

THE PRINTING WOMAN'S PROPER SPHERE:

THE DISCURSIVE MOMENT OF ELIZABETH BARRETT BROWNING'S AURORA LEIGH

A DISSERTATION
SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF GRADUATE STUDIES AND RESEARCH
IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS
for the degree of
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

BY
BINA FREIWALD
Department of English, McGill University, Montreal
April, 1983

" ...You shall not speak
To a printing woman who has lost her place
(The sweet safe corner of the household fire
Behind the heads of children), compliments,
As if she were a woman. We who have clipt
The curls before our eyes may see at least
As plain as men do."

Aurora Leigh, V, 805-811

ABSTRACT

The dissertation explores and contextualizes Elizabeth Barrett Browning's monumental endeavor, in Aurora Leigh (1856), of constructing a poetics of the female subject. Methodologically, the thesis draws on two theoretical frameworks: intertextual semiotics and feminist literary criticism; these frameworks are delineated in the Introductory Chapter. Chapters Two and Three propose a problem-context for Aurora Leigh by examining a tradition of self-reflexivity in women's writing from the late seventeenth century to the early nineteenth century, and by analysing the early Victorian hegemonic discourse on femininity. The evolution of a poetics of the female subject in Elizabeth Barrett Browning's canon is then explored in Chapters Four and Five. This poetics is seen to evolve out of the paradigm of the "poet's life" and to involve three sets of relationships: between the poet and the world; between the poet and the predecessors; within the poet: between female identity and poetic self. Finally, Chapter Six surveys the critical literature on Aurora Leigh from the date of its publication to the present day, with particular emphasis on the two major concerns of the present work, namely, (1) the poem's exploration of the problematics of a female poetic subject, and (2) the relative position of this endeavor both within the hegemonic context and within the context of a tradition of self-reflexivity in women's writing.

RESUME

Cette thèse propose une exploration et une contextualisation du projet monumental d'Elizabeth Barrett Browning dans son poème narratif Aurora Leigh (1856), qui est celui de construire une poétique du sujet féminin. Notre point de vue méthodologique s'appuie sur deux appareils théoriques: la sémiotique intertextuelle et la critique littéraire féministe.

Les Chapitres Deux et Trois abordent une problématique de contexte à l'égard d'Aurora Leigh à travers l'examen d'une tradition d'auto-réflexivité dans les écrits féminins de la fin du XVIIIe siècle au début du XIXe, et une analyse du discours hégémonique sur la "femme" du début de l'époque Victorienne. Dans les Chapitres Quatre et Cinq nous examinons l'évolution d'une poétique du sujet féminin chez Elizabeth Barrett Browning. Enfin, le Chapitre Six consiste en l'analyse de la littérature critique sur Aurora Leigh depuis la date de sa publication jusqu'aujourd'hui, ceci dans l'optique des deux préoccupations majeures de notre travail: (1) la construction d'un sujet poétique féminin dans Aurora Leigh, et (2) la position relative de ce projet à l'intérieur du contexte hégémonique et du contexte d'une tradition d'auto-réflexivité féminine.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

<u>Chapter</u>	<u>Page</u>
Acknowledgements	
A Note on the Documentation Style	
I. INTRODUCTION: Some Critical Preliminaries	1
II. POETIC IDENTITY AND FEMALE SELF: THE DOUBLE BIND	24
III. "You--tell us what we are": "A woman is a foreign land"	85
IV. "Through fissures of the clay": THE EVOLUTION OF EBB'S POETICS	136
V. "Now Press the clarion on thy woman's lip": THE LITERARY WOMAN'S APOTHEOSIS	216
VI. CRITICAL RECOGNITION AS LITERARY HISTORY: The Significance of <u>Aurora Leigh</u>	273
BIBLIOGRAPHY	329

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I will always be grateful to my thesis supervisor, Professor Irwin Gopnik, for his generous moral and intellectual support throughout the years, and for his sustaining faith in my project. I likewise wish to thank my other committee members, Professors Paisley Livingston and Marc Angenot, for their interest, encouragement, and invaluable assistance. I am deeply indebted to my doctoral projects committee members, Professors Lorris Elliott, William Wees, and Donald Bouchard, for their professional integrity and personal kindness. For their generous assistance and much needed recognition throughout my doctoral studies I thank the Quebec Ministry of Education, The Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, and the Graduate Faculty of McGill University. A special acknowledgement is due to the Biomedical Engineering Unit of McGill University and their MEDNET computer system management for making available to me hundreds of computer hours and advanced word processing programs which took the drudgery out of thesis preparation, and made rewriting and revising a scholar's dream come true. Last but foremost, I acknowledge with love and gratitude the unflagging support and truly sustaining affection of my husband Simon and my son Eran.

A Note on the Documentation Style

Throughout this dissertation I employ the new PMLA documentation style, using parenthetical notes in the text to provide bibliographical information. The notes identify the source by author's name followed by date of publication as cited in my Bibliography. Whenever possible I have used the original date of publication for reference purposes (that is, as the date immediately following the author's name in the Bibliography).

All references to Aurora Leigh are to the 1978 edition (London: Women's Press; intro. Cora Kaplan), and include Book number (in Roman numerals), followed by line numbers (in Arabic numbers). Unless otherwise indicated, all other references to Elizabeth Barrett Browning's poetry and prose are to the Porter and Clarke 1900 edition of her Works, in six volumes. In referring to this edition I have used Roman numerals to indicate volume number and Arabic numerals to indicate page and line numbers. To distinguish between references to page numbers and references to line numbers, I preface page numbers by "p." while I do not preface line numbers. In citing poetry from the Porter and Clarke edition I give only line numbers and omit volume number. All page references, however, are preceded by volume number. Because EBB appropriates spaced periods (...) in her writing to indicate pauses, I have used (***) to indicate these, while reserving spaced periods to indicate deleted material in my quotations from texts. I have used the following abbreviations:

EBB for Elizabeth Barrett Browning. These are the initials used by the poet herself both before her marriage (when she was Elizabeth Barrett Barrett) and after her marriage to Robert Browning.

AL for Aurora Leigh

HUP for EBB's Hitherto Unpublished Poems

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

Some Critical Preliminaries

to imagine that a confidence in our powers is undeviatingly shewn by our selection of an extensive field for their exertion, is an error; for the subject supports the writer, as much as it is supported by him.

Elizabeth Barrett Browning, An Essay on Mind (1826)

To exist humanly is to name the self, the world, and God.

Mary Daly, Beyond God the Father (1973)

My project in the present work is twofold, for I aim both to explore and to contextualize Elizabeth Barrett Browning's (hereafter EBB) monumental endeavor, in Aurora Leigh (1856), of constructing a poetics of the female subject. In my conception of this project, Aurora Leigh was thus the initial pebble whose "watery echo," to use a Faulknerian image, has compelled me to investigate the "ripple space" it created (Faulkner, 1936: p. 261). Methodologically, my practice throughout draws on two theoretical frameworks: intertextual semiotics, and feminist literary criticism. By way of an introduction, I propose first a cursory look at the 'rippling' structure which underlies the present work. I will then proceed to delineate the theoretical frameworks which inform my study.

"I proceed to the investigation of myself with no small anxiety," wrote in 1818 the twelve year old Elizabeth Barrett, initiating a life-long project of self-reflexion (EBB, 1818: p. 119). "I could write an autobiography, but not now," she confided in Richard Hengist Horne in 1843 (Mayer, 1877: I, p. 163). In 1856, now Elizabeth Barrett Browning, she published Aurora Leigh, the one book she thought "the most mature of my works, and the one into which my highest convictions upon Life and Art have entered" (Dedication, AL). The autobiographical mode is here embraced vicariously, as Aurora Leigh's poet-narrator announces in the poem's opening lines:

Of writing many books there is no end;
And I who have written much in prose and verse
For others' uses, will write now for mine, --
Will write my story for my better self.
(AL, I, 1-4)

This, then, is my first critical trajectory: from the early autobiographical essays to Aurora Leigh, through the intervening poetry and critical prose, in an attempt to chart EBB's monumental "investigation" of the "self." This trajectory provides the organizing principle of Chapters Four and Five.

The paradigm for the "self" is already present in the early autobiographical essays and is fully articulated in Aurora Leigh; the "self" is that of

Woman and artist, -- either incomplete,
Both credulous of completion.
(AL, II, 4-5)

As completion is deferred, however, the poetry exposes the essentially problematic nature of this paradigm. Here lies the focus of my critical endeavor: the unraveling of a narrative of a "self" (or a subjectivity) self-defined as both female and poetic. While Chapters Four and Five explore the evolution of a poetics of the female subject in EBB's canon, Chapters Two and Three attempt to construct a context within which to understand the problematics central to this poetics.

To EBB, Aurora Leigh probed the depths of a peculiarly modern condition, the predicament of a woman poet, a being hitherto absent from the scene of English literary history. EBB was, of course, aware of the existence of women writing poetry prior to her time. Her disavowal of a female poetic tradition -- in the statement cited below -- constituted a value judgment, an indication of her desire to disentangle herself from that tradition. In a heated response to Chorley's article in The New Quarterly exploring "the vantage ground of the poetesses of England," EBB challenged:

Where is our poetess before Joanna Baillie -- poetess in the true sense? ... The divine breath which seemed to come and go, and, ere it went, filled the land with that crowd of true poets whom we call the old dramatists -- why did it never pass, even in the lyrical form, over the lips of a woman? How strange! And can we deny that it was so? I look everywhere for grandmothers and find none. It is not in the filial spirit I am deficient, I do assure you -- witness my reverent love of the grandfathers.

(Kenyon, 1898: I, pp. 230-232)

From EBB's provocative statement, with its clear articulation of the centrality, to her, of literary relationships, I take my methodological cue in pursuing a contextual (intertextual) approach to the poetry. In her evocation of a dual literary parentage, moreover, one avowedly absent -- that of the "grandmothers" -- the other greatly revered -- that of the

"grandfathers" -- I find an invaluable insight into the intertextual dynamics we are called upon to describe. Broadly speaking, Chapter Two examines the tradition of the "grandmothers": a tradition of self-reflexivity in women's writing, from the late seventeenth century to the early nineteenth, which anticipates Aurora Leigh. Chapter Three examines the more immediate problem-context of Aurora Leigh, the early Victorian hegemonic discourse on femininity -- the tradition of the "grandfathers."

An understanding of the complex dynamics which characterizes the relationship of a text to all that precedes and surrounds it was not alien to EBB and the writers of her generation. In Sartor Resartus (1838), for example, Carlyle offers what today might be taken as a peculiarly Foucauldian insight: "Hast thou ever meditated on that word, Tradition: how we inherit not life only, but all the garniture and form of life; and work, and speak and even think and feel, as our Fathers and primeval grandfathers, from the beginning, have given it us?" Indeed, Carlyle's remarkable insight into the unintentional, unconscious act by which a text puts into use "Tradition," further supports the choice of a contextual approach for the present study. The issues at stake here become clearly focused in EBB's own meditations on the subject. In a letter to Richard Hengist Horne, a fellow-poet with whom she collaborated on a volume of critical essays, EBB sketches a theory of literary influence which assumes particular importance in the light of her aforementioned disavowal of literary "grandmothers." In discussing Dickens' novels EBB observes:

When people talk of Fielding and Smollett as being ideals and models before him [Dickens], elected by his own judgement, they (and even you) omit what consciously or unconsciously, 'in the body or out of the body, I cannot say,' Victor Hugo has been to him.

(Mayer, 1877: I, p. 242; italics mine)

Here EBB clearly proposes a scheme for the understanding of literary relations which subsumes authorial intention under a larger dynamics, anticipating, as we shall see, contemporary semioticians who contend that a text consists of "the focusing of convergences of force which no authorial will ... can control or even hope to be conscious of" (Lentricchia, 1980:

p. 202). EBB's observation, moreover, itself partakes of the nature of intertextual analysis. Extrapolating from what Jonathan Culler has called "application" -- that is, "the rubbing together of two texts in order to release energy" (Culler, 1976: p. 1387) -- EBB perceives beyond the Dickens/Hugo 'connection' the necessity for an interpretive mechanism which will account for "conscious" as well as "unconscious" relations bearing upon a text. In the present work I seek, in turn, to 'rub' EBB's two statements together, convinced, as I am, of the great critical energy to be released by bringing together EBB's disavowal of a female tradition (in favor of the "grandfathers") and her own appeal for a mode of criticism which would see 'through' a writer and beyond his or her conscious use of "ideals and models."

While EBB pleads not-guilty of association with her female precursors -- failing to find amongst them true poets like herself and her poet-heroine Aurora -- her poetry and critical prose, I shall argue, are "unconsciously" but firmly rooted in a tradition of self-reflexivity in women's writing. Nor is this the only extra-textual presence evoked by her own canon; as a recent student of Aurora Leigh has noted, the poem -- in many respects the apex of EBB's literary output -- is "a collage of Romantic and Victorian texts reworked from a woman's perspective" (Kaplan, 1977: p. 5). My contention in the present work is that in order to understand and assess properly EBB's monumental, and quite unprecedented, project of constructing a poetics centered around a female poetic subject, we need to contextualize it. This need is all the more evident with respect to my focal text, Aurora Leigh, since I consider the poem to be the first full-fledged exploration in English letters of the dilemma of the woman poet. Obviously, the poem does not introduce this problematics ex nihilo. In Chapters Two and Three I thus delineate what I regard to be the problem-context of Aurora Leigh, that is, the context which renders meaningful EBB's endeavor, in that poem, to establish a locus proper to the woman poet. In doing so, the dissertation will, in a sense, function as a two way road, for while my investigations of a tradition of self-reflexivity in women's writing prior to Aurora Leigh (Chapter Two) and of EBB's earlier poetry and prose (Chapter Four) help elucidate aspects of the poem (Chapter Five), my discussion of the evolution of EBB's poetics (Chapter Four) and of the poem itself (Chapter Five) constitutes a further

contribution towards an understanding of a tradition of self-reflexivity in women's writing. This double movement is also evident with relation to my discussion of the early Victorian hegemonic discourse on "woman" (Chapter Three), for while in the hegemonic representations of "woman" I discern the paradoxes which precipitate Aurora's project, I see EBB's canon, in turn, to illuminate or expose the hegemonic strategies of distortion and silencing. Finally, in Chapter Six I examine the critical literature on Aurora Leigh from the date of its publication to the present date as regards the two major concerns of the present work, namely, (1) the poem's exploration of the problematics of a female poetic subject, and (2) the relative position of this endeavor both within the hegemonic context and within the context of a tradition of self-reflexivity in women's writing. In doing so I further demonstrate an on-going discursive 'struggle' between EBB's revisionary project in Aurora Leigh and an hegemonic discourse which continually seeks to silence or misrepresent it.

The contextual project outlined above is conceived within a larger theoretical program which concerns itself with the essentially contextual nature not only of all texts but of all sign production. In this, my orientation is semiotic, for at the root of Peircian semiotics is a theory of the sign and of sign activity which posits that the sign is not primarily a representation of an object, but something which "address[es] itself to some other ... determine[s] some other" (Peirce, 1931-5: 5. 253). Peirce defines a "sign" or "representamen" as "a First which stands in such a genuine triadic relation to a Second, called its Object, as to be capable of determining a Third, called its Interpretant" (2. 274; italics his). Peirce then elaborates:

A sign has, as such, three references: first, it is a sign to some thought which interprets it; second, it is a sign for some object to which in that thought it is equivalent; third, it is a sign in some respect or quality, which brings it into connection with its object.

(5. 283; italics his)

Thus, the "first" reference of the sign is to an interpreting thought, the "interpretant." The interpretant, in a second moment, interprets by bringing the sign into a relation of equivalence with an object. This

equivalence, however, derives not from the object, as such, but from the interpretant, and is thus not absolute or exhaustive, but relative. For Peirce, moreover, the interpretant does not merely create ex nihilo an interpretation (of the representamen), for the representamen and the interpretant are already situated in a complex of previous signs and interpretations. The interpretive function of establishing an equivalence between representamen and object thus depends upon, is relative to, that "immense mass of cognition already formed" (Weber, 1980: p. 42). It is retrospective, implying a choice and combination of "habits," that is, of interpretive possibilities already existing; but it is also prospective, since the articulation of that choice or combination is itself a sign, a representamen requiring future interpretation.

As Samuel Weber has argued in attempting to appropriate Peirce for the context of literary theory, the Peircian model calls for a more complete analysis of signification (production of meaning), one which will account for the collective traditions and institutions through which "habits" transmit and reproduce themselves. The implications of this semiotic project for the study of literature are profound. Most significantly for our purposes, the Peircian understanding of the representamen and the interpretant as always situated in a complex of previous signs and interpretations leads to an understanding of the text as a locus of signification (production of meaning) where meaning is the activation of an intertextuality. Roland Barthes, in his 1968 "The Death of the Author" drives a point home:

We know now that a text is not a line of words releasing a single theological meaning (the "message" of the Author-God) but a multi-dimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash. The text is a tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable centers of culture, ... a text is made of multiple writings, drawn from many cultures and entering into mutual relations of dialogue, parody, contestation.
(Barthes, 1977: pp. 146-8)

Thus, what had always been part of the critical intuition, dimly sensed and vaguely expressed by Lionel Trilling, for example, as "culture's hum and

buzz of implication" (Trilling, 1953: p. 200), has, since the advent of semiotics, surfaced, giving rise to a self-consciously analytical perspective which seeks to describe intertextual practices such as "dialogue, parody, contestation." Consequently, The relation of the text to the intertext, or extratext, which is both outside it and constitutive of it, has become a major preoccupation in recent critical thought.

In his seminal L'Archeologie du Savoir (1969) Michel Foucault reiterates this understanding of the text which is central to the present work. Extrapolating from a differential model of sign activity to the intertextual and then discursive project at large, Foucault contends:

The frontiers of a book are never clear-cut; beyond the title, the first lines, and the last full stop, beyond its internal configurations and its autonomous form, it is caught up in a system of references to other books, other texts, other sentences: it is a node within a network, its unity is variable and relative.

(Foucault, 1972: p. 23)

This understanding of the text has important implications for practical criticism, for it allows us to reconcile a textual mode of analysis -- one which will account for the "internal configurations and autonomous form" of a given work -- with a contextual approach -- one which will account for the "references to other books, other texts."

The contextual perspective suggested by Foucault, then, involves the critical reconstruction of a discursive "unity," a "network" within which the text studied will be seen as a "node." Thus understood, intertextual analysis involves the reconstruction of a "positivity," of a "discursive formation" which constitutes the immediate context -- the "network" -- of a given text. This unity which the text is seen to share with other texts, however, is no longer identifiable with specific 'source' texts. Rather, it constitutes a field -- derived or generalized from specific texts -- in which "formal identities, thematic continuities, translations of concepts, and polemical interchanges may be deployed" (Foucault, 1972: pp. 126-7).

Drawing on this understanding of the text as signifying within discourse, Julia Kristeva has defined intertextual semiosis as the intersection of a given text (understood as a semiotic practice) with textual sequences external to it to which the given text points and which it assimilates. Any given text, Kristeva argues, is

le recouplement d'une organisation textuelle (d'une pratique sémiotique) donnée avec les énoncés (séquences) qu'elle assimile dans son espace ou auxquels elle renvoie dans l'espace des textes (pratiques sémiotiques) extérieurs.

(Kristeva, 1970: p. 12)

Since these other (external) texts are not necessarily other literary texts, intertextual analysis enables the critic to open up the text under examination to the social discourse at large. In focusing on intertextuality, Kristeva contends, semiotics situates the text within the context of society and history: "en étudiant le texte comme une intertextualité, [la sémiologie] le pense ainsi dans (les textes de) la société et l'histoire" (Kristeva, 1970: p. 12).

In order to further characterize the dynamics of intertextual semiosis -- which forms the object of intertextual analysis -- Kristeva proposes a three-term model. This tripartite model consists of "phéno-texte" -- which is the text studied; "géno-texte" -- consisting of the external texts brought to bear upon the text studied; and "transposition" -- the process by which the "géno-texte" is utilized by or made accessible to the "phéno-texte." Kristeva contends:

La valeur sémantique du texte est à chercher précisément à partir de ce statut dialogique ou tout énoncé autre est un acte de présupposition ... La transposition est nécessaire à ces rapports contextuels, à l'intertextualité, qui commandent la signification du texte. Nous pouvons maintenant mieux comprendre le rôle de la transposition dans l'intertextualité: agissant le géno-texte, la transposition produit, dans le phéno-texte, une présupposition généralisée.

