

The background of the page features a faint, light green line-art illustration of four faces. The faces are arranged in a square pattern, with two on the left and two on the right. The lines are thin and sketchy, giving it a delicate, artistic feel. The faces appear to be looking in various directions, some towards the center and some towards the corners.

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Elizabeth Barrett Browning
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Later Biblical Researches in Palestine and the adjacent Regions. By Edward Robinson, D.D., LL.D. John Murray.

[Travels of interest, but given in needless and wearisome detail.]

Southern Africa. By F. Fleming. Hall and Co.

Letters from the Seat of War. By a Staff-Officer. Murray.

Rambles in America. By John Shaw. Hope.

Ancient India. By Mrs. Speir. Smith, Elder, and Co.

[A very good book; the foundation is laid in real and solid knowledge; the style is tasteful; and the book is beautifully illustrated and got up.]

Twelve Months with the Bashi-Bazouks. By Edward Money, Lieut.-Col. Imperial Ottoman Army, and late Captain Bashi-Bazouks. Chapman and Hall.

[A very amusing book, written by one who had good opportunities for observing and a pleasant faculty for recording.]

Pen and Pencil Pictures. By Thomas Hood. Hurst and Blackett.

[There is humour and fancy in this book, though it is deficient in intensity for a young man's first effort. There is a little tendency to the *manufacture* of fun and sentiment.]

Florence Templar. Smith, Elder, and Co.

[Graceful and very interesting, with considerable artistic skill. Like so many other recent novels, it is life seen entirely from one point of view—painted on the camera-obscura of a woman's mind; but the observing medium is in this case clearly a delicate and thoughtful one.]

Ivors. By the Author of "Amy Herbert," &c. Longman and Co.

[Miss Sewell's stories are too moral and ecclesiastical in mould for perfect nature or perfect grace. We are tired of her ever-repeated Christian mothers. This tale, however, has rather more variety, and perhaps less divinity.]

Tender and True. By the Author of "Clara Morison." 2 vols. Smith, Elder, and Co.

[The merit of this tale lies in a grave quiet simplicity of tone. It is more agreeable reading than many more pretentious novels.]

Kathie Brande: The Fireside History of a Quiet Life. By Holme Lee. Smith, Elder, and Co.

[Grave and quiet, as it professes to be; but able and characteristic writing, and interesting reading.]

Kate Coventry. By G. J. Whyte Melville. John W. Parker and Son.

[This story is a reprint from *Fraser's Magazine*. It appears to be decidedly clever; it is unquestionably very fast.]

Round the Fire; Six Stories (for Children). Smith, Elder, and Co.

[Simple, and very interesting for children.]

THE NATIONAL REVIEW.

APRIL 1857.

ART. I.—AURORA LEIGH.

Aurora Leigh. By Elizabeth Barrett Browning. London: Chapman and Hall. 1857.

Poems. By Elizabeth Barrett Browning. Fourth Edition. 3 vols. London: Chapman and Hall. 1856.

It is a rash and futile effort of criticism to limit the forms in which poetic conception is to embody itself. The criticism of artistic forms is the science of an art. It measures a world which is always growing; and its dry system is at any moment liable to be burst asunder by the vital energy of the life to which it professes to assign its appropriate framework. Its work is the same as that of the lawyer, who, having reduced a medley of judicial decisions to an *ex-post-facto* "principle," as he fondly calls it, is suddenly called on to make room in it for a new decision in the Exchequer Chamber. For the poet is greater than the critic; and when the latter says, "thus far shalt thou come, and no farther," he stands like the flattered king upon the sands, and every new wave washes the ground from under his feet. So, too, of the distinctions between prose and poetry, the discussion of which is but a branch of the same school of inquiry. It is idle to attempt to assign them beforehand their respective boundaries. To use one of Mrs. Browning's metaphors with as much boldness and as little appropriateness as she herself is apt to employ them, they

"Play at leap-frog over the god Term."

That certain rules of composition sustain themselves at all, is due to the fact, that creative genius of a high order is not impatient of forms; but rather loves, on the contrary, to have certain limits

defined for it, and to be freed to some extent from "the weight of too much liberty." Shakespeare did not fret because tragedies are limited to five acts, nor Milton quarrel with the formal conditions of an epic poem.

Still, art is free; and when it chooses to break through old conditions which have been considered essential, and assume fresh forms, the new work vindicates or condemns itself. If it recommend itself to that ultimate human judgment with which the verdict lies, it takes its place in spite of all canons to the contrary; if not, it sinks into obscurity, or, if it lives at all, it is because some inner worth outweighs the faultiness and unfitness of the form in which it is embodied.

When, therefore, we say that Mrs. Browning has to some extent misconceived the sphere of verse in her novel of *Aurora Leigh*, and embarrassed herself with details of incident too complex for the rhythmical vehicle of expression, we make the assertion with as much modesty as a critic is capable of, and with a due consciousness that our conclusions are liable to be upset by any poet who chooses to produce a great and harmonious poem under conditions which we have pronounced to be ill adapted to his art. There is this strong fact, however, against the attempt to clothe the modern novel in verse, that verse was not the natural and spontaneous mode of expression which that kind of literature assumed. In all its stages of development, up to its present complex form, in which it fuses into a homogeneous new mould the old distinctions of epic and dramatic, it has always been in prose that its many gifted masters have found the medium for their utterance. At this day, to attempt to translate it into verse seems to us like an attempt to imitate in sculpture the "Transfiguration" of Raphael, or the "Blind Fiddler" of Wilkie. It does not follow, because verse is the highest instrument of expression, and finds a voice more ample and perfect than any other for the passion both of the imagination and the heart, that it has any claim in itself beyond this very fact of its being such true expression, or that you gain any thing by employing it for its own sake. It seems to us a decided loss of power to attempt to give a rhythmical form to the varied narration, the detailed conversation, and the minute and full-length representations of the modern conditions of social and individual life, which have already been so ably and so fully embodied in prose forms. We should go farther than to say merely that verse wants pliancy to adapt itself to those fine ramifications of external observation to which we have become accustomed, or that the contrast is too immediate between the every-day forms of speech which we are in the habit of using, and the same reproduced with a rhythmic cadence; we urge that there are many things

which, from their very nature, it is a breach of those essential harmonies to which, of all men, the poet should be most alive, to attempt to embody in the language of the imagination. Verse is two very different things; it may be used either as the expression of poetic thought, or as a mere external grace, to give a charm to narratives or descriptions, or pieces of humour, to which it is not in any sense necessary. Parts of Pope, of Crabbe, and of Prior, afford ready illustrations of this use of it. But when we speak of poetry, we mean, in general, verse used as the embodiment of poetic conception, to which it clings as the body of a man does to his spirit. It is possible to take this sort of expression, which true poetic conception demands, and use it for subject-matter which does not in itself require it; and, instead of letting the thought kindle the imagination for its own particular occasion, to maintain an artificial heat for general purposes. This is what is done throughout a great part of Mrs. Barrett Browning's poem: A greater master teaches another lesson. When his matter descends, Shakespeare's forms descend with it; and wherever the nature of his subject-matter demands it, he intersperses prose-scenes, or even prose-speeches, in his dramas; and more remarkable than these changes are the subtle variations in the rhythm, and in the warmth of the imaginative colouring, answering every where in the nicest correspondence to the level of the subject-matter. But Mrs. Browning maintains her high unstooping flight over all the varied surface of her story. She dresses her poetry as the ancient actors did their persons; and like them, she loses in truthfulness and nicety of expression what she gains in external display; and it repels the modern reader to find, instead of changing feature and modulated voice, the rigid tragic mask and sounding mouthpiece of the Greek theatre. This undue poetic excitement shows itself in the imaginative diction alone, and is not accompanied by any corresponding elevation in the structure of the metre, or the flow of the rhythm: in these the approach to prose is made as close as possible, bearing some such analogy to ordinary poetry as recitative does to singing; for while the lines are rhythmical, the periods are almost all prosaic. The result we cannot help thinking a very unsatisfactory one; and when, in this semi-verse, semi-prose, the matter of the author comes couched in the most daring and far-fetched metaphor, it makes the reading inconceivably difficult and wearisome. Where the matter is such as to be in keeping with this high poetic utterance, as in the last pages of the book, there is enough to kindle the answering fire in the reader's brain; and the bold and passionate snatchings of the imagination at depths of meaning, which no other language but its own can compel to the surface, are intuitively followed and comprehended. It is otherwise when

ordinary conversation, discussion, narrative, reasoning, or self-communing, are expressed in the poetic forms which poetic matter alone justifies; clothed upon with purple diction, and made to glitter with blazing jewelry of metaphor; distracting the reader from the matter before him, annoying him with their inappropriateness, and often puzzling him to seize their meaning. Take as an instance this description of the paper and printing of Wolff's *Homer*:

