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POETRY & LIFE

E. B. BROWNING
& HER POETRY

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Elizabeth Barrett Browning

ELIZABETH BARRETT BROWNING & HER POETRY

BY

KATHLEEN E. ROYDS *Index*

Author of "Coleridge and His Poetry"



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GENERAL PREFACE

A GLANCE through the pages of this little book will suffice to disclose the general plan of the series of which it forms a part. Only a few words of explanation, therefore, will be necessary.

The point of departure is the undeniable fact that with the vast majority of young students of literature a living interest in the work of any poet can best be aroused, and an intelligent appreciation of it secured, when it is immediately associated with the character and career of the poet himself. The cases are indeed few and far between in which much fresh light will not be thrown upon a poem by some knowledge of the personality of the writer, while it will often be found that the most direct—perhaps even the only—way to the heart of its meaning lies through a consideration of the circumstances in which it had its birth. The purely æsthetic critic may possibly object that a poem should be regarded simply as a self-contained and detached piece of art, having no personal affiliations or bearings. Of the validity of this as an abstract principle nothing need now be said. The fact remains that, in the earlier stages of study at any rate, poetry is most valued and loved when it is made to seem most human and vital; and the human and vital interest of poetry can be most surely brought home to the reader by the biographical method of interpretation.

GENERAL PREFACE

This is to some extent recognized by writers of histories and text-books of literature, and by editors of selections from the works of our poets ; for place is always given by them to a certain amount of biographical material. But in the histories and text-books the biography of a given writer stands by itself, and his work has to be sought elsewhere, the student being left to make the connexion for himself ; while even in our current editions of selections there is little systematic attempt to link biography, step by step, with production.

This brings us at once to the chief purpose of the present series. In this, biography and production will be considered together and in intimate association. In other words, an endeavour will be made to interest the reader in the lives and personalities of the poets dealt with, and at the same time to use biography as an introduction and key to their writings.

Each volume will therefore contain the life-story of the poet who forms its subject. In this, attention will be specially directed to his personality as it expressed itself in his poetry, and to the influences and conditions which counted most as formative factors in the growth of his genius. This biographical study will be used as a setting for a selection, as large as space will permit, of his representative poems. Such poems, where possible, will be reproduced in full, and care will be taken to bring out their connexion with his character, his circumstances, and the movement of his mind. Then, in

GENERAL PREFACE

addition, so much more general literary criticism will be incorporated as may seem to be needed to supplement the biographical material, and to exhibit both the essential qualities and the historical importance of his work.

It is believed that the plan thus pursued is substantially in the nature of a new departure, and that the volumes of this series, constituting as they will an introduction to the study of some of our greatest poets, will be found useful to teachers and students of literature, and no less to the general lover of English poetry.

WILLIAM HENRY HUDSON

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E. B. BROWNING & HER POETRY

WHILE it is impossible to affix a distinctive label to the literature of an era so complex and many-sided as the nineteenth century, certain influences may be traced which were at work in all its most vital and important productions. Among these the advance of democracy takes a prominent place. The principle on which the democratic theory is based, that every unit counts for one, rendered it inevitable that the "woman's movement" should take its rise with and be involved in its progress. Women, as a body, awoke to self-realisation in the nineteenth century; and with this they became articulate as a distinct force in the literature of the age.

Individuals had, of course, found expression before in various directions, particularly in the novel; while, in Scotland especially, lyrics as immortal as those of Burns had come from the pen of a woman—Lady Nairne. But in general what they wrote was conventional, and was stunted for want of wide experience and culture. When the fetters which bound down the eighteenth century to materialism, intellectualism, and prose were finally shattered at the French Revolution, and the air was cleared of the dust raised by the explosion, a fresh horizon was open to view. The new age was intensely

ELIZABETH BROWNING

interested in itself ; more awake to its own ignorance and infinite possibilities ; increasingly alive to the wonder and mystery of being. It could find place for any contribution of thought or feeling which might enlarge its boundaries or illuminate its depths. And here woman discovered her field. She was quickened into spontaneity by the conviction that what she had to say was worthy of a hearing, and had its part to play in the struggle of the age toward completer self-knowledge and larger prospects.

The woman poet came to self-consciousness in a world that was already old. Without any attempt to generalize along lines of sex, we may trace back to this fact many of the features which have been frequently pointed out as distinguishing her work from that of her brother poets. The pressure of " the burden of the mystery " was hers by inheritance in her youth ; and with the golden thread of youthful freshness the silver strand of sadness is constantly interwoven. Self-analysis and introspection were a sign of the age. The woman poet puts a great deal of herself directly into her writing, and she takes the world, herself, and her mission eminently seriously. This is not merely equivalent to saying that she is lyrical without a sense of humour. It means that what she says is fired by a genuineness and an enthusiasm which give it vitality and weight : though form may occasionally be sacrificed to the impatience which urges her to seek expression. Mrs. Browning is clearly a case in point ; though the artistic restraint and

AND HER POETRY

sense of form in which she was lacking were possessed to the full by Christina Rossetti.

It does, however, follow that the woman poet is generally lyrical. Subjectivity stamps her work. She writes at the call of feeling and her great appeal is to the emotions. She is usually, in consequence, artless and direct in utterance; while her importance lies in her self-revelation, and in the truth with which she is able to touch the chords of nobility, tenderness, and pathos in the human heart.

It is well to keep in mind these few facts concerning the conditions under which women poets began to write, and the place that was theirs to fill, in turning to consider one of the first, as well as the foremost, of those whose work counts in the literature of the century. Just what Mrs. Browning's position was we shall be better able to judge in the light of her life-story, and the point shall be taken up again when that is told.

II

IT serves small purpose to examine the family records of Elizabeth Barrett Barrett, for any light they throw on her genius. Of her immediate relations, her mother seems to have played little part in the moulding of her talents. She owed more to her father's influence.

Edward Moulton Barrett belonged on his mother's side to a family of wealthy West Indian landowners, and was himself a rich man.

ELIZABETH BROWNING

That Elizabeth Barrett grew up in a sheltered, even luxurious home, had important bearings later. Her attitude toward the problems which afterwards engaged her attention was always that of a theorist, and did not spring from any direct experience of social evils. But perhaps it is not fanciful to trace this interest to her father's influence in early years; for stories tell of meetings in the neighbourhood of his home, at which he used to speak, while the little Elizabeth, companion of his drives, sat and waited and listened. It may be, too, that she gained from him her serious outlook on life, and a tendency to moralize, often to over-moralize; for he seems to have been strict to narrowness in his views. From the first he took a deep interest in her studies and encouraged her writing. He had printed her juvenile epic poem, "The Battle of Marathon," and to him, once "my public and my critic," she dedicated in gratitude a later volume.

Elizabeth Barrett was born on March 6, 1806, at Coxhoe Hall, in the county of Durham. Three years later her father settled in a house he had had built for himself, with quaint gables and Gothic windows, "standing in a lovely park, among trees and sloping hills," at Hope End, near Ledbury, in Herefordshire. Here, amid quiet English scenery, in the seclusion of country life at the beginning of last century, Elizabeth spent her childhood and grew to womanhood.

The best, almost the only, record of these

AND HER POETRY

early years must be sought in her own poems. Several of the more important shorter ones are retrospective ; and "Aurora Leigh" is an invaluable spiritual autobiography. The picture is that of a child, studious, imaginative, and original. Her story is mainly concerned with thought and feeling ; little with events. She was by nature solitary, though the eldest of a large family. The landmarks that stand out as she looks back on her childhood are adventures experienced in lonely rambles ; or the opening up of a new kingdom, such as Keats found, through the reading of Homer and the poets. From her little green chamber, at whose window, surrounded by honeysuckle, she used to sit

And watch the morning quicken in the grey,
And hear the silence open like a flower
Leaf after leaf,

she sometimes escaped early on a summer morning

To slip downstairs through all the sleepy house,
As mute as any dream there, and escape
As a soul from the body, out of doors,
Glide through the shrubberies, drop into the lane,
And wander on the hills an hour or two,
Then back again before the house should stir.

Thoughtful and visionary, what to most children would be a quickly forgotten incident became for her food for meditation ; till it acquired symbolic meaning, and often a suggestion of mingled mystery and pathos, as she

ELIZABETH BROWNING

looked back at it in the light of after-experience. The scene of "The Lost Bower," written years after the adventure it records, was a wood near Hope End. It is imbued with charm through its delicate combination of reminiscence and mysticism.

THE LOST BOWER

I

In the pleasant orchard closes,
"God bless all our gains," say we ;
But "May God bless all our losses,"
Better suits with our degree.

Listen, gentle—aye, and simple ! listen, children
on the knee !

II

Green the land is where my daily
Steps in jocund childhood played,
Dimpled close with hill and valley,
Dappled very close with shade ;
Summer-snow of apple blossoms running up from
glade to glade.

III

There is one hill I see nearer
In my vision of the rest ;
And a little wood seems clearer
As it climbeth from the west,
Sideway from the tree-locked valley, to the airy
upland crest.

IV

Small the wood is, green with hazels,
And, completing the ascent,
Where the wind blows and sun dazzles

AND HER POETRY

Thrills in leafy tremblement,
Like a heart that, after climbing, beateth quickly
through content.

V

Not a step the wood advances
O'er the open hill-top's bound ;
There, in green arrest, the branches
See their image on the ground :
You may walk beneath them smiling, glad with
sight and glad with sound.

VI

For you hearken on your right hand,
How the birds do leap and call
In the greenwood, out of sight and
Out of reach and fear of all ;
And the squirrels crack the filberts through their
cheerful madrigal.

VII

On your left, the sheep are cropping
The slant grass and daisies pale,
And five apple-trees stand dropping
Separate shadows toward the vale,
Over which, in choral silence, the hills look you
their " All hail ! "

VIII

Far out, kindled by each other,
Shining hills on hills arise,
Close as brother leans to brother
When they press beneath the eyes
Of some father praying blessings from the gifts of
paradise.

ELIZABETH BROWNING

IX

While beyond, above them mounted,
And above their woods also,
Malvern hills, for mountains counted
Not unduly, loom a-row—
Keepers of Piers Plowman's visions through the
sunshine and the snow.¹

X

Yet, in childhood, little prized I
The fair walk and far survey :
'Twas a straight walk unadvised by
The least mischief worth a nay ;
Up and down—as dull as grammar on the eve of
holiday.

XI

But the wood, all close and clenching
Bough in bough and root in root,—
No more sky (for over-branching)
At your head than at your foot,—
Oh, the wood drew me within it, by a glamour
past dispute.

XII

Few and broken paths showed through it,
Where the sheep had tried to run,—
Forced with snowy wool to strew it
Round the thickets, when anon
They, with silly thorn-pricked noses, bleated back
into the sun.

¹ The Malvern Hills of Worcestershire are the scene of Langland's Visions, and thus present the earliest classic ground of English poetry.

AND HER POETRY

XIII

But my childish heart beat stronger
Than those thickets dared to grow :
I could pierce them ! I could longer
Travel on, methought, than so.
Sheep for sheep-paths ! braver children climb and
creep where they would go.

XIV

And the poets wander, said I,
Over places all as rude :
Bold Rinaldo's lovely lady
Sate to meet him in a wood :
Rosalinda, like a fountain, laughed out pure with
solitude.

XV

And if Chaucer had not travelled
Through a forest by a well,
He had never dreamt nor marvelled
At those ladies fair and fell
Who lived smiling without loving in their island-
citadel.

XVI

Thus I thought of the old singers,
And took courage from their song,
Till my little struggling fingers
Tore asunder gyve and thong
Of the brambles which entrapped me, and the
barrier branches strong.

XVII

On a day, such pastime keeping,
With a fawn's heart debonair,
Under-crawling, overleaping

ELIZABETH BROWNING

Thorns that prick and boughs that bear,
I stood suddenly astonished—I was gladdened
unaware.

XVIII

From the place I stood in, floated
Back the covert dim and close,
And the open ground was coated
Carpet-smooth with grass and moss,
And the blue-bell's purple presence signed it
worthily across.

XIX

Here a linden-tree stood, bright'ning
All adown its silver rind ;
For as some trees draw the lightning,
So this tree, unto my mind,
Drew to earth the blessed sunshine from the sky
where it was shrined.

XX

Tall the linden-tree, and near it
An old hawthorn also grew ;
And wood-ivy like a spirit
Hovered dimly round the two,
Shaping thence that bower of beauty which I sing
of thus to you.

XXI

'Twas a bower for garden fitter
Than for any woodland wide ;
Though a fresh and dewy glitter
Struck it through from side to side,
Shaped and shaven was the freshness, as by
garden-cunning plied.

AND HER POETRY

XXII

Oh, a lady might have come there,
Hooded fairly like her hawk,
With a book or lute in summer,
And a hope of sweeter talk,—
Listening less to her own music than for footsteps
on the walk.

XXIII

But that bower appeared a marvel
In the wildness of the place ;
With such seeming art and travail,
Finely fixed and fitted was
Leaf to leaf, the dark-green ivy, to the summit
from the base.

XXIV

And the ivy veined and glossy
Was enwrought with eglantine ;
And the wild hop fibred closely,
And the large-leaved columbine,
Arch of door and window mullion, did right
sylvanly entwine.

XXV

Rose-trees either side the door were
Growing lithe and growing tall,
Each one set a summer warder
For the keeping of the hall,—
With a red rose and a white rose, leaning, nodding
at the wall.

XXVI

As I entered—mosses hushing
Stole all noises from my foot ;
And a green elastic cushion,

ELIZABETH BROWNING

Clasped within the linden's root,
Took me in a chair of silence very rare and
absolute. .

XXVII

All the floor was paved with glory,
Greenly, silently inlaid
(Through quick motions made before me),
With fair counterparts in shade
Of the fair serrated ivy-leaves which slanted
overhead.

XXVIII

“ Is such pavement in a palace ? ”
So I questioned in my thought.
The sun, shining through the chalice
Of the red rose hung without,
Threw within a red libation, like an answer to my
doubt.

XXIX

At the same time, on the linen
Of my childish lap there fell
Two white may-leaves, downward winning
Through the ceiling's miracle,
From a blossom, like an angel, out of sight yet
blessing well.

XXX

Down to floor and up to ceiling
Quick I turned my childish face,
With an innocent appealing
For the secret of the place
To the trees, which surely knew it, in partaking
of the grace.

AND HER POETRY

XXXI

Where's no foot of human creature,
How could reach a human hand ?
And if this be work of nature,
Why has nature turned so bland,
Breaking off from other wild work ? It was hard
to understand.

XXXII

Was she weary of rough-doing,—
Of the bramble and the thorn ?
Did she pause in tender rueing
Here of all her sylvan scorn ?
Or, in mock of art's deceiving, was the sudden
mildness worn ?

XXXIII

Or could this same bower (I fancied)
Be the work of Dryad strong,
Who, surviving all that chancèd
In the world's old pagan wrong,
Lay hid, feeding in the woodland on the last true
poet's song ?