(Kristeva, 1974: p. 339-40; italics hers)

The usefulness of Kristeva's model lies, to a large extent, in its provision for a mediating function to explain the relationship between an anterior "géo-texte" and a given "phéno-texte." By introducing "transposition," Kristeva dispenses with the positivistic model of source study, suggesting that texts draw indirectly on other (anterior) texts. Kristeva proposes to see the "phéno-texte" as interacting not with the "géo-texte" but with a presuppositional field which is derived from the "géo-texte." In performing intertextual analysis, in turn, it is the critic's task to identify this presuppositional field in order to describe intertextual semiosis: the dynamic interaction of text and context.

We note that this understanding of a presuppositional field is rooted in semantic theory, notably in the work of Oswald Ducrot where the implications of the semantic pairing "posé-présumé" for a more englobing critique of texts are clearly indicated. Claiming that presuppositions form a necessary part of signification -- constituting a body of knowledge which needs be shared for communication to take place -- Ducrot, as Marc Angenot has demonstrated, further extends the notion to include the indicators of ideology in discourse (Angenot, 1977: p. 25). In Dire et ne pas dire (1972) Ducrot contends that a text becomes meaning-filled or coherent only when seen in the context of the beliefs and convictions which gave rise to it. Ducrot postulates:

on peut chercher dans tout texte le reflet implicite des croyances profondes de l'époque: on entendra par là que le texte n'est cohérent que si on le complète avec ces croyances.

(Ducrot, 1972: p. 13).

Angenot's own formulation of the project of intertextual analysis -- which draws on semantic presupposition and the Aristotelian notion of topos -- is pertinent to the present study. Like Kristeva, Angenot proposes a dynamic model in which the relations between the textual and the extra-textual are perceived as 'work' ("travail") carried out by the former on a generalized field constituted by the latter. Angenot contends:

l'événement narratif ... est le produit d'un travail plus ou moins intense ou critique, sur des lieux communs

culturels, des maximes idéologiques.
(Angenot 1978: p. 11; italics mine).

This understanding of signification as an interplay between a given text and a prior discourse -- "lieux communs," presuppositional field, a discursive positivity -- is crucial to my endeavor. First, it underlies my overall project of contextualizing Aurora Leigh, of constructing an intertextual space within which to understand the work. Secondly, it enables me to define the problematics of the female poetic subject -- the object of this study -- in terms of a conflict between a subject who seeks self-definition as both female and poetic and an hegemonic discourse, a positivity, which decries as mutually exclusive high artistic creativity and femininity.

Having outlined the model of intertextual semiosis which informs the present work, I turn now to define the concept of "subject" central to my project. Throughout this study I understand "subjectivity" or "subject" to be a discursive object, that is, to be constituted discursively. In this I draw on Foucault's understanding of discourse as an object-forming practice (Foucault, 1972: p. 49). For Foucault, the object is never out there, on the other side of discourse (words), a fullness of existence waiting to be articulated or deciphered. Rather, the object is seen as a function of discourse, for, argues Foucault:

The conditions necessary for the appearance of an object of discourse, the historical conditions required if one is to 'say anything' about it ... are many and imposing. Which means that one cannot speak of anything at any time; it is not easy to say something new; it is not enough for us to open our eyes, to pay attention, or to be aware, for new objects suddenly to light up and emerge out of the ground. But this difficulty is not only a negative one; ... the object does not await in limbo the order that will free it and enable it to become embodied in a visible and prolix objectivity; it does not pre-exist itself, held back by some obstacle at the first edges of light. It exists under the positive conditions of a complex group of relations.
(Foucault, 1972: pp. 44-45; italics mine)

Foucault extends this understanding of the "object of discourse" as constituted (brought into existence) by discourse to the "subject." Contemplating the privileged position of the "author" in the literary tradition, Foucault questions this accepted view of an "originating subject," that is, a subject who "deposits, with infinite wealth and generosity, an inexhaustible world of significations" (Foucault, 1979: pp. 158-9). Rejecting this view of the "free subject," Foucault proposes an understanding of the subject which will involve an attempt to answer the following set of questions:

How, under what conditions and in what forms can something like a subject appear in the order of discourse? What place can it occupy in each type of discourse, what functions can it assume, and by obeying what rules?
(Foucault, 1979: p. 158)

For Foucault, then, the "subject" -- that which declares itself as the generator of discourse -- is in effect "a variable and complex function of discourse" (Foucault, 1979: p. 158). Similarly, I consider "poetic identity" and "female self" -- the two constitutive elements of the female poetic subject -- as discursive objects, that is, as constituted through discourse. Chapters Two and Three prepare for an assessment of the evolution of EBB's poetics of the female subject by examining the discursive problematics to which "poetic identity" and "female self" (as discursive objects) have given rise. In Chapter Two, I explore a self-reflexive discourse in women's writing prior to Aurora Leigh, a discourse which both registers and is a reaction to a double bind dilemma. Employing Gregory Bateson's double bind communicational model, I view this dilemma as the result of a paradoxical hegemonic injunction which decries as mutually exclusive poetic identity and female self. Chapter Three further prepares for the examination of EBB's canon by exploring the early Victorian hegemonic discourse on female self, a discourse which reinforces the aforementioned paradox.

Intertextual analysis, then, provides me with a critical framework within which to examine "the relationship between a text and the languages or discursive practices of a culture and its relationship to those particular texts which, for the text in question, articulate that culture and its possibilities" (Culler, 1976, p. 1383; italics mine). Feminist literary criticism, to which we now turn, has to a large extent already embarked on such an intertextual project in its attempt to address the issue of writing and sexual difference. From Virginia Woolf's A Room of One's Own (1929) to Elaine Showalter's recent article "Writing and Sexual Difference" (1981), one of the chief projects of feminist literary criticism has been to describe or identify the inscription of sexual difference as textual difference. Showalter articulates this Ur-question of a criticism concerned with the study of women as writers -- for which she coins the terms "gynocritics" -- when she asks: "How can we constitute women as a distinct literary group? what is the difference of women's writing" (Showalter, 1981: p. 185; italics hers). Puzzling over the future of women's writing, we recall, Virginia Woolf asked in 1929: "What should that difference be?" (Woolf, 1929: p. 75). Frustrated in her search for an articulation of that difference (both sexual and textual) from a woman's point of view, Woolf defiantly complained: "Where shall I find that elaborate study of the psychology of women by a woman?" (p. 75). It has been the chief aim of feminist criticism, of course, to remedy this condition by restoring woman both as a focus of study and as a perspective from which to study.

Woolf's essay, to which I will return in Chapter Two, is paradigmatic in its articulation of the two main preoccupations of a criticism concerned with woman as writer. First, Woolf's articulation of the necessity to define the difference of women's writing implies a critical imperative, the necessity for a contextual approach with which to deal with this essentially relational phenomenon. Second, Woolf perceptively identifies at the core of women's writing a gender-awareness which marks their writing with a peculiar problematics. Woolf's own profound ambivalence towards the issue of writing and sexual difference -- which results in her paradoxical position on the matter -- itself exemplifies this awareness. On the one hand, Woolf laments the absence of a sustaining female tradition and declares that "a man's sentence," as well as other "older forms of

literature," are "unsuited for a woman's use" (Woolf, 1929: pp. 73-4). On the other hand, however, Woolf outrightly decries this gender-awareness in women's writing, accusing the nineteenth century woman writer:

She was saying it by way of aggression, or that by way of conciliation. She was admitting that she was 'only a woman,' or protesting that she was 'as good as a man.' ... She was thinking of something other than the thing itself. Down comes her book upon our heads. There was a flaw in the centre of it.

(Woolf, 1929: p. 71)

This "flaw in the centre," this thought of "something other than the thing itself," is the consciousness of difference which characterizes women's self-reflexive discourse. It is this "consciousness of difficulty" (Spacks, 1975: p. 35) which is my proper object of study here. This consciousness of difference which marks women's self-reflexive writing, moreover, is inextricably linked to their different position within the larger social and cultural sphere. To describe the dynamics of this difference, anthropologists Shirley Ardener and Edwin Ardener have proposed a model which proves illuminating in view of my present objectives. The model proposes that women constitute a muted group, the boundaries of whose culture and reality overlap, but are not wholly contained by, the dominant (male) group.

The central hypothesis of the "muted group" model is put forth by Shirley Ardener in her "Introduction" to a collection of essays significantly entitled Perceiving Women (1975). Ardener writes:

a society may be dominated or overdetermined by the model (or models) generated by one dominant group within the system. This dominant model may impede the free expression of alternative models of their world which subdominant groups may possess, and perhaps may even inhibit the very generation of such models. Groups dominated in this sense find it necessary to structure their world through the model (or models) of the dominant group, transforming their

own models as best they can in terms of the received ones.

(Ardener, 1975: p. xii)

This model can be seen as a specific manifestation of the "géno-texte": "phéno-texte" dynamics outlined above, with the muted group in the position of a "phéno-texte" whose self-articulation is to a large extent overdetermined or dictated by a dominant presuppositional field (the "géno-texte").

Ardener's provision for conflict, in the above cited model, moreover, is particularly helpful in our present context. Elaborating on the model dominant/subdominant, Ardener postulates a "theory of structures of thought" which regards the "changing categories of society at the surface of events" -- the "'S'-structures" or syntagmatic axis -- to be themselves "shaped by other more fundamental, more persistent structures" -- "'P'-structures" or paradigmatic axis (Ardener, 1975: p. xii). The latter are defined as "frameworks, or models, or sets of ground rules, which are linked in certain ways to those categories and ideas which we generate to help us order our experience of daily life" (p. xiv). Within this framework, both dominant and muted groups are seen to "generate ideas of social reality at the deepest ('P'-structural) level," but muted groups are inhibited from generating ideas "close or at the level of the surface of events ('S'-structural) since the conceptual space in which they would lie is overrun by the dominant model of events" (p. xiv). Ardener posits that while dominant 'P' and dominant 'S' are linked by certain transformational rules (which, on the whole, rule out conflict), "a muted system composed of the 'P'-structures of a muted group and the imposed 'S'-structures of a dominant group ... [could be expected] to be held together by more complex logical relationship" (p. xiv). Ardener's concluding observations in a sense describe the discursive space I undertake to explore in the present work. Elaborating on the predicament of the muted system outlined above, she argues:

if such a system is to be envisaged without a collapse, some adequate binding relationship must nevertheless obtain, so perhaps we must assume that generally muted groups manage to forge rickety or cumbersome links between the two orders of structures [muted 'P' and dominant 'S'].
(p. xiv; italics mine)

The double bind model, which I will introduce in Chapter Two, describes one such "binding relationship" which I consider central to the problematics of female poetic subjectivity.

It should be emphasized here that I do not read Ardener's 'P' structures as transcendental structures immanent to (inevitably present to) a given group. I do not consider these "sets of ground rules," in other words, to signify a referential truth taken as outside discourse. Here I draw on Catharine MacKinnon's recent theoretical observations in order to elucidate my view of the nature of the power conflict in which women have been engaged in the cultural sphere. MacKinnon describes this power conflict as a "closed system" in which "construction" precedes "representation": "men create the world from their own point of view, which then becomes the truth to be described" (MacKinnon, 1982: p. 537; italics hers). Accordingly, MacKinnon defines power as "the power to create the world from one's point of view" (p. 537; italics hers). Similarly, I do not read Ardener's 'P' structures as authentic signifieds of a referential truth which lies outside discourse; rather, I perceive in them the generalized rules which constitute a "positivity" in the Foucauldian sense. I thus see the necessary shift between 'P' and 'S' structures not as a shift from 'appearance' to 'reality' but rather as a shift in levels of abstraction and performance, from the level of "laws of possibility, rules of existence," to the level of the "objects that are named, designated, or described within it" (Foucault, 1972: p. 91).

Ardener's model is compatible with my theoretical perspective in yet another important sense, namely, in its rejection of what Foucault has termed the "repressive hypothesis" concerning power (Foucault, 1976: p. 23). In a recent essay on "The Subject and Power," Foucault has proposed an understanding of "power" and "domination" as relational rather than static (as in the power exerted/consent paradigm). Foucault here realizes "power" to lie in "power relations," viewing "Government" as the paradigm of power:

To govern, in this sense, is to structure the possible fields of action of others. The relationship proper to power would not, therefore, be sought on the side of

violence or of struggle, nor on that of voluntary linking
... but rather in the area of the singular mode of action
... which is government.

(Foucault, 1982: p. 790; italics mine)

Similarly, Ardener expresses the wish that "it should ... be possible to discuss the relationship between models in terms of dominance, without any necessary implication that the group generating the dominant model has been able to do so only through a monopoly of sin (or, for that matter, by possessing special virtue)" (Ardener, 1975: p. xxi). The implications of this view for the study of an emergent discourse of female poetic subjectivity are important. Thus, I do not seek to recover an authentic voice -- that of the 'true' female poetic subject. Rather, I am concerned to describe a network of relations whose overall problematics consists in an attempt -- on the part of a self-designated female poetic subject -- to inhabit a space decried as paradoxical by the dominant discourse. Moreover, since that realm which structures the possible field of action/discourse of others -- the hegemonic realm -- will be seen to regard "woman" and "poet" as mutually exclusive, it is to be expected that at its most radical, the self-reflexive attempt to claim a female poetic subjectivity will involve a challenge to the accepted definitions of both "woman" and "poet."

In Defining Females, Ardener outlines an understanding of the "subject" -- in this case of the female subject -- which clearly supports my project as formulated above. Commenting on the subtitle of Defining Females: The Nature of Women in Society (1978), Ardener explains:

It suggests that perceptions of the nature of women affect the shape of the categories assigned to them, which in turn reflect back upon and reinforce or remould perceptions of the nature of women, in a continuing process.

(Ardener, 1978: p. 9; italics mine)

This dynamic, interactive model for subject-constitution is vital to the present study for three main reasons. First, it underlies my interpretive procedure as I seek to identify a poetics of the female subject. Given my understanding of the "subject," this procedure should not be taken as a

search for an authentic female voice but rather as an attempt to describe a complex of textual strategies designed to articulate a voice self-defined as female and poetic. Second, this understanding of subject-constitution is inextricably linked to a larger conceptualization of the status of textual meaning vis-à-vis its object (history). Here I accept, with Terry Eagleton, that "It is ... intrinsic to the character of literary discourse that it does not take history as its immediate object, but works instead upon ideological forms and materials of which history is, as it were, the concealed underside" (Eagleton, 1976: pp. 73-4). Third, the interactive model of subject-constitution is vital to my present concern for, as I will demonstrate in Chapter Two, an essential characteristic of the discourse of female poetic subjectivity consists in an initial recognition, on the part of the female subject, of the power of discourse to name the self. Here, my primary sources are also my best guides, for I take my theoretical 'clue' from the woman writer's own recognition of the faculty of discourse to name (define, fill with meaning) the subject. I will moreover argue that it is this recognition -- of the faculty of discourse to shape the "categories" which in turn affect "perceptions of the nature of woman" -- which can free the woman writer to resist the hegemonic interdiction by re-naming herself, by re-inventing that discursive object which is a female poetic subject.

In terms of a theory of literary relationships, a concern which has initiated my present theoretical venture, the preceding discussion clearly points to a need for a comprehensive, contextual model with which to understand women's writing. Showalter embraces such a model, articulating a perception which is central to my endeavor as well, namely, that "women's writing is a 'double-voiced discourse' that always embodies the social, literary, and cultural heritages of both the muted and the dominant" (Showalter, 1981: p. 201). To EBB's disavowal of literary grandmothers, then, I respond with a critical project that asserts, with Showalter, that "a woman's text ... confronts both paternal and maternal precursors and must deal with the problems and advantages of both lines of inheritance" (p. 203).

This contextual imperative is also articulated by Myra Jehlen who supports a 'dual-parentage' model for a feminist literary history (Jehlen, 1981: p. 585). Jehlen is, moreover, particularly suggestive in her insistence on a new locus for feminist criticism -- a "feminist fulcrum" -- which is "not just any point in the culture where misogyny is manifested but one where misogyny is pivotal or crucial to the whole. The thing to look for in our studies ... is the connection, the meshing of a definition of woman and a definition of the world" (p. 586; italics mine). Seeking to "focus on points of contradiction as the places where we can see the whole structure of a world most clearly" (p. 600), Jehlen singles out the essential contradiction constitutive of the "precondition" of women's writing:

All women's writing ...[is] congenitally defiant and universally characterized by the blasphemous argument it makes in coming into being. And this would mean that the autonomous individuality of a woman's story or poem is framed by engagement, the engagement of its denial of dependence.

(p. 582; italics mine)

Thus, the work of a woman, before being anything else, is already engaged in a 'story' of her blasphemous defiance of the hegemonic discourse, for her "very proposal to be a writer in itself reveals that female identity is not naturally what it has been assumed to be" (p. 585).

In venturing to identify the "story" which "frames" women's writing, Jehlen is already engaged in carrying out what Showalter has defined as the first task of "gynocritic criticism," namely, "to plot the precise cultural locus of female literary identity" (Showalter, 1981: p. 202). This project of identifying the "locus of female literary identity" -- which is also the proper project of the present work -- is already under way in works like Elaine Showalter's A Literature of Their Own (1977), Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar's The Madwoman in the Attic (1979), and Suzanne Juhasz' Naked and Fiery Forms (1976). In her ground-breaking study of the female literary tradition in the English novel from the generation of the Bronte's to the present day, Showalter is already well on her way to reject a fetishism of an innate female subject, favoring an investigation which

looks "not at an innate sexual attitude, but at the ways in which the self-awareness of the woman writer has translated itself into a literary form in a specific place and time-span" (Showalter, 1977: p. 12). Similarly, Juhasz's reading of contemporary women poets, whom she finds to have established "a new tradition, one that speaks in the voice of women, rather than in a pseudo-male or neuter voice," is motivated by her "belief that their [the women poets'] interactions between self and society are related to the poetry that they write" (Juhasz, 1976: pp. 1-5).

Although I find Juhasz' description of the woman poet as caught in a "double bind situation" (p. 2) suggestive, I cannot accept the essentialist premise paradoxically underlying her use of the term. Without much theoretical elaboration, Juhasz argues that "to be a woman poet in our society is a double bind situation ... For the words "woman" and "poet" denote opposite and contradictory qualities and roles" (Juhasz, 1976: p. 1). Ostensibly proceeding from an interactive model of poetic anxiety, Juhasz ultimately fails to pursue this model's logic, resorting instead to a lopsided acceptance of one on the terms of the opposition -- "woman" -- as the valorized pole. Rather than investigate the woman poet's relative position vis à vis the two terms constitutive of the double bind, Juhasz chooses to compose her own critical narrative in which a 'happy end' awaits the woman poet at the end of a continuum of strategies (p. 4). Juhasz defines this continuum as ranging from a negatively marked (undesirable) denial of female experience -- "leaving feminine experience out of art" -- to a positive and valorized "involvement in her [the poet's] own experience of womanhood" (p. 4). Despite its centrality to the scheme, this "experience of womanhood" remains undefined, leaving one to suspect that it involves an uncritical acceptance of the hegemonic definition of "woman." Although Juhasz does envisage a possibility slightly outside the aforementioned continuum -- a possible disintegration of the double bind as the woman poet succeeds in making "woman a function of poet, poet a function of woman" (p. 4) -- her failure to expose the logic which underwrites this opposition seriously hampers her vision. As Chapter Two will demonstrate, a critique of the double bind which involves an insight into the workings of discourse as a practice that names -- a practice that provides a framework within which meaning is deployed -- is the single most important feature characterizing the discourse of female poetic

subjectivity.