"The kissing Judas, Wolff, shall go instead,
Who builds us such a royal book as this
To honour a chief-poet, folio-built,
And writes above, 'The house of Nobody:'
Who floats in cream, as rich as any sucked
From Juno's breasts, the broad Homeric lines,
And, while with their spondaic prodigious mouths,
They lap the lucent margins as babe-gods,
Proclaims them bastards. Wolff's an atheist."

Or read the following description of a lady tearing a letter; of the extravagance of which the author herself seems to be sensible, and which she half apologises for, and half justifies. But though a letter might possibly be torn under circumstances of weight and passion to justify such a simile, yet we cannot think that the destruction of an instrument of gift, even before the eyes of giver and lover, can warrant it:

"As I spoke, I tore
The paper up and down, and down and up
And crosswise, till it fluttered from my hands,
As forest-leaves, stripped suddenly and rapt
By a whirlwind on Valdarno, drop again,
Drop slow, and strew the melancholy ground
Before the amazed hills . . . why, so, indeed,
I'm writing like a poet, somewhat large
In the type of the image,—and exaggerate
A small thing with a great thing, topping it!—
But then I'm thinking how his eyes looked . . . his,
With what despondent and surprised reproach!"

This want of accordance between the matter and the manner is not a superficial defect, it is connected with the fundamental characteristics of Mrs. Browning's genius; rather, we ought to say, with a fundamental deficiency which leaves its trace on all her works, and limits powers which would otherwise lift her into the very highest ranks of the poetical hierarchy. But she is a poet cleft in half; she wants one whole side of the faculties of the artist; and though the other side be great beyond the ordinary proportions of our modern poets, the loss is one which necessarily affects the whole frame, can only be partially compensated by other excellencies, and can never be replaced.

The greatest poets have been those whose spirits are set in

such fine harmony with the world of things outside themselves, that you can scarcely say whether they breathe their own music, or it is breathed out of them by the influences which surround them. Wordsworth, indeed, is more of a conscious interpreter; but Shakespeare seems like some mighty organ, from which the passions, and the affections, and the characters of men, draw each its own tones; and Homer is the name not of a man but of a poem. These things are not really so. The poet does indeed create; but he creates from so complete a sympathy, that he is lost in his work, and it is as if the children of his imagination were the immediate offspring of nature herself. Such poets receive openly what they give, and give openly back what they have received. They are like the flowing rivers, which gather their waters from every source that earth affords; into which every scattered spring and land-draining brook empties its waters; which increase by the quick rains of heaven, the fleeting snow, and the gray dew from the grasses on their banks; which tinge their currents with a trace of every soil through which they pass; and as they flow on render out of the abundance of that they have received beauty and fertility and joy. Others there are, like great springs of clear water, which bubble up into some great reservoir; but are fed from secret and subterranean sources, whose strength and freshness seems to be in themselves, and by whose innate virtue man and beast are revived and strengthened. All poets partake more or less of the characteristics of each class; but perhaps no great poet has ever belonged so exclusively to the latter as Mrs. Browning. It is from the strength of her own soul, the resources of her own intellect, and the riches of her own heart, that she writes. She gives no voice to the world around her. It is herself she is pressed to utter. And this is not only the unconscious, but the direct and conscious aim of her striving. She even tells us it is so:

"With stammering lips and insufficient sound
I strive and struggle to deliver right
That music of my nature, day and night,
With dream and thought and feeling interwound,
And inly answering all the senses round
With octaves of a mystic depth and height,
Which step out grandly to the infinite,
From the dark edges of the sensual ground!
This song of soul I struggle to outbear,
Through portals of the sense sublime and whole,
And utter all myself into the air."

She is never the passive subject of that sort of inspiration by which some men almost unconsciously render back the impressions of things around them; what comes from her is part of her. It is the song of her own soul she "struggles to outbear,"

and she grasps the outer world to make it yield her a language. Not till a thing has become transmuted into the substance of her own mind does she feel the impulse to speak it; and then only she turns to external things, and her imagination ranges out through the circle of the universe to find some full and adequate voice for it. Shakespeare used himself to express other men. Mrs. Browning uses all things to express herself. The whole machinery of *Aurora Leigh*,—poetic conception, dramatic personages, varied incident,—are not shown for themselves, but to expound and elucidate one main and various subordinate ideas of the author. She holds that the poet must have lived his poetry before he writes it, and speaks passionately of the suffering and the effort that his career demands:

“ Art
Sets action on the top of suffering:
The artist’s part is both to be and do,
Transfixing with a special, central power
The flat experience of the common man,
And turning outward, with a sudden wrench,
Half agony, half ecstasy, the thing
He feels the inmost: never felt the less
Because he sings it. Does a torch less burn
For burning next reflectors of blue steel,
That *he* should be the colder for his place
’Tixt two incessant fires,—his personal life’s,
And that intense refraction which burns back
Perpetually against him from the round
Of crystal conscience he was born into
If artist-born? O sorrowful great gift
Conferred on poets, of a twofold life,
When one life has been found enough for pain !”

This is, we have little doubt, a very truthful, as well as very forcible, description of her own experience as a poet; but it is far from being a true description of all poets, or at least of the whole function of any complete poet. No man, from the riches of his own life and actually experienced feelings, could have written *Lear* and *Hamlet*. Even in lyrical poetry, greater poems have been written from feelings assumed by the imagination than from real ones. Burns, more than most poets, found the sources of his poetry within his own heart; yet “Scots wha hae wi’ Wallace bled” is greater than even “Thou lingering star with lessening ray.” But Mrs. Browning has little, if any, of this power of assuming a temporary sympathy by virtue of the imagination alone; and she is still more destitute of another, closely allied to it,—the capacity of speaking from a point of view not one’s own. This capacity is the basis of dramatic power; and therefore of dramatic power Mrs. Browning has not even the rudiments. Much pure gold issues from her treasury; but she coins it all, and stamps it with her own image. Her poetry is

isolated and sedentary; not isolated in its sympathies, which are as warm and broad and tender as poet’s need to be; but her voice comes as the voice of one who has always dwelt apart, and felt for men and admired nature at a distance, rather than walked familiarly in the common pathways. Hence, as she does not go down among that mass of men who read her, they must come up to her to understand. Proportioned to the absence of mobile capacity in herself is the demand she makes on that of her readers. They must assume her standing-place, and look on her work from her own point of view, if they would comprehend her meanings. Her very greatness makes this difficult; it is not all minds which can adapt themselves to her intellectual focus. Moreover, partly a want of experience, which shows in her writings, partly her own constitution, throw her back a good deal on the facts of her own inner life; and there is thus often a difficult subject-matter as well as a difficult treatment.