XXXIV

Or was this the house of fairies,
Left, because of the rough ways,
Unassoiled by Ave Marys
Which the passing pilgrim prays,
And beyond Saint Catherine's chiming on the
blessèd Sabbath days ?

XXXV

So, young muser, I sate listening
To my fancy's wildest word.
On a sudden, through the glistening

ELIZABETH BROWNING

Leaves around, a little stirred,
Came a sound, a sense of music, which was rather
felt than heard.

XXXVI

Softly, finely, it enwound me ;
From the world it shut me in,—
Like a fountain, falling round me,
Which with silver waters thin
Clips a little water Naiad sitting smilingly within.

XXXVII

Whence the music came, who knoweth ?
I know nothing. But indeed
Pan or Faunus never bloweth
So much sweetness from a reed
Which has sucked the milk of waters at the oldest
river-head.

XXXVIII

Never lark the sun can waken
With such sweetness ! when the lark,
The high planets overtaking
In the half-*evanished* Dark,
Casts his singing to their singing, like an arrow to
the mark.

XXXIX

Never nightingale so singeth :
Oh, she leans on thorny tree,
And her poet-song she flingeth
Over pain to victory !
Yet she never sings such music,—or she sings it
not to me.

AND HER POETRY

XL

Never blackbirds, never thrushes,
Nor small finches sing as sweet,
When the sun strikes through the bushes
To their crimson clinging feet,
And their pretty eyes look sideways to the summer
 heavens complete.

XLI

If it *were* a bird, it seemèd,
Most like Chaucer's, which, in sooth,
He of green and azure dreamèd,
While it sate in spirit-ruth
On that bier of a crowned lady, singing nigh her
 silent mouth.

XLII

If it *were* a bird!—ah, sceptic,
Give me “yea” or give me “nay”—
Though my soul were nympholeptic,
As I heard that virèlay,
You may stoop your pride to pardon, for my sin
 is far away.

XLIII

I rose up in exaltation
And an inward trembling heat,
And (it seemèd) in geste of passion
Dropped the music to my feet
Like a garment rustling downwards!—such a
 silence followed it.

XLIV

Heart and head beat through the quiet
Full and heavily, though slower.
In the song, I think, and by it,

ELIZABETH BROWNING

Mystic Presences of power
Had up-snatched me to the Timeless, then returned
me to the Hour.

XL

In a child-abstraction lifted,
Straightway from the bower I past,
Foot and soul being dimly drifted
Through the greenwood, till, at last,
In the hill-top's open sunshine I all consciously
was cast.

XLVI

Face to face with the true mountains
I stood silently and still,
Drawing strength from fancy's dauntings,
From the air about the hill,
And from Nature's open mercies, and most debonair
goodwill.

XLVII

Oh, the golden-hearted daisies
Witnessed there, before my youth,
To the truth of things, with praises
Of the beauty of the truth,
And I woke to Nature's real, laughing joyfully
for both.

XLVIII

And I said within me, laughing,
I have found a bower to-day,
A green lusus—fashioned half in
Chance, and half in Nature's play—
And a little bird sings nigh it, I will nevermore
missay.

AND HER POETRY

XLIX

Henceforth, *I* will be the fairy
Of this bower not built by one ;
I will go there, sad or merry,
With each morning's benison,
And the bird shall be my harper in the dream-hall
I have won.

L

So I said. But the next morning,
(—Child, look up into my face—
'Ware, O sceptic, of your scorning !
This is truth in its pure grace !)
The next morning, all had vanished, or my
wandering missed the place.

LI

Bring an oath most sylvan holy,
And upon it swear me true—
By the wind-bells swinging slowly
Their mute curfews in the dew,
By the advent of the snowdrop, by the rosemary
and rue,—

LII

I affirm by all or any,
Let the cause be charm or chance,
That my wandering searches many
Missed the bower of my romance—
That I nevermore, upon it, turned my mortal
countenance.

LIII

I affirm that, since I lost it,
Never bower has seemed so fair ;
Never garden-creeper crossed it

ELIZABETH BROWNING

With so deft and brave an air—
Never bird sung in the summer, as I saw and
heard them there.

LIV

Day by day, with new desire,
Toward my wood I ran in faith,
Under leaf and over brier,
Through the thickets, out of breath—
Like the prince who rescued Beauty from the
sleep as long as death.

LV

But his sword of mettle clashèd,
And his arm smote strong, I ween,
And her dreaming spirit flashèd
Through her body's fair white screen,
And the light thereof might guide him up the
cedar alleys green.

LVI

But for me, I saw no splendour—
All my sword was my child-heart ;
And the wood refused surrender
Of that bower it held apart,
Safe as Ædipus's grave-place, 'mid Colonos' olives
swart.

LVII

As Aladdin sought the basements
His fair palace rose upon,
And the four-and-twenty casements
Which gave answers to the sun ;
So, in wilderment of gazing I looked up, and I
looked down.

AND HER POETRY

LVIII

Years have vanished since as wholly
As the little bower did then ;
And you call it tender folly
That such thoughts should come again ?
Ah, I cannot change this sighing for your smiling,
brother men !

LIX

For this loss it did prefigure
Other loss of better good,
When my soul, in spirit-vigour,
And in ripened womanhood,
Fell from visions of more beauty than an arbour
in a wood.

LX

I have lost—oh, many a pleasure,
Many a hope, and many a power—
Studious health, and merry leisure,
The first dew on the first flower !
But the first of all my losses was the losing of the
bower.

LXI

I have lost the dream of Doing,
And the other dream of Done,
The first spring in the pursuing,
The first pride in the Begun,—
First recoil from incompleteness, in the face of
what is won—

LXII

Exaltations in the far light
Where some cottage only is ;
Mild dejections in the starlight,

ELIZABETH BROWNING

Which the sadder-hearted miss ;
And the child-cheek blushing scarlet for the very
shame of bliss.

LXIII

I have lost the sound child-sleeping
Which the thunder could not break ;
Something too of the strong leaping
Of the staglike heart awake,
Which the pale is low for keeping in the road it
ought to take.

LXIV

Some respect to social fictions
Has been also lost by me ;
And some generous genuflexions,
Which my spirit offered free
To the pleasant old conventions of our false
humanity.

LXV

All my losses did I tell you,
Ye, perchance, would look away ;—
Ye would answer me, " Farewell ! you
Make sad company to-day,
And your tears are falling faster than the bitter
words you say."

LXVI

For God placed me like a dial
In the open ground with power,
And my heart had for its trial
All the sun and all the shower !
And I suffered many losses,—and my first was of
the bower.

AND HER POETRY

LXVII

Laugh you ? If that loss of mine be
Of no heavy-seeming weight—
When the cone falls from the pine-tree
The young children laugh thereat ;
Yet the wind that struck it, riseth, and the tempest
shall be great.

LXVIII

One who knew me in my childhood
In the glamour and the game,
Looking on me long and mild, would
Never know me for the same.
Come, unchanging recollections, where those
changes overcame.

LXIX

By this couch I weakly lie on,
While I count my memories,—
Through the fingers which, still sighing,
I press closely on mine eyes,—
Clear as once beneath the sunshine, I behold the
bower arise.

LXX

Springs the linden-tree as greenly,
Stroked with light adown its rind ;
And the ivy-leaves serenely
Each in either intertwined ;
And the rose-trees at the doorway, they have
neither grown nor pined.

LXXI

From those overblown faint roses
Not a leaf appeareth shed,
And that little bud discloses

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Not a thorn's-breadth more of red
For the winters and the summers which have
passed me overhead.

LXXII

And that music overfloweth,
Sudden sweet, the sylvan eaves :
Thrush or nightingale—who knoweth ?
Fay or Faunus—who believes ?
But my heart still trembles in me to the trembling
of the leaves.

LXXIII

Is the bower lost, then ? who sayeth
That the bower indeed is lost ?
Hark ! my spirit in it prayeth
Through the sunshine and the frost,—
And the prayer preserves it greenly, to the last
and uttermost.

LXXIV

Till another open for me
In God's Eden-land unknown,
With an angel at the doorway,
White with gazing at His Throne,
And a saint's voice in the palm-trees, singing—
“ All is lost . . . and *won* ! ”

The command over melodious music, the spontaneous simplicity, and the haunting, underlying strain of sadness will strike the reader at once. The proneness to analyse at too great length the moral suggested is also evident.

The chief companion and friend of Elizabeth's childhood was her brother Edward, with whom,

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preferring his tutor to her own governess, she studied the classics, passing the time

On Horace' page, or Maro's sweeter lore ;
While one young critic, on the classic style,
Would sagely try to frown, and make the other smile.

If the story of her sitting reading Homer in the original at eight years old is not sufficiently authenticated, there can be no question as to her extraordinarily precocious powers. Pope's Homer at least she devoured at a very early age. Greek myth and legend possessed her ; and soon summer visitors to Hope End might have found the child under some shady tree in the park, her black pony forgotten for the nonce, poring over the leaves of the Greek dramatists or Plato, with all the diligence and perhaps more than the ardour of a student in an Oxford library. In her garden, the tending of which she always loved, at nine years old she made a " huge giant wrought of spade," named him " Hector, son of Priam," laid out his great figure and limbs in flowers, and half believed the disembodied soul of " old Hector, once of Troy " would come one day to take possession.

In her father's library she plunged into the world of books, and from wide and varied reading learnt not pedantry, but independence, not servility, but trust of her own instinct and her own reason. After her brother Edward went to school, she carried on her studies of the classics with a friend who lived near—the blind scholar Hugh Stuart Boyd. She would read

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aloud to him in Greek, the dramatists, and the writings of the early Fathers. "The Wine of Cyprus," a poem which will be quoted in another connection later on, gives a delightful picture of winged hours, spent by the blind scholar and the eager girl, deep in the works of the great masters. It was in these early years that Elizabeth Barrett laid the foundations of the wide culture which distinguishes her from most other women writers of her generation. The impress of the second of the main influences of her girlhood is far less prominent. For though, throughout her most receptive years she lived a free life, in the depths of the country, she was never a poet of nature. That she loved its beauties is evident from many a passage in her works. Few have seized on and conveyed so felicitously the essential features of English scenery as she has in the following passage, fragrant with memories of the country she rambled over as a child :

On English ground

You understand the letter,—ere the fall
How Adam lived in a garden. All the fields
Are tied up fast with hedges, nose-gay-like ;
The hills are crumpled plains, the plains parterres,
The trees, round, woolly, ready to be clipped,
And if you seek for any wilderness
You find, at best, a park. A nature tamed
And grown domestic like a barn-door fowl,
Which does not awe you with its claws and beak
Nor tempt you to an eyrie too high up,
But which, in cackling, sets you thinking of

AND HER POETRY

Your eggs to-morrow at breakfast, in the pause
Of finer meditation.

Rather say,
A sweet familiar nature, stealing in
As a dog might, or child, to touch your hand
Or pluck your gown, and humbly mind you so
Of presence and affection, excellent
For inner uses, from the things without.

Or in this :

Whoever lives true life, will love true love.
I learnt to love that England. Very oft,
Before the day was born, or otherwise
Through secret windings of the afternoons,
I threw my hunters off and plunged myself
Among the deep hills, as a hunted stag
Will take the waters, shivering with the fear
And passion of the course. And when at last
Escaped, so many a green slope built on slope
Betwixt me and the enemy's house behind,
I dared to rest, or wander, in a rest
Made sweeter for the step upon the grass,
And view the ground's most gentle dimplement
(As if God's finger touched but did not press
In making England), such an up and down
Of verdure,—nothing too much up or down,
A ripple of land ; such little hills, the sky
Can stoop to tenderly and the wheat-fields
climb ;
Such nooks of valleys lined with orchises,
Fed full of noises by invisible streams ;
And open pastures where you scarcely tell
White daisies from white dew,—at intervals
The mythic oaks and elm-trees standing out
Self-poised upon their prodigy of shade,—

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I thought my father's land was worthy too
Of being my Shakespeare's.

* * * * *

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 everywhere,
Confused with smell of orchards.

But she was too early cut off from its influences to gain any deep philosophic insight into nature. She was more theorist than philosopher ; and where she passes beyond simple description it is not for interpretation, but for illustration.

Meanwhile from at least the age of eight the love of making verses possessed her ; and persisted until poetry became for her a life-object and a definite ambition. It is of some critical interest to notice that her early efforts, "The Battle of Marathon," and a volume published anonymously in 1826, "An Essay on Mind and other Poems," were both written under the influence of the school of Pope, still

AND HER POETRY

alive in out-of-the-way corners almost thirty years after the publication of the "Lyrical Ballads." The "Essay on Mind" gives evidence of remarkable range of learning for so young a writer—and beyond that need not concern us.

When she was about fifteen, Elizabeth suffered from an illness, brought on, it is thought, by a strain incurred while saddling her pony. It laid the foundations of a long period of invalidism in later years; and its influence on her poetry is important. It meant that she was to pass from a life of seclusion in the country, to a life of seclusion on her couch in London. Thus, while a natural tendency to abstraction and theorising was encouraged, she was cut off from all possibility of the wide experience of life which direct contact with it alone can give.

The move to London was necessitated by money difficulties in which her father was already involved when her mother died in 1828. Hope End was sold, and after some unsettled years, at Sidmouth and in London, a house taken in Wimpole Street became her home till her marriage.

III

LONDON had for Elizabeth Barrett two great advantages. It afforded her opportunity to meet friends with her own interests, and it brought her into closer touch with current literature. The city did not, however, present itself at first in any very

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attractive aspect. For some time after their arrival she saw from her window

Fog only, the great tawny weltering fog,
Involve the passive city, strangle it
Alive, and draw it off into the void,
Spires, bridges, streets and squares, as if a sponge
Had wiped out London.

Presently she might discover its poetry and its inspiration, when it surprises "By a sudden sense of vision and of tune." Meantime a resource and interest which were independent of surroundings were hers. Severe winters that kept her a prisoner indoors were given up to strenuous study. She applied herself to her chosen profession with high seriousness of purpose, and a devotion which came from the deepest sense of the demands and responsibilities of the poet's calling.

Soon after the move to London there appeared one of the first of her poems which showed real mastery. It was a ballad, "The Romaunt of Margret." The idea underlying it is the old superstition that a forewarning of the approach of death is given to the man who sees an apparition of himself.

THE ROMAUNT OF MARGRET

I

I plant a tree whose leaf
The yew-tree leaf will suit ;
But when its shade is o'er you laid,
Turn round and pluck the fruit.

AND HER POETRY

Now reach my harp from off the wall
Where shines the sun aslant.
The sun may shine and we be cold—
O hearken, loving hearts and bold,
Unto my wild romaunt,
Margret, Margret.

II

Sitteth the fair ladye
Close to the river side,
Which runneth on with a merry tone
Her merry thoughts to guide.
It runneth through the trees,
It runneth up the hill,
Nathless the lady's thoughts have found
A way more pleasant still.
Margret, Margret.