Finally, Gilbert and Gubar's impressive study, The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth Century Literary Imagination (1979), is a motivated re-reading, mainly of nineteenth century women novelists, aimed at exploring the problematic position of the woman writer within the literary tradition. Gilbert and Gubar's sense of a female tradition is dictated by "the woman writer's own discomfort, her sense of powerlessness, her fear that she inhabits alien and incomprehensible places" (Gilbert and Gubar, 1979a: pp. 84-5). Extremely suggestive as it is, Gilbert and Gubar's monumental effort at a revisionary feminist criticism is flawed by what Jacobus has termed the "mistress-plot" underwriting it (Jacobus, 1981: p. 518). This plot is the story of a woman writer's struggle to free herself from the confines of patriarchy, and its main "subplots" are: her battle with male precursors, the woman writer's quest for self definition, and her attempt to restore or remember the fragments of a lost story, that of women's wholeness. As Jacobus points out, not only is this scheme reductive -- collapsing women's writing into a diagnosed neurosis in the woman writer -- it is also essentialist, allying itself with Romantic mythmaking. It is Gilbert and Gubar's underlying search for a lost wholeness, for "a lost mother country of origin" (Jacobus, 1981: p. 519), which ultimately renders their study incompatible with my project.

Although many of the insights arrived at in The Madwoman in the Attic could be called forth to support the double bind paradigm I discuss in Chapter Two, my model breaks free of the "madwoman mistress-plot" by regarding women's self-reflexive discourse to be generated by rather than locked into an initial discursive paradox. Furthermore, while Gilbert and Gubar systematically read women's texts as allegories of a self-reflexive moment, thus absorbing the Victorian woman writer into the Victorian woman writer's plot, I deliberately confine my project to the woman writer's self-reflexive discourse. While I do claim this discourse to be generated by a paradoxical moment, I by no means argue that this same paradox is necessarily at the root of all aspects of women's writing. Indeed, even within the context of the self-reflexive discourse, my emphasis is rather on the plurality of strategies devised in response to the double bind than

on any common symptom (such as the "madwoman plot") or on the desirable route of escape towards a 'true' female wholeness.

More recently, Alicia Ostriker's "The Thieves of Language: Women Poets and Revisionist Mythmaking" (1982) is an excellent example of a practical criticism based on an interactive model which avoids imposing its own "mistress-plot" on the corpus studied. Ostriker characterizes the work of contemporary women poets as "a vigorous and various invasion of the sanctuaries of existing language, the treasuries where our meanings for 'male' and 'female' are themselves preserved" (Ostriker, 1982: p. 171). More specifically, she undertakes to examine a large body of poetry by American women, composed in the last twenty years, in which "the project of defining a female self has been a major endeavor" (p. 70). Focusing on these women poets' interest in "revisionist mythmaking," Ostriker explores women's reworking of myth in which she perceives not only a revolt -- a rejection of stereotypes -- but also a reclaiming. Ostriker thus detects in the poetry a female voice which strives to re-appropriate not only an epic voice, that of the myth teller, but also an epic territory, that of myth. Women's revisionist mythmaking, Ostriker contends, "treat[s] existing texts as fence posts surrounding the terrain of mythic truth but by no means identical to it" (p. 87). Ostriker's own project, like that of the women poets she studies, is properly contextual; her context, moreover, like Showalter's cultural model, acknowledges the dual parentage of the woman writer. The "mythmaking" of women modernists, Ostriker realizes, grows "at least as much from a subterranean tradition of female self projection and self-exploration as from the system building of the Romantics and Moderns" (p. 73). It is my project in the present work to contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of this "tradition of female self projection and self exploration" by examining its manifestations in a given period, while never losing sight of the larger context within which they occur.

To recapitulate, I understand textual signification (production of meaning) to be a discursive phenomenon, that is to occur within a discursive field. This discursive field -- the "g no-texte" -- constitutes a "unity," a "positivity" which it is the critic's task to identify and

describe. This unity consists of a network of discursive rules which identify what is true or meaning-filled within a given sphere. In as much as this unity is composed of the standards of what is appropriate or acceptable, moreover, it is characterized as hegemonic. Given this understanding of discourse, it is my contention in the present work that women's self reflexive writing in the period under consideration (late seventeenth century to mid-nineteenth century) evidences a conflict with the hegemonic discourse. This conflict, I submit, is illustrative of the binding relationship which obtains between muted and dominant frameworks as outlined by Shirley and Edwin Ardener. As Chapter Three demonstrates, the hegemonic definition of "woman" decries as mutually exclusive poetic identity and female self. A tradition of self-reflexivity in women's writing, which I trace in Chapter Two, reveals an awareness of this hegemonic paradox and a range of strategies devised to resolve the double bind. These strategies are devised so as to allow the woman writer to assume an identity (or a subjectivity) that is both female and poetic.

Although an understanding of the "subject" as constituted through discourse might seem alien to EBB and the women writers discussed in Chapter Two, my reading of their self-reflexive explorations demonstrates that a central and recurrent tactic for resolving the double bind involves a recognition that the hegemonic representations of woman are not simply reflections of an objective, natural, innate state of affairs. It is this recognition, in turn, which enables the woman writer to defy the paradoxical injunction and which frees her to write her own story for her "better self" (AL, I, 4). This transgressive act of defiance reaches one of its highest points in EBB's canon and in Aurora Leigh in particular. The discursive battle between the hegemonic discourse and the discourse of female poetic subjectivity, however, was not over with Aurora Leigh. In Chapter Six I document this struggle as it manifests itself in the critical literature on Aurora Leigh from the time of its publication to the present date.

CHAPTER TWO

POETIC IDENTITY AND FEMALE SELF: THE DOUBLE BIND

She was saying it by way of aggression, or that by way of conciliation. She was admitting that she was 'only a woman,' or protesting that she was 'as good as a man.' ... she was thinking of something other than the thing itself. Down comes her book upon our heads. There was a flaw in the centre of it.

Virginia Woolf, A Room of One's Own (1929)

"Is a pen a metaphorical penis?" wonder Gilbert and Gubar on broaching the subject of Feminist Poetics (Gilbert and Gubar, 1979a), bearing well in mind the words of protest of a seventeenth century woman poet, Ann Finch, Countess of Winchilsea:

Alas! a woman that attempts the pen,
Such an intruder on the rights of men,
Such a presumptuous creature is esteemed,
The fault can by no virtue be redeemed.
(Finch, 1928: p. 24)

"How does the consciousness of being a woman affect the workings of the poetic imagination?" ponders Margaret Homans at the outset of her Women Writers and Poetic Identity (1980). "Comment écrire quand une identité vous est refusée?" asks herself Beatrice Didier in her compelling L'écriture-femme (1981), bringing to the fore the problematics of the subject in women's writing (Didier, 1981: p. 34). In contemporary thought, this line of inquiry could be traced back to Virginia Woolf's all too ambivalent reflections on women and creativity in A Room of One's Own (1929). In attempting to unravel the meaning of her assigned topic "women and fiction," Woolf articulates a concern that is central to the present work. "The title women and fiction might mean," suggests Woolf, "women and what they are like, or it might mean women and the fiction that they write; or it might mean women and the fiction that is written about them, or it might mean," she adds in a moment of intertextual inspiration, "that all three are inextricably mixed together" (Woolf, 1929: p. 5). The present work has been conceived as an attempt to describe -- within given limits -- such a network of intersecting, "inextricably mixed" discourses. My focus throughout is on the moment of attempted synthesis exemplified by Woolf's own essay: a self-reflexive moment in which the woman writer contemplates the fiction written about her and the fiction she writes, in order to arrive at an understanding of what she is like.

While the next chapter will focus specifically on aspects of the fiction (in a broader, discursive, sense) written about women (in early Victorian England), the present chapter strives to understand that self-reflexive moment in women's writing which occurs when the female speaking subject reflects upon all three concerns delineated by Woolf.

Given an hegemonic discourse which assigns women the private, domestic, sphere, and thus denies them the poet's public speech, what have women writers thought of themselves? How have they reconciled poetic identity and female self? What did they have to say about the fictions written about them (as women, as poets, as women poets)? what were the fictions they were telling, in turn? The following is a preliminary study in what still remains a largely uncharted area. It is an attempt to probe certain aspects of that "lieu commun" (Angenot, 1977a: p. 14) from which English women writers, as a group, have been speaking since their ascent to published/public speech in the seventeenth century. I look at this marginalized discourse, the self-reflexive commentary (on the woman writer) running through women's writing from the seventeenth century to the mid-nineteenth, seeking not comprehensiveness but rather an elucidation of the basic features of this discourse. I thus look at works across generic boundaries, ranging from the didactic (Astell, Wollstonecraft) to the high poetic (Baillie, L.E. Landon), in order not only to point out common preoccupations but also to underline the intimate links between aesthetic constraints and epistemological liberties. In 'unearthing' this self-reflexive discourse, it will be remembered, my aim is twofold. First, I strive to identify the terms of the problematics which it exposes, the problematics of female poetic subjectivity. Second, I attempt to reclaim or recover for EBB's canon in general, and Aurora Leigh in particular, a literary tradition, the heritage of the "grandmothers" whom EBB so provocatively disavowed.

Historically, it was not until the time of Henry VIII, with Renaissance ideas concerning the education of women coming to England from Spain (through Catherine, the first wife of Henry VIII), that the learned lady became a recognizable factor in English social life (Reynolds, 1920). By the seventeenth century, a distinct body of women writers had formed itself, although the number of truly professional women, that is women who depended on their writing for subsistence, was still small. From these very early days of female authorship, however, there already emerges a certain shared awareness, an awareness that will mark much of the literature produced by women in the generations to follow. From the very beginning, women writers had registered an awareness of the anomalous nature that their literary activity assumed in the societies in which they lived and

produced.

Throughout the period under consideration here -- late seventeenth century to the early nineteenth -- an hegemonic discourse on women (only partially documented by Rogers, 1966), can be seen to assert that intellectual activity, the active pursuit of knowledge and public speech, of which serious art partakes, jeopardizes femininity, and with it, desirability. This discourse thus declares not so much woman's relative intellectual incompetence (although this would serve as an argument) as the very incompatibility of intellectual activity and femininity. Throughout the centuries, major as well as minor writers and philosophers, essayists and poets, politicians and educators alike, have engaged in perpetuating this discourse; Aristotle and Plato, Milton, Pope, and Rousseau, as well as Hannah More, Dr. Gregory, Mrs. Ellis, and myriad of others, have all had their share in it.

The arguments used to substantiate the claims of this discourse have been as varied as the ideological structures with which the discourse has intersected at different historical points. During centuries of flourishing Christianity, for example, the Epistle of Paul was used as a model text; the Epistle makes an explicit connection between woman's subordinate position and her exclusion from the realms of learning and public speech:

Let the woman learn in silence with all subjection. But I suffer not a woman to teach, nor to usurp authority over the man, but to be in silence.

(I Timothy 2: 11-12; italics mine)

Not surprisingly, when a 15th century woman visionary did speak, she inevitably experienced a peculiarly 'feminine' anxiety of authorship, being compelled to a self-defensive stand. Julian of Norwich (1343-1443), a religious visionary, writes: "But because I am a woman, ought I therefore to believe that I should not tell you of the goodness of God, when I saw at the same time that it is his will that it be known?" (Juliana, 1978: ch. 6, p. 135). This anxiety, which becomes more visible but also more acute as the woman writer ventures into self-reflexivity, involves a recognition on the woman writer's part that her 'life-story' radically conflicts with

the 'life-story' that the hegemonic discourse holds up to her as her mirror image, as her 'natural' image. Thus, Margaret Cavendish, the Duchess of Newcastle, the author of the first important secular autobiography by a woman, agonizes near the end of her True Relation of my Birth, Breeding and Life (1656): "why hath this lady writ her own life?" (Cavendish, 1656: p. 178). She is driven to face up to this narrative incongruity confessing that she has been since childhood "addicted ... to write with the pen [rather] than to work with a needle" (p. 172). Anne Bradstreet, her contemporary, defiantly discloses her fondness for the "poet's pen," writing: "I am obnoxious to each carping tongue/ Who says my hand a needle better fits" (Bradstreet, 1967: p. 16).

We find the clearest articulation of this discursive conflict in the words of a seventeenth century lyric poet, Ann Finch, Countess of Winchilsea (1661-1720):

Alas! a woman that attempts the pen,
Such an intruder on the rights of men,
Such a presumptuous creature is esteemed,
The fault can by no virtue be redeemed.
They tell us we mistake our sex and way;
Good breeding, fashion, dancing, dressing, play,
Are the accomplishments we should desire;
To write, or read, or think, or to enquire
Would cloud our beauty, and exhaust our time,
And interrupt the conquests of our prime.
Whilst the dull manage of a servile house
Is held by some our utmost art and use.
(Finch, 1928: p. 24).

In Ann Finch's poignant words lies a clue to the understanding of much of the literature produced by women since. For, as Virginia Woolf knew, and from first hand experience, a woman writing in the sixteenth, as in the nineteenth, century, "was an unhappy woman, a woman at strife against herself. All the conditions of her life, all her own instincts, were hostile to the state of mind which is needed to set free whatever is in the brain" (Woolf, 1929: p. 50).

Finch's prologue-poem is exemplary of the discourse of female poetic subjectivity in that it has as its subject matter, as well as as its speaking subject, the woman poet. I thus define the discourse of female poetic subjectivity by a necessary convergence for in it both the figure of the 'real' (historical) author and that of the 'fictional' (poetic) persona coincide in the discursive subject -- a woman poet -- and a discursive practice -- self reflexivity. In what follows I propose an understanding of this discourse as characterized by a conflict with the hegemonic "historical a-priori" which decries as mutually exclusive high artistic creation and femininity. I see this paradoxical injunction which posits as mutually exclusive poetic identity and female self to be at the root of a self-reflexive discourse whose thrust it is to resolve the double bind by recourse to various strategies, chief among which is the very activity of self-creation through writing. Although the present chapter is concerned with the interrelationship between genre and self-reflexivity, I use "poet" and "poetics" here in a broader sense to indicate artistic self-consciousness. In this respect it is already highly symptomatic that Finch's epistle -- which I consider as representative of the discourse of female poetic subjectivity -- appears in the form of a preface to a collection of her poems. During the period under examination, women writers' self-reflexive discourse will be seen to emerge slowly and gradually from a position of total marginality vis-à-vis the belles lettres, appearing mainly in such personal forms as diaries and letters, to take on more public forms such as treatises and other forms of didactic literature, before ultimately venturing into the realm of high art.

In Finch's poem, the poetic subject (persona) attempts to define a discursive locus that will be appropriate to, that could accomodate, a female poetic subject. The attempt is shown to be, in a sense, self-defeating, for all the woman poet can know are acts of exclusion and a play of contradictions, finding herself in a state of sin in which "the fault [of being a woman poet] can by no virtue be redeemed." Writing as a woman poet, Finch is driven to recognize her paradoxical condition within a discourse which regards femininity -- "breeding, fashion, dancing, dressing, play, ... beauty" -- and poetic creativity -- "to write or read, or think, or enquire" -- as mutually exclusive. Finch is moreover aware of the inescapable hold of this discourse which dictates duty ("the dull

manage of a servile home") as well as desire ("the accomplishments we should desire"), thus barring all escape routes, for to desire deviance from the prescribed role is already to relinquish sexual identity.

Two centuries and two major literary periods later, one is overwhelmed with a striking resemblance; the voice here is that of a twelve year old poet-to-be, Elizabeth Barrett:

My mind is naturally independent, and spurns that subserviency of opinion which is generally considered necessary to feminine softness.... It is not -- I know it is not -- an encroachment on masculine prerogative but it is a proud sentiment which will never allow me to be humbled in my own eyes.

(EBB, 1820: p. 131)

I will return to EBB's revealing statement, written at the age of fourteen, in Chapter Four. In the present chapter I attempt to reconstruct a tradition of feminine-poetic self-reflexivity within which to situate EBB's large-scale explorations of female poetic identity. To account for the formal properties of the discourse of female poetic subjectivity, which we will see to persist despite diversity of theme and genre, I turn now to the double bind communicational model elaborated by Gregory Bateson in his studies of schizophrenia.

Bateson's overall approach is methodologically compatible with my own orientation in two ways. First, Bateson's is a contextual-interactive model which translates well into the scheme of intertextual semiosis that I have adopted. Bateson writes: "the weaving of contexts and of messages which propose context -- but which, like all messages whatsoever, have 'meaning' only by virtue of context -- is the subject matter of the so called double bind theory" (Bateson, 1972: p. 275). Second, Bateson's model is compatible with my diachronic approach (which crosses chronological as well as formal boundaries) in that Bateson accomplishes a generalized formal (as opposed to local) description of sequences, looking not for "some specific traumatic experience ... but rather for characteristic sequential patterns" (p. 206). As will become evident from the discussion that follows, Bateson's communicational model serves well

the purposes of this study in that both its degree of abstraction (formal properties) and its level of analysis (injunctions, messages) are compatible with the discursive project I have undertaken.

The necessary "ingredients for a double bind situation" according to Bateson are:

1. Two or more persons. Of these, we [Bateson's research team] designate one, for purposes of our definition, as the "victim."
2. Repeated experience. We assume that the double bind is a recurrent theme in the experience of the victim. Our hypothesis does not invoke a single traumatic experience, but such repeated experience that the double bind structure comes to be an habitual expectation.
3. A primary negative injunction.
4. A secondary injunction conflicting with the first at a more abstract level, and like the first enforced by punishments or signals which threaten survival.
5. A tertiary injunction prohibiting the victim from escaping from the field.
6. Finally, the complete set of ingredients is no longer necessary when the victim has learned to perceive his universe in double bind patterns.

(extracted from Bateson, 1972: pp. 206-207)

While in the schizophrenic situation the double bind could be inflicted "either by mother alone or by some combination of mother, father, and/or siblings" (p. 206), in the literary scene the acting forces are those of the literary and social discourse (the "géo-texte"). Within this framework a special significance is to be accorded, as I shall argue, to the inscription of the sexual on the textual (EBB speaks, we recall, of absent grandmothers and powerful grandfathers). The repetition characteristic of the double bind experience is extremely pertinent to my

analysis for the discourse of female poetic subjectivity is clearly in conflict with an hegemonic discourse, a repeated discursive practice. Our "victim," then, is a literary subject whose self-reflexive discourse is the discourse of a subject self-defined as both feminine and poetic. To this subject whose a priori self definition is as feminine and poetic, I argue, the hegemonic discourse delivers:

1. A primary negative injunction: retain poetic identity by relinquishing feminine self.
2. A secondary negative injunction: retain feminine self by relinquishing poetic identity.
3. A tertiary negative injunction -- the prohibition to escape -- is constituted (as in the schizophrenic double bind) both by the threat to survival (the threat of losing a vital identity core) and by devices which are not purely negative, such as excessive rewards for conformity with hegemonic representations.

Bateson's reliance on a communicational model and on Russell's theory of Logical Types enables him to define the specific communicational deficiencies (disfunctions) which lock the subject in the double bind. In the schizophrenic double bind situation "the individual is involved in an intense relationship; that is, a relationship in which he feels it vitally important that he discriminate accurately what sort of message is being communicated so that he may respond appropriately" (Bateson, 1972: p. 208). It is my underlying assumption here that such intense relationship prevails between the female poetic subject and the hegemonic discourse. It is vitally important for the female poetic subject involved in self-reflexion to respond appropriately to the messages delivered by the hegemonic discourse. Since these messages, however, involve a paradoxical injunction -- the subject self-defined as woman poet cannot both retain poetic self by relinquishing feminine identity and retain feminine identity by relinquishing poetic self -- any attempt on the part of the female poetic subject to claim an identity which is both feminine and poetic is caught in a double bind situation.

Finally, Bateson capitalizes on the victim's inability "to comment on the messages being expressed to correct his discrimination of what order of message to respond to, i.e., he cannot make a metacommunicative statement" (Bateson, 1972: p. 208; italics mine). Bateson sees this absence of any self-correcting mechanism in the individual to result in a spiral of "never ending, but always systematic, distortions" (p. 212). These distortions could range from a dissociation of the individual from herself or himself -- "in an impossible situation it is better to shift and become somebody else, or shift and insist that he is somewhere else" (p. 210) -- to other self-defense tactics in which the individual will be described as "paranoid, hebephrenic, or catatonic" (p. 211). In literary history, women have most often resorted to the first and last of these tactics. The extreme marginalization of the discourse of female subjectivity, its virtual absence from the bulk of the literature produced by women, and the tendency in women's writing to conform to hegemonic representations of the female, all attest to a tactic of dissociation. The silence that replaces literary production by women in various historical periods and different genres could be partly understood as a testimony to the paralyzing effect of the paradoxical discursive injunction.