This want of intimacy, if we may so call it, with the outward world, is probably at the bottom of a peculiar defectiveness in the expressional matter of Mrs. Browning’s poetry. We have before spoken of a discordance between the whole imaginative temper and sense of the matter; but besides this, there is often an utter want of harmony between the matter in hand and the simile under which it is represented to us: the likeness may be true enough, forcible, and cogent; but it carries with it a distracting set of associations, and makes a sudden discord, to which Mrs. Browning seems to be insensible. Our meaning will be made clear, and our criticism best justified, by quoting some of the most marked instances of this defect. In her last poem, she has the following passage to express and illustrate a poet’s rendering of his age:

“ Never flinch,
But still, unscrupulously epic, catch
Upon 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 !”

The contrast is almost savage. Burning lava and a woman’s breast! and concentrated in the latter the fullest ideas of life. It is absolute pain to read it. No man could have written it; for, independently of its cruelty, there is a tinge in it of a sort of forward familiarity, with which Mrs. Browning sometimes, and never without uneasiness to her readers, touches upon things which the instinct of the other sex prevents them, when undebaused, from approaching without reverence and tenderness.

A little further on we have some lines on which commentary

is hopeless; we only ask for their perusal, and for a deliberate consideration of the varied metaphors:

" 'Tis true the stage requires obsequiousness
To this or that convention; 'exit' here
And 'enter' there; the points for clapping, fixed,
Like Jacob's white-peeled rods before the rams;
And all the close-curl'd imagery clipped
In manner of their fleece at shearing-time.
Forget to prick the galleries to the heart
Precisely at the fourth act,—culminate
Our five pyramidal acts with one act more,—
We're lost so!"

When you are describing the shifty life of a degraded drunken vagrant, is it fitting to embody in this exquisite language his occasional help in driving Welsh ponies?

" Her father earned his life by random jobs
Despised by steadier workmen—keeping swine
On commons, picking hops, or hurrying on
The harvest at wet seasons,—or, at need,
Assisting the Welsh drovers, when a drove
Of startled horses plunged into the mist
Below the mountain-road, and sowed the wind
With wandering neighings. In between the gaps
Of such irregular work, he drank and slept,
And cursed his wife because, the pence being out,
She could not buy more drink."

Sometimes the indiscriminating lavishness with which the imagery is poured forth results in the direst confusion; as in the following lines, where we are represented as shut up with wild-beasts inside a key (for it is the natural world we are shut up in), whose wards, moreover, we have filled with clay:

" 'Thus it is,'
I sighed. And he resumed with mournful face.
' Beginning so, and filling up with clay
The wards of this great key, the natural world,
And fumbling vainly therefore at the lock
Of the spiritual,—we feel ourselves shut in
With all the wild-beast roar of struggling life,
The terrors and compunctions of our souls,
As saints with lions,—we who are not saints,
And have no heavenly lordship in our stare
To awe them backward!"

It is a common error of Mrs. Browning's to carry her image just one step too far, and thus to raise it out of its proper subordination, and give it an undue importance; so that, instead of being subdued and moulded to the tone of the matter, it lifts its strong and ragged head, and insists on an independent recog-

nition. For instance, when she speaks of her father's Elzevirs, written over with his faded notes:

"—conferenda hæc cum his—
Corruptè citat—lege potius,
And so on, in the scholar's regal way
Of giving judgment on the parts of speech,
As if he sate on all twelve thrones up-piled,
Arraigning Israel."

Here the single word "regal" conveys all that is wanted with abundantly ample force and distinctness; and the two last lines serve only to distract us, by introducing a misplaced definiteness and a set of ideas on a new scale too large for the thought.

It would be absurd, of course, to say that Mrs. Browning is destitute of an insight into or a sense of the true harmonious relations of things, for without this she could not be a poet; and few poets surpass her in that felicitous command over the hidden and mysterious powers of words and their associations, which is of the very essence of the poet's art; but she wants the negative sense which shrinks from a discord. Probably an intense intellectual activity has something to do with this: her mind moves in starts; one idea occupies her for a moment; she holds it up in the vivid light of her imagination, throws it down, and seizes another. Her intellect is too fertile in proportion to her artistic instincts; and her thoughts and fancies bristle up over her work "like quills upon the fretful porcupine." It is a great fault in her poetry, that it wants the fine connecting links by which parts are smoothed into a whole. Rapid and sudden transitions may, of course, often be effective and desirable; but Mrs. Browning's poetry is apt to be broken up by a constant series of small disconnections; her carriage has no springs; and though the main course of the poem and the thought is consecutive, the reader is sadly jolted by the way:

Sometimes Mrs. Browning's high-wrought metaphors give the impression of a vice which she is bound by all the indisputable greatness of her gifts not to fall into,—that of straining for effect from mere startling force of diction, instead of seeking in simplicity the truest expression,—that meretricious display of matterless large-mouthedness, for which much modern poetry is commended. Of a conscious acquiescence in this sort of untruthfulness,—for it is of the nature of untruthfulness,—no one who has read and knows the poetry of Mrs. Browning will for a moment accuse her; but she may be fairly charged with having rather spurred on when she should have curbed her naturally daring and vehement imagination. And she loses by it; for just as a mounted horse can always overtake an unmounted one, so power is greater and more effective when under the control of

a higher power. It leads her astray too sometimes. Real life is higher and more responsible than any art, and no gain of force in imagery can justify the least failing in religious reverence. But Mrs. Browning has accustomed herself to so stimulating a diet, that when she has exhausted all earthly elements of intensity, she is fain to resort to divine ones, and the most sacred ideas and associations are used just as material for poetry with a boldness which shocks and startles; and though we are far from saying that she writes with conscious irreverence, it is certain that she has passages which cannot be read without a shrinking sense of undue familiarity with the most awful objects to which our thoughts can aspire. It is as if she did not scruple to light her torch at that burning bush before which Moses bowed with unsandalled feet. And she not only uses things too high to give forcible embodiment to her thoughts; she pulls down the highest things, and thrusts them into her sharply-bounded decisive similes, with a freedom which we cannot designate as less than repulsive. She compares the Lord Christ, assuming our flesh, to

“Some wise hunter creeping on his knees,
With a torch, into the blackness of some cave,
To face and quell the beast there.”

She tells us of the creation of man,

“Within whose fluttering nostrils then at last,
Consummating Himself, the Maker sighed,
As some strong winner at the footrace sighs
Touching the goal.”

This sort of audacity, and all Mrs. Browning's excess of high-sounding phrase and elaborate and startling metaphor, are signs of some deficiency in real strength; just as a feeble man must use a more violent effort than a strong one to attain to the same end, and as he who is timid and self-distrustful makes the greatest show of his weapons. It needs, indeed, a high class of power to wield the glittering instruments Mrs. Browning grasps with the grace and ease which she displays; but there is a higher class of power, whose might is in the simplicity of its own strength; which dares go unarmed, and unsheathes its sword only when the occasion is absolute; and whose single home-stroke is more fatal than a thousand of these intricate flourishes. “The Cry of the Children” is a poem of infinite pathos and passionate appeal; but Mrs. Browning has written as a motto to it a short direct unadorned line, whose vivid flash pales even the fine splendours of the poem which succeeds:

φειῦ, φειῦ, τί προσδέρκεσθε μ' ἄμμασιν τέκνα.