III

The night is in her hair
And giveth shade to shade,
And the pale moonlight on her forehead white
Like a spirit's hand is laid ;
Her lips part with a smile
Instead of speakings done :
I ween, she thinketh of a voice,
Albeit uttering none.
Margret, Margret.

IV

All little birds do sit
With heads beneath their wings :
Nature doth seem in a mystic dream,
Absorbed from her living things.
That dream by that ladye

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Is certes unpartook,
For she looketh to the high cold stars
With a tender human look.

Margret, Margret.

V

The lady's shadow lies
Upon the running river ;
It lieth no less in its quietness,
For that which resteth never :
Most like a trusting heart
Upon a passing faith,—
Or as, upon the course of life,
The stedfast doom of death.

Margret, Margret.

VI

The lady doth not move,
The lady doth not dream,
Yet she seeth her shade no longer laid
In rest upon the stream.
It shaketh without wind,
It parteth from the tide,
It standeth upright in the cleft moonlight,
It sitteth at her side.

Margret, Margret.

VII

Look in its face, ladye,
And keep thee from thy swound !
With a spirit bold, thy pulses hold,
And hear its voice's sound.
For so will sound thy voice,
When thy face is to the wall ;
And such will be thy face, ladye,
When the maidens work thy pall.

Margret, Margret.

AND HER POETRY

VIII

“ Am I not like to thee ? ”—
The voice was calm and low ;
And between each word you might have heard
The silent forests grow.
“ *The like may sway the like,* ”
By which mysterious law
Mine eyes from thine and my lips from thine
The light and breath may draw.
Margret, Margret.

IX

“ My lips do need thy breath,
My lips do need thy smile,
And my pallid eyne, that light in thine
Which met the stars erewhile.
Yet go with light and life,
If that thou lovest one
In all the earth, who loveth thee
As truly as the sun,
Margret, Margret.

X

Her cheek had waxèd white
Like cloud at fall of snow ;
Then like to one at set of sun
It waxèd red alsò ;
For love’s name maketh bold,
As if the loved were near.
And then she sighed the deep long sigh
Which cometh after fear.
Margret, Margret.

XI

“ Now, sooth, I fear thee not—
Shall never fear thee now ! ”
(And a noble sight was the sudden light

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Which lit her lifted brow.)

“Can earth be dry of streams ?

Or hearts, of love ? ” she said ;

“Who doubteth love, can know not love :

He is already dead.”

Margret, Margret.

XII

“I have ” . . . and here her lips

Some word in pause did keep,

And gave the while a quiet smile,

As if they paused in sleep,—

“I have . . . a brother dear,

A knight of knightly fame !

I broidered him a knightly scarf

With letters of my name.

Margret, Margret.

XIII

“I fed his grey goss-hawk,

I kissed his fierce bloodhound,

I sate at home when he might come

And caught his horn's far sound :

I sang him hunters' songs,

I poured him the red wine—

He looked across the cup and said,

love thee, sister mine.”

Margret, Margret.

XIV

IT trembled on the grass,

With a low, shadowy laughter ;

The sounding river which rolled for ever,

Stood dumb and stagnant after.

“Brave knight thy brother is !

AND HER POETRY

But better loveth he
Thy chaliced wine than thy chanted song,
And better both, than thee,
Margret, Margret."

XV

The lady did not heed
The river's silence while
Her own thoughts still ran at their will,
And calm was still her smile.
"My little sister wears
The look our mother wore :
I smooth her locks with a golden comb,
I bless her evermore."
Margret, Margret.

XVI

"I gave her my first bird,
When first my voice it knew ;
I made her share my posies rare,
And told her where they grew.
I taught her God's dear name
With prayer and praise, to tell—
She looked from heaven into my face,
And said, *I love thee well,*"
Margret, Margret.

XVII

IT trembled on the grass
With a low, shadowy laughter :
You could see each bird as it woke and stared
Through the shrivelled foliage after.
"Fair child thy sister is !
But better loveth she
Thy golden comb than thy gathered flowers,
And better both, than thee,
Margret, Margret."

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XVIII

The lady did not heed
The withering on the bough :
Still calm her smile, albeit the while
A little pale her brow.

“ I have a father old,
The lord of ancient halls ;
An hundred friends are in his court,
Yet only me he calls.

Margret, Margret.

XIX

“ An hundred knights are in his court,
Yet read I by his knee ;
And when forth they go to the tourney show,
I rise not up to see.

’Tis a weary book to read,
My tryst’s at set of sun,
But loving and dear beneath the stars
Is his blessing when I’ve done.”

Margret, Margret.

XX

IT trembled on the grass
With a low, shadowy laughter ;
And moon and star, though bright and far,
Did shrink and darken after.

“ High lord thy father is !
But better loveth he
His ancient halls than his hundred friends,
His ancient halls, than thee,

Margret, Margret.”

XXI

The lady did not heed
That the far stars did fail :
Still calm her smile, albeit the while . . .

AND HER POETRY

Nay, but she is not pale!
"I have a more than friend
Across the mountains dim:
No other's voice is soft to me,
Unless it nameth *him*."
Margret, Margret.

XXII

"Though louder beats mine heart
I know his tread again,
And his far plume ay, unless turned away,
For the tears do blind me then.
We brake no gold, a sign
Of stronger faith to be,—
But I wear his last look in my soul,
Which said, *I love but thee!*"
Margret, Margret.

XXIII

IT trembled on the grass
With a low, shadowy laughter;
And the wind did toll, as a passing soul
Were sped by church-bell after;
And shadows, 'stead of light,
Fell from the stars above,
In flakes of darkness on her face
Still bright with trusting love.
Margret, Margret.

XXIV

"He *loved* but only thee!
That love is transient too:
The wild hawk's bill doth dabble still
I' the mouth that vowed thee true.
Will he open his dull eyes,

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When tears fall on his brow ?
Behold, the death-worm to his heart
Is a nearer thing than *thou*,
Margret, Margret."

XXV

Her face was on the ground—
None saw the agony,
But the men at sea did that night agree
They heard a drowning cry ;
And when the morning brake,
Fast rolled the river's tide,
With the green trees waving overhead,
And a white corse laid beside.
Margret, Margret.

XXVI

A knight's bloodhound and he
The funeral watch did keep ;
With a thought o' the chase he stroked its face
As it howled to see him weep.
A fair child kissed the dead,
But shrank before its cold ;
And alone yet proudly in his hall
Did stand a baron old.
Margret, Margret.

XXVII

Hang up my harp again !
I have no voice for song :
Not song, but wail, and mourners pale,
Not bards, to love belong.
O failing human love !
O light, by darkness known !
O false, the while thou treadest earth !
O deaf beneath the stone !
Margret, Margret.

AND HER POETRY

This was a poem of remarkable promise. The story unfolds directly in one sweep of inspiration. The music, weirdness, and melancholy add to the charm. The poet is dealing with a subject that attracts her by its suggestion of mysticism ; and her grotesqueness of diction is not here out of place.

This, and two other well-known ballads written a little later, "The Rhyme of the Duchess May" and "The Lay of the Brown Rosary," bear witness that she was once touched by Coleridge's magic wand. But her theory of poetry's mission stood in the way of her perfecting, as art, a form whose inspiration was the romantic past. She wrote :

My ballads prospered ; but the ballad's race
Is rapid for a poet who bears weights
Of thought and golden image.

And, for good or ill, she turned from the past to the present, from the world of romance to the world of reality.

Of external events during the early years in London there is little to tell. They were not, of course, without their importance, though she wrote of herself, "A bird in a cage would have as good a story." They were especially fruitful in the formation of friendships. One devoted friend and lifelong admirer gained at this time was Miss Mary Russell Mitford, of "Our Village" fame. To her we owe a description of the poet, who struck her most by her extreme youthfulness. Indeed, Miss Mitford had "some

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difficulty in persuading a friend . . . that the translator of the 'Prometheus' of Æschylus, the authoress of the 'Essay on Mind' was old enough to be introduced into company." The two kept up a close correspondence till Miss Mitford's death, some years after Mrs. Browning's marriage; and such was the attraction of Elizabeth Barrett's society that her elderly friend would willingly travel forty miles—a more serious undertaking then than now—to spend an hour with her.

Another great friendship must not be forgotten. Her distant cousin, John Kenyon, now began to play an important part in her life. He was for long an interesting figure in literary circles. "Giving up his early ambition to be known as an author, he devoted his life to making other authors happy." He watched his cousin's development with interest and unfailing kindness, introducing her to many famous writers, and acting generally as "guide, philosopher, and friend." He had been at school with the father of another rising young poet, Robert Browning.

It was through Mr. Kenyon that, on a red-letter day among so many entirely uneventful, Elizabeth Barrett met a writer for whom she had a great admiration—the poet Wordsworth. Landor was also present.

The youthful poet, trembling in soul and body as Wordsworth talked to her, little imagined that on his death in 1850, at least one influential literary paper, the "Athenæum,"

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would advocate her appointment as his successor in the Laureateship. Landor, estranged from kith and kin, was to find, in his old age, the truest of friends in Mr. and Mrs. Browning.

But, generally, Elizabeth Barrett's life now was one of great seclusion ; her days, however, were filled with literary labours, and the time of quiet was not unproductive. The volume which appeared in 1838 was the first published under her own name ; and while one critic hailed her at once as possessor of " many of the highest qualities of the divine art," by another her work was greeted as " especially welcome as an evidence of female genius and accomplishment." The reception accorded was partly due to its appearance at an auspicious moment. It came at a time when any signs of genuine power were very significant. The period of post-revolutionary reaction had checked enthusiasm and dulled inspiration. Browning had not yet caught the public ear ; Tennyson's star was barely above the horizon ; the importance of the volume was the greater since there was certainly no woman writer who could claim to stand in the front rank.

Adverse criticism, of course, accompanied the praise ; and it was accepted in a spirit of humility mingled with the confidence of one who was awakening to consciousness of power and the conviction of a message.

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IV

IN the very year of her success an illness, following on the breaking of a blood-vessel, left Elizabeth Barrett so frail that the risk of a winter in London was considered too great to run. Accordingly, accompanied by her favourite brother, Edward, she went to Torquay. An illness at the end of the second winter of such severity as to make it seem "utterly improbable, speaking humanly, that I ever should be any better" destroyed any immediate hope of return to London.

Her brother Edward was again with her in July 1840. One Saturday he and two friends went out together in a small sailing-boat. Night came, and the boat did not return. Suspense deepened into fear, and fear into practical certainty, when news was brought that a boat answering in description to the one they sailed in had been seen to sink in Babbicombe Bay. Three days later the bodies were recovered and no possible room for doubt was left.

For months his sister, already an invalid when the blow fell, was prostrate from grief. She lay bowed down by the sense of her loss, unable to forget that devotion to her had kept her brother at Torquay, and so in a way brought about his death. When Miss Mitford saw her in the autumn no one expected her to live more than a few months. Yet her indomitable spirit reasserted itself.

AND HER POETRY

She set herself resolutely to conquer by sheer hard work the insistency of haunting memories ; and, obliged to lie continually on her back, she took up again the broken threads of correspondence and composition. But she could never, to the end of her life, bear any reference to this terrible time.

From the depths of feeling awakened by the tragedy comes "The Cry of the Human." It pulsates with penetrating sympathy for common sorrows. Elizabeth Barrett's insight into universal emotion, coupled with the absolute sincerity which gave its expression individual appeal, was a large part of her genius. The vein of sadness, natural under the circumstances, runs all through her early lyrics.

THE CRY OF THE HUMAN

I

"There is no God," the foolish saith,
But none "There is no sorrow,"
And nature oft the cry of faith
In bitter need will borrow :
Eyes, which the preacher could not school,
By wayside graves are raisèd,
And lips say "God be pitiful,"
Who ne'er said "God be praised."
Be pitiful, O God !

II

The tempest stretches from the steep
The shadow of its coming,
The beasts grow tame, and near us creep,
As help were in the human

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Yet, while the cloud-wheels roll and grind,
We spirits tremble under !—
The hills have echoes, but we find
No answer for the thunder.

Be pitiful, O God !

III

The battle hurtles on the plains,
Earth feels new scythes upon her ;
We reap our brothers for the wains,
And call the harvest—honour ;
Draw face to face, front line to line,
One image all inherit,—
Then kill, curse on, by that same sign,
Clay, clay,—and spirit, spirit.

Be pitiful, O God !

IV

The plague runs festering through the town,
And never a bell is tolling,
And corpses, jostled 'neath the moon,
Nod to the dead-cart's rolling.
The young child calleth for the cup,
The strong man brings it weeping ;
The mother from her babe looks up,
And shrieks away its sleeping.

Be pitiful, O God !

V

The plague of gold strikes far and near,
And deep and strong it enters ;
This purple chimar which we wear
Makes madder than the centaur's :
Our thoughts grow blank, our words grow
strange,
We cheer the pale gold-diggers—

AND HER POETRY

Each soul is worth so much on 'Change,
And marked, like sheep, with figures.
Be pitiful, O God !

VI

The curse of gold upon the land
The lack of bread enforces ;
The rail-cars snort from strand to strand,
Like more of Death's white horses !
The rich preach "rights" and future days,
And hear no angel scoffing,—
The poor die mute—with starving gaze
On corn-ships in the offing.
Be pitiful, O God !

VII

We meet together at the feast,
To private mirth betake us ;
We stare down in the winecup, lest
Some vacant chair should shake us.
We name delight, and pledge it round—
"It shall be ours to-morrow !"
God's seraphs, do your voices sound
As sad in naming sorrow ?
Be pitiful, O God !

VIII

We sit together, with the skies,
The steadfast skies, above us,
We look into each other's eyes,
"And how long will you love us ?"—
The eyes grow dim with prophecy,
The voices low and breathless,—
"Till death us part !"—O words, to be
Our *best*, for love the deathless !
Be pitiful, O God !

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IX

We tremble by the harmless bed
Of one loved and departed :
Our tears drop on the lips that said
Last night, " Be stronger-hearted ! "

O God,—to clasp those fingers close,
And yet to feel so lonely !—
To see a light upon such brows,
Which is the daylight only !

Be pitiful, O God !

X

The happy children come to us,
And look up in our faces :
They ask us—Was it thus, and thus,
When we were in their places ?—
We cannot speak ;—we see anew
The hills we used to live in,
And feel our mother's smile press through
The kisses she is giving.

Be pitiful, O God !

XI

We pray together at the kirk,
For mercy, mercy, solely :
Hands weary with the evil work,
We lift them to the Holy.

The corpse is calm below our knee,
Its spirit, bright before Thee—
Between them, worse than either, we—
Without the rest of glory !

Be pitiful, O God !

XII

We leave the communing of men,
The murmur of the passions,

AND HER POETRY

And live alone, to live again
With endless generations.
Are we so brave?—The sea and sky
In silence lift their mirrors,
And, glassed therein, our spirits high
Recoil from their own terrors.
Be pitiful, O God!