Given a definition of the double bind as an inability to make a metacommunicative statement regarding a paradoxical injunction, The resolution of a double bind situation inevitably lies in the correction of the metacommunicative disfunction. Bateson writes:

the only way the child can really escape from the situation is to comment on the contradictory position his mother has put him in.... The ability to communicate about communication, to comment upon the meaningful actions of oneself and others, is essential for successful social intercourse.

(Bateson, 1972: p. 215)

For all the women writing self-reflexively in the period under consideration, the one discursive invariable is an hegemonic decree which posits woman and poet as mutually exclusive. While the terms of this exclusion vary across synchronic as well as diachronic lines (for example, across generic as well as periodic lines), I see both the double bind

situation and its only possible resolution in a metacommunicative act as invariables of the discourse of female subjectivity. Whenever there is an absence of metacommunicative awareness (awareness of the double bind) in women's self-reflexive discourse, it is an absence that bespeaks a silenced subject. On the other hand, the articulated self-reflexivity is persistently and consistently a working out of the double bind, an attempt to resolve conflict through appeal to 'higher' logical types (a metacommunicative act) which subsume lower-level conflicts and resolve them on a higher plane of description.

Within the double bind communicational paradigm -- which serves as my conceptual model -- I thus consider self-reflexivity to occupy the position of a corrective mechanism (a mechanism absent in the schizophrenic model) aimed at the restoration of choice to a situation where a paradoxical injunction "bankrupts choice itself, setting in motion a self-perpetuating oscillating series" (Watzlawick, 1967: p. 217). Finch's strategy, in the poem quoted above, constitutes a necessary first step towards a restoration of choice and the establishment of a female poetic subject. This strategy consists in exposing the 'fictiveness' of the mutually exclusive plots of art and femininity. Finch's very articulation of the double bind already reveals an underlying recognition that the tale she is told is not a transparent carrier of a truth, not (to use a more modern idiom) "a slender surface of contact ... between reality and a language," but rather discourse, "a practice that ... forms the objects of which it speaks" (Foucault, 1972: pp. 48-49). "They tell us," Finch contends, exposing the dynamics of the double bind as a two-party interaction in which "they" bind "us" by a message, a tale "they tell us." Finch's own act of writing, moreover, not only defies this injunction but also demonstrates its 'fictionality': a woman can be, in real fact, a poet.

In as much as it is primarily generated by the awareness that discourse does not simply reflect objective reality but only claims to do so while in effect creating its own objects, the discourse of female poetic subjectivity offers a particularly opportune example for the study of the complex mutual articulation of the ideological and the aesthetic. In this, moreover, it sets the paradigm for a contextual feminist literary criticism as outlined in the previous chapter. I thus partly agree with Terry

Eagleton when he affirms that feminist literary criticism is "spontaneously aware of the ideological nature of received literary hierarchies, and struggles for their reconstruction" (Eagleton, 1981: p. 98). What I disagree with is Eagleton's qualifying adverb; one is not "spontaneously" aware of the inscription of the ideological in the textual. For the female writing subject this awareness has specifically arisen out of the need to resist a preempting, mutilating discourse. Needless to say, both the hegemonic injunction and the poet's self-reflexive project are historically/intertextually specific, as any given text stands at the point of intersection of particular semiotic practices. Thus, while I consider the double bind paradigm to be an invariable of this discourse, I am more specifically concerned with the particular ideological and aesthetic configurations as they materialize in individual texts or groups of texts. What follows, then, is an attempt to outline significant strategies for dealing with the double bind as they manifest themselves in the self-reflexive explorations of individual women writers from the late seventeenth century to the early nineteenth century.

Ann Finch, or "the gentle Ardelia" as she came to be called, was primarily a lyrical poet whose nature poetry won her, almost a century after her death, Wordsworth's approval, and thus a more lasting fame. Her strategy for dealing with the double bind is particularly representative of her age, for it consists in bringing scepticism to bear upon the notion of woman's natural, innate, 'femininity'. She thus reasons:

How are we fallen! fallen by mistaken rules,
And Education's, more than Nature's fools.
Debarred from all improvements of the mind,
And to be dull, expected and designed.
(Finch, 1928: p. 25)

Finch's strategy is a thoroughly logical one: by questioning the validity of one of the terms of the opposition, in this case 'femininity', she undermines the validity of the opposition itself. Ann Finch's culprits, moreover, are the ones women writers will seek out time and again: a faulty education and the "mistaken rules" of a society which blocks a woman's access to the "improvements of the mind."

Margaret Cavendish, the Duchess of Newcastle (1624-1674), like Ann Finch, the Countess of Winchilsea, was not a professional writer. She was, however, deeply concerned with the damaging effects of the hegemonic discourse on women's self-image and their pursuit of intellectual and artistic interests. Being well aware of the connection between access to the written/published word and access to power, the Duchess of Newcastle is able to offer women a way to bypass the double bind. Like the Countess of Winchilsea she scrutinizes the traditional definition of femininity; unlike her, she is capable of perceiving the politics of power underlying it. She thus writes an Address to the Two Universities (1655), in the hope that her book may be received

for the good incouragement of our sex, lest in time we should grow irrational as idiots ... through the careless neglects, and despisements of the masculine sex to be effeminate, thinking it impossible we should have either learning or understanding, wit or judgement, as if we had not rational souls as well as men, and we out of a custom of dejectedness think so too, which makes us quit all industry towards profitable knowledge. ... for we are kept like birds in cages to hop up and down in our houses ... we are shut out of all power and authority.
(Cavendish, 1655)

In pointing out the connection between the ideology of femininity and the practice of shutting women "out of all power and authority," the Duchess of Newcastle offers women an insight into the nature of the double bind, and a possible way out. As I shall argue, it was left to Mary Wollstonecraft to make the most of this insight, demonstrating the intimate links between the political order and a view of the sexual order (sex roles) which falsely presents itself as reflecting the natural order.

The Duchess of Newcastle and the Countess of Winchilsea were not professional writers; their painful awareness of their predicament was mostly a matter of introspective activity. For their contemporaries Aphra Behn (1640-1689) and Susanna Centlivre (1667-1723), however, playwrighting was a means of subsistence. For these early professional women the double bind necessarily became an issue that had to be dealt with openly,

publicly, in order for them to establish an acceptable, if possible favourable, position with the public. For Aphra Behn, the first Englishwoman to earn her living by writing, the conflict was further aggravated by her choice of a discourse considered taboo for women, the "Bawdy": for the very low in art, as the very high, is unwomanly. For Behn, however, a significant part of the solution to the double bind problem lies in its reformulation: rather than internalize the conflict, she conceives of it in chiefly materialistic/professional terms. Having been attacked on the ground that the "bawdy" was improper for a woman, she retaliates, in the Preface to Sir Patient Fancy (1678), by way of allusion to "the Author's unhappiness, who is forced to write for Bread, and not ashamed to owne it, and consequently ought to write to please (if she can) an Age which has given several proofs it was by this way of writing to be obliged, though it is a way too cheap for men of wit to pursue who write for Glory" (Behn, 1915: IV, p. 7).

Behn's voice is honest and straightforward: it is the voice of a woman striving professionally in a man's world, the voice of a woman who acknowledges her aims, and is perfectly clear about her means. On presenting Sir Patient Fancy (1678) to the public, she further charges: "the play has no other Misfortune but that of coming out for a Woman's; had it been owned by Man, though the most Dull Unthinking Rascally Scribbler in Town, it had been a most admirable Play" (Behn, 1915: IV, p. 7). This charge is again incorporated in the play itself, where in the Epilogue Mrs. Gwin exclaims: "What has poor Woman done, that she must be/ Debar'd from Sense, and sacred Poetry?" (IV, p. 115). With her two feet on the ground, Behn does not hesitate to confront men with their own hypocrisy: defining herself as a professional writer rather than as a woman writer, she demands an impartial and critically honest hearing. Consequently, however, Behn is driven to see herself as divided between the woman and the "masculine part" in her, the writer.⁽¹⁾ The manifesto she added to The Lucky Chance (1687) clearly attests to her refusal to grant the woman writer a literary identity. Behn's final plea in the manifesto reflects this split consciousness:

(1) Angeline Goreau's recent and excellent Reconstructing Aphra: A Social Biography of Aphra Behn (1980), deals with this dilemma in a chapter entitled "Double Binds; or, the Male Part in Me."

All I ask, is the privilege for my masculine part, the poet in me, (if any such you will allow me) to tread in those successful paths my predecessors have so long thrived in.

(Behn, 1915: III, p. 187)

Behn's self-avowed identification with the other sex in her capacity as a writer notwithstanding, her writing reveals an attempt to reconcile masculine wit with feminine appeal. Her own way of dealing with the double bind is well illustrated in the following passage from the Prologue to her first play, The Forced Marriage, or the Jealous Bridegroom (1670):

Beauty alone goes now at too cheap rates;
And therefore they, like Wise and Politick States,
Court a new Power that may the old supply,
To keep as well as gain the Victory.
They'll join the force of Wit to Beauty now,
And so maintain the Right they have in you
(Behn, 1915: III, p. 285).

Behn's strategy will become a stock one with women writers, for no one has a more intimate knowledge of the transience of that most cherished of feminine attributes, beauty, than woman herself. Thus, women writers will strive to turn the double bind situation upside-down, making their literary activity itself a desirable feminine attribute, appealing to the rational, rather than the sensual, in men. We will come to see personalities as diametrically opposed as the revolutionary Mary Wollstonecraft and the arch-conservative Hannah More, writers as different in their literary talent as Maria Edgeworth and Elizabeth Barrett Browning, women as temperamentally worlds apart as George Sand and Letitia E. Landon, all transform, in their works, literary and intellectual activity into a most desired aspect of womanhood.

Both Aphra Behn and Susanna Centlivre fought a woman's battle for recognition, in a desire to establish themselves as writers in a man's world. Theirs was more a doing than a saying; they trespassed rather than philosophized. Thus, although a number of Aphra Behn's plays were produced anonymously -- the novelty of a woman playwright not promising popularity -- there would often be some indication, in the prologue or the epilogue,

as to the feminine authorship. In a like manner, Susanna Centlivre published The Platonic Lady (1706) anonymously, but then broke away from the custom of dedicating the work to a nobleman to make her dedication the occasion of a protest against the fashion of decrying plays merely on account of the sex of the playwright. Like Behn, Centlivre was first and foremost preoccupied with the practical, damaging consequences of the double bind situation. Hers was a war less with the internal tyrants and more with public opinion. Her immediate enemies came from without, in the form of a Charles Gildon who, in his 1702 A Comparison Between the Two Stages has his character Critick startle at the mention of a play by a "Lady" and exclaim:

I wonder in my Heart we are so lost to all Sense and Reason: What a Pox have the Women to do with the Muses?
... Sir, I tell you we are Abus'd: I hate these Petticoat-Authors; 'tis false Grammar, There's no Feminine for the Latin word, 'tis entirely of the Masculine Gender, and The language won't bear such a thing As a She-Author.
(Gildon, 1702: p. 17)

Centlivre's strategy in dealing with the double bind would set another model for women writers to follow. On one level, Centlivre is careful to keep up a feminine, lady-like facade, prefacing her plays with lines such as the following, from the Prologue to her first play The Perjur'd Husband (1700):

And Here's To-night, what doubly makes it sweet,
A Private Table, and a Lady's Treat.
At her reflections none can be uneasy,
When the kind Creature does her best to please ye.
(Centlivre, 1872: I, p. 3)

Having put up this facade, she then proceeds to indulge in that most unfeminine occupation, the writing of witty, successful plays, and under the cover of anonymity, in the safety of the "women's quarters," outrightly challenges the myth of male superiority. In her unsigned contribution to Sara Fyge Egerton's Collection of Poems on Several Occasions (1706), Centlivre addresses Mrs. Egerton thus:

Thou Champion for our sex go on and show,
Ambitious Man what Womankind can do
In vain they boast of large Scholastick Rules,
Their skill in Arts and Labour in the Schools

...

Since here they'll find themselves outdone by thee.
(Egerton, 1706)

Yet, unlike her contemporary the feminist essayist Mary Astell, Centlivre had not only to deal, in a dramatically credible way, with the further implications of woman's newly acquired intellectual position for the relationship between the sexes, but had also to make this presentation as palatable as possible. Thus, in The Basset Table (1706), Valeria is the prototype of the clever, progressive woman whose scientific interests leave her no time for the more feminine affairs of the heart. She is, however, sympathetically portrayed by Centlivre who delivers her of ridicule and spinsterhood by finally making love win the contest with science, the thesis of the play being that no matter how learned a woman becomes, love will always reign at the end.

Centlivre's attempt to reconcile Valeria's intellectual inclinations with her 'feminine' destiny (her marriageability) is indicative of the writing woman's projected effort to resolve the conflict between her will to write (as a vocation) and her wish to retain her status as woman. This, we will come to see, has been a constant preoccupation with women writers: since the very position in which their literary activity puts them implies a conflict between their femininity and their creativity, and thus a threat to their relationship with men, their works often involve a constant reworking of this relationship and of the concept of love itself. Whenever the self-reflexive element enters a woman's writing, it more often than not leads to a reflection upon her position as a loved/loving object/subject.

By the end of the seventeenth century and beginning of the eighteenth, a whole body of successful women playwrights had established itself. Dramatists and novelists like Aphra Behn, Susanna Centlivre, Mary de la Riviere Manley (1672-1724), Eliza Haywood (1693-1756), and Letitia Pilkington (1712-1750), were all treating the fact of female authorship

mainly in as much as it affected public recognition and approval.(2) For other women of the period, however, notable among them Mary Astell (1668-1731), a further and more profound questioning of social structures was inevitable. For Mary Astell, as for the Duchess of Newcastle before her, the issue of female authorship is only symptomatic of a larger social problematics; accordingly, one of Astell's first tasks is to do away with the mystification of the feminine character, and to establish instead a larger ideological context within which to view the present state of affairs.

In her Essay in Defence of the Female Sex (1696) -- which foreshadows much of Mary Wollstonecraft's famous Vindication of the Rights of Woman (1792) -- Astell charges:

I shall not enter into any dispute, whether Men, or Women be generally more ingenious, or learned; that point must be given up to the advantage Men have over us by their Education, Freedom of Converse, and Variety of Business and Company.

(Astell, 1696: p. 6)

Having acknowledged these constraining circumstances, Astell proceeds to spell out women's full potential. Here, again, for Mary Astell, as for Wollstonecraft a century later, as for so many other women writers since, the attempt at self definition (as a woman and an artist) necessarily involves a re-examination of the relationship with the male, a relationship hitherto based on a clear cut binary opposition viewing man as the mind, woman as the body/heart. Astell's argument could serve as a prototype of many such to come:

This is indeed the true reason, why love, which is generally so hot at first cools commonly so suddenly; because being generally the issue of Fancy, not Judgment, it is grounded upon an over great Opinion of those Perfections, which first strike us, and which fall in our

(2) Letitia Pilkington's Memoires of Celebrated Female Characters who have distinguished themselves by their Talents and Virtues in every Age and Nation attests, however, to her interest in the subject of women's history and achievement.

esteem upon more natural examination. From whence it is likewise that Men are less constant in their Affections than we; for Beauty being generally the object of their Passion, the Effect must necessarily be as fading as the Cause.

(Astell, 1696: pp. 128-9)

By pointing out the search for sensual gratification as the real motive behind the glorification of woman's 'innocence' -- which is but an imposed ignorance -- and by declaring the transience of the affections resting on the sensual alone, Astell establishes an argument for the development of the "Graces of the Mind" as a woman's chief resource. In A Serious Proposal to the Ladies (1694) she tells the "ladies" that her "only design" is "to improve your Charms and heighten your Value, by suffering you no longer to be cheap and contemptible" (Astell, 1694: p. 1). Her Proposal's aim, she declares, is "to fix that Beauty, to make it lasting and permanent, which Nature with all the helps of Art cannot secure ... An obliging Design which wou'd procure them inward beauty" (p. 1; italics hers).

Astell's A Serious Proposal to the Ladies for the Advancement of their True and Greatest Interest (1694) is an extensive attempt to deal with the problematics of women and knowledge. Using a recognizable and widely acceptable religious framework, Astell denounces her contemporaries' view of femininity by demonstrating its appeal to the "corruptible Body" over the "immortal Mind" (Astell, 1694: p. 1). Her "Design" in the Proposal is thus in total conformity with religious principles since it calls for the reformation of the "Soul" and the cultivation of "inward Beauty" (p. 10). In a second turn of her argument, Astell invokes the great advocates of "Reason" -- Descartes and Locke -- whom she inserts within the religious framework to support her design in rectifying "that Ignorance [which] is the cause of most Feminine Vices" (p. 7). Astell's primary objective is to dismantle the accepted view of femininity, an objective she chiefly achieves by pointing at an array of feminine practices, which she condemns as incapacitating "Follies," arguing that they are "acquired not natural, and [are] none ... so necessary," since women "might avoid them if they pleas'd themselves" (p. 6). Astell, moreover, considers the accepted view

of woman -- the claim that woman is naturally alienated from knowledge -- to be based on a false tautology and an abusive practice; she argues: "women are from their very infancy debar'd those Advantages, with the want of which they are afterwards reproached, and nursed up in those Vices which will hereafter be upbraided to them" (p. 6).

Astell dissolves the double bind conflict by shifting to new grounds, by redefining the three basic parameters: woman, man, world. Underlying her revisionary project (of redefinition) is an appeal to Divine authority and Divine precept, a tactic which serves both to support her call for change -- in the name of devout perfection -- and to justify her own presumption in assuming the authority to speak up. Astell is well aware of the radical implications of her call for feminine access to knowledge, and of the threat it poses to a male hegemony which she perceives to reside in power gained through knowledge. She contends:

The ladies, I'm sure, have no reason to dislike this Proposal, but I know not how the Men will resent it to have their enclosure broke down, and women invited to taste of that Tree of knowledge they have so long unjustly Monopolized.

(Astell, 1694: P. 20; italics hers).

While she hastens to pacify potential opposition, claiming "we pretend not that women shou'd teach in the Church, or usurp Authority where it is not allow'd them" (p. 20), Astell unequivocally undermines the hegemonic authority by appealing to a higher order: "for since GOD has given Women as well as Men intelligent Souls, why should they be forbidden to improve them?" (p. 18). While improvement is warranted by Divine will, Astell argues, it can be accomplished through the agency of "Reason," and with the help of philosophers such as Descartes and Locke. Reason itself, Astell contends, is a divine endowment, for "a desire to advance and perfect its Being, is planted by GOD in all Rational Natures," and "the Eternal Word and Wisdom of GOD declares his Fathers' will unto us, by Reason" (p. 135; italics hers).

In Astell's scheme, then, woman's fall consists in a fall from a rational state in which woman possessed knowledge to a state in which woman is possessed by the body, driven by "unreasonable Passions" (Astell, 1694: p. 155), and consumed by a desire "to be admir'd" and "to get love" (p. 9). Astell attributes this fall to men's "own folly, in denying them [women] the benefit of an ingenuous and liberal Education" (p. 7). Deprived of an education and thus of "a well inform'd and discerning Mind," woman has fallen prey to "silly Artifices"; internalizing the deceitful images of femininity projected back to her by men, she has allowed this "Enemy from without" draw "over to his Party these Traitors from within," Ignorance and Vanity (p. 9). Exposing the hegemonic view of woman -- the view of woman as vain, ignorant, and at the mercy of her passions -- Astell argues this state of affairs to be not woman's natural state, but an imposed atrocity, the work of an "Enemy from without" (men) who, in banishing women from knowledge, have left them at the mercy of the internal tyrants, Ignorance and Vanity.

Astell's critique, in turn, enables her to unmake the double bind by demonstrating its absurdity, invalidating it within the very religious framework used (by the hegemonic discourse) to construct it. Astell thus contends that to bar women's access to knowledge -- which, she submits, is knowledge of the Divine -- is tantamount to forcing them to live in sin, knowing only a sensual, Godless, existence. Astell points out that while the cherished feminine attributes are said to be "Beauty .. Love and Honour," in effect the true meaning of these words has been preempted and distorted by the language of "Appearances" taught to women, a language in which "these venerable Names ... [are] ... wretchedly abus'd and affixt to their direct contraries, yet this is the Custom of the World" (Astell, 1694: p. 9; italics mine). Significantly, Astell's strategy for resolving the double bind is already suggested by her critique of the causes which have brought it about. This critique is twofold, for it recognizes both the capacity of discourse to manipulate meaning -- affixing "Names" to "their direct contraries," for example -- and the power inherent in that practice, a power achieved through consensus -- the effect of "Custom." Accordingly, Astell proposes to resolve the double bind by 'restoring' to words -- and in particular to the feminine attributes -- their 'original', namely, religious, meaning. Appealing to the widely

accepted religious view which asserts the preeminence of the "Soul" (knowledge) over the "Body" -- "the Body is the Instrument of the Mind and no more" (p. 137) -- Astell urges the restoration of that realm to women.