We have criticised in a strict and uncompromising spirit the

defects of Mrs. Browning's workmanship, and the limitations of her genius. We have no compunction in doing so; for the least she merits is, to be tried by no debased standard. Her faults and defects are important, by reason of the value of the work from whose perfectness they detract. On the other hand, her gifts are great; so great, that England will never cease to number her in the first ranks of her poets. In abundance of ideas, in a certain fineness, vigour, and fire of intellect, she surpasses all her contemporaries. Her mind has a peculiar clearness and brilliancy, and shows the signs of much direct culture. The isolation and immobility we have indicated, narrow indeed her resources, but they shut out too all profane intrusion into the pure and lofty sphere of her own meditations. All her poetry introduces us but to one mind and one nature; but it must be a rich and spacious one which from its own treasury can bring forth matter “new and strange,” profound and true, in so great a profusion. A lofty spirit shines through all her lines. Her muse has a sort of proud virgin carriage. No eyes dare gaze on her disrespectfully. Clear air hangs about her. She writes as from the unsullied ideal of a girl of fifteen, and with the same sort of freshness and intellectual eagerness. She puts aside the shortcomings of the world, half in ignorance, half in disdain; its basenesses and pettinesses lie under her unconscious feet, and her clear eyes, fixed on the morning, have no wandering glances for the lower shadows. The vice and wickedness of the world she sees; but scans it from afar, as one standing on the mountains; and the sin which comes to her with the force of reality is not that which consists in grovelling in the fens below, but in false steps and shortcomings in climbing the heights. As you read, you see (though this applies more to her early poems) that her mind has been nurtured on books rather than on things; and what she gives us of living and fresh is from the life and freshness of her own nature. Direct and brief expressions of personal feeling or conviction are best adapted to her genius. Perhaps she has written finer things than her sonnets; yet most of her readers turn oftenest to these; and they have now and then a perfect grace and harmony, unspoiled by those small jars which too often grate upon us in reading her longer poems. We will instance one which, of all, is perhaps the best known, and therefore the best for our purpose. Custom cannot stale the infinite variety of good poetry:

“When some beloved voice that was to you
Both sound and sweetness, faileth suddenly,
And silence, against which you dare not cry,
Aches round you like a strong disease and new,
What hope? what help? what music will undo
That silence to your sense? Not friendship's sigh,

Not reason's subtle count. Not melody
Of viols, nor of pipes that Faunus blew ;
Not songs of poets, nor of nightingales,
Whose hearts leap upward through the cypress-trees
To the clear moon ! nor yet the spheric laws
Self-chanted,—nor the angels' sweet all-hails,
Met in the smile of God. Nay, none of these.
Speak THOU, availing Christ !—and fill this pause.”

A passionate tenderness finds a voice in the Portuguese sonnets. Nay, so passionate and so tender are they, that one half shrinks from the perusal of them, and reads with some such feeling as one opens the love-letters of those long dead, and can scarcely reconcile oneself to an intrusion into the innermost secrets of another heart.

Her earlier great poems are celestial dramas. In some respects she has not improved on them. The *Drama of Exile*, looked at simply for the diction, is a far more finished poem than *Aurora Leigh*. It is briefer, simpler, completer. In its matter it is far inferior; but a fervid imagination, without the experience which furnishes it with materials out of actual life, is very apt to seize on this sort of subject. There is a tempting boundlessness of field; nothing cramps the play of the fancy. And Mrs. Browning's mind, especially in its younger and less experienced time, was exactly calculated to find fascination in a subject like that of "The Seraphim." It is a stimulating mental exercise to endeavour to understand how Angels look upon the universe, and feel and express themselves with reference to the mysteries of man's creation and destiny. But there must necessarily be so much of mere hypothesis and unbased fancy in these speculations; they touch so remotely the living interests of men; the ideas and affections they deal with are so floating and unattached,—that they can never form the subject-matter of great and permanent works of art. It is useless to attempt to conceal from ourselves that we know nothing whatever of Gabriel, Michael, or Lucifer; and it is only by re-creating for ourselves certain more or less disproportioned human figures to which we give these names that it is possible to take any interest in them. It is the anthropomorphism and overwhelming human element in Milton's *Paradise Lost* from which it derives its power over us. Nevertheless there is a sort of poetic rejoicing in soaring in such wide and untried regions; and Mrs. Browning's ardent, strong-winged, contemplative imagination was just the one to try its earlier flights in these bright but distant fields of air. Still with her, as with all others, it is when she touches closest on human sympathies that we lend our readiest ear, and are willing, not unwisely, to think her poetry at its best. Eminently beautiful, though not without a certain vagueness in the idea, is that chorus of Eden

spirits, whose sounds pursue Adam and Eve as they fly from Paradise:

“Harken, O harken ! let your souls behind you
Turn, gently moved !
Our voices feel along the Dread to find you,
O lost, beloved !
Through the thick-shielded and strong-marshalled angels,
They press and pierce :
Our requiems follow fast on our evangels,—
Voice throbs in verse !
We are but orphan spirits left in Eden
A time ago.
God gave us golden cups, and we were bidden
To feed you so.
But now our right hand hath no cup remaining,
No work to do,
The mystic hydromel is spilt and staining
The whole earth through.
Most ineradicable stains for showing
(Not interfused !)
That brighter colours were the world's foregoing,
Than shall be used.
Harken, O harken ! ye shall harken surely,
For years and years,
The noise beside you, dripping coldly, purely,
Of spirits' tears !
The yearning to a beautiful denied you,
Shall strain your powers ;
Ideal sweetnesses shall over-glide you,
Resumed from ours !
In all your music, our pathetic minor
Your ears shall cross ;
And all good gifts shall mind you of diviner,
With sense of loss.
We shall be-near you in your poet-languors
And wild extremes,
What time ye vex the desert with vain angers,
Or mock with dreams.
And when upon you, weary after roaming,
Death's seal is put,
By the foregone ye shall discern the coming
Through eyelids shut.”

More human and more lovely in their deep yet restrained pathos are the concluding lines of the "Song of the Morning Star to Lucifer;" words that are like the verbal reflection of the pale shining of the planet in heaven, and afford as complete an instance as one could desire of that sort of harmony between the thing and the expression, against the frequent breach of which in *Aurora Leigh* we have protested :

“Thine angel glory sinks
Down from me, down from me,—
My beauty falls, methinks,
Down from thee, down from thee !

O my light-bearer,
O my path-preparer,
Gone from me, gone from me!
Ah, ah, Heosphoros!

I cannot kindle underneath the brow
Of this new angel here, who is not Thou:
All things are altered, since that time ago,—
And if I shine at eve, I shall not know!
I am strange—I am slow.
Ah, ah, Heosphoros!

Henceforward, human eyes of lovers be
The only sweetest sight that I shall see,
With tears between the looks raised up to me.
Ah, ah!

When, having wept all night, at break of day,
Above the folded hills they shall survey
My light, a little trembling, in the grey.
Ah, ah!

And gazing on me, such shall comprehend,
Through all my piteous pomp at morn or even,
And melancholy leaning out of heaven,
That love, their own divine, may change or end,
That love may close in loss!
Ah, ah, Heosphoros!"

It was natural that Mrs. Browning, as her powers developed themselves, and her experiences widened, should leave this school of poetry behind her. It was natural, too, that she should desire to go beyond the more detached and simpler subject-matters of her shorter poems, and attempt the higher task of giving a shape of verse to the more complex phenomena of life and society. Her present flight is an ambitious one. If we rightly understand her, she tells us that *Aurora Leigh* is her attempt in a poem "unscrupulously epic" to "represent the age" in which she lives. She admits that to most men their own age, being too close, is as ill-discerned, as would be the lineaments of that colossal statue into which Xerxes proposed to carve Mount Athos to the peasants "gathering brushwood in his ear." But, she says,

"Poets should
Exert a double vision; should have eyes
To see near things as comprehensively
As if afar they took their point of sight,
And distant things as intimately deep
As if they touched them."

She tells us, that if there is any room for poets in the world, their sole work is to represent their own times. And she seems to think that in a single poem a poet can condense a sort of distillation of his age; and this she has attempted in *Aurora Leigh*. Such, at least, is what we gather from the poem itself.