XIII

We sit on hills our childhood wist,
Woods, hamlets, streams, beholding :
The sun strikes through the farthest mist,
The city's spire to golden.
The city's golden spire it was,
When hope and health were strongest,
But now it is the churchyard grass
We look upon the longest.
Be pitiful, O God!

XIV

And soon all vision waxeth dull—
Men whisper, " He is dying " :
We cry no more " Be pitiful ! "
We have no strength for crying.
No strength, no need. Then, soul of mine,
Look up and triumph rather—
Lo, in the depth of God's Divine,
The Son adjures the Father,
BE PITIFUL, O GOD!

The deadening power of a great calamity, that, as Oliver Wendell Holmes says, " stains backward through all the leaves we have turned over in the book of life, before its blot of tears or of blood is dry on the page we are turning,"

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withering the blossoms of past joys with its touch and making fresh ones seem not worth the gathering, finds pathetic expression in the sonnet "Irreparableness."

IRREPARABLENESS

I have been in the meadows all the day
And gathered there the nosegay that you see,
Singing within myself as a bird or bee
When such do field-work on a morn of May.
But now I look upon my flowers, decay
Has met them in my hands more fatally
Because more warmly clasped,—and sobs are free
To come instead of songs. What do you say,
Sweet counsellors, dear friends? that I should go
Back straightway to the fields, and gather more?
Another, sooth, may do it,—but not I!
My heart is very tired, my strength is low,
My hands are full of blossoms plucked before,
Held dead within them till myself shall die.

Another, "Grief," is poignant and penetrating, and, generally, striking in expression.

GRIEF

I tell you, hopeless grief is passionless;
That only men incredulous of despair,
Half-taught in anguish, through the midnight air
Beat upward to God's throne in loud access
Of shrieking and reproach. Full desertness
In souls, as countries, lieth silent-bare
Under the blanching, vertical eye-glare
Of the absolute Heavens. Deep-hearted man, express
Grief for thy Dead in silence like to death:—

AND HER POETRY

Most like a monumental statue set
In everlasting watch and moveless woe,
Till itself crumble to the dust beneath.
Touch it : the marble eyelids are not wet ;
If it could weep, it could arise and go.

The spirit in which Elizabeth Barrett set herself to face life again may be illustrated by one more sonnet.

WORK

What are we set on earth for ? Say, to toil ;
Nor seek to leave thy tending of the vines,
For all the heat o' the day, till it declines,
And Death's mild curfew shall from work assoil.
God did anoint thee with His odorous oil,
To wrestle, not to reign ; and He assigns
All thy tears over, like pure crystallines,
For younger fellow workers of the soil
To wear for amulets. So others shall
Take patience, labour, to their heart and hand,
From thy hand, and thy heart, and thy brave cheer,
And God's grace fructify through thee to all.
The least flower, with a brimming cup, may stand,
And share its dewdrop with another near.

The three are interesting as examples of the early work of the author of the " Sonnets from the Portuguese." If the inspiration is not equally sustained, that they contain fine lines and some beautiful imagery will be readily admitted. They are not unworthy of the apprenticeship of the hand that penned the later series.

In spite of natural longing to get away from

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Torquay, it was not till September 1841 that it was possible for the journey to London to be undertaken. Then it was only the invalid's determination and strength of will that carried her through in the face of all opposition.

Once installed in her father's house in Wimpole Street again, in the two adjoining rooms which were to be practically a prison for four years, she threw herself with keen zest into her literary work. Often for long together she could see no one but the members of her family or most intimate friends. Journeys from bed to couch in a half-darkened room were the utmost she could accomplish. Yet she put away all complaining as unworthy, and bade herself

. . . like a cheerful traveller take the road,
Singing beside the hedge. What if the bread
Be bitter in thine inn, and thou unshod
To meet the flints? At least it may be said
"Because the way is *short*, I thank Thee, God."

Hardly a murmur or a regret escapes in letters or poems. "Probably," wrote one who knew her well, "there never was a greater instance of the power of genius over the weakness of the flesh." Her cheerfulness, courage, and persevering devotion to her art were unflinching, under circumstances that would have reduced any less courageous woman, at best, to a resigned acceptance of uselessness and impotence. She contributed a series of essays on "The Greek Christian Poets" to the "Athenæum," with

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AND HER POETRY

occasional poems to that and other periodicals, and she began to prepare another collection of her works. She maintained a lively interest in the arrangements made for her comfort. Undaunted even by an upheaval savouring of spring-cleaning, she entered with zest into her brothers' devices for converting her bedroom into a study, the bedroom furniture being laden with shelves of books, or adorned with busts of the poets. Outside her window were such plants as careful tending could persuade to grow in the London atmosphere. They spoke to the invalid, in imagination, of loved woods and fields ; but her retrospection was untinged by any murmuring comparisons. In home affections, reading, and her own thoughts she found happiness enough.

The advent of a spaniel, a present from Miss Mitford, was an event of great importance in the recluse's life. The record of his faithful companionship is handed down and his name immortalised in the poem "To Flush, my Dog." It is a graceful tribute to canine affection, not without its pathos.

TO FLUSH, MY DOG

I

Loving friend, the gift of one
Who her own true faith has run
Through thy lower nature,
Be my benediction said
With my hand upon thy head,
Gentle fellow creature !

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II

Like a lady's ringlets brown,
Flow thy silken ears adown
 Either side demurely
Of thy silver-suited breast,
Shining out from all the rest
 Of thy body purely.

III

Darkly brown thy body is,
Till the sunshine striking this
 Alchemize its dullness,
When the sleek curls manifold
Flash all over into gold,
 With a burnished fullness.

IV

Underneath my stroking hand,
Startled eyes of hazel bland
 Kindling, growing larger,
Up thou leapest with a spring,
Full of prank and curveting,
 Leaping like a charger.

V

Leap ! thy broad tail waves alight,
Leap ! thy slender feet are bright,
 Canopied in fringes ;
Leap—those tasselled ears of thine
Flicker strangely, fair and fine,
 Down their golden inches.

VI

Yet, my pretty, sportive friend,
Little is't to such an end
 That I praise thy rareness !

AND HER POETRY

Other dogs may be thy peers
Haply in these drooping ears,
And this glossy fairness.

VII

But of *thee* it shall be said,
This dog watched beside a bed
Day and night unwearied,—
Watched within a curtained room,
Where no sunbeam brake the gloom
Round the sick and dreary.

VIII

Roses, gathered for a vase,
In that chamber died apace,
Beam and breeze resigning ;
This dog only, waited on,
Knowing that when light is gone
Love remains for shining.

IX

Other dogs in thymy dew
Tracked the hares and followed through
Sunny moor or meadow ;
This dog only, crept and crept
Next a languid cheek that slept,
Sharing in the shadow.

X

Other dogs of loyal cheer
Bounded at the whistle clear,
Up the woodside hieing ;
This dog only, watched in reach
Of a faintly uttered speech,
Or a louder sighing.

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XI

And if one or two quick tears
Dropped upon his glossy ears,
Or a sigh came double,—
Up he sprang in eager haste,
Fawning, fondling, breathing fast
In a tender trouble.

XII

And this dog was satisfied
If a pale thin hand would glide
Down his dewlaps sloping,—
Which he pushed his nose within,
After,—platforming his chin
On the palm left open.

XIII

This dog, if a friendly voice
Call him now to blyther choice
Than such chamber-keeping,
“Come out ! ” praying from the door,—
Presseth backward as before,
Up against me leaping.

XIV

Therefore to this dog will I,
Tenderly not scornfully,
Render praise and favour :
With my hand upon his head,
Is my benediction said
Therefore, and for ever.

XV

And because he loves me so,
Better than his kind will do
Often, man or woman,

AND HER POETRY

Give I back more love again
Than dogs often take of men,
Leaning from my Human.

XVI

Blessings on thee, dog of mine,
Pretty collars make thee fine,
Sugared milk make fat thee !
Pleasures wag on in thy tail,
Hands of gentle motion fail
Nevermore, to pat thee !

XVII

Downy pillow take thy head,
Silken coverlid bestead,
Sunshine help thy sleeping !
No fly's buzzing wake thee up,
No man break thy purple cup,
Set for drinking deep in.

XVIII

Whiskered cats aointed flee,
Sturdy stoppers keep from thee
Cologne distillations ;
Nuts lie in thy path for stones,
And thy feast-day macaroons
Turn to daily rations !

XIX

Mock I thee, in wishing weal ?—
Tears are in my eyes to feel
Thou art made so straitly,
Blessing needs must straiten too,—
Little canst thou joy or do,
Thou who lovest *greatly*.

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XX

Yet be blessèd to the height
Of all good and all delight
Pervious to thy nature ;
Only *loved* beyond that line,
With a love that answers thine,
Loving fellow creature !

It is gratifying to be able to add that, when Miss Barrett made her almost miraculous journey to Italy after her marriage, Flush went with the travellers and became an honoured member of the Casa Guidi household.

Another poem, also occasional in origin, but deservedly permanent in fame, was written on the reception of a present of wine from Mr. Boyd, who was now living in London. The wine reminds the poet of the draughts from the perennial fountain of classic literature of which she and the donor had drunk deep together long ago ; and its praise is turned with felicitous touch into a song in honour of " memories more delicious than the wine," and full, moreover, of critical acumen.

WINE OF CYPRUS

I

If old Bacchus were the speaker
He would tell you with a sign,
Of the Cyprus in this beaker
I am sipping like a fly,—

AND HER POETRY

Like a fly or gnat on Ida
At the hour of goblet-pledge,
By queen Juno brushed aside, a
Full white arm-sweep, from the edge.

II

Sooth, the drinking should be ampler
When the drink is so divine,
And some deep-mouthed Greek exemplar
Would become your Cyprus wine :
Cyclops' mouth might plunge aright in,
While his one eye over-leered—
Nor too large were mouth of Titan,
Drinking rivers down his beard.

III

Pan might dip his head so deep in
That his ears alone pricked out,
Fauns around him, pressing, leaping.
Each one pointing to his throat :
While the Naiads, like Bacchantes,
Wild, with urns thrown out to waste,
Cry,—“ O earth, that thou wouldst grant us
Springs to keep, of such a taste ! ”

IV

But for me, I am not worthy
After gods and Greeks to drink,
An my lips are pale and earthy
To go bathing from this brink :
Since you heard them speak the last time
They have faded from their blooms,
And the laughter of my pastime
Has learnt silence at the tombs.

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V

Ah, my friend ! the antique drinkers
Crowned the cup and crowned the brow.
Can I answer the old thinkers
In the forms they thought of, now ?
Who will fetch from garden-closes
Some new garlands while I speak,
That the forehead, crowned with roses,
May strike scarlet down the cheek ?

VI

Do not mock me ! with my mortal
Suits no wreath again, indeed ;
I am sad-voiced as the turtle
Which Anacreon used to feed :
Yet as that same bird demurely
Wet her beak in cup of his
So, without a garland, surely
I may touch the brim of this.

VII

Go,—let others praise the Chian !
This is soft as Muses' string,
This is tawny as Rhea's lion,
This is rapid as his spring,
Bright as Paphia's eyes e'er met us
Light as ever trod her feet !
And the brown bees of Hymettus
Make their honey not so sweet.

VIII

Very copious are my praises,
Though I sip it like a fly !—
Ah—but, sipping,—times and places
Change before me suddenly :

AND HER POETRY

As Ulysses' old libation
Drew the ghosts from every part,
So your Cyprus wine, dear Grecian,
Stirs the Hades of my heart.

IX

And I think of those long mornings
Which my thought goes far to seek,
When, betwixt the folio's turnings,
Solemn flowed the rhythmic Greek :
Past the pane the mountain spreading,
Swept the sheep-bell's tinkling noise,
While a girlish voice was reading,
Somewhat low for *ai*'s and *oi*'s.

X

Then, what golden hours were for us !—
While we sate together there,
How the white vests of the chorus
Seemed to wave up a live air !
How the cothurns trod majestic
Down the deep iambic lines,
And the rolling anapæstic
Curled like vapour over shrines !

XI

Oh, our Æschylus, the thunderous !
How he drove the bolted breath
Through the cloud, to wedge it ponderous
In the gnarlèd oak beneath.
Oh, our Sophocles, the royal,
Who was born to monarch's place,
And who made the whole world loyal,
Less by kingly power than grace.

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XII

Our Euripides, the human,
With his droppings of warm tears,
And his touches of things common
Till they rose to touch the spheres !
Our Theocritus, our Bion,
And our Pindar's shining goals !—
These were cup-bearers undying,
Of the wine that's meant for souls :

XIII

And my Plato, the divine one,
If men know the gods aright
By their motions as they shine on
With a glorious trail of light !—
And your noble Christian bishops,
Who mouthed grandly the last Greek !
Though the sponges on their hyssops
Were distent with wine—too weak.

XIV

Yet, your Chrysostom, you praised him
As a liberal mouth of gold ;
And your Basil, you upraised him
To the height of speakers old.
And we both praised Heliodorus
For his secret of pure lies,—
Who forged first his linkèd stories
In the heat of lady's eyes.

XV

And we both praised your Synesius
For the fire shot up his odes,
Though the Church was scarce propitious
As he whistled dogs and gods.

AND HER POETRY

And we both praised Nazianzen
For the fervid heart and speech :
Only I eschewed his glancing
At the lyre hung out of reach.

XVI

Do you mind that deed of Atè
Which you bound me to so fast,—
Reading “ De Virginitate,”
From the first line to the last ?
How I said at ending, solemn,
As I turned and looked at you,
That Saint Simeon on the column
Had had somewhat less to do ?

XVII

For we sometimes gently wrangled,
Very gently, be it said,
Since our thoughts were disentangled
By no breaking of the thread !
And I charged you with extortions
On the nobler fames of old—
Aye, and sometimes thought your Porsons
Stained the purple they would fold.

XVIII

For the rest—a mystic moaning
Kept Cassandra at the gate,
With wild eyes the vision shone in
And wide nostrils scenting fate.
And Prometheus, bound in passion
By brute Force to the blind stone,
Showed us looks of invocation
Turned to ocean and the sun.

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XIX

And Medea' we saw burning
At her nature's planted stake :
And proud Œdipus fate-scorning
While the cloud came on to break—
While the cloud came on slow—slower,
Till he stood discrowned, resigned !—
But the reader's voice dropped lower
When the poet called him BLIND.

XX

Ah, my gossip ! you were older,
And more learned, and a man !—
Yet that shadow, the enfolder
Of your quiet eyelids, ran
Both our spirits to one level,
And I turned from hill and lea
And the summer-sun's green revel,
To your eyes that could not see.

XXI

Now Christ bless you with the one light
Which goes shining night and day !
May the flowers which grow in sunlight
Shed their fragrance in your way !
Is it not right to remember
All your kindness, friend of mine,
When we two sate in the chamber,
And the poets poured us wine ?