Astell's practical plea, which frames and engenders both parts of the Proposal is for an "Institution [which] is rather Academical than Monastic" (p. 157; italics hers). This practical plan coincides well with the philosophical project undertaken by Astell: since she endeavors to undo a discourse which has become "the Custom of the World" -- that is, has become so transparent as to be mistaken for the nature of the world -- her call is for a temporary withdrawal from the world. She proclaims:

therefore it is fit we Retire a little, to furnish our Understanding with useful Principles, to set our Inclinations right, and to manage our Passions, and when this is well done, but not till then, we may safely venture out.

(p. 158)

Appropriately, in her own narrative Astell 'ventures out' to address and solicit the sympathy of the other sex. Astell reassures the men that the women coming out of the Institute -- which she describes as an earthly paradise, a "little emblem of that blessed place" (p. 33) -- will be women whose "Affections have daily regaled on those delicious Fruits of Paradise which Religion presents them with, and are therefore too sublime and refin'd to relish the muddy Pleasures of Sensual Delights" (p. 34). This woman, argues Astell, could not but please and endear herself to man as wife and mother, with the possible exception of the "Beaux" and the "gay fluttering Fops," who regard nothing but their "own brutish Appetites" (p. 40). While appeasing the men, Astell in fact further incites the women by suggesting the desirability of a marriage of like-minded mates and by proposing that a husband both match up to his wife's "knowledge" and respect and appreciate it. "Give me leave therefore to hope," she addresses the ladies, "that no gentleman who has honorable designs, will hence-forward decry Knowledge and Ingenuity in her he would pretend to Honour; if he does, it may serve for a Test to distinguish the feigned and unworthy from the real Lover" (p. 38).

Astell calls out to women: "why shou'd not we assert our Liberty, and not suffer every Trifler to impose a Yoke of Impertinent Custom on us?" (p. 53), and does not fail to add the price tag: "who will think 500 pounds too much to lay out for the purchase of so much Wisdom and Happiness?" (p. 39). Interestingly, although Astell well knows the women will have to venture out of the Institute eventually -- and her appeal to men is meant to prepare for this experience -- she dotes greatly on the happiness which women at the institute will experience through female love and friendship. Astell promises her female readers that once freed of the stultifying "Custom" which drives women "to imagine that our Souls were given us only for the service of our Bodies, and that the best improvement we can make of these is to attract the Eyes of Men" (p. 4), they will rediscover, in the institute, "such a Paradise as your Mother Eve forfeited, where you shall feast on Pleasures ... Here are no serpents to deceive you, whilst you entertain your selves in these delicious Gardens" (pp. 15-16; italics hers).

To sum up, since Astell perceives the double bind as a result of a debilitating hegemony which exercises power through "Custom" -- "Custom" is here understood as both discourse and social practice -- she proposes to remedy this condition by overthrowing "that Tyrant Custom, which is the grand motive to all those irrational choices which we daily see made in the world, so very contrary to our [women's] present interest and pleasure" (Astell, 1694: p. 11; italics hers). In return (for banishing "Custom"), Astell promises both satisfaction of interest -- better marital arrangements, superior education of children, etc. -- and gratification of desire (pleasure) -- mainly in a vision of love and friendship between women but also through a better understanding between man and woman. Astell's argument thus weaves orthodoxy with reform, "Faith" with "Science" (Book II, chapter 3), permanence with change. She proposes "Natural Logic" as a method of study in the Institute, i.e., as the method by which a new understanding of woman is to emerge, but this understanding is shown to be at once new and ancient, for to learn it the students are sent no "further than your Own Minds" (p. 97). While Faith thus represents the inscription on the Mind of "Truth," "Science" serves for reasoning in matters not pertaining to faith, and is argued to illuminate such practices as the employment of language. Demonstrating the arbitrary nature of semantic

meaning, Astell further illustrates the manipulative potential of language and its susceptibility to error through indeterminacy (pp. 100-101). Consequently, she incorporates into her plan for female and universal education the project of constructing a new language, one "free of all Equivocation" (p. 100), one in which meaning -- preferably the meanings set forth in her essay -- will become fixed and determinate.

Astell was working against incredible odds and deeply rooted social codes, not the least among them being a male idiom long internalized by women. As a woman speaking out in the seventeenth century, Astell had no other recourse but to a male idiom; she did, however, use it subversively, as is particularly evident in her use of the much favoured horticultural imagery of the day. Astell condemns this discursive practice of equating woman with the exclusively sensual, and asks of her fellow-women: "how can you be content to be in the world like Tulips in the Garden, to make a fine show and be good for nothing?" (Astell, 1694: p. 19). Almost a century later Wollstonecraft, who has still only a male idiom to resort to, does not fail to use it subversively; here, for example, is Wollstonecraft on the lilies-of-the-valley theory:

The conduct and manner of women, in fact, evidently prove that their minds are not in a healthy state; for, like the flowers which are planted in too rich a soil, strength and usefulness are sacrificed to beauty; and the flaunting leaves, after having pleased a fastidious eye, fade, disregarded on the stalk, long before the season when they ought to have arrived at maturity.

(Wollstonecraft, 1792: p. 31)

Wollstonecraft's answer to the problem of woman's desirability, like Astell's, comes out of her redefinition of the relationship between the sexes: for stereotypic feminine beauty she substitutes, like Centlivre and Astell, the Graces of the Mind.

Interestingly enough, it is in their non-fictional writings that women's attempts to construct a new image for themselves first emerges. Where Behn and Centlivre had on the whole adopted the feminine stereotypes dictated by the hegemonic discourse, Astell was actively engaged in

subverting it. In a similar manner, while Fanny Burney and Maria Edgeworth (towards the end of the eighteenth century) chiefly echoed contemporary male standards of femininity, Wollstonecraft, as I will demonstrate, was courageously engaged in undermining them. It remained for the first generation of "feminine writers," the "female role innovators" as Showalter calls them -- the Brontës, Mrs. Gaskell, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Harriet Martineau, and George Eliot -- to break new grounds and create new possibilities (Showalter, 1977: p. 19).

As we proceed into middle and late eighteenth century, a third kind of literary woman emerges, a woman who unlike Behn and Centlivre uses a milder idiom, a woman living in a society that accords the learned lady, she who knows her place, a respectable position. This woman captivates the gentlemen with her wit, and gains their approval by gracefully accepting their views on women (other women, of course!). She has the best of both worlds: she is an active artist, she is cherished by men and feels superior to other women, in short, she has managed to bypass the double bind by dissociation (from the 'victim' role) and complicity (with the victimizer). One such woman was Hannah More (1745-1833), the most prolific female writer of non-fiction of her time, a woman who enjoyed an independent and most stimulating social and intellectual life, and a close acquaintance with the prominent men of letters of her time. She was much inclined, however, to talking of woman in the third person, advocating humility and submissiveness. "To be unstable and capricious," she writes to a male friend, "I really think, is but too characteristic of our sex; and there is perhaps no animal so much indebted to subordination for its good behaviour as woman. I have soberly and uniformly maintained this doctrine, ever since I have been capable of observation" (Roberts, 1837: I, 427). Here is an extremely self-confident woman writer subtly manipulating rhetoric to by-pass the double bind: while preaching subservience to other women, she establishes her own independence of mind through the use of a self-assertive rhetoric (note "soberly," "uniformly," "doctrine," "observation"). This strategy of dissociation, which enabled More to guard her femininity while practicing her profession, characterizes the persona behind much of her fictional as well as non-fictional writings.

More's Strictures on the Modern System of Female Education (1799), Coelebs in Search of a Wife (1809; her only novel), her Practical Piety (1811), Christian Morals (1812), and Essays on the Character of St. Paul (1815), all uphold a Christian doctrine which stresses submissiveness. Within the general framework of worship, however, More's emphasis throughout is on man as the Head, woman as a mere helpmate. While we pause to have a closer look at More's classical Strictures, it would be instructive to bear in mind that this active author of numerous religious and educational tracts was also the author of two successful plays, Percy (1777) and Fatal Falsehood (1779), was herself well educated (her father being a schoolmaster), and enjoyed financial and social independence (through a legacy of a former fiance and income from her girls' boarding school). More's Strictures is of a particular interest here, for it is not only a highly representative conduct book (which enjoyed great popularity), and an inventory of eighteenth and nineteenth century culturally determined feminine attributes, but is also an exploratory text dealing with woman's position vis-à-vis knowledge and artistic expression.

In a sense, Strictures is More's own monumental attempt to bypass the double bind through a dissociation of her own activity from the ideological corpus of her work and through a forceful reinforcement of an alleged conformity to society's views. Although Strictures is greatly concerned with women's access to knowledge -- one chapter is subtitled "female study and initiation into knowledge" and another "the practical use of female knowledge" -- More is very clear about the limits a woman should set on her aspirations. Her argument for advocating these limits is that "when a man of sense comes to marry, it is a companion whom he wants, and not an artist" (More, 1799: p. 59). More further elaborates on the miseries of the female author:

there is one human consideration -- which would perhaps more effectually tend to damp in an aspiring woman the ardours of literary vanity ... which is, that in the judgement passed on her performances, she will have to encounter the mortifying circumstances of having her sex always taken into account; and her highest exertions will probably be received with the qualified approbation, that

it is really extraordinary for a woman.

(More, 1799: p. 188; italics hers)

More here comments on a double standard pervasive in critical appreciations of women writers, a critical practice the detrimental effect of which has been studied by Elaine Showalter in her seminal study of the female literary tradition in the English novel, A Literature of their Own (1977).

In general, More preaches a limited, domestic knowledge for women, one that will help them be "instrumental to the good of others" (p. 181), for "the kind of knowledge which is rather fitted for home consumption than foreign exportation, is peculiarly adapted for women" (p. 182). To those aspiring for a public or literary career, however, More's advice is essentially this: "let not then aspiring .. woman, view with pining envy the keen satyrist, ... the sagacious politician, ... the acute lawyer ... and the skilfull dramatist"; instead, women should resort to the feminine forms, to "polite letters":

In almost all that comes under the description of polite letters, in all that captivates by imagery, or warms by just and affecting sentiment, women are excellent. They possess in a high degree that delicacy and quickness of perception which comes under the denomination of taste. Both in composition and action they excel in details; but they do not so much generalize their ideas as man ... They are acute observers, they have an intuitive penetration into character.

(More, 1799: p. 196; italics mine).

Although one might glimpse in More's poetic program for women writers superficial ties to Romantic poetics -- a forerunner of Wordsworth's 1800 "Preface" with its claim that "all good poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feeling" -- one is also quick to realize how deceiving the appearance. For Wordsworth (and even more so for Coleridge) spontaneity is complemented by the other accomplishments vital to good poetry. "Poems to which any value can be attached," contends Wordsworth in the Preface to the Lyrical Ballads (1800), "were never produced on any variety of subjects but by a man who, being possessed of more than usual organic sensibility, had

also thought long and deeply." As Irene Tayler and Gina Luria have lucidly demonstrated, Wordsworth, in the following passage from The Excursion, unwittingly describes "the denied 'accomplishments' if not necessarily the 'gifts' of those of his female contemporaries who aspired to be writers" (Tayler and Luria, 1977: p. 102):

Oh! many are the Poets that are sown
By Nature; men endowed with highest gifts,
The vision and the faculty divine;
Yet wanting the accomplishment of verse,
(which, in the docile season of their youth,
It was denied to them to acquire, through lack
Of culture and the inspiring aid of books,
Or haply by a temper too severe,
Or a nice backwardness afraid of shame).
(The Excursion, I, 77-85)

More denies women these "accomplishments," urging them to avoid conflict (the double bind) by keeping away from the 'masculine' forms and limiting their activities to those forms most expressive of the accepted feminine qualities. As we will see, More's advice did strike a cord, for when G.H. Lewes came to express his sympathetic view of the "Lady Novelists" (1852), he accredited them with many of the attributes recommended by More.

Other women writers of the period, writers like Ann Taylor (1782-1866), her sister Jane Taylor (1783-1824), and Jane West (1758-1852), although sharing More's views concerning female authorship, never attained her degree of popularity and literary success, or her self-confidence. These minor poets and novelists were constantly plagued by an awareness of the double bind, counter-balancing it, as it were, by writing highly conservative conduct books, such as Ann Taylor's Practical Hints to Young Females on the Duties of a Wife, a Mother, and a Mistress of a Family (1815), and Jane West's The Advantages of Education (1803) and Letters to a Young Lady, in which the Duties and Characters of Women are considered chiefly with a Reference to Prevailing Opinion (1806). In these books, the submissive, feminine, ideal is promoted, always complete with a warning against presumptions to knowledge and a wider sphere of action. As West's Letters to a Young Lady makes clear, a woman's only "happy art" is "to

superintend and conduct a household with regularity, propriety, elegance, and good humour"; knowledge, on the other hand, is to be avoided, for it is "a most precious talent, and must pay the highest price" (West, 1806: III, p. 6). For these women, the solution to the double bind dilemma lay in a strategy of dissociation (from their role as women writers) and complicity (with the injunction to retain female self by relinquishing poetic identity). Ann Taylor, for example, defends her sister Jane by assuring the public that "she was fond of the labours of the needle and of every domestic engagement," that she "was free ... from that ambition which often accompanies intellectual superiority," and moreover that "to the character of a literary lady she had, in fact, a decided dislike" (quoted in Agress, 1978: p. 54).

West's strategy in introducing her Letters Addressed to a Young Man (1801) is particularly instructive in respect to her response to the double bind dilemma. Keenly aware of her 'presumption' in addressing a male audience (albeit a youthful one) on heady matters such as education, "the principles of government," and "morality" (West, 1801: p. xviii), West's narrative duly opens with a lengthy apology:

Many female writers have contributed their mite to increase that arrogant supercilious look, and that authoritative disputatious tone which meets us at every corner. Surely it must be deemed more congenial to the character of a woman to try to repress this dangerous spirit. Should the author, in her attempt to controvert them, seem to trespass on a province wisely withheld from her sex, let it be remembered that the original idea of this work is that of a mother speaking to a child on whose improvement she had bestowed considerable attention from his earliest years. In this light, observations may be admitted which, if introduced in the character of a public instruction, might be thought too masculine. This apology, however, is not designed to extend to the tendency of her observations. If the principles on which they are founded are estimable, the sex of the writer will not authorize the reader to reject them.

(West, 1801: p. xii)

West is here obviously groping for arguments to excuse her transgression in assuming a public, authoritative, voice. The ones she resorts to are stock ones with women writers of her generation: the appeal to a higher order (the "principles" of religion and accepted morality), the attempt to hide behind a highly acceptable sex role (that of the mother). Speaking of the "principles of government," West excuses herself by reassuring her public that these are "intimately connected with morals," and thus "cannot be deemed improper for maternal attention" (p. xviii; italics mine). Anticipating an audience highly critical of the self-assertiveness of her first person narrative, West "begs" her accusing judges "to observe that the epistolary style requires the greatest recurrence of the personal pronoun; and the relation of the person to whom she addresses herself [son] justifies an authoritative impressive manner" (p. xix). Obsessively, she reiterates her withdrawal from any claims to the forbidden public sphere. Stressing that her speech has indeed issued from the properly female locus -- the letters having flowed from the "heart of the author" -- West further insists that "she urges no dictatorial claim to public deference" (pp. xx-xxi; italics hers).

By striving to conform to feminine stereotypes in their life-stories as well as in their works, women writers have attempted to disengage themselves from the double bind. As regards their art, eighteenth century women novelists (in particular) "exploited a stereotype of helpless femininity to win chivalrous protection from male reviewers and to minimize their unwomanly self-assertion" (Showalter, 1977: p. 17). A similar tactic was at work where the life-stories of these women were concerned. Patricia Meyer Spacks observes the persistence of a "female apology, heavily tinged with resentment, for the life of the mind" in eighteenth century autobiographies and novels by women (Spacks, 1976: p. 79). Spacks finds that at the center of these autobiographical records is an attempt "to resolve both sides of this dilemma: to assert the reality of the protagonist and her mental life but also to declare that she is nonetheless a good and valuable woman" (Spacks, 1976: p. 79). As late as 1858 the novelist Dina Craik Mulock (1826-1887) is still trying to drive a point home. In A Woman's Thoughts about Women (1858) Mulock defends the

literary woman, contending:

It is a notable fact, that the best housekeepers, the neatest needlewomen, the most discreet managers of their own and others' affairs, are ladies whose names the world cons over in library lists and exhibition catalogues.

(Mulock, 1858: p. 56)

It was a strategy, moreover, much approved of by their public, as the following excerpt from Richard Hengist Horne's 1844 volume A New Spirit of the Age (to which EBB contributed anonymously) can demonstrate. In summing up the section on Mary and William Howitt, Horne concludes:

We may further add, for the honour of womanhood, that while our authoress sends forth her delightful works in unbroken succession, to the four quarters of the globe, William Howitt has been heard to declare that he will challenge any woman, who never wrote a line, to match his good woman in the able management of a large household, at the same time that she fills her own little world of home with the brightness of her own heart and spirit.

(Horne, 1844: p. 140)

As far as female authorship is concerned, the eighteenth century seems to have been a period of maintained status-quo, with women writers generally conforming to contemporary ideologies. The more privileged figures, like Hannah More and Lady Mary Wortley Montague (1690-1762), were successfully engaged in establishing for themselves a proper place in literary society. Thus, it was in connection with re-unions held in London about 1750, at the houses of Mrs. Montague, Mrs. Vesey, and Mrs. Ord, "who exerted themselves to substitute for the card playing, which then formed the chief recreation at evening parties, more intellectual modes of spending the time, including conversations on literary subjects, in which eminent men of letters often took part," that the term "blue-stocking" was originally used (OED: I, p. 946). Literary history, however, has not been as kind to this club as it had been to the exclusively male circles of Pope and Johnson, for example. Although it was for a certain Mr. Benjamin Stillingfleet, who habitually wore grey or blue worsted, instead of black

silk stockings, that these mixed assemblies were dubbed "blue stocking" assemblies, by the first quarter of the nineteenth century the term was "transferred sneeringly to any woman [but not man!] showing a taste for learning, a literary lady" (OED). Even as women were gradually entering the literary institution, however, and despite neoclassical exhortations to reason, the woman who aspired to shine in any intellectual field was a stock butt in comedy from the later seventeenth century on. As Katharine Rogers has demonstrated, although "most writers from the early seventeenth century through the nineteenth apparently felt that the 'fair sex' had to be treated with at least overt gentleness ... harshness was reserved for the 'unfeminine' woman who dominated her husband, studied latin, or pursued a career" (Rogers, 1966: p. 174). Addison, Pope, and Steele, Thomas Wright, Thomas Shadwell, and Colley Cibber, John Gay, John Arbuthnot, and Edward Young have all created in their writings learned ladies who were not only "odious for their unwomanliness, but ridiculous for their gullibility, their pride in nonexistent learning, and their belief that women are mentally capable of studying philosophy or writing plays" (Rogers, 1966: p. 180).

By the end of the eighteenth century, the tone is softened but the mood remains much the same. Oliver Goldsmith in fiction, James Fordyce and Dr. Gregory in their educational tracts, all make one point clear: "self styled [women] intellectuals who consider themselves superior to the trifles which preoccupy the rest of their sex actually only make bores or fools of themselves, since genuine reason or knowledge are beyond the reach of woman" (Rogers, 1966: p. 185). Intellectual activity in women is moreover considered to interfere with their femininity; Oliver Goldsmith, for example, writes in the early 1760's:

How amiable may a woman be! ... Women, while untainted by affectation, have a natural cheerfulness of mind, which justly endears them to us, either to animate our joys, or soothe our sorrows; but how are they changed, and how shocking do they become, when the rage of ambition, or the pride of learning, agitates and swells those breasts, where only love, friendship, and tender care should dwell!