Now there is no doubt that every great poet must more or less give expression to the times in which he lives. No man can be a great poet whose power and knowledge are not derived from an insight into the actual life which surrounds him; and it is impossible that the conditions under which he has lived, and the things which he has most familiarly known, should not leave their impress upon him, and through him, upon his work. As Wordsworth's poetry is haunted by the influences of the lakes and mountains; as the nature of the Scottish peasant underlies the genius of Burns; as a self-willed worldly spirit clings to the highest flights of Byron; as Milton cannot shake off the Puritan, and even Shakespeare has some flavour of the courtier,—so it is idle to suppose every poet and every man does not carry the impress of the less close but more universal influences of the social conditions which surround him. It does not follow, however, that he is the greatest poet who most fully and most immediately reproduces these influences in the gross; still less that it is the highest effort of the poet consciously to devote himself to this task. Man is greater and more interesting than the life he lives, and it is greater to paint him simply under the conditions of his own nature than under any restricted conditions of circumstances; it is profounder and more lasting to use the special surroundings in which men exist (and without using which they cannot be painted at all) to body forth the men themselves than to attempt to reproduce an abstract whole of men and their lives as they live at a given time,—a higher task to use the age to show a man than to use men to show an age. When it was said of the greatest poet that he was of no age, it was no idle compliment; it was not meant that he wrote of things abstract and disconnected from the realities of every age; but that he pierced to those deeper realities which underlie all the ages of men, which are what the root and springing sap of the tree are to the fleeting generations of its leaves. He used the special as a body for the universal. It is true, a poet may legitimately take a lower flight than this; he may choose to embody the leading ideas and characteristics of the period of time in which he lives; and this, no doubt, is a higher artistic effort than to attempt to embody those of any other particular age,—if for no other reason, because he is dealing with things more real, more familiar, and in all probability of a deeper interest. It does not follow, however, even if this be his direct object, that his events and his characters must be chosen from those which immediately surround him. He may select in the past, or invent for himself, the framework of his poem of modern ideas; or he may deal with the ideas of the past for the sake of some bearing they have, either by contrast or analogy, on the ideas of the present. Kingsley's *Saint's Tra-*

gedy, and Tennyson's *Princess*, are cases in point. Mrs. Browning, however, holds,—and the idea is a common one at the present day,—that it is higher effort to represent modern ideas in their actual modern dress. Perhaps it is. Certainly it is a much more difficult one. Perhaps the poet ought to be able to see his own times at the same moment with the eyes of one removed from them and one near to them; but we know no poet who has ever done so. It is obvious enough to cite Homer; but even granting that “Wolff's an atheist,” it is not easy to believe that “the tale of Troy divine” was written in the actual times it deals with. The Homeric poems give us our knowledge of the Homeric age; but whether they are a true description of the times of Achilles, or a story cast in those times, and an incidentally true delineation of the manners and thoughts of a later time in which they were written, is, to say the least of it, an open question. Even the satirist paints his times, not as they are, but in their relation to a special preconceived idea of his own. No doubt it is easy to clothe some of the simpler elements of the present life in the dress of the time; but the deeper and more searching the knowledge of a poet of the great and fundamental characteristics of the life which surrounds him, the more difficult and intricate a task does it become to reproduce these things in their actual context with the thousand crossing and entangled details through which he has pierced to and gathered up their real significance. His instinct,—and we think it is a true one,—is, to take what he has gained quite away from these complications; and crystallize it in some new form, in which it may shine in fuller clearness and simplicity.

However this may be, Mrs. Browning has undertaken to build a poem purely from modern materials. She has produced a work which, in completeness of form and artistic execution, falls far short of many of her previous efforts; but which in matter far surpasses the best of them. A wider experience, a profounder philosophy, a more real and human knowledge, attempt to find a voice in language more removed than that of any of her other poems from the adequacy of genuine simplicity, and are couched in a semi-dramatic form, which is one the author's genius least qualifies her to deal successfully with. As is natural, nay, inevitable, from the conformation of Mrs. Browning's mind, her poem deals primarily with ideas of her own; and all the narrative and dramatic elements in the book are but the constituent materials in the erection of an edifice of thought. We cannot help thinking, that where this is the case, care should be taken that these elements should preserve the same secondary place in the poem that they do in the matter. Mrs. Browning has unfortunately given a most undue prominence to the least valuable

and most defective part of her work. Unpossessed, as we have before said, of that pliancy and mobility of mind which qualifies a poet to deal with details of external life, she selects a poem to which such details are indispensable, and even then overlays her matter with a mass of them totally unnecessary. Minuteness of incident receives the utmost redundancy of expression; and the real thread of her meaning runs through the whole like a golden wire strung thick with beads, and obscured from all but special research. Perhaps one reader in a thousand can master Mrs. Browning's poem at a single reading; though, indeed, some parts of it are so contrived as that it shall be impossible to understand them on a first perusal (as in that behaviour and those allusions of Romney, in his interview with Aurora, which result from his blindness, of which we are ignorant). The poem is worth reading once, twice, thrice, oftener, till you do understand the full force and significance of all it contains: but it is a long poem, a very long poem; and we fear Mrs. Browning would not be pleased with a statistical return of those who have received from it only confused impressions and a brief excitement of the imagination and feelings. It would have been a greater, a simpler, a truer, and a more valuable poem, if it had been compressed within one-fourth of its present limits. Nor is its author unwise only in her excess of detail and exuberance of secondary matter. It was necessary that she should deal with human beings; but it was not necessary that she should display them by dramatic forms, and so conduct her story as to lay bare the most prominent defect of her poetic genius in its most undisguised nakedness.

There are many persons in the poem who are made to express themselves in the first person; but characters, except in brief description, there are none,—nothing but vague hazy embodiments given to certain contrasted sets of ideas. They do not deceive us for an instant. We never think of them as individuals who have, or ever have had, life, as we do of Agamemnon, or Hamlet, or Cuddie Headrigg; we see them at once to be only some other person's notion of a person;—phantoms which may have had flesh-and-blood antecedents, but now walk only in books, and whose vaporous unsubstantial forms betray them to be but reveries of the poet, simulating speech and motion. Aurora Leigh, the poetess, tells her own story; and yet even with her you never feel that you know her personally, or have pierced beyond one or two of the marked and prominent characteristics of her nature. You are conscious that she is but the representative of the real poet behind; and that she comes forward only to give a voice to the inner convictions, the intellectual questionings and problems, and the heart's solutions of the artist who employs her. The poetess, the philanthropist, the woman of fashion, and

the vagrant child, all express themselves in exactly the same language, use the same tropes, the same recondite imagery, and are on the same high level of intellectual cultivation and vigorous thought. The child of brutal parents, kept pure by the instincts of her own nature, but owing her only intellectual discipline to stray half-torn volumes, picked up from wandering pedlars, does not scruple to talk of "madrepores," and invariably employs more recondite forms of expression than would be used by one woman in a hundred of the educated classes of England.

The characters were meant to be distinct, nay, were no doubt conceived as distinct; but in passing through the author's mind, they have retained so much of her, and lost so much of what is distinctive, that they seem only like shadows of herself in various attitudes and different lights. In actually describing what she has seen, however, whether in nature or in human character, Mrs. Browning is often very successful. Lord Howe is well touched:

"Let me draw Lord Howe;

A born aristocrat, bred radical,
 And educated socialist, who still
 Goes floating, on traditions of his kind,
 Across the theoretic flood from France,—
 Though, like a drenched Noah on a rotten deck,
 Scarce safer for his place there. He, at least,
 Will never land on Ararat, he knows,
 To recommence the world on the old plan:
 Indeed, he thinks, said world had better end:
 He sympathises rather with the fish
 Outside, than with the drowned paired beasts within
 Who cannot couple again or multiply:
 And that's the sort of Noah he is, Lord Howe.
 He never could be any thing complete,
 Except a loyal, upright gentleman,
 A liberal landlord, graceful diner-out,
 And entertainer more than hospitable,
 Whom authors dine with and forget the port.
 Whatever he believes, and it is much,
 But no-wise certain . . . now here and now there, . . .
 He still has sympathies beyond his creed,
 Diverting him from action. In the House,
 No party counts upon him, and all praise
 All like his books too, (he has written books)
 Which, good to lie beside a bishop's chair,
 So oft outreach themselves with jets of fire
 At which the foremost of the progressists
 May warm audacious hands in passing by,
 —Of stature over-tall, lounging for ease;
 Light hair, that seems to carry a wind in it,
 And eyes that, when they look on you, will lean
 Their whole weight half in indolence, and half
 In wishing you unmitigated good,
 Until you know not if to flinch from him
 Or thank him.—'Tis Lord Howe."