XXII

So, to come back to the drinking
Of this Cyprus,—it is well,
But those memories, to my thinking,
Make a better œnomet ;

AND HER POETRY

And whoever be the speaker,
None can murmur with a sigh,
That, in drinking from *that* beaker,
I am sipping like a fly.

As a complement to this poem, with its thorough, heartfelt appreciation of the ancient masters, we will quote the concluding poem of the 1844 volume, in which all the foregoing appeared. "The Dead Pan" was written on the reception from Mr. Kenyon of a translation of Schiller's "Götter Griechenlands." It was "partly founded on a well-known tradition mentioned in a treatise of Plutarch, . . . according to which, at the hour of the Saviour's agony, a cry of 'Great Pan is dead!' swept across the waves in the hearing of certain mariners—and the oracles ceased." Schiller, in the work referred to, laments with an artist's regret the fading away of beauty from the earth in an age for which the ancient myths have lost their meaning. Where "Helios in far-off ages, Majestic drove his golden tire," there now rolls, insensate, merely an orb of fire. Fancy, which once made all life beautiful, now lives in poetry alone. The complaint was not an unusual one for a poet at the close of the materialistic eighteenth century. The fairy-tales of science had not yet replaced the poetry that scientific investigation seemed to have driven out of nature. Keats lamented that analysis had spoiled the rainbow. Even Wordsworth bade the scientist avoid the poet's grave. But Elizabeth Barrett belonged to the group of

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poets whose golden age lies in the future. Such a regret was impossible alike to her optimistic idealism and to her religious convictions. And she never judged her art from the artistic standpoint alone. The moral issue was continually, as we have seen, to the forefront with her. Later on she was to bear the trumpet-call to Italy to remain no longer, "Of her our past, impassioned nympholept," sitting "still upon her tombs." Here, in the same spirit, she enters the field as champion of the present and the future, in a poem which has as its avowed object the vindication of the superior beauty, vitality, and inspirational power for modern poetry of the truths of Christianity over pagan mythology.

THE DEAD PAN

I

Gods of Hellas, gods of Hellas,
Can ye listen in your silence ?
Can your mystic voices tell us
Where ye hide ? In floating islands,
With a wind that evermore
Keeps you out of sight of shore ?
Pan, Pan is dead.

II

In what revels are ye sunken,
In old Æthiopia ?
Have the Pygmies made you drunken,
Bathing in mandragora
Your divine pale lips, that shiver
Like the lotus in the river ?
Pan, Pan is dead.

AND HER POETRY

III

Do ye sit there still in slumber,
In gigantic Alpine rows ?
The black poppies out of number
Nodding, dripping from your brows
To the red lees of your wine,
And so kept alive and fine ?

Pan, Pan is dead

IV

Or lie crushed your stagnant corsos
Where the silver spheres roll on,
Stung to life by centric forces
Thrown like rays out from the sun ?—
While the smoke of your old altars
Is the shroud that round you welters ?

Great Pan is dead.

V

" Gods of Hellas, gods of Hellas,"
Said the old Hellenic tongue !
Said the hero-oaths, as well as
Poets' songs the sweetest sung !
Have ye grown deaf in a day ?
Can ye speak not yea or nay —

Since Pan is dead ?

VI

Do ye leave your rivers flowing
All alone, O Naiades,
While your drenchèd locks dry slow in
This cold feeble sun and breeze ?—
Not a word the Naiads say,
Though the rivers run for ay.

For Pan is dead.

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VII

From the gloaming of the oak-wood,
O ye Dryads, could ye flee ?
At the rushing thunderstroke, would
No sob tremble through the tree ?—
Not a word the Dryads say,
Though the forests wave for aye.
For Pan is dead.

VIII

Have ye left the mountain places,
Oreads wild, for other tryst ?
Shall we see no sudden faces
Strike a glory through the mist ?
Not a sound the silence thrills
Of the everlasting hills.
Pan, Pan is dead.

IX

O twelve gods of Plato's vision,
Crowned to starry wanderings,—
With your chariots in procession,
And your silver clash of wings !
Very pale ye seem to rise,
Ghosts of Grecian deities,—
Now Pan is dead !

X

Jove, that right hand is unloaded,
Whence the thunder did prevail,
While in idiocy of godhead
Thou art staring the stars pale !
And thine eagle, blind and old,
Roughs his feathers in the cold.
Pan, Pan is dead.

AND HER POETRY

XI

Where, O Juno, is the glory
Of thy regal look and tread ?
Will they lay, for evermore, thee,
On thy dim, straight, golden bed ?
Will thy queendom all lie hid
Meekly under either lid ?

Pan, Pan is dead.

XII

Ha, Apollo ! floats his golden
Hair all mist-like where he stands,
While the Muses hang enfolding
Knee and foot with faint wild hands ?
'Neath the clanging of thy bow,
Niobe looked lost as thou !

Pan, Pan is dead.

XIII

Shall the casque with its brown iron,
Pallas' broad blue eyes, eclipse,
And no hero take inspiring
From the god-Greek of her lips ?
'Neath her olive dost thou sit,
Mars the mighty, cursing it !

Pan, Pan is dead.

XIV

Bacchus, Bacchus ! on the panther
He swoons,—bound with his own vines ;
And his Mænads slowly saunter,
Head aside, among the pines,
While they murmur dreamingly,
“ Evohe !—ah—evohe— ! ”

Ah, Pan is dead !

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XV

Neptune lies beside the trident,
Dull and senseless as a stone ;
And old Pluto deaf and silent
Is cast out into the sun :
Ceres smileth stern thereat,
“ We *all* now are desolate—
Now Pan is dead.”

XVI

Aphrodite ! dead and driven
As thy native foam, thou art ;
With the cestus long done heaving
On the white calm of thine heart !
Ai Adonis ! at that shriek,
Not a tear runs down her cheek—
Pan, Pan is dead.

XVII

And the Loves, we used to know from
One another, huddled lie,
Frore as taken in a snow-storm,
Close beside her tenderly,—
As if each had weakly tried
Once to kiss her as he died.
Pan, Pan is dead.

XVIII

What, and Hermes ? Time enthralleth
All thy cunning, Hermes, thus,—
And the ivy blindly crawleth
Round thy brave caduceus ?
Hast thou no new message for us,
Full of thunder and Jove-glories ?
Nay, Pan is dead.

AND HER POETRY

XIX

Crownèd Cybele's great turret
Rocks and crumbles on her head ;
Roar the lions of her chariot
Toward the wilderness, unfed.
Scornful children are not mute,—
" Mother, mother, walk afoot—
Since Pan is dead."

XX

In the fiery-hearted centre
Of the solemn universe,
Ancient Vesta,—who could enter
To consume thee with this curse ?
Drop thy grey chin on thy knee,
O thou palsied Mystery !
For Pan is dead.

XXI

Gods, we vainly do adjure you,—
Ye return nor voice nor sign !
Not a votary could secure you
Even a grave for your Divine !
Not a grave, to show thereby,
Here these grey old gods do lie.
Pan, Pan is dead.

XXII

Even that Greece who took your wages
Calls the obolus outworn ;
And the hoarse deep-throated ages
Laugh your godships unto scorn ;
And the poets do disclaim you,
Or grow colder if they name you—
And Pan is dead.

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XXIII

Gods bereavèd, gods belated,
With your purples rent asunder !
Gods discrowned and desecrated,
Disinherited of thunder !
Now, the goats may climb and crop
The soft grass on Ida's top—
Now, Pan is dead.

XXIV

Calm, of old, the bark went onward,
When a cry more loud than wind
Rose up, deepened, and swept sunward,
From the pilèd Dark behind ;
And the sun shrank and grew pale,
Breathed against by the great wail—
“ Pan, Pan is dead.”

XXV

And the rowers from the benches
Fell,—each shuddering on his face—
While departing Influences
Struck a cold back through the place ;
And the shadow of the ship
Reeled along the passive deep—
“ Pan, Pan is dead.”

XXVI

And that dismal cry rose slowly
And sank slowly through the air,
Full of spirit's melancholy
And eternity's despair !
And they heard the words it said—
“ PAN IS DEAD—GREAT PAN IS DEAD—
PAN, PAN IS DEAD.”

AND HER POETRY

XXVII

'Twas the hour when One in Sion
Hung for love's sake on a cross ;
When His brow was chill with dying,
And His soul was faint with loss ;
When His priestly blood dropped downward
And His kingly eyes looked throneward—
Then, Pan was dead.

XXVIII

By the love He stood alone in
His sole Godhead rose complete,
And the false gods fell down moaning,
Each from off his golden seat ;
All the false gods with a cry
Rendered up their deity—
Pan, Pan was dead.

XXIX

Wailing wide across the islands,
They rent, vest-like, their Divine !
And a darkness and a silence
Quenched the light of every shrine ;
And Dodona's oak swang lonely
Henceforth, to the tempest only,
Pan, Pan was dead.

XXX

Pythia staggered,—feeling o'er her,
Her lost god's forsaking look ;
Straight her eyeballs filmed with horror,
And her crispy fillets shook,
And her lips gasped through their foam
For a word that did not come.
Pan, Pan was dead.

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XXXI

O ye vain false gods of Hellas,
Ye are silent evermore !
And I dash down this old chalice,
Whence libations ran of yore.
See, the wine crawls in the dust
Wormlike--as your glories must,
Since Pan is dead.

XXXII

Get to dust, as common mortals,
By a common doom and track !
Let no Schiller from the portals
Of that Hades call you back,
Or instruct us to weep all
At your antique funeral.
Pan, Pan is dead.

XXXIII

By your beauty, which confesses
Some chief Beauty conquering you,—
By your grand heroic guesses,
Through your falsehood, at the True,—
We will weep *not* . . ! earth shall roll
Heir to each god's aureole—
And Pan is dead.

XXXIV

Earth outgrows the mythic fancies
Sung beside her in her youth .
And those debonair romances
Sound but dull beside the truth.
Phœbus' chariot-course is run :
Look up, poets, to the sun !
Pan, Pan is dead.

AND HER POETRY

XXXV

Christ hath sent us down the angels ;
And the whole earth and the skies
Are illumed by altar-candles
Lit for blessèd mysteries ;
And a Priest's hand, through creation,
Waveth calm and consecration—
And Pan is dead.

XXXVI

Truth is fair : should we forgo it ?
Can we sigh right for a wrong ?
God Himself is the best Poet,
And the Real is His song.
Sing His truth out fair and full,
And secure His beautiful.
Let Pan be dead.

XXXVII

Truth is large. Our aspiration
Scarce embraces half we be :
Shame, to stand in His creation,
And doubt truth's sufficiency !—
To think God's song unexcelling
The poor tales of our own telling—
When Pan is dead.

XXXVIII

What is true and just and honest,
What is lovely, what is pure—
All of praise that hath admonisht,
All of virtue, shall endure,—
These are themes for poets' uses,
Stirring nobler than the Muses,
Ere Pan was dead.

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XXXIX

O brave poets, keep back nothing,
Nor mix falsehood with the whole :
Look up Godward ; speak the truth in
Worthy song from earnest soul !
Hold, in high poetic duty,
Truest Truth the fairest Beauty.
Pan, Pan is dead.

Convinced, as Elizabeth Barrett was, that poetry is a vehicle for religious teaching, and as such fulfils its highest mission, she wrote "The Dead Pan" to emphasize the lesson contained in the last few stanzas. A contemporary critic took objection to them as, in too narrow a sense, specifically scriptural. If he was right, held their author, so much the worse for the poetry and the religion of the day ; but whether he was right or whether he was wrong, it was still the poet's business to work, not to please, but to purify, not to win applause from, but to elevate the minds of his readers. While it may still, therefore, be largely a matter of temperament which part of the poem makes the greatest appeal, the last stanzas deserve special attention for the insight they give into the poet's conception of her aims and her responsibilities.

The two poems just quoted form together an excellent illustration, both of the wide classical reading of the writer and of its influence upon her. It might have been expected that, living as she did a life largely shut off from all

AND HER POETRY

social intercourse, and being an omnivorous reader, the literature she produced would have belonged to the class that "smells of literature," have been markedly imitative in quality, and out of touch with the spirit of the age. As a matter of fact, nothing, under the circumstances, is more surprising than the absence of bookishness or dependence on authority in her writings. The reader must already have been struck by the originality both in form and mode of expression which is a most prominent feature of her work. This is due in part to the impulsive spontaneity which was at once her weakness and her strength. But it is also closely connected with the sympathetic sensitiveness which kept the secluded invalid in constant touch with the varied movements, literary, social, and political, of the life around her. Appreciation never for her meant imitation; and she continually looked at the past in the light of the future.

V

IT is an easy transition from the foregoing statement to the consideration of a poem in which Elizabeth Barrett for the first time definitely took her stand as a fighter in the social arena. The interest of "The Cry of the Children" is more than literary; and before dealing with it, it will be well to notice certain characteristics of the era from which it came.

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The nineteenth century was a time of upheaval in many directions. The reaction which inevitably followed the excesses of the French Revolution was only temporary ; and when it was exhausted the forces at the back of the movement, of which indeed the Revolution itself was but an incident, reasserted themselves. In England they found expression, as we have seen, mainly in the increased attention to social problems which marks the advance of democracy throughout the century ; in political movements tending in the same direction ; and in general, in a widening of sympathies everywhere with the suffering and the oppressed. To recall to the reader how widespread and diverse were the manifestations in literature of the influences at work, it will be enough to mention the names of such writers as Carlyle, Ruskin, Dickens, Disraeli, and Kingsley.

A crying evil accompanying last century's progress in industrialism was the employment in mines and factories of women and children, under conditions so brutal and degrading as to be painful to read of. Elizabeth Barrett's attention was called to these by the report of a Commission to investigate the facts, on which her friend Mr. R. H. Horne had worked. Her ready sympathies were roused to indignation at the thought especially of the suffering children ; in a white heat of anger and compassion she wrote the following eloquent appeal that such a state of things should be endured no longer. As a poem its success was immediate. It

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undoubtedly hastened the passing of an Act of Parliament to remedy the evil ; and it takes its place deservedly beside Hood's " Song of the Shirt," among the classics of the dumb many who have been cheated of their birthright.

THE CRY OF THE CHILDREN

Φεῦ, φεῦ· τί προσδέρκεσθέ μ' ὄμμασιν, τέκνα ;

Medea

I

Do ye hear the children weeping, O my brothers,
Ere the sorrow comes with years ?
They are leaning their young heads against their
mothers,
And *that* cannot stop their tears.

The young lambs are bleating in the meadows,
The young birds are chirping in the nest,
The young fawns are playing with the shadows,
The young flowers are blowing toward the west—
But the young, young children, O my brothers,
They are weeping bitterly !
They are weeping in the playtime of the others,
In the country of the free.

II

Do you question the young children in the sorrow
Why their tears are falling so ?
The old man may weep for his to-morrow
Which is lost in Long Ago ;
The old tree is leafless in the forest,
The old year is ending in the frost,
The old wound, if stricken, is the sorest,
The old hope is hardest to be lost.