(Goldsmith, 1768: III, p. 337)

By the beginning of the nineteenth century the term 'blue-stocking' has become the "objective correlative," as it were, for the double bind. A 'blue-stocking' is a deviant, masculine, female; In his essay "On Great and Little Things" (1822), Hazlitt writes :

I have an utter aversion to blue-stockings. I do not care a fig for any woman that knows even what an author means. If I know that she has read any thing I have written, I cut her acquaintance immediately. This sort of literary intercourse with me passes for nothing. ... I would have her read my soul: she should understand the language of the heart.

(Hazlitt, 1822: p. 236; italics his)

Byron in his Don Juan (1810) and Thomas Moore in his comic opera M.P. or, The Blue Stocking (1811) further elaborated on the type which by mid-century has become a popular object of caricature in Punch and the Comic Almanack.

By 1792, however, several factors had combined to create a more favorable climate for the inception (if not reception) of an outspoken literary creation of a clearly feminist nature. With Mary Wollstonecraft one definitely enters into a new era for women in the realm of letters and public or published speech. In the spirit of the Duchess of Newcastle and Mary Astell, Wollstonecraft regards proper education for women as a prerequisite for their intellectual and social emancipation. From my present perspective, however, the two most significant aspects of Wollstonecraft's 1792 A Vindication of the Rights of Woman are the political and social perspectives employed to demystify the notion of femininity, and the particular ideological position offered as a solution to the double bind situation. Significantly, the Vindication is dedicated to Talleyrand Perigord, Bishop of Autun, one of the leaders of the revolution in France, who was also in favour of the proposal for political representation and equal suffrage for women made in the Cahier presented to Napoleon at the meeting of the States General in 1789 (Gregory, 1966: p. 236). The ideological structure carried into Wollstonecraft's Vindication is in the same spirit of liberalism which inspires her 1790 A Vindication of the Rights of Man, written in response to Edmund Burke's Reflections on

the Revolution in France (1790), as well as her 1794 Historical and Moral View of the French Revolution. A Vindication of the Rights of Woman takes the revolutionary platforms of liberty, equality, and fraternity to apply to men as well as women, and strives to demystify "femininity" by showing it to be a product of a particular social system rather than an innate, "natural," quality.

For Wollstonecraft, the solution to the double bind situation lies in the redefinition of the properly "feminine." In Wollstonecraft's view, "femininity" has come to exclude intellect through the workings of a "false system of education," and "the present corrupt state of society" (Wollstonecraft, 1792: p. 31); it is a fostered mystification dictated by specific political interests, rather than an intrinsic truth. For her the glorified feminine attributes of "weak elegance of mind, exquisite sensibility, and sweet docility of manner," are not innately feminine but rather artificially promoted by men whose interest is in the sensuous, and by women who "intoxicated by the adoration which men, under the influence of their senses, pay them," have turned themselves into "insignificant objects of desire" (pp. 32-5). Since Wollstonecraft altogether dispenses with the traditional definition of "femininity," she is able to do away with the contradiction woman/artist.

Consequently, Wollstonecraft's self-definition is as a human being rather than as a woman; and as such no conflict exists between her activity and her life. In her Vindication she is well aware of the anomalous position in which her literary activity has put her; she addresses this conflict directly in her introduction to the first edition of the book: "I am aware of an obvious inference,- from every quarter have I heard exclamations against masculine women." Her answer to this is in tune with, and comes out of, her ideology; for her, "the first object of laudable ambition is to obtain a character as a human being, regardless of the distinction of sex" (Wollstonecraft, 1792: p. 34; italics mine). Wollstonecraft is able to do away with the double bind because she not only redefines her own values as being those of a "human being" rather than of a "woman," but also reexamines her position vis-à-vis the man. Thus, rather than conceive of herself through him (as a daughter, wife, or mother), she chooses to view the relationship differently:

I love man as my fellow; but his sceptre, real or usurped, extends not to me, unless the reason of an individual demands my homage; and even then the submission is to reason, and not to man.

(Wollstonecraft, 1792: p. 72).

Like Astell's "design" in A Serious Proposal to the Ladies (1694), Wollstonecraft's project in A Vindication is properly semiotic and revisionary for it seeks to undo given meanings and reconstitute a new vocabulary. Wollstonecraft's underlying contention throughout the book is profoundly revolutionary in that it not only questions specific meanings but indeed exposes the arbitrary nature of all production of meaning. Responding to "exclamations" from "every quarter ... against masculine women" (p. 33), and to claims "that woman would be unsexed by acquiring strength of body and mind" (p. 254), Wollstonecraft affirms "that the sexual distinction which men have so warmly insisted upon is arbitrary" (p. 285; italics mine). Wollstonecraft thus strives to show that the accepted view of the feminine character (and consequently the behaviour of many females) is but a result of a given discursive practice -- a given view of sexual differences -- and not a reflection of a natural state of affairs. Like Astell, she charges men with viciously subjecting and distorting the feminine character: "from the tyranny of men, I firmly believe, the greater number of female follies proceed" (p. 285). And like Astell, Wollstonecraft views the essence of this distortion -- principally perpetuated through "a false system of education" (p. 31) -- to lie in the reduction of the feminine to the body and the sensual. Since men are anxious to make of women "alluring mistresses," women, in turn, become "only anxious to inspire love" (pp. 31-2), being trapped in a semantic delusion, unable to read "soft phrases, susceptibility of heart, delicacy of sentiment, and refinement of taste," for what they really mean -- "weakness" (p. 34). Wollstonecraft sums up the effect and its causes in a nutshell articulation of her book's chief contention, namely, "that the instruction which women have hitherto received has only tended, with the constitution of civil society, to render them insignificant objects of desire" (p. 35; italics mine). Thus, it is desire which has come to characterize women both in the eyes of men and, gravely yet, in their own eyes, as they have become "subjected by ignorance to their sensations" (p.

272).

Investigating how this state of affairs has come about, Wollstonecraft opens up her text to the large panorama of the social order, arguing that women's grievances are only symptomatic of greater social ills. In Chapter IX of A Vindication, the argument concerning the arbitrary nature of "sexual distinction" is integrated into a more comprehensive critique of "the pernicious effects which arise from the unnatural distinctions established in society" (p. 212). Substituting the language of social criticism for Astell's religious idiom, Wollstonecraft builds her critique on the two semantic pillars of "virtue" (which is also "duty") and "reason":

one class presses on another; ... and property, once gained, will procure the respect due only to talents and virtue ... There must be more equality established in society, or morality will never gain ground, and this virtuous equality will not rest firmly even when founded on a rock, if one half of mankind be chained to its bottom by fate, for they will be continuously undermining it through ignorance or pride.

(pp. 212-3; italics mine)

Consequently, Wollstonecraft's appeal to the "Gracious Creator" constitutes yet another attempt to give new meaning to accepted notions, to revolutionize them from within. Wollstonecraft's "Creator" is a deity with a difference, a deity with an expanded social conscience; she appeals to this "Gracious Creator of the whole human race":

hast thou created such a being as woman, who can trace thy wisdom in thy works, and feel that thou alone art by thy nature exalted above her, -- for no better purpose? Can she believe that she was only made to submit to man, her equal, a being who like her was sent into the world to acquire virtue? Can she consent to be occupied merely to please him; merely to adorn the earth, where her soul is capable of rising to thee? And can she rest supinely dependent on man for reason, when she ought to mount with

him the arduous steps of knowledge?
(p. 114)

Since she believes that it is through desire and pleasure that women have been kept captive, Wollstonecraft seeks to replace "love" and "pleasure" by "the sober steady eye of reason" (p. 115): by justice and virtue, understanding and usefulness. Countering the many "eloquent writers" who "depict love with celestial charms," Wollstonecraft time and again endeavors to demystify, redefine, and expose this 'ideal.' She wishes to draw women away from the paths of love- and pleasure-seeking. "Love and friendship cannot subsist in the same bosom," she claims, warning women of "love" which is but "sheer sensuality" disguised "under a sentimental veil" (p. 122). She cautions women: "virtue and pleasure are not, in fact, so nearly allied in this life as some eloquent writers have laboured to prove" (p. 122). Granting men "physical superiority" (p. 32), Wollstonecraft addresses herself to an issue which she regards as being beyond the physical and material, namely "the rights and involved duties of mankind" (p. 40). These rights and duties, Wollstonecraft argues, "must be common to all" (Dedication), regardless of sexual or class distinctions. In this realm of virtue, reason, and knowledge -- thus redefined -- into which Wollstonecraft desires women to enter, gender, in effect, becomes meaningless. By exposing the power relations which underlie the accepted view of "sexual distinction," Wollstonecraft denounces it, claiming that any situation where power is achieved through "great subordination of rank ... is highly injurious to morality" (p. 45). Consequently, Wollstonecraft advocates the dissolution of sexual difference in the name of dissolving power, and thus also resolves the double bind.

Constrained by her social doctrine, however, Wollstonecraft can claim equality only by forfeiting sexual identity, and happiness only by denouncing pleasure and desire. Wollstonecraft argues well for women's access to knowledge and power, but fails to account for pleasure (hitherto rooted in sexual difference) which she dismisses as "the night of sensual ignorance" (p. 48). Fearing enslavement by passion, Wollstonecraft advocates the reign of reason and intellect but ends up banishing pleasure and sexual identity as well. She appeals:

Strengthen the female mind by enlarging it, and there will be an end to blind obedience; but, as blind obedience is ever sought for by power, tyrants and sensualists are in the right when they endeavour to keep women in the dark, because the former only want slaves, and the latter a plaything.

(p. 56)

Exposing women's manipulation by the "sensualists," "those most dangerous of tyrants" (p. 56), Wollstonecraft warns women against becoming "insignificant objects of desire" but unwittingly also denies them the possibility of becoming significant desiring subjects. Wollstonecraft evokes "one eternal standard" (p. 59), "one archetype for man" (p. 69), and in asking women to strive towards it projects a "utopian" (p. 72) world "where sensation will give place to reason" (p. 58), love and passion to friendship.

Wollstonecraft's failure to grant woman a desiring subjectivity is a properly discursive failure, one reflective of the hegemonic discourse on femininity. We find an exemplary articulation of this discourse in Edmund Burke's A Philosophical Inquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful (1756). "There are two sets of societies," writes Edmund Burke in this influential treatise, "the first is the society of sex. The passion belonging to this is called love, and it contains a mixture of lust; its object is the beauty of women" (Burke, 1756: pp. 84-5; italics mine). Burke's statement exposes with crystalline clarity that "lieu commun" which I identify as the hegemonic ideology of femininity. While Burke's valorization of the feminine properties of beauty ("smallness," "smoothness," "gradual variation," and "delicacy") might mislead us into believing it a valorization of femininity per se, his (unwitting?) denial to women of the status of a desiring subject unequivocally exposes the profound bias of his discourse. Indeed, throughout Burke's essay, woman is totally and literally objectified. In discussing "Smoothness," for example, Burke chooses to illustrate his argument with the following examples: "smooth leaves are beautiful; smooth slopes of earth in gardens; smooth streams in the landscape; ... in fine women, smooth skins" (p. 133).

Burke explicitly associates beauty with women (the feminine), while the masculine is the realm of the sublime. "The virtues which cause admiration, and are of the sublimer kind," contends Burke, are such as "fortitude, justice, wisdom, and the like" (Burke, 1756: p. 130). Beauty, on the other hand, he defines as "some quality in bodies acting mechanically upon the human mind by the intervention of the senses" (p. 131). Burke's definition here clearly confirms writers such as Astell and Wollstonecraft in their interpretation of the ideology of femininity as one which reduces woman to the bodily and the sensual. Also reinforcing that interpretation is Burke's perception of the power relations corollary to this ideology. "We submit to what we admire [the sublime, the masculine]," affirms Burke, "but we love what submits to us [the beautiful, the feminine]" (p. 132). Furthermore, Burke, like Wollstonecraft, realizes the mutually exclusive character of these two properties within the hegemonic discourse; he asserts: "the ideas of the sublime and the beautiful stand on foundations so different, that it is hard, I had almost said impossible, to think of reconciling them in the same subject" (p. 132).

Responding to the debilitating hegemonic discourse (so clearly articulated by Burke), both Astell and Wollstonecraft propose a framework for thinking about women that is asexual. In the case of Astell, the explicit orientation consists, as Regina Janes has demonstrated, in shifting the perceived center of women's lives "from the biological and social functions in this world to that world to come in which distinctions of sex ... disappear" (Janes, 1976: p. 124). Implicitly, however, Astell entreats women to rejoice in female bonding and friendship, thus compensating for the denied pleasures of the traditional intercourse between the sexes. Wollstonecraft's position, although in many respects strengthened by a more fully formulated (and more radical) theoretical framework -- an egalitarian philosophy -- and in spite of its exhortations for far-reaching social change, fails to account for the complex psychological realities attendant upon these changes.

Even a brief comparison between Wollstonecraft and a writer like Jane West, however, is sufficient to reveal the astonishing discursive distance travelled by the first. West, writing in 1806, is still anchored in an

anti-egalitarian ideology which reveres social hierarchy and is totally uncritical of present power relations. She confesses to the "young lady" who is the addressee of her Letters to a Young Lady: "I profess myself a steady advocate for that gradation of wealth and rank, which, if not positively appointed by God in scripture, is there shown to have been nearly coeval with the world we inhabit" (West, 1806: p. 203). Given this understanding of the social order, West has no scruples in advocating an uncritical compliance with a traditional "woman's sphere" which subordinates woman to man within the confines of an exclusively domestic environment. West openly denounces the authors of the "schools of infidelity and anarchy," and seeks to avert her young reader's look away from their teachings. Advocating "subordination" and "regular submission" to all persons whose "station in life" dictates so (West, 1806: pp. xiii-xvi), West's doctrine is indeed as constraining to certain classes of men as it is to women. In her idealized vision of a future society, as in Bernard de Mandeville's The Fable of the Bees (1725), an oppressive past is projected onto the future to ensure the rule of power through imposed ignorance and blind obedience. West challenges: "give me a boy at the plough, and the girl at her spinning wheel, rather than Master learning metaphysics, and Miss studying life and manners, in the pages of Wollstonecraft and Godwin" (West, 1801: p. 73). Bernard de Mandeville, we recall, voiced the panic of a whole class when he thus 'reasoned':

To make the society happy, and people easy under the meanest circumstances, it is requisite that great numbers of them should be ignorant, as well as poor. ... The more a shepherd, a ploughman, or any other peasant, knows of the world, and the things that are foreign to his labour or employment, the less fit he will be to go through the fatigues and hardships of it with cheerfulness and content. (Mandeville, 1725: p. 179)

Interestingly, Hannah More, who was also "pestered to read The Rights of Woman" but was "invincibly resolved not to do it," had more in common with the feminist than she had ever cared to admit. Although preaching intellectual subservience to other women, More herself strove to share a common intellectual ground with men, much in the same manner advocated by

Wollstonecraft. More's own personal fantasy, elaborated in her quite popular 1786 The Bas Bleu; or Conversation, Addressed to Mrs. Vesey, bears a closer affinity to Wollstonecraft's ideas than to those expounded in her own numerous educational tracts. At a high point in the poem More addresses the "blue stocking" ladies her poem celebrates, encouraging them to confirm her ideal of intellectual "Communion" with men:

Enlighten'd spirits! you, who know
 What charms from polished converse flow,
 Speak, for you can, the pure delight
When kindred sympathies unite;
 When correspondent tastes impart
 Communion sweet from heart to heart;
 You ne'er the cold gradations need,
 Which vulgar souls to union lead.
 (More, 1786: pp. 85-6; italics mine)

Unlike most of the manifestations of self-reflexivity and double bind awareness discussed above, Maria Edgeworth's Letters for Literary Ladies (1799) addresses itself directly and almost solely to this awareness. In the book, published anonymously, the "gentleman" who addresses his letter to "his friend upon the birth of a Daughter" presents the conflict of the woman artist thus:

Literary ladies will, I am afraid, be losers in love as well as in friendship, by their superiority. Cupid is a timid, playful, child, and is frightened at the helmet of Minerva. It has been observed, that gentlemen are not apt to admire a prodigious quantity of learning and masculine acquirements in the fair sex -- we usually consider a certain degree of weakness, both of mind and body, as friendly to female grace.
 (Edgeworth, 1799: p. 33)

The gentleman in question further proceeds to disclose his real fear, namely, that learning will actually undermine not just femininity, but domesticity itself. He argues: "as Moliere has pointed out with all the forces of comic ridicule, in the Femmes Savantes, a lady who aspires to the

sublime delights of philosophy and poetry, must forego the simple pleasure and will despise duties of domestic life" (pp. 35-6).

In reply, the "father," although conceding that women should not strive for public recognition (i.e., publish) but rather "cultivate their understanding ... with the desire to make themselves useful and agreeable," nonetheless addresses the double bind dilemma directly. He presents Edgeworth's own particular solution to the double bind, arguing that "the power of beauty over the human heart is infinitely increased by the associated ideas of virtue and intellectual excellence" (p. 106). Edgeworth's attempt to transform intellectual assets into feminine attributes requires a careful maneuvering; thus, she retains a familiar idiom which makes her ideas appear more acceptable, rhetorically transforming intellect into physical beauty: "the expression of intelligent benevolence renders even homely features and cheeks of sorry grain agreeable" (p. 107).

The subject is taken up again in "Letters of Julia and Caroline," included in the same volume. Julia, who represents traditional "femininity," argues against the acquisition of knowledge:

what has woman to do with philosophy? The graces flourish not under her empire; a woman's part in life is to please ... Then leave us our weakness, leave us our follies; they are our best arms ... the bewitching caprice, the 'lively nonsense', the exquisite yet childish susceptibility which charms, interests, captivates ... what then can a woman gain by reason? can she prove by argument that she is amiable? or demonstrate that she is an angel?

(Edgeworth, 1799: pp. 121-3)

In Julia's brief speech, most of the stereotypical definitions of femininity, reinforced through centuries of exclusive male access to public speech, are present: the woman as a child (an underdeveloped human being), a capricious, irresponsible, and seductive creature whose existence could be defined only through the male. Interestingly enough, Julia, although voicing these traditional (and misogynistic) views, is herself undermining them, for she does not so much embody them as employ them for her own ends,

that is, for the purpose of attracting the man. In response, Caroline, Edgeworth's mouthpiece, does not so much question Julia's ends as her means; for Caroline, as for Julia, a woman is ultimately defined through the male. Caroline, however, strives to reconcile intellect and femininity, and as in Wollstonecraft's case, has to do it via a redefinition of the relationship between the sexes; Caroline proclaims: "conscious of her worth, and daring to assert it, I would have a woman ... know that she is capable of filling the heart of a man of sense and merit -- that she is worthy to be his companion and friend" (p. 135). Although far from admitting any egalitarian view of the sexes, Edgeworth does suggest the possibility of a common intellectual ground.

From the time women began to actively pursue literary careers they were driven to question and counteract a large male opposition to their ascent to knowledge and serious art. In the late eighteenth century and early nineteenth the issue of femininity vs. artistic accomplishment had come into sharper focus, owing mainly to the ever growing number of writing women; it still was, moreover, as pressing in 1869 as it had been in 1792. In his 1862 The Subjection of Women, J.S. Mill still tries to reason with the enemy, endeavoring to illustrate that "what is now called the nature of woman is an eminently artificial thing -- the result of false repression in some directions, unnatural stimulation in others" (Mill, 1970: p. 148). By the beginning of the nineteenth century, however, a number of strategies had been developed by women writers, chief among them being a continual reassessment of the notion of femininity itself. As I have demonstrated, the arguments were there for women to use; the opposition, however, was strong, as could be inferred from the fact that we know of only a few professional women writers before Fanny Burney. The emergence of the novel, however, opened a new avenue for women writers, and an attractive solution to the double bind. It was the genre women had been waiting for; from now on, women would be able to dispense with the kind of apology present in Eliza Haywood's Preface to her 1792 Frederick, Duke of Brunswick-Lunenburgh in which she confesses "the Want of those Embellishments of Poetry, which the little Improvements my sex receives from Education, allowed me not the power to adorn it with." The novel did not have the male prestige and did not require the classical training which made the serious dramatic and poetic genres inaccessible to women, and it

was economically viable. Moreover, as sociologist Viola Klein remarks

it is not by admittance to the traditionally established professions that newcomers are accepted. The old taboos excluding specific groups from certain spheres of work live on in the form of prejudices and are an effective barrier in their admission. It is the development of new brands of trade, of art, or industry, which enables outsiders to force their way, or to slip, into the established system.

