocative portrayal of the displaced and debased self. In line with Byron’s argument that women poets’ contribution

to the formulation of the genre has been undervalued I have attempted to show that Elizabeth Barrett Browning's 'The Runaway Slave at Pilgrim's Point' constitutes an astute polemic of the dehumanising and corrupt social order and foregrounds the inverted morality lying at the heart of the biopolitical sovereign state. Inspired by the theories of Foucault, Agamben and Arendt, I have argued that the slave's body as 'bare life' constitutes the discursive site upon which the totalizing oppression of the system is inscribed.

Moreover, I have argued that the dramaturgy of the poem is structured on a visual dynamics which was originally introduced with Bentham's *Panopticon* and I have shown that Elizabeth Barrett Browning activates this surveillance system in order to stage scenes of entrapment. Mill's flawed distinction between poetry and eloquence (which collapses at the intersection of the private with the public sphere) has been treated as the result of a destabilizing force originating in the collision of literary forms with social formations, and has helped me to show that Elizabeth Barrett Browning's fidelity to the transformative powers of poetry betrays an astonishingly clear perception of the dogmatism inhering in Mill's fallacious distinction. Aligning myself with critics who recognize the infanticide as an act of defiance, I have argued that in carrying within it the very same socio-historical baggage it defies, the infanticide becomes the organizing principle of the poem, which 'does what it says'. Hence, the slave, in smothering her own child lays claim to self-definition in an unorthodox way, in accordance with Elizabeth Barrett Browning's poetical choice to claim the transforming power of the poem by insistently trading on the plasticity of its form. Moreover, the infanticide as a literary trope in its capacity to upset social formations, qualifies as a strategic formalist reading of the poem. Finally, the discursive density underlying the slave's statement 'I am not mad: I am black' has been addressed anew with a view to overrule insanity as a motivation of the infanticide and to clarify that the poignancy of madness in the poem as moral

deviation and intellectual deficiency is exploited poetically in order to maximize dramatic effect by defying the very same socio-historical structure it signifies.

My conclusions bring my argument full circle back to my introduction, wherein I stated that I distance myself from Bloom's account of poetic tradition. While critics will probably continue to posit dangerously limiting tools to fragment, categorize, periodize or even glibly canonize poetic production, poets, on the other hand, may be less receptive to the normalising dictates and segregational practices of literary criticism when they become literary critics. I have demonstrated that so was the case with Elizabeth Barrett Browning's wan resistance to L.E.L.'s sentimental extravagances, I suggest that Emily Dickinson's poetic registration of her encounter with Elizabeth Barrett Browning's work in 'I Think I was Enchanted' alerts us to what might be called a poet's instinct for 'true' poetry.

I think I was enchanted  
When first a sombre Girl --  
I read that Foreign Lady --  
The Dark -- felt beautiful --

And whether it was noon at night --  
Or only Heaven -- at Noon --  
For very Lunacy of Light  
I had not power to tell --  
.....  
I could not have defined the change --  
Conversion of the Mind  
Like Sanctifying in the Soul --  
Is witnessed -- not explained --

'Twas a Divine Insanity --  
The Danger to be Sane  
Should I again experience --

‘Tis Antidote to turn – <sup>6</sup>

Dickinson perceives all the elemental characteristics of her poetry and synopsizes them, structuring her poem on antithetical pairs with astonishing clarity: ‘beautiful’ ‘Dark[ness]’ / Lunacy of Light; ‘Conversion of the Mind / ‘Sanctifying in the soul’; ‘Divine Insanity / Danger to be Sane’. Allowing myself to indulge in speculation, I seriously doubt that Dickinson perceived her relation to Elizabeth Barrett Browning in Bloom’s antagonistic terms and I also challenge the validity of his account in *The Western Canon*, wherein he contends that Emily Dickinson is a ‘stronger’ poet than Elizabeth Barrett Browning, leaving her ‘far behind in the dust’.<sup>7</sup> Instead, I argue that Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s adherence to poetic modes not typically associated with female approaches to poetic production and her revisionist interventions are responsible for Dickinson’s intellectual formation as a poet and that her legacy might be granted deserved reverence within the context of an interactive literary community.

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<sup>6</sup> Emily Dickinson, ‘I Think I was Enchanted’. *The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson*, ed. Thomas H. Johnson (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1960), sts. 1, 2, 6, 7.

<sup>7</sup> Harold Bloom, *The Western Canon: The Books and School of All Ages* (New York: Harcourt Brace and Company, 1994), p. 34.

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