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But the young, young children, O my brothers,
Do you ask them why they stand
Weeping sore before the bosoms of their mothers,
In our happy Fatherland ?

III

They look up with their pale and sunken faces,
And their looks are sad to see,
For the man's hoary anguish draws and presses
Down the cheeks of infancy.
"Your old earth," they say, "is very dreary ;
Our young feet," they say, "are very weak !
Few paces have we taken, yet are weary—
Our grave-rest is very far to seek.
Ask the aged why they weep, and not the children ;
For the outside earth is cold ;
And we young ones stand without, in our bewildering,
And the graves are for the old.

IV

"True," say the children, "it may happen
That we die before our time ;
Little Alice died last year—her grave is shapen
Like a snowball, in the rime.
We looked into the pit prepared to take her :
Was no room for any work in the close clay !
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 ;
Could we see her face, be sure we should not know her.
For the smile has time for growing in her eyes :
And merry go her moments, lulled and stilled in
The shroud by the kirk-chime !
It is good when it happens," say the children
"That we die before our time."

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V

Alas, alas, the children ! they are seeking
Death in life, as best to have ;
They are binding up their hearts away from breaking
With a cerement from the grave.
Go out, children, from the mine and from the city,
Sing out, children, as the little thrushes do ;
Pluck your handfuls of the meadow cowslips pretty,
Laugh aloud, to feel your fingers let them through !
But they answer, " Are your cowslips of the meadows
Like our weeds anear the mine ?
Leave us quiet in the dark of the coal-shadows,
From your pleasures fair and fine !

VI

" For oh," say the children, " we are weary,
And we cannot run or leap ;
If we cared for any meadows, it were merely
To drop down in them and sleep.
Our knees tremble sorely in the stooping,
We fall upon our faces, trying to go ;
And, underneath our heavy eyelids drooping,
The reddest flower would look as pale as snow ;
For, all day, we drag our burden tiring
Through the coal-dark, underground—
Or, all day, we drive the wheels of iron
In the factories, round and round.

VII

" For, all day, the wheels are droning, turning,—
Their wind comes in our faces,—
Till our hearts turn,—our head, with pulses burning,
And the walls turn in their places :

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Turns the sky in the high window blank and reeling,
Turns the long light that drops adown the wall,
Turn the black flies that crawl along the ceiling,
All are turning, all the day, and we with all.
And all day, the iron wheels are droning,
And sometimes we could pray,
' O ye wheels ' (breaking out in a mad moaning).
' Stop ! be silent for to-day ! ' "

VIII

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

IX

Now tell the poor young children, O my brothers,
To look up to Him and pray ;
So the blessèd One who blesseth all the others,
Will bless them another day.
They answer, " Who is God that He should hear us,
While the rushing of the iron wheels is stirred ?
When we sob aloud, the human creatures near us
Pass by, hearing not, or answer not a word.

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And *we* hear not (for the wheels in their resounding
Strangers speaking at the door :
Is it likely God, with angels singing round Him,
Hears our weeping any more ?

X

“ Two words, indeed, of praying we remember,
And at midnight’s hour of harm,
‘ Our Father,’ looking upward in the chamber,
We say softly for a charm.
We know no other words, except ‘ Our Father,’
And we think that, in some pause of angels’ song,
God may pluck them with the silence sweet to
gather,
And hold both within His right hand which is
strong.
‘ Our Father ! ’ If He heard us, He would surely
(For they call Him good and mild)
Answer, smiling down the steep world very purely,
‘ Come and rest with Me, My child.’

XI

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

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XII

And well may the children weep before you!
They are weary ere they run;
They have never seen the sunshine, nor the glory
Which is brighter than the sun.
They know the grief of man, without its wisdom;
They sink in man's despair, without its calm;
Are slaves, without the liberty in Christdom,
Are martyrs, by the pang without the palm,—
Are worn, as if with age, yet unretrievingly
The harvest of its memories cannot reap,—
Are orphans of the earthly love and heavenly.
Let them weep! let them weep!

XIII

They look up, with their pale and sunken faces,
And their look is dread to see,
For they mind you of their angels in high places,
With eyes turned on Deity!—
“How long,” they say, “how long, O cruel nation,
Will you stand, to move the world, on a child's
heart,—
Stifle down with a mailed heel its palpitation,
And tread onward to your throne amid the mart?
Our blood splashes upward, O gold-heaper,
And your purple shows your path!
But the child's sob in the silence curses deeper
Than the strong man in his wrath.”

At the end of her life, in a “Song for the Ragged Schools of London,” Mrs. Browning made a similar, though less fervent, appeal for the opening of ragged schools for the—

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Ragged children, hungry-eyed,
Huddled up out of the coldness
On your doorsteps, side by side.

Even before "The Cry of the Children" it is evident that the whole weight of her convictions regarding life and art was drawing her inevitably into the modern field. Yet, though her interest in social questions and in politics was deep, its basis was always purely emotional. It resolved itself, whether in England or in Italy, into a generous, large-souled championship of the down-trodden and the injured. The injustice that touched her feelings caused her enthusiasm to leap into a blaze; and the fire that consumes the heart is the secret of her strength. It has been said, not wholly unfairly, that she only felt where she thought she thought. Certainly, feeling was uppermost. But until man is all intellect and politics have passed beyond the reach even of the leavening power of a pure and unselfish enthusiasm, this need not be read entirely in disparagement. The results meanwhile on her poetry are twofold. In the first place it is marked by absolute sincerity: the sentiment may be "over-strained and violent" at times, but it is never false. In the next place, the power of expression too often falls short of the inspiration: the primary consideration is what she has to say; and how it is said is second in importance. This is particularly the case in the later poems dealing with Italy, which will be considered presently.

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One more point must be dwelt on in connection with the 1844 volume before picking up again the threads of the story. Two of the poems quoted, "Wine of Cyprus" and "The Dead Pan," contain many instances of the peculiar rimes which Elizabeth Barrett frequently permitted herself to use; and which appear to justify a charge continually made against her, of slovenly workmanship, or at least of indifference. The reader will have no difficulty in finding plenty of illustrations. Thus in Stanza III. of "Wine of Cyprus" the following are used: "deep in . . . leaping," "out . . . throat," "Bacchantes . . . grant us." There are only two strict rimes in the stanza; and it is by no means an exception. In the light of the poet's serious view of her mission, it is easy to understand that any criticisms which put down faults in her work to carelessness were keenly felt by her. She was making experiments deliberately and of set purpose. Our earliest English poet, Chaucer, humorously lamented the paucity of rimes in the language; and many a poet, famed or unfamed, has doubtless suffered since from the same limitation. Elizabeth Barrett set herself to try to enlarge its possibilities. It is as a perfectly justifiable experiment that her attempt must be judged. But while she is freed from the charge of slovenly workmanship, it must be admitted that the device constitutes a flaw which obtrudes itself more and more on reperusal of the poems. That the trial,

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permissible in the first place, is not justified by its results, must be the final verdict. Coulson Kernahan goes so far as to say that, in the liberties she took in this and other ways, "Mrs. Browning . . . made what is known as 'poetic license' synonymous with the removal of the landmarks of art." He accuses her, further, of having exercised a very harmful influence over would-be poets of the succeeding generation ; and avers that one of his commonest experiences as an editor was the reception of indignant letters of protest from contributors whose work he rejected, pointing out to him that the rimes to which he unreasonably took exception were used freely by her. That she herself came to agree with the critics is shown by the fact that she allowed herself far less license in this respect in her later writings.

The volume containing the poems we have been considering was indeed a noteworthy one. Many letters of congratulation reached the author. Among them came one which gave her special pleasure. It was from a writer already known to her as the friend of John Kenyon, and recognized as the possessor of genius greater than the critics as yet suspected—the poet Browning.

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VI

THE love-story of Robert Browning and Elizabeth Barrett Barrett is one of the most romantic and beautiful in the history of men and women of letters. Here it shall be told chiefly as it is revealed in the work of Elizabeth Barrett herself.

Browning's first letter was marked by characteristic impetuosity and generous appreciation of her work. It was the beginning of a close correspondence between the two poets, and in May 1845 Browning paid her his first visit. Immediately afterward he declared his love. When it is remembered that Elizabeth Barrett was entering her fortieth year ; that for eight winters she had been a confirmed invalid ; and that both she and Browning believed that the future could hold nothing for her but years of invalidism like her past, we can understand the emotions with which she received his avowal. She answered his letter by the denials which it seemed nothing but her duty to give, for she could only feel :

We have met late—it is too late to meet,
O friend, not more than friend !
Death's forecome shroud is tangled round my feet,
And if I step or stir I touch the end.

In this last jeopardy
Can I approach thee, I, who cannot move ?
How shall I answer thy request for love ?
Look in my face and see.

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But the subject, forbidden once, was renewed. For Browning there was from the first but one aspect to the question. All that Elizabeth Barrett told him might be true : that her youth was past ; that recovery of strength seemed hopeless ; that his love for her must be an impediment to him in his future career ; that therefore it was her very love made her resolve that she " only could leave him." For all he had but one answer. It was not a question now that could be weighed and decided one way or the other. She might, rightly or wrongly, persist in her refusals ; it was not his to pass judgment on her decision, but whatever that might finally be, he too, no longer in his first youth, knew his own mind. He loved her, and would do so through all the years to come. And gradually love overcame doubt. In the light of a revelation it came to the invalid that her life still held undreamt-of possibilities ; that it might yet be hers to contribute directly to another's happiness ; to give as well as to receive. For her, the call to the future had come from Love, not Death. The story of what the awakening meant to her is told as no other can ever tell it in the " Sonnets from the Portuguese " :

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 antique tongue,
I saw, in gradual vision through my tears,

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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."

Yet with love acknowledged, Elizabeth Barrett still had fears that such as she had to offer could only be a hindrance to the man she loved. Her final surrender, after the renewal of doubt, finds expression in the following sonnet :

XVI

And yet, because thou overcomest so,
Because thou art more noble and like a king,
Thou canst prevail against my fears and fling
Thy purple round me, till my heart shall grow
Too close against thine heart, henceforth to know
How it shook when alone. Why, conquering
May prove as lordly and complete a thing
In lifting upward, as in crushing low !
And as a vanquished soldier yields his sword
To one who lifts him from the bloody earth,—
Even so, Belovèd, I at last record,
Here ends my strife. If *thou* invite me forth,
I rise above abasement at the word.
Make thy love larger to enlarge my worth.

The realisation of past emptiness that came with the sense of present completion, as the light of this new love was shed over her life, is revealed in several of the sonnets.

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XXVI

I lived with visions for my company,
Instead of men and women, years ago,
And found them gentle mates, nor thought to know
A sweeter music than they played to me.
But soon their trailing purple was not free
Of this world's dust,—their lutes did silent grow,
And I myself grew faint and blind below
Their vanishing eyes. Then THOU didst come . . . to be,
Belovèd, what they seemed. Their shining fronts,
Their songs, their splendours (better, yet the same,
As river-water hallowed into fonts),
Met in thee, and from out thee overcame
My soul with satisfaction of all wants—
Because God's gifts put man's best dreams to shame.

Meanwhile, a marked improvement took place in the invalid's health during the summer of 1845. This, coupled with the feeling that it was worth while now to follow the doctor's advice and avoid the risks of a London winter, led to the projection of a plan for spending some months in Pisa. All arrangements were made, when suddenly, unaccountably, Mr. Barrett refused his consent. His daughter yielded at once, and the season was passed in England. Fortunately it was a very mild one. Elizabeth Barrett's health suffered less than usual. There seemed once more a prospect that if she could get to Italy for the succeeding winter she might yet be well. But there was only one way in which it appeared this could be secured, and that way her love and Browning's justified in the face of all difficulties. One main obstacle, however,

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had to be evaded or overcome. Mr. Barrett was fanatically opposed to the marriage of any of his daughters. In Elizabeth's case there certainly would have appeared some excuse for his opposition. But that the obstacle lay in his own obstinate prejudices and not in anything external was proved afterwards in a sister's and a brother's cases. Elizabeth Barrett, certain what would be the result of an attempt to gain his consent, physically incapable of enduring the storm she knew it would raise, decided that it was not her duty to go through the formal application. Fully conscious of what she was giving up, entirely confident of the sufficiency of compensation, she wrote another of the sonnets :

XXXV

If I leave all for thee, wilt thou exchange
And be all to me ? Shall I never miss
Home-talk and blessing and the common kiss
That comes to each in turn, nor count it strange,
When I look up, to drop on a new range
Of walls and floors . . . another home than this ?
Nay, wilt thou fill that place by me which is
Filled by dead eyes too tender to know change ?
That's hardest. If to conquer love, has tried,
To conquer grief, tries more . . . as all things prove ;
For grief indeed is love and grief beside.
Alas, I have grieved so I am hard to love.
Yet love me—wilt thou ? Open thine heart wide
And fold within, the wet wings of thy dove.

To avoid involving her sisters in their father's displeasure, Elizabeth kept the details of her plans even from them. On September 12, 1846,
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she walked quietly out of the house at Wimpole Street, followed only by Wilson, her faithful maid, and was married to Robert Browning at Marylebone Parish Church. A week later she again left the house to meet her husband, whom meanwhile she had not seen, and the two set out on their journey to Italy.

This part of Mrs. Browning's story may fittingly close with the quotation of a sonnet in which she gave completest expression to her ideal of a perfect love.

XLIII

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 every day's
Most quiet need, by sun and candlelight.
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 childhood's 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.

The "Sonnets from the Portuguese," which have been drawn upon in illustration of the preceding narrative, were not shown to Browning till some months after their marriage. Mr. Gosse in "Critical Kit-Kats" has told the story as Browning told it to him:

"One day, early in 1847, their breakfast

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being over, Mrs. Browning went upstairs, while her husband stood at the window watching the street till the table should be cleared. He was presently aware of some one behind him, although the servant was gone. It was Mrs. Browning, who held him by the shoulder to prevent his turning to look at her, and at the same time pushed a packet of papers into the pocket of his coat. She told him to read that, and to tear it up if he did not like it; and then she fled again to her own room."

Persuaded by him, she allowed the sonnets to be printed, first privately at Reading, and then in her 1850 collection of poems under their present title. Browning placed them nearest to Shakespeare's of any written since Shakespeare's day. Perhaps only Dante Gabriel Rossetti's "House of Life" can enter as a whole into serious rivalry with them. Certainly there is no other such series written by a woman. For this reason, if for no other, their interest and value would be unique.

Mrs. Browning was always at her best when frankly expressing personal emotions. Here, depth of feeling combined with the form chosen to express it, to produce a restraint which is frequently absent from her work. The demands of the sonnet purged away her tendency to diffuseness; in this case supremely artist and woman united; and she achieved expression, almost perfect technically, sincere, unreserved, yet unexaggerated, of the fervour and purity of her inmost soul.