Marian, too, the daughter of the people, is admirably described,—rather, we should say, admirably conceived; and the fine and most truthful and delicate conception glimmers through the brief description. But, unfortunately, Mrs. Browning will not rely on description; and when Marian comes to speak for herself we are utterly thrown out, and a nondescript confused image of a somewhat affected young woman, of vast powers of poetical expression, usurps the place of that true idea we in vain attempt to hold steadily before us. Thus she paints the personal appearance of Marian:

"No wise beautiful
 Was Marian Erle. She was not white nor brown,
 But could look either, like a mist that changed
 According to being shone on more or less.
 The hair, too, ran its opulence of curls
 In doubt 'twixt dark and bright, nor left you clear
 To name the colour. Too much hair perhaps
 (I'll name a fault here) for so small a head,
 Which seemed to droop on that side and on this,
 As a full-blown rose uneasy with its weight,
 Though not a breath should trouble it. Again,
 The dimple in the cheek had better gone
 With redder, fuller rounds: and somewhat large
 The mouth was, though the milky little teeth
 Dissolved it to so infantine a smile!
 For soon it smiled at me; the eyes smiled too,
 But 'twas as if remembering they had wept,
 And knowing they should, some day, weep again."

It seems strange, that one who can both observe and describe so accurately, should stand always at arm's length from other minds, and should be powerless to paint people as they appear to themselves, or to make them paint themselves as they appear to others. The only trace of dramatic power occurs now and then in some brief flash, which is, indeed, only the shining of a spark of accurate observation, and makes the surrounding dimness more noticeable; as when, in Marian's letter, she says:

"I'm poor at writing at the best,—and yet
 I tried to make my *gs* the way you showed."

Aurora Leigh is the daughter of an English gentleman and an Italian mother, born in Italy, early orphaned, and brought back to be educated in England by a maiden-aunt. Under all the repressions and exactions of a young lady's education more recondite than we have elsewhere heard of, she leads an inner life of her own, familiar with nature and the books of her dead father's collecting; and at the age of twenty years, walking in the dewy garden on the morning of her birthday, she crowns herself with an ivy-wreath—a poet by anticipation. Mrs. Brown-

ing describes the child let loose in the world of books in some lines replete with that wealth of thought, and that rich and vivid imagination, which, with all its shortcomings and sins against true keeping, make *Aurora Leigh* a great poem. But our space for quotation is limited, and we turn rather to those lovely verses in which she describes the young poetic girl rejoicing in the external beauty around her :

“ I flattered all the beauteous country round,
As poets use . . . the skies, the clouds, the fields,
The happy violets hiding from the roads
The primroses run down to, carrying gold,—
The tangled hedgerows, where the cows push out
Impatient horns and tolerant churning mouths
’Twixt dripping ash-boughs,—hedgerows all alive
With birds and gnats and large white butterflies
Which look as if the May-flower had caught life
And palpitated forth upon the wind,—
Hills, vales, woods, netted in a silver mist,
Farms, granges, doubled up among the hills,
And cattle grazing in the watered vales,
And cottage-chimneys smoking from the woods,
And cottage-gardens smelling every where,
Confused with smell of orchards. ‘See,’ I said,
‘And see! is God not with us on the earth?
And shall we put Him down by aught we do?
Who says there’s nothing for the poor and vile
Save poverty and wickedness? behold!’
And ankle-deep in English grass I leaped,
And clapped my hands, and called all very fair.”

Standing with her ivy-wreath on her head, and her arms raised to bind it on, she is startled by her cousin Romney Leigh. Romney is a philanthropist, as she is a poet. The physical distress and pain of the universe, the misery of his fellow-men, have weighed so deeply on his spirit, that, in the violence of a sort of despair, he has dedicated his whole life and being to the effort of lightening their toil, and satisfying at least the cravings of the ill-fated multitude for the supply of their bodily wants. He comes to ask her to be his wife. He has found a volume of her poems. He warns her against playing with art, which he assumes is all a woman can do, and bids her choose the nobler work, to seek some cure for the social strait; he asks her to help him with love and fellowship through bitter duties. She turns on him sharply enough with the retort, that she who, he says, is not competent to stand alone, or to sing even like a blackbird, can never be competent to uphold him and to love. “Any thing does for a wife,” she tells him. And when he replies, that though her sex is weak in art, it is strong for life and duty, and still urges their common task, she retorts upon him, that he loves a cause and not a woman, and wants not a mistress but a helpmate,—to bear about

with him a wife, a sister, like the apostle. Like a man, she says, he talks of woman as only the complement of his own sex; but

“ That every creature, female as the male,
Stands single in responsible act and thought,
As also in birth and death.”

That the work proposed must be not only *his* best, but *her* best work, the best she was ordained to, before she can love and work with him. That she too has her vocation; and though the world were twice as wretched, no less necessary work than his, nay, more so; for that his best success would be but failure, if man,—all his physical wants supplied, and the best socialistic union and plenty prevailing,—should not have the poet to keep open the pathways to and from the unseen world which surrounds them. Nay, she tells him he cannot attain his own poor limits of material ease without the poet’s aid:

“ It takes a sail
To move a body; it takes a high-souled man
To move the masses, even to a clearer stage;
It takes the ideal to blow a hair’s breadth off
The dust of the actual. Ah, your Fouriers failed,
Because not poets enough to understand
That life develops from within.”

For herself, she says, perhaps she is not worthy of work like this, perhaps a woman’s soul aspires and not creates; yet she will try out these perhapses, and, at any rate, will love her art, and not wish it lower to suit her own stature. So they part; yet a shadow passes over her, as if it were hard to refuse even the mere potentiality of love. But when her somewhat grim and straightlaced aunt declares she loves Romney, in spite of her refusal, she indignantly repudiates the charge, and is naturally confirmed in her feelings by finding that Romney had motives of generosity for marrying her, and might possibly, therefore, not be prompted by love alone, or even, if so, might oppress her with too resistless an obligation. Aurora’s aunt dies, and she and Romney go out on their several paths into the world. After years, and at the end of the book, they meet again in Italy. She is somewhat worn with her work, supporting herself with one hand, and labouring for her art with the other. She has tasted the emptiness of reputation, the disgusts of shallow applause and false criticism, the painful sense of her own shortcomings. She has bent the whole force of her energy and life to one great task, and accomplished it; but still her ideal lies unreached before her. She thinks the artist may be childless like the man; and when she gathers fame, though it be the love of all, her woman’s heart is troubled with the absence of the love of one. Thus wearied, she goes to her native Italy to rest. Romney’s failure has been

more complete. A Lady Waldemar,—drawn in colours more coarse and repulsive than there seems occasion for, and whose character seems to be somewhat sacrificed to Mrs. Browning's taste for high-pressure writing,—falls in love with him. He, on the other hand, has resolved to marry the Marian of whom we have spoken, with the view of establishing a sort of matrimonial suspension-bridge over the gulf which separates English classes. Lady Waldemar spirits Marian away on the very wedding-day, and she is decoyed into some den of infamy in France, where she falls a victim to violence. All Romney's schemes for the reconstruction of the world fail. He turns Leigh Hall into a phalanstery, and brings all the country about his ears. The very wretches he had brought in "cursed him for his tyrannous constraint, in forcing crooked creatures to live straight;" and they and the scandalised peasantry unite together and burn the Hall down, Romney himself losing his eyesight by the malice of one whom he was saving. In France, Aurora has found Marian; and has taken her and her boy, the offspring of her misery, with her to Italy. Thither comes Romney too, who has learned her miserable history, to redeem his old obligations, and make her his wife. He finds Aurora; and has a long conversation with her, in which they confess and compare their several failures and shortcomings. Their colloquy is full of noble poetry; and wants but compression, and the greater closeness, strength, and simplicity, which compression gives, to make it entirely worthy of the great powers of the author. The blind Romney, whose aspiring reconstructive schemes God has defeated, and put himself aside like a broken tool, confesses the truth of the words Aurora had spoken on that June-day which parted their youth. He sees now that his ends were too low, that his despair of the world, and his harassing desire to reconstruct it, as if he alone could do it and were needful to success, betrayed a want of faith, and merited the lesson of humility he had received. He speaks with bitter scorn of his presumptuous endeavour