(Klein, 1949: p. 19)

The novel's adherence to social and domestic realism, its use of everyday materials and plain language, singled it out as a comparatively "low" genre, a genre suited for women. By the mid-nineteenth century, the claim that fiction is indeed the literary woman's proper domain had become a commonplace. In 1852 the liberal critic G.H. Lewes (1817-1878) presented the public with "The Lady Novelists," a serious and sympathetic essay on contemporary women novelists. Interestingly enough, the essay opens with a discussion of the woman writer's double bind position:

The appearance of Woman in the field of literature is a significant fact. It is the correlate of her position in society. To some men the fact is doubtless as distasteful as the social freedom of women in Europe must be to an eastern mind: it must seem so unfeminine, so contrary to the real destination of woman; and it must seem so in both cases from the same cause. But although it is easy to be supercilious and sarcastic on Blue Stockings and Literary Ladies, -- and although one may admit that such sarcasms have frequently their extenuation in the offensive pretensions of what are called "strong minded women" -- it is certain that the philosophic eye sees in the fact of literature cultivated by women, a significance not lightly to be passed over.

(Lewes, 1852: p. 129; italics mine)

The "significance" that Lewes' "philosophic eye" detects in women's literature, we note, also allows him to resolve the paradox of the woman

artist. Lewes' argument, which recapitulates More's, is the following: since valuable, original, literature by women is literature deriving from "genuine female experience," and since "the Masculine mind is characterized by the predominance of the intellect and the Feminine by the predominance of the emotions," it logically follows that,

Of all departments of literature, Fiction is the one to which, by nature and by circumstances, women are best adapted. Exceptional women will of course be found competent to the highest success in other departments; but speaking generally, novels are their forte. The domestic experiences which form the bulk of woman's knowledge find an appropriate form in novels; while the very nature of fiction calls for the predominance of Sentiment which we have already attributed to the feminine mind. Love is the staple of fiction, for it "forms the story of a woman's life."

(Lewes, 1852: pp. 131-3)

Accordingly, Lewes praises the major women novelists of his time, Jane Austin, George Sand, Lady Morgan, Miss Burney, Miss Edgeworth, Charlotte Brontë (or rather Currer Bell), and Mrs. Gaskell (or rather the authoress of Mary Barton), as well as some minor novelists (such as Mrs. Gore and Miss Jewsbury), for their "womanliness in tone and point of view" and their peculiarly feminine attributes of "Observation" and "Sentiment" (Lewes, 1852: p. 141).

To a large extent, many of the major and minor women novelists of the late eighteenth century and early nineteenth did indeed escape the double bind by adhering to the 'feminine' genre and by portraying in their fiction highly stereotypic feminine characters. The novels of manners, such as Fanny Burney's Evelina (1778), Elizabeth Inchbald's A Simple Story (1796), Maria Edgeworth's Belinda (1801), and Susan Ferrier's Marriage (1818), focus on the process of a young girl's education and socialization, and conclude with the ultimate reward -- marriage. The domestic and regional novels, such as Elizabeth Hamilton's The Cottagers of Glenburnie (1808), Sydney Owenson Morgan's The Wild Irish Girl (1806), and Mary Russell Mitford's Our Village (published serially 1824-32), all urged women to

accept their domestic role, dramatizing the unhappy lives of those hopeless sinners who were foolish enough to depart from the acceptable feminine norm. Even the gothic novels, like Ann Radcliffe's The Mysteries of Udolpho (1794) and Mary Shelley's Frankenstein (1818), with their added dose of the improbable and the romantic, did not fail to conform to society's stereotypes. The women writers' reward was, in turn, a sympathetic critical reception, a public 'license' to practice their art without jeopardizing their femininity. In his 1853 review of Mrs. Gaskell's Ruth, for example, J.M. Ludlow duly 'absolves' her of any charges of 'masculinity':

Now, if we consider the novel to be the picture of human life in a pathetic, or ... in a sympathetic form, that is to say, addressed to human feelings, rather than to human taste, judgement or reason, there seems nothing paradoxical in the view, that women are called to the mastery of this peculiar field of literature.

(Ludlow, 1853: pp. 90-91)

A significant change in the role of women writers occurs as we pass from the early nineteenth century -- when women essentially wrote for and were largely read by women -- to the Victorian period, when women novelists became an integral part of the literary scene. But even as women gained in literary respectability, the stigma of the blue-stocking, of the de-sexed female scribbler, continued to plague them both from within and from without. Miss Mitford apologizes to a friend, "I would rather scrub floors [than write], if I could get as much [money] by the healthier, more respectful and more feminine employment" (quoted in Agress, 1978: p. 118). Lady Morgan (1776-1859) writes in a letter to a friend, Mrs. Lefanu:

I am ambitious, far, far beyond the line of laudable emulations, perhaps beyond the power of being happy. Yet the strongest point of my ambition is to be every inch a woman. Delighted with the pages of La Voisine, I dropped the study of chemistry, though urged to it by a favourite friend and preceptor, lest I should be less the woman. Seduced by taste, and a thousand arguments, to Greek and

Latin, I resisted, lest I should not be a very woman. And I have studied music rather as a sentiment than as a science, and drawing as an amusement rather than an art, lest I should have become a musical pedant or a masculine artist. And let me assure you, that if I admire you for any one thing more than another, it is that, with all your talent and information you are 'a woman still'.... I agree, perfectly agree with you, that when Rousseau insists on le coeur aimant of Julie, he endows her with the best and most endearing attribute woman can possess.

(Morgan, 1862: I, p. 230; italics hers)

Lady Morgan, however, was one of those women whose life and career reflect an era of transition, and a personal capacity for growth. In the 1803 letter to Mrs. Lefanu, mentioned above, she is a young woman both excited and threatened by literary success; "I entirely agree with you," she reassures her friend, "that some women, in attaining that intellectual acquisition which excite admiration and even reverence, forfeit their (oh! how much more valuable) claims on the affections of the heart, the dearest, proudest, immunity nature has endowed her daughters with -- the precious immunity which gives them empire over empire, and renders them sovereigns over the world's lords" (Morgan, 1862: I, p. 229-30; italics hers). In 1840 Lady Morgan published Woman and her Master, an historical survey of famous women from early classical time to the coming of Christianity, a study which adopts not a socialist but a Comtean scientific-positivist approach. Where Wollstonecraft saw the solution to the double bind situation in the emergence of a new political system, believing that "as sound politics diffuse liberty, mankind, including women, will become more wise and virtuous" (Wollstonecraft, 1792), Lady Morgan put her faith in "mind, the universal mind, [which] is now in action, producing new and endless combinations, political, moral, and material; and, though the interests of a few, or the lingering prejudices of the many, may oppose and delay its march, still, ... e pure si muove" (Morgan, 1840: I, pp. 5-6). Ultimately, both Wollstonecraft and Lady Morgan pronounce an englobing philosophy and an a-sexual ideal as the only means to transcend the double bind.

In the literary marketplace, then, the women novelists were establishing for themselves a publicly acceptable sphere of action, one that did not seem to conflict with their sexual identity. In contributing to the evolution of a new form, moreover, they were also subtly undermining old concepts: the fiction of Jane Austin, Charlotte Brontë, Mrs. Gaskell, and George Eliot, has already in it the seeds of a new literature by women, a self-searching yet self-assertive literature. As for the women poets, however, things have evolved differently. Reviewing the poetry written by women between 1600 and 1800, E. Thomas finds it "mostly like that of the contemporary men. It differs because it is inferior" (Thomas, 1910: p. 63). It is inferior, moreover, because it is imitative, and "cannot indeed be called a body of distinctively feminine thought and emotion" (p. 63). It lacks "the woman's point of view," and on the whole bears a tone of "resignation, a meek sadness, a longing after content, patience, health, and peace" (p. 63).

The "resignation," "longing," and "sadness" which Thomas detects in women's poetry are nothing other than the twin sentiments of that "rage" of which Virginia Woolf speaks: "the heat and violence of the poet's heart when caught and tangled in a woman's body" (Woolf, 1929: p. 47). Woolf's mini-narrative in A Room of One's Own which tells the (hypothetical) story of "Judith Shakespeare," Shakespeare's sister, opens with a "gifted," "adventurous," "imaginative" heroine, and ends with Judith killing herself "one winter night" (Woolf, 1929: pp. 46-7). In between the moment of promise and the tragic disillusioned ending, Woolf enumerates the typical obstacles: lack of education, denial of access to the profession, and sexual exploitation. Woolf is perhaps one of our first modern critics to address the issue of genre in relation to gender. Attempting to reconstruct women's literary history, and contemplating the implications of her hypothetical narrative (of Shakespeare's sister), she stops to ponder: "Why ... were they [works by women], with very few exceptions, all novels?" (p. 63). Woolf ventures a number of answers, suggesting that "less concentration is required" for writing prose, and that women's literary training -- "in the observation of character, in the analysis of emotion" -- was more suitable to novel writing (p. 64). Reflecting on the adverse effects of "discouragement" and of "dragging even into the criticism of poetry criticism of sex" (p. 72), Woolf speculates on yet

another reason for women's choice of the novel form: "all the other forms of literature were hardened and set by the time she became a writer. The novel alone was young enough to be soft in her hands" (p. 74). Finally, Woolf comes to the argument implicit in her essay's very title:

Intellectual freedom depends on material things. Poetry depends upon intellectual freedom. And women have always been poor ... women have had less intellectual freedom than the sons of Athenian slaves. Women, then, have not had a dog's chance of writing poetry.

(Woolf, 1929: p. 103)

The relationship between genre and gender is also a central issue in a recent collection of critical essays appropriately entitled Shakespeare's Sisters: Feminist Essays on Women Poets (1979). In their introduction to the volume, Gilbert and Gubar note that while novel writing was considered useful, because lucrative, occupation, and thus less intellectually or spiritually valuable than verse writing, "before the nineteenth century the poet had a nearly priestly role, and 'he' had a wholly priestly role after Romantic thinkers had appropriated the vocabulary of theology for the realm of aesthetics" (Gilbert and Gubar, 1979b: pp. xx-xxi). They consequently ask "if in Western culture women cannot be priests, then how -- since poets are priests -- can they be poets?" (p. xxi). Elaborating on Woolf's perception of the woman poet as denied access to the "hardened" literary forms, Gilbert and Gubar suggest "a sort of triple bind":

on the one hand, the woman poet who learns a 'just esteem' for Homer is ignored or even mocked.... On the other hand, the woman poet who does not (because she is not allowed to) study Homer is held in contempt. On the third hand, however, whatever alternative tradition the woman poet attempts to substitute for 'ancient rules' is subtly devalued.

(Gilbert and Gubar, 1979b: pp. xxi-xxii)

To this Gilbert and Gubar add a further concern of vital importance to our project here, namely, the relation between genre and speaking subjectivity. They contend that while a novelist "sees herself from the outside, as an

object, a character, ... the lyric poet must be continually aware of herself from the inside, as a subject, a speaker" (p. xxii; italics theirs). Gilbert and Gubar observe that a conflictual dynamics -- closely resembling what I have characterized as a double bind -- is intensified in the case of the female poetic subject in lyric poetry. As a "subject" the lyric poet "must be assertive, authoritative ... while at the same time absorbed in her own consciousness -- and hence, by definition, profoundly 'unwomanly', even freakish" (p. xvii).

Intruders upon an already well established, rigidly controlled and male-dominated literary tradition, the women poets could only boast an inferior education and a limited range of experience. Where the novel had succeeded in incorporating, through the medium of verisimilitude, values other than the purely artistic, poetry had chiefly remained a highly formalized genre, the artistic genre par excellence. Adrienne Rich provides us with a further insight into the nineteenth century psychodynamics of female authorship. Reflecting on the interrelationship between genre and self-perception, Rich suggests:

the novel is or can be a construct, planned and organized to deal with human experiences on one level at a time. Poetry is too much rooted in the unconscious; it presses too close against the barriers of repression; and the nineteenth century woman had much to repress.

(Rich, 1976: p. 66)

Interestingly, it is in this context that Rich brings up EBB's Aurora Leigh, which she views as an attempt "to fuse poetry and fiction." This attempt, Rich speculates, sprang from EBB's recognition of "the need for fictional characters to carry the charge of her experience as a woman artist" (Rich, 1976: p. 66).

EBB's experience as a woman artist and her position within the literary tradition were indeed of great concern to her. As I have pointed out in the introductory chapter, it was a "strong impression" with EBB "that previous to Joanna Baillie there was no such thing in England as a poetess" (Kenyon, 1898: I, p. 229). "Where is our poetess before Joanna Baillie -- poetess in the true sense?" she asks Chorley in response to his

Athenaeum article on the English women poets, and continues to press a point home:

the divine breath which seemed to come and go, and, ere it went, filled the land with that crowd of true poets whom we call the old dramatists -- why did it never pass, even in the lyrical form, over the lips of a woman? How strange! And can we deny that it was so? I look everywhere for grandmothers and find none. It is not in the filial spirit I am deficient, I do assure you -- witness my reverent love of the grandfathers.

(Kenyon, 1898: I, p. 232).

The answer to EBB's question is there in her own words: it is the women poets' "reverent love for the grandfathers" that had been their undoing. For the 'true' and 'divine' poetry of which EBB speaks is male poetry, a poetry expressive of male experience and male values, a poetry which has for too long idealized a female Muse to allow a truly female voice be heard. Women not only lacked the classical training required for the writing of 'divine' poetry; their very position in society, their very psychological make-up, were at odds with the spirit of the genre. Thus, the women poets of the late eighteenth century and early nineteenth could only project onto their poetry the internalized feminine stereotypes already codified by the genre itself. Joanna Baillie (1762-1851), who did venture into a male domain in writing dramatic poetry, had to face the public's disbelief upon disclosing her authorship of the first, and successful, volume of Plays on the Passions (1812) to which was prefaced a lengthy and philosophical "Introductory Discourse." The writer of the 1853 "Life of Joanna Baillie" tells of the public's astonishment at the

acknowledgment of the volume by a lady ... this [being] the more startling as the speculators had decided that the plays, and especially the [philosophical] preface, must have been written by a man. So convinced were many of this, that after the source of the dramas was placed beyond a doubt, the preface was still declared to manifest a masculine origin.

(Baillie, 1853: p. x).

Baillie's "introductory discourse," which undertakes "to delineate the stronger passions of the mind" (p. 1), itself totally avoids the issue of sexual difference, placing a genderless subject -- a "human being" or "the human mind" (pp. 2-3) -- at the center.

Baillie does, however, bring up the double bind issue in her Preface to the Metrical Legends (1821) where she discusses her choice of a heroine for The Legend of Lady Griseld Baillie. Both in the Preface and in the poem's last stanza Baillie explicitly states her differences with the "learned ladies" who make a claim to male "mental requirement" (Baillie, 1853: p. 709). In the Preface, Baillie explains:

I might have selected for my heroine women who in high situations of trust, ... have behaved with a wisdom and courage that would have been honorable for the noblest of the other sex. But to vindicate female courage and abilities has not been my aim. I wished to exhibit a perfection of character which is peculiar to woman, and makes her ... something which man can never be.
(p. 709; italics mine)

Least we miss the designated (feminine) properties, Baillie adds, "A man seldom becomes a careful and gentle nurse, ... a woman is seldom roused to great and courageous exertion .. reverse the matter, and you deform the fair seemliness of both" (p. 709; italics mine). Such a deformed character is indeed she "whose cultured, high-strained talents soar/ Through all th' ambitious range of letter'd lore" (p. 758), the learned lady whose objections to the subject of the author's "artless page" are anticipated in the poem's last stanza. Her "finger, white and small, with ink-stain tipt," this paragon of female knowledge is an example of pretentious ignorance and "female degradation," an unnatural being totally alienated from the (sexual) order of things, for she "seems almost ashamed to be a woman,/ And yet the palm of parts will yield to no man" (p. 759).

While clearly perpetuating a stereotypical image of the "blue-stocking," Baillie concomitantly advances an 'ideal' view of the intellectual woman, wishing to provide for those women who "possess that strong natural bent for learning" (Baillie, 1853: p. 709). This woman

may attend to her "mental acquirements" only in as much as these may be "cultivated without interfering with domestic duties" or with other "useful and appropriate occupations," and given they are not "connected with vanity" (p. 709). Baillie's solution to the double bind is thus pragmatic rather than epistemological, allowing for learning but only within the traditional feminine framework. Baillie is careful not to undermine the accepted view of woman's (desirable) innocence/ignorance, reassuring her audience:

women have this desirable privilege over the other sex,
that they may be unlearned without an implied inferiority
... At the same time they may avowedly and creditably
possess as much learning ... as they can fairly and
honestly attain, the neglect of more necessary occupations
being here considered as approaching to a real breach of
rectitude.

(p. 709)

Ultimately, Baillie's proposed strategem is one of dissimulation, as becomes evident from the following stanza from "On the Death of a very dear Friend":

But not in gentleness alone
The nature of her mind was known;
High intellect, acute and strong,
Did to this gifted friend belong,
In time of need a present aid
To comfort, counsel, or persuade,
To hold o'er other minds a sway
Ruling their will when seeming to obey .
(Baillie, 1853: pp. 832-3; italics mine)

Most of the women who succeeded Baillie confined their writing to a more feminine genre, the lyrical. Much of the poetry by Felicia Hemans (1793-1835), Letitia Elizabeth Landon (1802-1838), the young Brontës and the young EBB, avoids a confrontation with the double bind conflict through a complete internalization of the feminine stereotypes; this poetry teems with sentimental and imaginative heroines who pine away, forever awaiting

their Master, be it a mortal prince or an heavenly one.

Eventually, though, one does get glimpses of a more profound reality, of conflicts, and of secret triumphs. Women did not hasten to speak of their double bind in prose, much less so in verse. But they did pay tributes to one another, and thus, indirectly, spoke about themselves. Ann Killigrew (1660-1685) paid one such tribute to Katherine Phillips, the 'matchless Orinda' (1632-1664), in which she subtly probed the compatibility of 'art' with 'femininity':

Orinda, (Albions and her sexes Grace)
 Ow'd not her Glory to a Beauteous Face;
 It was her Radiant Soul that shone Within,
 which struck a Lustre thro' her Outward Skin;
 That did her Lips and Cheeks with Roses dye,
 Advanc't her Height, and Sparkled in her Eye.
 Nor did her Sex at all obstruct her Fame,
 But higher 'mong the Stars it fix't her Name;
 What she did write, not only all allow'd,
 But every Laurel to her Laurel bow'd!
 (Killigrew, 1686: p. 46)

The theme of accomplished artistic activity transformed into 'proper' feminine attributes (like beauty), is here subtly presented through the use of imagery: Orinda's intellectual and artistic accomplishments are made to actually dye her cheeks and lips, give lustre to her skin, in short, endow her with the desired, stereotypic, and exclusively physical, feminine attributes.

For Anne Killigrew herself, however, poetry promised much more: in it she found the promise of self-fulfillment, the promise of an independent and exalted existence. In her fiercely self-assertive poem "Upon the saying that my verses were made by another" -- in which the above-cited tribute to Katherine Phillips serves as a self-defense tactic -- she declares:

Next Heaven my vows to thee, (O sacred Muse!)
 I offer'd up, nor didst thou refuse.

O queen of Verse, said I, If thou'lt inspire,
 And warm my Soul with thy Poetique Fire,
 No Love of Gold shall share with thee my heart,
 Or yet Ambition in my Brest have Part,
 More Rich, more Noble I will ever hold
 The Muses Laurel, than a Crown of Gold.
 An Undivided Sacrifice I'll lay
 Upon thine Altar, Soul and Body pay;
 Thou shalt my Pleasure, my Employment be,
 My all I'll make a Holocaust to thee.
 (Killigrew, 1686: p. 44)

For the women poets who dared, there lay in poetry a gift of a special kind: is assuming the elevated and highly esteemed persona of the poet they could give up their femininity for an identity of a higher order. For Ann Killigrew, as (occasionally) for L.E. Landon and EBB, the rejection of a 'feminine' identity in favor of an unsexed, androgynous, artistic identity is a means (albeit only a temporary one at times) to avoid the double bind.