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VII

THE journey to Italy was the beginning of a new life for Mrs. Browning. The freshness of her impressions lives for us in the record of Aurora's travels. She fell first beneath the spell of "fair, fantastic Paris," where the poets joined Mrs. Jameson, a great friend of both, whose astonishment at seeing the invalid was unbounded. She had left her on her couch for the winter, as she believed, a few weeks before. All went on together to Pisa, sailing from Marseilles to Genoa, watching as

The old miraculous mountains heaved in sight,
One straining past another along the shore,
The way of grand dull Odyssean ghosts,
Athirst to drink the cool blue wine of seas
And stare on voyagers,

their sides dotted with "brown convent towers," "little lighted villages," and waterfalls like streaks of silver, among the "myrtle and orange groves."

Mrs. Browning was delighted with the country and its associations. First Pisa, then Florence, charmed her. She became in health really transformed, as Mrs. Jameson said; able to take daily walks and drives and to make long excursions among the mountains. Passages of beautiful description occur in her work. Five vivid lines in "Casa Guidi Windows" recall a

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visit to Vallombrosa made in the summer of 1847. Here

. . . sublime

The mountains live in holy families,
And the slow pinewoods ever climb and climb
Half up their breasts, just stagger as they seize
Some grey crag, drop back with it many a time,
And straggle blindly down the precipice.

In the autumn of next year, rooms which became thenceforth the poets' headquarters were taken in Casa Guidi at Florence. The loveliness of the city appealed more at first to Mrs. Browning than its historical associations. It is vividly painted in a typical descriptive passage in "Aurora Leigh." The villa at Bellosguardo belonged to a friend whom the Brownings constantly visited :

I found a house at Florence on the hill
Of Bellosguardo. 'Tis a tower which keeps
A post of double-observation o'er
That valley of Arno (holding as a hand
The outspread city) straight toward Fiesole
And Mount Morello and the setting sun,
The Vallombrosan mountains opposite,
Which sunrise fills as full as crystal cups
Turned red to the brim because their wine is red.
No sun could die nor yet be born unseen
By dwellers at my villa : morn and eve
Were magnified before us in the pure
Illimitable space and pause of sky,
Intense as angels' garments blanched with God,
Less blue than radiant. From the outer wall
Of the garden drops the mystic floating grey

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Of olive trees (with interruptions green
From maize and vine), until 'tis caught and torn
Upon the abrupt black line of cypresses
Which signs the way to Florence. Beautiful
The city lies along the ample vale,
Cathedral, tower and palace, piazza and street,
The river trailing like a silver cord
Through all, and curling loosely, both before
And after, over the whole stretch of land
Sown whitely up and down its opposite slopes
With farms and villas.

In Florence, husband and wife settled down to a life of quiet industry. It was their custom to write regularly every morning in separate rooms, and not to show their work to each other until it was completed. They lived simply, as their income required, getting their furniture even in piecemeal as funds came in from their poems. Browning, ever practical and never outgrowing the influence of strict early training, had a constitutional horror of even the smallest debt, and so prudent were the two poets that at the end of the year furnishing was still going on by slow degrees. Their caution must have set at rest the fears of those friends who, like Mrs. Jameson, had doubts at first as to the worldly wisdom of the pair of poet hearts and poet heads.

The ins-and-outs of the Brownings' various migrations from Florence need not be traced here. Apart from the events of contemporary Italian history, which will be dealt with later, there is little to record for a time that finds

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reflection in Mrs. Browning's poetry. In her home-life she came to know a happiness beyond that which she had ever dreamt might be her lot. Her chief pleasures outside were still those of friendly intercourse, and interchange of thought with congenial spirits. Sometimes a winter was spent in Rome, or a summer holiday was taken at the Baths of Lucca. An American, William Wetmore Story, who became very intimate with the poets, has left a delightful reminiscence of days spent picnicking among the woods and mountains near Lucca, where "under the great chestnuts, we read and talked the livelong day, the Lima, at our feet, babbling on clear and brown, over the stones, and the distant rock-ribbed peaks taking the changes of the hours."

In 1849 a fresh joy was brought into the Brownings' life by the birth of their son, Robert Wiedemann—afterwards given the pet-name of Penini. The inspired picture of Marian Erle's sleeping baby in "Aurora Leigh" is heightened, no doubt, by maternal feeling.

There he lay upon his back,
The yearling creature, warm and moist with life
To the bottom of his dimples,—to the ends
Of the lovely tumbled curls about his face ;
For since he had been covered over-much
To keep him from the light-glare, both his cheeks
Were hot and scarlet as the first live rose
The shepherd's heart-blood ebb'd away into
The faster for his love. And love was here
As instant ; in the pretty baby-mouth,

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Shut close as if for dreaming that it sucked,
The little naked feet, drawn up the way
Of nestled birdlings ; everything so soft
And tender,—to the tiny holdfast hands,
Which, closing on a finger into sleep,
Had kept the mould of 't.

Ties of affection were thus binding the Brownings closer to the land of their adoption. Mrs. Browning's health forbade, in any case, frequent visits to England ; and she only came to London twice after her marriage. One thing always marred the pleasure of her sojourns there. Her father persistently refused to hold any intercourse with her. Several times she wrote to him and received no reply. A letter from her husband called forth a bitterly upbraiding answer, with which were returned all that she herself had written ; not one had been opened. This put an end to all hopes of reconciliation.

Mrs. Browning came more and more to love Florence as her own city, to rejoice at returning to the home of her happiest memories and sweetest associations. Before passing on to her work there, we will give two pictures, one of her, and one of her room at Casa Guidi. The first is that drawn by Mrs. Hawthorne, who, with her husband, visited the poets at Florence in 1858. They were shown into the drawing-room by Penini, and taken on to the balcony. " Then Mrs. Browning came out to us—very small, delicate, dark and expressive. She looked like a spirit. A cloud of hair falls on each side her face in curls, so as partly to veil her features.

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But out of the veil look sweet, sad eyes, musing and far-seeing and weird. Her fairy fingers seem too airy to hold, and yet their pressure was very firm and strong. The smallest possible amount of substance encloses her soul, and every particle of it is infused with heart and intellect. I was never conscious of so little unredeemed, perishable dust in any human being."

And the room shall be painted by another American friend and admirer, Miss Kate Field :—" They who have been so favoured " (as to know Casa Guidi) " can never forget the square ante-room, with its great picture and pianoforte, at which the boy Browning passed many an hour—the little dining-room covered with tapestry, and where hung medallions of Tennyson, Carlyle, and Robert Browning,—the long room filled with plaster casts and studies, which was Mr. Browning's retreat—and, dearest of all, the large drawing-room where *she* always sat. It opens upon a balcony filled with plants, and looks out upon the old iron-grey church of Santa Felice. There was something about this room that seemed to make it a proper and especial haunt for poets. The dark shadows and subdued light gave it a dreamy look, which was enhanced by the tapestry-covered walls and the old pictures of saints that looked out sadly from their carved frames of black wood. Large book-cases constructed of specimens of Florentine carving selected by Mr. Browning were brimming over with wise-looking books. Tables

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were covered with more gaily-bound volumes, the gifts of brother authors. Dante's grave profile, a cast of Keats's face and brow taken after death, a pen-and-ink sketch of Tennyson, the genial face of John Kenyon, Mrs. Browning's good friend and relative, little paintings of the boy Browning, all attracted the eye in turn, and gave rise to a thousand musings."

Mrs. Browning's marriage did not change her intellectual currents, and the influence of Browning the poet is little directly traceable in her work. But the wider experience of life that now opened to her seems to have inspired her with confidence for longer flights than hitherto ; her most ambitious poems belong to the first ten years of her married life. While these were in preparation, a collection appeared in which, beside the "Sonnets from the Portuguese," several previously published poems were gathered together. Among them are lyrics as representative of her essentially feminine genius as any that she wrote. It is her woman's sympathy and insight which are the inspiration of such an one as the following :

THE MASK

I

I have a smiling face, she said,
I have a jest for all I meet,
I have a garland for my head
And all its flowers are sweet,—
And so you call me gay, she said.

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II

Grief taught to me this smile, she said,
And Wrong did teach this jesting bold ;
These flowers were plucked from garden-bed
While a death-chime was tolled.
And what now will you say ?—she said.

III

Behind no prison-grate, she said,
Which slurs the sunshine half a mile
Live captives so uncomforted
As souls behind a smile.
God's pity let us pray, she said.

IV

I know my face is bright, she said,—
Such brightness, dying suns diffuse ;
I bear upon my forehead shed
The sign of what I lose,—
The ending of my day, she said.

V

If I dared leave this smile, she said,
And take a moan upon my mouth,
And tie a cypress round my head,
And let my tears run smooth,—
It were the happier way, she said.

VI

And since that must not be, she said,
I fain your bitter world would leave.
How calmly, calmly, smile the Dead,
Who do not, therefore, grieve !
The yea of Heaven is yea, she said.

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VII

But in your bitter world, she said,
Face-joy's a costly mask to wear.
'Tis bought with pangs long nourishèd,
And rounded to despair.
Grief's earnest makes life's play, she said.

VIII

Ye weep for those who weep ? she said—
Ah fools ! I bid you pass them by.
Go, weep for those whose hearts have bled
What time their eyes were dry.
Whom sadder can I say ? she said.

VIII

IT is characteristic that the work which is, with the exception of her sonnet-series, the greatest achievement of Mrs. Browning's poetic career, should have been put forward avowedly as an experiment and a challenge. It was an attempt to win a new realm for poetry. Years before she had told John Kenyon of an ambition to write a poem dealing freely with modern questions, depicting contemporary life, and aiming at combining the functions of poetry and the popular novel. In 1856 she dedicated "Aurora Leigh" to the same "dearest cousin and friend," as "the most mature of my works, and the one into which my highest convictions upon Life and Art have entered." But before dealing with it,

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or considering how far the experiment is successful, we must revert to another poem which foreshadowed it, in the 1844 volume.

Space forbids the insertion of "Lady Geraldine's Courtship." Its relation to the age it came from and to the greater work it preceded may briefly be made clear. This early "Romance of the Age" is, like much of "Aurora Leigh," the outcome of Mrs. Browning's speculations on the social problems of her day. It tells of the wooing and winning of the noble Lady Geraldine by the poet Bertram, a son of the people. Almost destitute of plot, and as a story unconvincing, it is made the vehicle for a glowing, passionate declaration of the author's democratic sympathies. It is permeated by the time-spirit: so much so that the theme, commonplace in any case, has been almost robbed by time of its meaning. But for its rush of melody and glow of emotion, for the sheer beauty of many of its passages, it must live as long as the poet's name is remembered. Mrs. Browning said she wrote the last nineteen pages in one day, in response to a demand from her publisher; and some of the fever-heat of inspiration has passed into the verse. For the student of her work the poem is of interest for another reason. It gives, before "Aurora Leigh," some embodiment of her social theories, her deepest convictions as to the place and power in society of poetry and its ideals; and it gives it in a form clearly leading up to the experiment of the novel in verse.

AND HER POETRY

The first six books of "Aurora Leigh" were written chiefly at Casa Guidi. As a side-light on the methods of work of a poet who, like her husband, made poetic composition for long periods a matter of daily routine, it is interesting to learn that much of it was written in the intervals of teaching Penini, or of receiving visitors, during whose stay it was thrust away out of sight. The poem was completed rather hurriedly in London, where it was published. Within fifteen days the enthusiastic public had called for a second edition. Yet already for the majority it takes its place among the masterpieces that are tacitly acknowledged and neglected. Nevertheless it is a great achievement; and it has a unique interest, as will become apparent.

Aurora is the orphan child of an austere English father and a beautiful Italian mother. The story of her loneliness in her aunt's home in England, whither she is sent; of her gradual awakening to the sense of her vocation as a poet, through the "sweet familiar" influences of English country, and of the "world of books," veils, under a thin disguise, Mrs. Browning's own spiritual autobiography. Aurora therefore, at least when she serves the poet for self-revelation, is a living character; and the story of her development is of paramount interest. But with Romney Leigh, her cousin, master of Leigh Hall, the case is different. He is created to meet the demands of the parable which underlies the story, and has therefore far

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less vitality. He is so absorbed in schemes for the regeneration of society through material means ; so buried beneath the burden of social wrongs, that Aurora's idealism seems to him caprice. She refuses the love he offers her, and they take different paths to their own ends ; till they are brought through error and suffering to reconciliation, when each has learnt the other's lesson, and together the philanthropist, made blind that he may see, the poet awakened from her blindness, watch as the story closes the vision of the New Jerusalem that will arise when the ideal and the real, the practical worker and the dreamer of dreams, labour at its building side by side.

In thus indicating the main lines of the plot, one of its weak points as a novel has already been suggested, namely, the unreality that marks the characterisation. We have also pointed out one reason for this : the actors are so obviously created to fill their parts ; and this extends from many of the single characters to the representative groups which figure in its pages. Thus Romney is the compound of a personified utilitarian-socialistic philanthropy, and Lady Waldemar's individuality is sacrificed to the society type as Mrs. Browning conceived it ; while the contrasted pictures of the " classes " and the " masses," of " St. James in cloth of gold " and " St. Giles in frieze," who gather together to witness Romney's intended wedding with the drover's daughter, Marian Erle, are over-coloured and highly artificial.

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The fact is, Mrs. Browning had no power of dramatic projection. Her ignorance of the society she endeavoured to paint is apparent, and her characters are either the mouthpieces of her own philosophy, or are entirely unconvincing. And with this is involved another criticism. The interpretation of the parable, as even the brief summary reveals, is too near the surface; for she had not the dramatic instinct necessary to let the theories work themselves out in action, as a novel requires. We are not even the least persuaded that it is Aurora's poetic ideals and aspirations which keep her apart from Romney so long; though for the sake of the parable she has to be "converted" before her pride breaks down and she confesses her love. And further, the fact that the work was a thesis novel was a pitfall to Mrs. Browning. Long and numerous digressions continually interfere with the development of the plot. Even if the end were attainable hers was not the genius to attain it. Whether another might succeed in such an aim is not here the question. But of the two English poets who have come nearest, Scott and Mrs. Browning herself, the work of one tends more and more to forget the poetry in the novel, till it passes by a natural transition to prose fiction in "Waverley"; the other wrote a great poem which, although for some it may sustain interest on account of its story, no one would criticise as a story. Indeed, its treatment as a novel would hardly be necessary if it were not for the fact that Mrs. Browning challenged

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such criticism in avowing her aims. As fiction, then, it fails ; but as a poem, in spite of unevennesses and even occasional lapses from taste, its manifold beauties are such that it is difficult to give any conception of them by selections. Little realisation of the " living fire " that, as Swinburne says, carries the reader on with " the rush and glow and ardour of aspiring and palpitating life " can be thus given. For in its pages Mrs. Browning pours forth, with a fervour and sincerity sweeping all before them, her deepest philosophy, her highest artistic ideals, her tenderest woman's passions. It is the one great poem of its generation that, written by a woman, gave free and full expression to a woman's point of view as individual, mother, and wife ; it attacked passionately, and with daring for the time in which it was produced, the social conventions which press unevenly on men and women, and on the rich and the poor ; and it is of supreme value in giving, as has been pointed out, the spiritual autobiography of England's greatest woman poet. As such, it has been constantly drawn on in the course of the narrative ; some descriptive passages have also been quoted ; the picture of Marian Erle's child is a gem picked out from pages imbued with the very " fragrance of babyhood." Room must now be found for one eminently successful character study. It will serve also to illustrate the flashes of penetrating insight and pungent satire which lighten the work. It is that of Miss Leigh, the aunt whose chilly, formal

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reception of the little Aurora freezes her spontaneous affection into dull indifference.