"to stand and claim to have a life
Beyond the bounds of the individual man,
And raze all personal cloisters of the soul
To build up public stores and magazines,
As if God's creatures otherwise were lost,
The builder surely saved by any means!
To think,—I have a pattern on my nail;
And I will carve the world new after it,
And solve so, these hard social questions,—nay,
Impossible social questions,—since their roots
Strike deep in Evil's own existence here,
Which God permits because the question's hard
To abolish evil nor attain free-will.
Ay, hard to God, but not to Romney Leigh!

For Romney has a pattern on his nail,
(Whatever may be lacking on the Mount)
And not being overnice to separate
What's element from what's convention, hastes
By line on line, to draw you out a world,
Without your help indeed, unless you take
His yoke upon you and will learn of him,—
So much he has to teach; so good a world!
The same the whole creation's groaning for!
No rich nor poor, no gain nor loss nor stint,
No potage in it able to exclude
A brother's birthright, and no right of birth,
The potage,—both secured to every man;
And perfect virtue dealt out like the rest,
Gratuitously, with the soup at six,
To whoso does not seek it."

And it needs Aurora to remind him that

"If he strained too wide,
It was not to take honour, but give help;
The gesture was heroic. If his hand
Accomplished nothing . . . (well, it is not proved)
That empty hand thrown impotently out
Were sooner caught, I think, by One in heaven,
Than many a hand that reaped a harvest in
And keeps the scythe's glow on it."

She too confesses,

"We both were wrong that June-day,—both as wrong
As an east wind had been. I who talked of art,
And you who grieved for all men's griefs . . . what then?
We surely made too small a part for God
In these things. What we are, imports us more
Than what we eat; and life, you've granted me,
Develops from within. But innermost
Of the inmost, most interior of the interae,
God claims his own, Divine humanity
Renewing nature,—or the piercingest verse,
Prest in by subtlest poet, still must keep
As much upon the outside of a man,
As the very bowl in which he dips his beard.
—And then, . . . the rest. I cannot surely speak.
Perhaps I doubt more than you doubted then,
If I, the poet's veritable charge,
Have borne upon my forehead. If I have,
It might feel somewhat liker to a crown,
The foolish green one even.—Ah, I think,
And chiefly when the sun shines, that I've failed.
But what then, Romney? Though we fail indeed,
You . . . I . . . a score of such weak workers, . . . He
Fails never. If He cannot work by us,
He will work over us. Does He want a man,
Much less a woman, think you? Every time
The star winks there, so many souls are born,
Who all shall work too. Let our own be calm:
We should be ashamed to sit beneath those stars,
Impatient that we're nothing."

Aurora has supposed Romney married to Lady Waldemar; and as he amazingly vindicates himself from the charge, as involving an incredible degradation, and reminds her of the claim that Marian Erle has on him, she herself appears between them, and the poem deepens to the pathos of her renunciation of him; for her love for him (if it was not always worship rather than love) is lost in her passion for her child; and thence the strain rebounds and scales the highest heaven of joy as the secret of Aurora's heart is wrung from her by the sudden knowledge of Romney's blindness, and her passionate and capacious nature finds in his love its full contentment. The barriers of her pride fall away, and she learns the error of her life,—that she had striven to be an artist instead of a woman, rather than been content to be a simple woman, and let her art spring from that true basis; and the truth, which is the deepest moral of the work, overwhelms her with its sudden conviction, that great as is art, greater is the human life of the artist; and greatest, love, which is the centre of that life and of all life—

“ Art symbolises heaven, but Love is God
And makes heaven.”

As the theme deepens, and the faulty artist forgets herself in the true poet, the verse runs smooth and clear; the startling, jarring metaphors are subdued to the element in which they move, and the verse is no unfit medium for the lofty matter. Our brief argument of the poem is not for the purpose of conveying any adequate idea of its varied contents; but only preserves the sequence of incident and follows the main clue of thought sufficiently to enable us to quote some of the later passages, which give the best idea of the best parts of the work:

“ ‘ Ah!—not married.’

‘ You mistake,’ he said;
‘ I’m married. Is not Marian Erle my wife?
As God sees things, I have a wife and child;
And I, as I’m a man who honours God,
Am here to claim them as my child and wife.’

I felt it hard to breathe, much less to speak.
Nor word of mine was needed. Some one else
Was there for answering. ‘ Romney,’ she began,
‘ My great good angel, Romney.’

Then at first,
I knew that Marian Erle was beautiful.
She stood there, still and pallid as a saint,
Dilated like a saint in ecstasy,
As if the floating moonshine interposed
Betwixt her foot and the earth, and raised her up
To float upon it. ‘ I had left my child,

Who sleeps,’ she said, ‘ and, having drawn this way,
I heard you speaking, . . friend!—Confirm me now.
You take this Marian, such as wicked men
Have made her, for your honourable wife?’

The thrilling, solemn, proud, pathetic voice.
He stretched his arms out toward the thrilling voice,
As if to draw it on to his embrace.
—‘ I take her as God made her, and as men
Must fail to unmake her, for my honoured wife.’

She never raised her eyes, nor took a step,
But stood there in her place, and spoke again.
—‘ You take this Marian’s child, which is her shame
In sight of men and women, for your child,
Of whom you will not ever feel ashamed?’

The thrilling, tender, proud, pathetic voice.
He stepped on toward it, still with outstretched arms,
As if to quench upon his breast that voice.
—‘ May God so father me, as I do him,
And so forsake me as I let him feel
He’s orphaned haply. Here I take the child
To share my cup, to slumber on my knee,
To play his loudest gambol at my foot,
To hold my finger in the public ways,
Till none shall need inquire, ‘ Whose child is this,’
The gesture saying so tenderly, ‘ My own.’”

She appeals to Aurora; and she too gives her verdict:

“ That Romney Leigh is honoured in his choice,
Who choseth Marian for his honoured wife.”

“ Her broad wild woodland eyes shot out a light;
Her smile was wonderful for rapture. ‘ Thanks,
My great Aurora.’ Forward then she sprang,
And dropping her impassioned spaniel head
With all its brown abandonment of curls
On Romney’s feet, we heard the kisses drawn
Through sobs upon the foot, upon the ground—
‘ O Romney! O my angel! O unchanged
Though, since we’ve parted, I have past the grave!
But Death itself could only better thee,
Not change thee!—Thee I do not thank at all:
I but thank God who made thee what thou art,
So wholly godlike.’

When he tried in vain
To raise her to his embrace, escaping thence
As any leaping fawn from a huntsman’s grasp,
She bounded off and lighted beyond reach,
Before him, with a staglike majesty
Of soft, serene defiance,—as she knew
He could not touch her, so was tolerant
He had cared to try. She stood there with her great
Drowned eyes, and dripping cheeks, and strange sweet smile
That lived through all, as if one held a light

Across a waste of waters,—shook her head
To keep some thoughts down deeper in her soul,—
Then, white and tranquil as a summer cloud
Which, having rained itself to a tardy peace,
Stands still in heaven as if it ruled the day,
Spoke out again.”

She renounces him on the grounds we have indicated; and we move on to where, after learning Romney's never-failing love and the greatness of his calamity, the floodgates of Aurora's passion are broken down:

“No matter: let the truth
Stand high; Aurora must be humble: no,
My love's not pity merely. Obviously
I'm not a generous woman, never was,
Or else, of old, I had not looked so near
To weights and measures, grudging you the power
To give, as first I scorned your power to judge
For me, Aurora: I would have no gifts
Forsooth, but God's—and I would use *them*, too,
According to my pleasure and my choice,
As he and I were equals,—you, below,
Excluded from that level of interchange
Admitting benefaction. You were wrong
In much? you said so. I was wrong in most.
Oh, most! You only thought to rescue men
By half-means, half-way, seeing half their wants,
While thinking nothing of your personal gain.
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. Flower from root,
And spiritual from natural, grade by grade
In all our life. A handful of the earth
To make God's image! the despised poor earth,
The healthy odorous earth,—I missed, with it,
The divine breath that blows the nostrils out
To ineffable inflatus: ay, the breath
Which love is. Art is much, but love is more.
O Art, my Art, thou'rt much, but Love is more!
Art symbolises heaven, but Love is God
And makes heaven. I, Aurora, fell from mine:
I would not be a woman like the rest,
A simple woman who believes in love,
And owns the right of love because she loves,
And, hearing she's beloved, is satisfied
With what contents God: I must analyse,
Confront, and question; just as if a fly
Refused to warm itself in any sun
Till such was *in leone*: I must fret
Forsooth, because the month was only May;

Be faithless of the kind of proffered love,
And captious, lest it miss my dignity,
And scornful, that my lover sought a wife
To use . . . to use! O Romney, O my love,
I am changed since then, changed wholly,—for indeed,
If now you'd stoop so low to take my love,
And use it roughly, without stint or spare,
As men use common things with more behind,
(And, in this, ever would be more behind)
To any mean and ordinary end,—
The joy would set me like a star, in heaven,
So high up, I should shine because of height
And not of virtue. Yet in one respect,
Just one, beloved, I am in nowise changed:
I love you, loved you . . . loved you first and last,
And love you on for ever. Now I know
I loved you always, Romney. She who died
Knew that, and said so; Lady Waldemar
Knows that; . . . and Marian: I had known the same
Except that I was prouder than I knew,
And not so honest. Ay, and, as I live
I should have died so, crushing in my hand
This rose of love, the wasp inside and all,—
Ignoring ever to my soul and you.
Both rose and pain,—except for this great loss,
This great despair,—to stand before your face
And know I cannot win a look of yours.
You think, perhaps, I am not changed from pride,
And that I chiefly bear to say such words,
Because you cannot shame me with your eyes?
O calm, grand eyes, extinguished in a storm,
Blown out like lights o'er melancholy seas,
Though shrieked for by the shipwrecked,—O my Dark,
My Cloud,—to go before me every day
While I go ever toward the wilderness,—
I would that you could see me bare to the soul!—
If this be pity, 'tis so for myself,
And not for Romney: *he* can stand alone;
A man like *him* is never overcome:
No woman like me, counts him pitiable
While saints applaud him. He mistook the world:
But I mistook my own heart,—and that slip
Was fatal. Romney,—will you leave me here?
So wrong, so proud, so weak, so unconsoled,
So mere a woman!—and I love you so,—
I love you, Romney.”

Could I see his face,
I wept so? Did I drop against his breast,
Or did his arms constrain me? Were my cheeks
Hot, overflowed, with my tears, or his?
And which of our two large explosive hearts
So shook me? That, I know not. There were words
That broke in utterance . . . melted, in the fire;
Embrace, that was convulsion, . . . then a kiss . . .
As long and silent as the ecstatic night,—
And deep, deep, shuddering breaths, which meant beyond
Whatever could be told by word or kiss.”

She learns how he had ever loved her, since he,

“ A boy still, had been told the tale
Of how a fairy-bride from Italy,
With smells of oleanders in her hair,
Was coming through the vines to touch his hand;”

and how the very strength of his devotion, and the greatness of his worship, had made him feel, too, that she must be made part of his “dedication to the human need,” and “prove he kept back nothing, not his soul.” And again the tide of joy rolls up, and gives a fuller voice than any other poet has ever done to the intensity of love’s rapture in a woman’s heart:

“ But oh, the night! oh, bitter-sweet! oh, sweet!
O dark, O moon and stars, O ecstasy
Of darkness! O great mystery of love,—
In which absorbed, loss, anguish, treason’s self
Enlarges rapture,—as a pebble dropt
In some full wine-cup, over-brims the wine!
While we two sate together, leaned that night
So close, my very garments crept and thrilled
With strange electric life; and both my cheeks
Grew red, then pale, with touches from my hair
In which his breath was; while the golden moon
Was hung before our faces as the badge
Of some sublime inherited despair,
Since ever to be seen by only one,—
A voice said, low and rapid as a sigh,
Yet breaking, I felt conscious, from a smile,—
‘Thank God, who made me blind, to make me see!
Shine on, Aurora, dearest light of souls,
Which rul’st for evermore both day and night!
I am happy.’

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,
And, as we sate, we felt the old earth spin,
And all the starry turbulence of worlds
Swing round us in their audient circles, till
If that some golden moon were overhead
Or if beneath our feet, we did not know.”

He accepts the limits that have been assigned him through his calamity, and bids the artist assume her true functions, nor cease from her labour on the earth; and together they turn their faces to the East, to await God’s great coming day of final restoration.

A noble poem, and every where throughout it the poet shows greater than her work. Indeed, given a poem of certain excellence, and the degree in which it shows defectiveness in the interpretive faculty (in which we have described Mrs. Browning

as wanting) is but a measure of the higher order of personal qualities necessarily present in the poet; who by that very defectiveness is thrown back more than another on the resources of his own mind and nature. Mrs. Browning is conscientiously devoted to her art; it is no by-work to her, but the deliberately undertaken business of her life. There is no reason why she should not gain a much higher degree of artistic unity and simplicity than she now possesses. The fountains of her genius show an unfailing freshness and force; and high as *Aurora Leigh* stands, its author may live to look back on it as only a stepping-stone to the highest things of which she is capable.

ART. II.—SECONDARY PUNISHMENTS.

First, Second, and Third Reports from the Select Committee on Transportation; together with the Proceedings of the Committee, Minutes of Evidence, and Appendix. Ordered, by the House of Commons, to be printed, 27th May 1856, 20th June 1856, and 11th July 1856.

Report from the Select Committee of the House of Lords, appointed to inquire into the Provisions and Operation of the Act 16 and 17 Vict. cap. 99, intituled “An Act to substitute in certain cases other Punishment in lieu of Transportation;” and to report thereon to the House; together with the Minutes of Evidence, Appendix, and Index. Ordered, by the House of Commons, to be printed, 25th July 1856.

Report from the Select Committee on Transportation; together with the Minutes of Evidence, Appendix, and Index. Ordered, by the House of Commons, to be printed, 3d August 1838.

England and Wales: Tables showing the Number of Criminal Offenders committed for trial, or bailed for appearance at the Assizes and Sessions in each County, in the year 1855, and the Results of the Proceedings. Presented to both Houses of Parliament by command of her Majesty.

The Colonial Policy of Lord John Russell’s Administration. By Earl Grey. 2 vols. London: Bentley, 1853.

The London Prisons: to which is added, a Description of the chief Provincial Prisons. By Hepworth Dixon. London: Jackson and Walford, 1850.

John Howard, and the Prison World of Europe. From Original and Authentic Documents. By Hepworth Dixon. Second Edition. London: Jackson and Walford, 1850.