I think I see my father's sister stand
Upon the hall-step of her country-house
To give me welcome. She stood straight and calm,
Her somewhat narrow forehead braided tight
As if for taming accidental thoughts
From possible pulses ; brown hair pricked with grey
By frigid use of life (she was not old
Although my father's elder by a year),
A nose drawn sharply, yet in delicate lines ;
A close mild mouth, a little soured about
The ends, through speaking unrequited loves
Or peradventure niggardly half-truths ;
Eyes of no colour,—once they might have smiled,
But never, never have forgot themselves
In smiling ; cheeks, in which was yet a rose
Of perished summers, like a rose in a book,
Kept more for ruth than pleasure,—if past bloom,
Past fading also.

She had lived, we'll say,
A harmless life, she called a virtuous life,
A quiet life, which was not life at all
(But that, she had not lived enough to know),
Between the vicar and the country squires,
The lord-lieutenant looking down sometimes
From the empyrean to assure their souls
Against chance-vulgarisms, and, in the abyss
The apothecary, looked on once a year
To prove their soundness of humility.
The poor-club exercised her Christian gifts
Of knitting stockings, stitching petticoats,
Because we are of one flesh after all
And need one flannel (with a proper sense

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Of difference in the quality)—and still
The book-club, guarded from your modern trick
Of shaking dangerous questions from the crease,
Preserved her intellectual. She had lived
A sort of cage-bird life, born in a cage,
Accounting that to leap from perch to perch
Was act and joy enough for any bird.

The remaining selections shall exemplify as far as possible the theories on which the poem is based. They found direct or indirect expression through all the writings of Mrs. Browning's poetic maturity.

The first gives the key to the inspiration of the work, and raises the controversial question as to the poet's proper field. Tennyson, it will be remembered, questioning whether it were wise to attempt to "remodel models" and bring back the past, since "Nature brings not back the Mastodon," solved his doubt by imbuing ancient themes with the modern spirit in the "Idylls." Mrs. Browning, occupied with the same problem, reached a different conclusion :

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,—'twere 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.

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Nay, if there's room for poets in this world
A little overgrown (I think there is),
Their sole work is to represent the age,
Their age, not Charlemagne's,—this live, throbbing
age,

That brawls, cheats, maddens, calculates, aspires,
And spends more passion, more heroic heat,
Betwixt the mirrors of its drawing-rooms,
Than Roland with his knights at Roncesvalles.
To flinch from modern varnish, coat or flounce,
Cry out for togas and the picturesque,
Is fatal,—foolish too. King Arthur's self
Was commonplace to Lady Guenever ;
And Camelot to minstrels seemed as flat
As Fleet Street to our poets.

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 !
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.”

But the artist must be prophet and seer. If
he deal with the present and the material,
it must be to interpret it in the light of the
eternal and the spiritual ; and so viewed
“ the whole temporal show ” is of “ eterne
significance.”

Natural things

And spiritual,—who separates those two
In art, in morals, or the social drift,

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Tears up the bond of nature and brings death,
Paints futile pictures, writes unreal verse,
Leads vulgar days, deals ignorantly with men,
Is wrong, in short, at all points. We divide
This apple of life, and cut it through the pips,—
The perfect round which fitted Venus' hand
Has perished as utterly as if we ate
Both halves. Without the spiritual, observe,
The natural's impossible,—no form,
No motion : without sensuous, spiritual
Is inappreciable,—no beauty or power :
And in this twofold sphere the twofold man
(For still the artist is intensely a man)
Holds firmly by the natural, to reach
The spiritual beyond it,—fixes still
The type with mortal vision, to pierce through,
With eyes immortal, to the antetype
Some call the ideal,—better called the real,
And certain to be called so presently
When things shall have their names.

* * * * *

No lily-muffled hum of a summer-bee,
But finds some coupling with the spinning stars ;
No pebble at your foot, but proves a sphere ;
No chaffinch, but implies the cherubim ;
And (glancing on my own thin, veined wrist),
In such a little tremor of the blood
The whole strong clamour of a vehement soul
Doth utter itself distinct. Earth's crammed with
heaven,
And every common bush afire with God ;
But only he who sees, takes off his shoes,
The rest sit round it and pluck blackberries,
And daub their natural faces unaware
More and more from the first similitude.

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The poet then is supremely the interpreter : and that he may fulfil his mission he must shrink from no experience that life may offer. "World's cruelty behoves thee know," she wrote in "A Vision of Poets" at the beginning of her career. "A Musical Instrument" at the close gives varied expression to the idea underlying the following passages. The poets must "learn in suffering what they teach in song."

While 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
'Twixt 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 !
We, staggering 'neath our burden as mere men,
Being called to stand up straight as demi-gods,
Support the intolerable strain and stress
Of the universal, and send clearly up
With voices broken by the human sob,
Our poems to find rimes among the stars !

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And the price must be paid for their greater insight. They could not give voice to it if they did not realise keenly the sweeter joys of our common humanity, which it may be their lot to forgo.

O my God, my God,
O supreme Artist, who as sole return
For all the cosmic wonder of Thy work,
Demandest of us just a word . . . a name,
"My Father!" Thou hast knowledge, only
Thou,

How dreary 'tis for women to sit still
On winter nights by solitary fires
And hear the nations praising them far off,
Too far! aye, praising our quick sense of love,
Our very heart of passionate womanhood,
Which could not beat so in the verse without
Being present also in the un-kissed lips
And eyes undried because there's none to ask
The reason they grew moist.

To sit alone
And think for comfort how, that very night,
Affianced lovers, leaning face to face
With sweet half-listenings for each other's breath,
Are reading haply from a page of ours,
To pause with a thrill (as if their cheeks had
touched)
When such a stanza, level to their mood
Seems floating their own thought out—"So I feel
For thee,"—"And I, for thee: this poet knows
What everlasting love is!"

Finally, theories of life and art, the woman's and the poet's, meet and find consummation in the impassioned exaltation of the close:

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“ Art ’s a service,—mark :

A silver key is given to thy clasp,
And thou shalt stand unwearied, night and day,
And fix it in the hard, slow-turning wards,
To open, so, that intermediate door
Betwixt the different planes of sensuous form
And form insensuous, that inferior men
May learn to feel on still through these to those,
And bless thy ministration. The world waits
For help. Beloved, let us love so well,
Our work shall still be better for our love,
And still our love be sweeter for our work,
And both commended, for the sake of each,
By all true workers and true lovers born.
Now press the clarion on thy woman’s lip
(Love’s holy kiss shall still keep consecrate)
And breathe thy fine keen breath along the brass,
And blow all class-walls level as Jericho’s
Past Jordan,—crying from the top of souls,
To souls, that, here assembled on earth’s flats,
They get them to some purer eminence
Than any hitherto beheld for clouds !
What height we know not,—but the way we know,
And how by mounting ever, we attain,
And so climb on. It is the hour for souls,
That bodies, leavened by the will and love,
Be lightened to redemption. 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 economies, new laws
Admitting freedom, new societies
Excluding falsehood : He shall make all new.”

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My Romney !—Lifting up my hand in his,
As wheeled by seeing spirits toward the east,
He turned instinctively, where, faint and far,
Along the tingling desert of the sky,
Beyond the circle of the conscious hills,
Were laid in jasper-stone as clear as glass
The first foundations of that new, near Day
Which should be builded out of heaven to God.
He stood a moment with erected brows
In silence, as a 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.”

Without entering into any discussion of the views put forth, we may pause a moment to point out two distinctive features.

First, stress must be laid on the words which crystallise Mrs. Browning's whole theory of art : “ Art's a service.” This high and noble utilitarianism was more and more her inspiration. If, in the widest sense, there can be no other view, its peril lies in too narrow an interpretation, when art, sacrificed to service, loses half its power to serve. Mrs. Browning's impetuosity and keen human sympathy combined, particularly in her later work, to make this an especial danger.

Secondly, it is clear from the extracts that her idealistic philosophy of life and of art is essentially emotional. The poet's sphere is suffering that he may serve. Art and life alike

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are useless until touched by love to finer issues. No definite conclusion is reached, or even suggested, as to the social problems raised.

The same, however, may be said of the other great poem of the period which attacks similar difficulties—Tennyson's "Princess." And while artistically Tennyson's work may be far more perfect, it compares but ill for conviction, fire, and living force with that of the woman poet on the questions which deeply concern her.

IX

THE foregoing quotations have a personal interest, beyond that of the important problems touched upon. They show clearly that the devotion with which Mrs. Browning abandoned herself to the fighting of Italy's battles was simply the translation into action of her poetic creed. To live in and for the present was with her an article of faith. But even a less sympathetic nature must have been stirred to the depths by the events that were taking place in Italy, and for such as Mrs. Browning to stand aside was impossible. Here was a nation working out its destiny, a "live throbbing age" with history visibly in the making. Inevitably she threw herself heart and soul into the struggle that Italy was engaged in against Austrian tyranny. We must return to this to take up her story.

In the outburst of revolutionary enthusiasm

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that swept over Europe in 1848 it seemed for a moment that the hour of Italy's freedom had already come. The first part of the poem "Casa Guidi Windows" gives the record of Mrs. Browning's impressions and aspirations. But they were not yet to find fulfilment. Defeat was succeeded by the restoration of the Austrian *régime* with severer oppression, and the second part of the poem tells of despair. The whole is one of the least successful of Mrs. Browning's longer works. In spite of passages of great beauty, its spontaneous enthusiasm often lapses into bombast; its satire into violence; and it had no political significance.

Yet it is not without interest historically; for it is the outcome of a spirit that is wholly of nineteenth-century growth,—the passion for freedom which transcends the limitations of country, race, and creed in a common sympathy of human brotherhood.

Eight years passed before the Italians made any further attempt to throw off their subjection. In the interval Victor Emanuel and his brilliant minister, Cavour, matured their plans and watched and waited.

Meanwhile, Mrs. Browning brought "Aurora Leigh" to completion, and with its publication her greatest work was done. She produced no other long poem; very few that added anything to her reputation. One reason undoubtedly lies in the sacrifice of her Muse to the cause of Italian liberty. To this must be added the steady decrease in health which became

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apparent from the time of what proved her last visit to England in 1856. After a visit to France two years later she left Italy no more.

But, through bodily frailty, the eager and courageous spirit shone only in a flame of purer enthusiasm. Henceforth, her story becomes Italy's. In 1859 hopes, dashed to the ground ten years before, sprang up again when Napoleon III. entered the field on behalf of her beloved country. She was always an admirer of a man of power such as she believed him to be. Now she hailed him as hero and deliverer in "Napoleon III. in Italy."

. . . he might have had the world with him,
But chose to side with suffering men,
And had the world against him when
He came to deliver Italy.

Emperor
Evermore.

Her happiness at his early successes knew no bounds. She worked herself up into a fever of enthusiasm. England's hesitation, the doubts of those who distrusted the Emperor, alike aroused her anger and bitter scorn, which she poured out in several poems, impassioned if not inspired. She looked at Italy through the halo of her unselfish ardour, interpreting all the actions of the allies, down to those of the meanest soldier in the ranks, in the light of her own idealism. But a terrible disappointment was in store. The Emperor suddenly made peace at Villafranca, with the liberation of Italy

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unachieved. So keenly did the blow affect Mrs. Browning, after all her elation, that a severe illness resulted. Yet with the restoration of comparative health she recovered her faith in Napoleon. The recovery is interesting psychologically, for it illustrates the pertinacity with which she clung to a cause, or an illusion.

In the "Poems before Congress," published in 1860, Mrs. Browning collected her writings referring to the crisis. Their main virtue is their unquestionable sincerity; none are specially noteworthy. The feeling with which they are written is often, to say the least, overwrought; for the poet's health was failing and the nervous strain very great. Further, it is extremely doubtful if poetry and politics can ever mix, without detriment at any rate to the poetry. It may be that Mrs. Browning's genius was in any case becoming exhausted. Yet two among her last poems, "Little Mattie" and "The Musical Instrument," rank with her best, and seem to point to the conclusion that she made a very real sacrifice in giving up her talents to political warfare. But if from the critical point of view this is to be regretted, it must be remembered that the price was one Mrs. Browning herself would never have hesitated to pay. Seemingly unconscious of the inferiority of this collection of poems to much of her other work, she expected their politics to raise a storm. Yet the moral courage which prompted the courting of unpopularity by their publication was unflinching.

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She printed them to satisfy her own conscience, to relieve her own feelings ; persuaded that that alone is worth writing which springs from conviction ; that truth, beauty, and utility go hand in hand in the production of an artistic whole ; and that while the failure or the success of performance might be left to the critics to judge, the subject was one in its very essence suited to artistic treatment. If this conviction were mistaken, the verdict involved condemnation not only of her art as such, but of her life-work.

Out of the darkness which followed the Peace of Villafranca came deliverance. This is not the place to dwell on the thrilling story of the romantic march of Garibaldi and his "thousand." After their occupation of Naples, Cavour, ever ready, seized his opportunity, joined Garibaldi, and in 1861 Victor Emanuel was declared king of a united Italy. Cavour died at the moment of triumph. Mrs. Browning just lived to know the deed accomplished. Sorrow for Italy's sake over the great statesman's death possibly increased her susceptibility to the illness which hastened her end. She was seized with a bronchial attack, apparently little more severe than those to which she was continually subject. Browning felt anxious from the first, but told himself there was nothing to justify his fears. On the evening of June 28 they made plans for the summer holidays and next year's movements, and Penini was sent to bed reassured that she was

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much better. A night of broken sleep was followed in the early morning by symptoms which alarmed Browning so much that he sent for the doctor. His wife smiled at his fears. As he took her in his arms she gave him, as if moved by premonitions of parting, a last, perfect expression of her love for him. A few minutes later, her head against his cheek, she breathed her last.

She was buried in the English cemetery at Florence, where stands the sarcophagus designed by Sir Frederick Leighton, with the simple inscription, "E. B. B. ob. 1861." On the walls of Casa Guidi, Florence has placed a marble slab to the memory of the English poet who made Italy's cause her own :

Here wrote and died

ELIZABETH BARRETT BROWNING

In whose woman's heart were reconciled
The knowledge of the wise, and the inspiration of
the poet,

And who made of her verse a golden ring
Between Italy and England.

Grateful Florence
Has placed this stone.

1861.

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