In one of those rare occasions on which L.E. Landon departs from the stereotypical persona which characterizes much of her poetry, she pays a soul-searching tribute to Felicia Hemans. In "Felicia Hemans" Landon quite explicitly explores the conflict between woman and poet, showing the woman to pay dearly for the poet's achievements. Landon opens with a reiteration of an idealized Romantic view of the poet:

A general bond of union is the poet,
 By its immortal verse is language known,
 And for the sake of song do others know it -
 One glorious poet makes the world his own.

Hers, however, is no easy tribute, for she is well aware of the conflicting needs of 'woman' and 'poet':

Thy name was lovely, and thy song was dear
 Was not this purchased all too dearly? - never
 Can fame atone for all that fame hath cost.

...

However mournful words may be, they show not
 The whole extent of wretchedness and wrong.
 They cannot paint the long sad hours, passed only
 In vain regrets o'er what we feel we are.
 Alas! the kingdom of the lute is lonely -
 Cold is the worship coming from afar.

Although loneliness, solitude, and detachment by (Romantic) necessity mark the poet's employment, they clash fatally with what Landon considers to be woman's natural inclinations. Landon here clearly articulates the acute conflict experienced by a woman poet conscious of the mutually exclusive demands of poetic identity and female self:

Yet what is mind in woman, but revealing
 In sweet clear light the hidden world below,
 By quicker fancies and a keener feeling
 Than those around, the cold and careless know?
 What is to feed such feeling, but to culture
 A soil whence pain will never more depart?
 The fable of Prometheus and the vulture
 Reveals the poet's and the woman's heart.
 Unkindly are they judged--unkindly treated--
 By careless tongues and by ungenerous words.

...

What on this earth could answer thy requiring,
 For earnest faith -- for love, the deep and true,
 The beautiful, which was thy soul's desiring,
 But only from thyself its being drew.

(Landon, 1857: II, p. 334)

For Landon, in this poem, self-realization as a woman is indeed incompatible with accession to literary fame: a woman is defined through love, personal love, while the artist gains only public recognition. As I shall demonstrate, this line of argument becomes a central preoccupation with EBB's Aurora Leigh who laments:

How dreary 'tis for women to sit still,
 On winter nights by solitary fires,
 And hear the nations praising them far off,

Too far!

(AL, V, 439-442)

Landon, however, just like Aurora Leigh, is incapable of giving up the artistic ideal, for in it she perceives an identity of a higher order, an identity which transcends sexual distinctions. In "Lines of Life" she writes:

I have such eagerness of hope
To benefit my kind;
And feel as if immortal power
Were given to my mind.

...

Why write I this? because my heart
Towards the future springs,
The future where it loves to soar
On more than eagle wings.
Oh! not myself,- for what am I?
The worthless and the weak
Whose every thought of self should raise
A blush to burn my cheek.

But song has touched my lips with fire,
And made my heart a shrine.
For what, although alloy'd, debased,
Is in itself divine.
(Landon, 1857: II, pp. 139-140)

In Landon's long narrative poem The Improvisatrice (1824) we find a fuller articulation of the self-reflexive moment, and an important precursor to Aurora Leigh.⁽³⁾ Although the poem's unifying theme is the conventional theme of ill-fated love, two aspects of this long narrative poem are of special interest to us here. First, the poem's preoccupation

(3) Both The Improvisatrice and Aurora Leigh were clearly inspired by Madame de Staël's Corinne, ou l'Italie (1807), a work which Ellen Moers has recently described as "the book of the woman of genius" (Moers, 1977: p. 263). Landon wrote the "Metrical Versions of the Odes" for Isabel Hill's 1833 translation of Corinne.

with feminine-poetic self-reflexion is evident throughout. The improvisatrice, who is the first person narrator, explicitly identifies herself, from the start, as both "woman" and "Genius" (Landon, 1857: II, p. 7). Second, although dramatic tension in the narrator's life-story does not stem from the double bind but from Lorenzo's (the beloved) prior commitment, both the beginning and the ending of this autobiographical narrative anticipate the moments of initiation and closure in Aurora Leigh. In the poem's exposition, the improvisatrice depicts an ideal state of selfhood, a state in which the woman poet comes to know life and love through art:

My power was but a woman's power;
 Yet, in that great and glorious dower
 Which Genius gives, I had my part:
 I poured my full and burning heart
 In song, and on the canvass made
 My dreams of beauty visible;
 I knew not which I loved the most --
 Pencil or lute, -- both loved so well.
 (Landon, 1857: II, p. 7)

In this state of ideal selfhood, the threat of gender-awareness -- "My power was but a woman's power" -- is dismissed, as the narrator evokes the great leveller, "Genius."

Throughout the poem, the narrator's integrity as both woman and poet is kept intact (and unproblematic), for the improvisatrice brings the two together under the woman's peculiar sign: love. This artist woman paints scenes of love and sings of love, she loves her vocation and is, in turn, loved for her talent. Landon, like her female predecessors and like EBB, seeks to merge woman and artist; she accomplishes this by subsuming both under love. Admitting that "love" has been a frequent "source" of her "song," Landon proclaims in a Preface to a collection of her poems:

for a woman, whose influence and whose sphere must be in
 the affections, what subject can be more fitting than one
 which it is her peculiar province to refine, spiritualise
 and exalt?

(Landon, 1857: II, p. 102)

Similarly, in The Improvisatrice the narrator, who achieves artistic heights by singing of love -- that is, by giving expression to her 'true' nature as woman -- is, in turn, loved for this genius which proves her all the more the woman. In the poem's climactic ending, Lorenzo, now a widower free of other commitments, confesses his long-standing love for her:

I worshipped thee,
My beautiful, bright deity!
Worshipped thee as a secret thing
Of Genius' high imagining; --
But loved thee for thy sweet revealing
Of woman's own most gentle feeling.

(London, 1857: II, p. 20)

The parallels with Aurora Leigh, as Chapter Five will further illustrate, are revealing. Like Landon's improvisatrice, EBB's Aurora first discovers full selfhood, love and creative fulfillment, in art. Like the improvisatrice, who knows not which she "loved most --/ Pencil or lute, -- both loved so well," Aurora, too, exclaims: "My own best poets ... thus I love you" (AL, I, 881-2). The improvisatrice's first artistic experience excites both body and soul: "Oh, yet my pulse throbs to recall,/ When first upon the gallery's wall/ Picture of mine was placed" (p. 7). Similarly, Aurora's initiation into the "world of books [which] is still the world" (I, 748), is a highly sensuous experience:

But the sun was high
When first I felt my pulses set themselves
For concord; when the rhythmic turbulence
Of blood and brain swept outward upon words.

(I, 895-898)

Finally, both Lorenzo in The Improvisatrice and Romney in Aurora Leigh come to love the woman artist through her art. Lorenzo admits to having "worshipped" the improvisatrice "as a secret thing/ Of Genius' high imagining," and Aurora's book, when Romney finally reads it, regenerates love and awakens desire. Romney tells Aurora in the scene which prepares for the poem's climactic ending:

This last book o'ercame me like soft rain
 Which falls at midnight, when the tightened bark
 Breaks out into unhesitating buds
 And sudden protestations of the spring.
 (AL, VIII, 595-8)

In the decades that preceded the publication of EBB's Aurora Leigh the issue of female authorship was 'publicly' settled by generally ascribing to women the literary genres best suited to accomodate their 'domestic' and 'affective' nature, namely the novelistic and the sentimental-lyrical. Ludlow and Lewes sang the praise of women's natural propensity to novel writing, and Mrs. Ellis duly recommended to the Daughters of England the poetry of the heart:

If, then, for men it be absolutely necessary that he should sacrifice the poetry of his nature for the realities of material and animal existence, for woman there is no excuse -- for woman, whose whole life ... is one of feeling, rather than action; whose highest duty is so often to suffer, and be still; whose deepest enjoyments are all relative; who has nothing, and is nothing, of herself ... for woman to cast away the love of poetry, is to pervert from their natural course the sweetest and loveliest tendencies of a truly feminine mind.

(Ellis, 1845: p. 133; italics mine)

For the women writing in the shadow of Mrs. Ellis' extremely popular treatises, the double bind was indeed a deadlock: being granted ontological vacuity, they would in vain seek the fullness and self-assertiveness of the poetic persona. At best, they could avoid the double bind by a tactic of dissociation, alienating their works from the very activity that brought them about. In a like manner, Maria Jane Jewsbury (1800-1833), in another literary tribute from one writing woman to another, not only transforms the poet Felicia Hemans into a stereotypic feminine heroine (in the guise of Egeria), but further transforms the poetic genre itself into an extension of Hemans' very 'femininity.' In Three Histories (1830) Egeria is portrayed as "exquisitely feminine ... a genius," to whom "anything abstract or scientific was unintelligible and

distasteful, ... her knowledge was extensive and various, but ... it was poetry that she sought." Jewsbury proceeds to 'erase' any possible traces of 'masculinity,' answering a silent but omnipresent accuser:

there was no room in her mind for philosophy, nor in her heart for ambition; the one was filled by imagination, the other engrossed by tenderness.... her strength and weakness alike lay in her affections ... She was a muse, a grace, a variable child, a dependent woman, the Italy of human beings.

(in Elwood, 1843: p. 239-240; italics mine).

Given the nature of the double bind situation in which women writers have found themselves, it is little wonder that one finds almost no literary heroines in women's writings over the period discussed above. In the Half Sisters (1848) Geraldine Jewsbury espouses the cause of the actress, and the heroine in Mrs. Craik's 1850 novel, Olive, is a self-supporting painter; but it was not until Elizabeth Barrett Browning came forth with Aurora Leigh that the "printing woman" herself received a full treatment in poetical language.

CHAPTER THREE

"You -- tell us what we are": "A woman is a foreign land."

"The books that so sayeth, women made them not."

Christine de Pisan, The Boke of the Cyte of Ladys (1521)

When in 1844 EBB started seriously contemplating the plan for Aurora Leigh, she had in mind

a sort of novel-poem -- a poem as completely modern as [her own] 'Geraldine's Courtship', running into the midst of our conventions, and rushing into drawing rooms where 'angels fear to tread'; and so meeting face to face and without mask the Humanity of the age, and speaking the truth as I conceive of it, out plainly.

(Kintner, 1969: p. 31; italics mine).

The "truth" she chose to speak out about in Aurora Leigh, I will argue, is the truth about "Woman and artist,-- both incomplete,/ Both credulous of completion" (AL, II, 4-5). In doing so EBB was inevitably engaged in a dialogue with other texts which also strove to define either "woman" or "poet" or both. While Chapter Two has delineated a self-reflexive discourse in women's writing prior to Aurora Leigh which attempts to define a female speaking subjectivity, the present chapter investigates the discourse with which EBB had to contend in coming to write about "woman." To complete this contextual project, Chapter Four will explore the particular metaphysical framework which informs EBB's view of the "poet."

EBB, we have seen, was determined to write a "completely modern" poem; one aspect of 'modernism' with which she was concerned and which greatly stimulated her thinking on her epic-to-be was the traditionalist vs feminist controversy concerning women, a controversy which came into a particularly sharp focus in the 1840's. With regard to my present interest, namely the discourse on femininity -- the discourse creating the textual object "woman" -- the controversy could be seen to occupy a discursive spectrum ranging from an unequivocal affirmation of essential difference (between the sexes) to an assertion of a "deep and broad basis of likeness" (Davies, 1866; italics mine). The former is constitutive of what I will be calling the hegemonic discourse on femininity, being a position generally held and consistently argued in both fictional and non-fictional works of the period. The second I consider to constitute a problematizing factor, a direct challenge to the hegemonic perception of "woman." In the present chapter I proceed in two stages. First, I will seek to identify major points of contention in the controversy over the

"woman's question," particularly as they relate to the constitution of a female speaking subject. Second, I will proceed to examine the articulation of this problematics in two poetic texts which I view as exemplary or representative in this regard: Coventry Patmore's The Angel in the House (1854-6) and Alfred Tennyson's The Princess (1847). In my reading of these texts I will point out a range of responses to the problematized issue of female subjectivity spanning from an affirmation of the hegemonic notion of "difference" -- the example of Patmore's The Angel in the House -- to an attempt to reconcile "difference" with "similarity" -- the example of Tennyson's The Princess. I thus consider these two long narrative poems to constitute the immediate problem-context of Aurora Leigh, for while Patmore's poem is an exemplary articulation of the hegemonic injunction constitutive of the double bind, Tennyson's poem is a forceful exploration of the conflict between this hegemonic discourse and women's aspirations for an independent and full identity. These two poems, moreover, form a particularly appropriate context for Aurora Leigh since EBB's poem is explicitly concerned with Aurora's desire to assume the role of the poet, a desire which is frustrated by her recognition of the mutually exclusive demands of a feminine destiny (as defined by the hegemonic poetic tradition) and poetic identity.

An exemplary articulation of the early-Victorian hegemonic position on "woman" can be found in a didactic text which enjoyed great popularity throughout the first half of the nineteenth century, Thomas Gisborne's An Inquiry into the Duties of the Female Sex (1797). Gisborne, who combines an authority grounded in religious precept with the more modern idiom of historical/sociological observation, asserts: "the power who called the human race into being has, with infinite wisdom, regarded, in the structure of the corporeal frame, the tasks which the different sexes were respectively destined to fulfil" (Gisborne, 1797: p. 19) Thus, to the man, "He imparted ... strength," while "the female form He has cast in a smaller mould, and bound together by a looser texture." Gisborne then proceeds to 'logically' deduce that the Creator "has adopted ... a corresponding plan of discrimination between mental powers and dispositions of the two sexes" (pp. 19-20). Gisborne hastens to list these different "mental powers and dispositions," and it soon transpires that while he reserves the entire scope of human endeavor for the one sex, very little is

left for the other. To man, Gisborne argues, the Creator gave "the science of legislation, of jurisprudence, of political economy.... etc," blessing him with "a mind endued with the powers of close and comprehensive reasoning" (p. 21). Women, he contends, the Creator has endowed with "sprightliness and vivacity," "quickness of perception" and "powers adapted to unbend the brow of the learned, to refresh the over-laboured faculties of the wise" (p. 22).

In Gisborne's scheme of things, then, power is joyfully relegated to the 'naturally' (by Divine law) superior, while, by a twist of logic, (male) fantasy becomes divine precept as he thus reasons:

to protect weakness from the oppression of domineering superiority, those whom He has not qualified to contend, He has enabled to fascinate.

(Gisborne, 1791: p. 20)

In Gisborne's 'explication' of the divine precept, men are not only endowed with a natural "superiority" over the weak and vulnerable other sex, but are also ensured continued gratification of their desires (pleasure) by this same superiority. While Gisborne denies women all other talents (with which to acquire power), he 'benevolently' grants them the ability to please and "fascinate." He thus posits a self-perpetuating cycle by which the threat of men's "domineering superiority" forever compels women to "fascinate," that is, give pleasure to men. While man's power also entitles him to pleasure, woman's powerlessness, dictates Gisborne, forever renders her the instrument of another's pleasure.

This same fantasy, we note, disguised as a philosophical precept (in the name of a Natural law) is also Rousseau's; he writes in the widely influential Emile, ou de l'education (1762): "l'empire des femmes n'est point a elles parce que les hommes l'ont voulu, mais parce que ainsi veut la nature ... ce principe etabli, il s'ensuit que la femme est faite specialement pour plaire a l'homme" (Rousseau, 1762: pp. 446-449; italics mine). It is by a natural law, Rousseau contends, that woman has been destined to please man. In Rousseau's scheme of things woman is drained of all subjectivity, becoming a 'relative creature' whose whole existence is defined through the functions she fulfills vis-à-vis the man. Here syntax

reinforces semantics as man becomes the sole possible subject in this discursive universe: "ainsi toute l'éducation des femmes doit être relative aux hommes. Leur plaire, leur être utiles, se faire aimer et honorer d'eux, les élever jeunes, les soigner grands, ... leur rendre la vie agréable et douce; voilà les devoirs des femmes dans tous les temps" (p. 449). In this universe woman is destined to please man, be useful to man, elicit love in man, make life agreeable for him, tend to men young and old; she is instrumental to man but is nothing in herself.

The first half of the nineteenth century saw the further elaboration of this hegemonic discourse concerning women; "even before Victoria's reign, reactionary conservatism, which at the turn of the century reacted alike against the freedom of aristocratic morals and the French revolution's threat of subversion, created a climate favourable to a traditionalist conception of woman under the sway of man and enclosed within the family" (Basch, 1974: p. 3; italics mine). The Victorian traditionalists promoted an idealization of woman even more disarming than any previously more misogynist concepts, for as Basch has argued

When a woman is denied all capacity for creation, action and authority, her contribution in the masculine world becomes the emotional and moral guidance which are her vocations as wife and mother. On the basis of her physical and intellectual weakness, a theory of her power was constructed which commanded general assent perhaps just because of the paradox.

(Basch, 1974: p. 5)

In the 1840's and 1850's the climate of opinion was much influenced by such writings as Aimé Martin's L'Education des Mères and Comte's Cours de Philosophie Positive, which supported the theory of woman's special influence (viz. inferiority) on scientific grounds. At home this "separate sphere" theory was loudly acclaimed by such conservative and didactic writers as Mrs. Sarah Ellis who, at the onset of one of her numerous educational books, declares to have taken it for granted

that the youthful reader of these pages has reflected seriously upon her position in society as a woman, has

acknowledged her inferiority to man, has examined her own nature, has found there an ability of feeling, a quickness of perception, and a facility of adaptation, beyond what he possesses, and which, consequently, fits her for a distinct and separate sphere.

(Ellis, 1845: p. 16)

This view was as powerful in affecting the characterization of women in fiction as it was in determining the evaluation of actual women writers. In accordance with the traditionalist view of woman, to their contemporaries "nineteenth century women writers were women first, artists second" (Showalter, 1977: p. 73). While Victorian physicians argued that women's inferiority could be demonstrated in almost every analysis of the brain and its functions, the literary reviewers continued to voice such familiar arguments as "the nature of woman demands that to perfect it in life which must half-lame it for art" (Massey, 1862: p. 271). In 1851 Coventry Patmore wrote in the North British Review:

There certainly have been cases of women possessed of the properly masculine power of writing books, but these cases are all so truly and obviously exceptional, and must and ought always to remain so, that we may overlook them without the least prejudice to the soundness of our doctrine.

(Patmore, 1851: p. 281; italics mine)

At the same time, Victorian physicians were promoting the new scientific findings, namely, that "maternal functions diverted nearly 20 percent of women's vital energies from potential brain activity" (Haller, 1974: p. 65-66). They maintained that women had smaller and less efficient brains, and that any expenditure of mental energy by women would divert the supply of blood and phosphates from the reproductive system to the brain, leading to dysmenorrhea, "ovarian neuralgia", physical degeneration, and sterility. In this light, female intellectual distinction came to suggest "not only a self-destructive imitation of a male skill, but also a masculine physical development" (Showalter, 1977: p. 77).

In public opinion, moreover, the accomplished artist was the child of the failed, frustrated woman. G.H. Lewes offers this 'insight' into the nature of female literary activity:

If the accidents of her position make her solitary and inactive, or if her thwarted affections shut her somewhat from that sweet domestic and maternal sphere to which her whole being spontaneously moves, she turns to literature as to another sphere.

(Lewes, 1852: pp. 133-134)

G. H. Lewes was indeed particularly sympathetic to the woman writer's cause, as both his critical writings and his unwavering support of George Eliot's literary career can amply demonstrate. The rather sordid characterization of female authorship cited above is indicative of Lewes' awareness of the double bind dilemma and his inability -- shared, as we have demonstrated, by the women writers -- to think "female authorship" outside that conflict. A similar failure to 'escape' the double bind, to resist its inhibiting conflictual formula, is evident in the work of another mid-century advocate of female authorship, the critic Frederick Rowton (1818-1854). Rowton's 1848 survey of poetry written by women brings into a particularly sharp focus the dilemma of the woman poet.

Frederick Rowton's The Female Poets of Great Britain (1848) is an anthology of poetry written by women from Juliana Berners (1460) and Queen Anne Boleyn (1507-1536) to EBB and Charlotte Young. In his "Introductory Chapter" and "Critical Remarks," avowedly designed to further contest the "belief that the thoughts of the feminine soul are not worth preserving" (Rowton, 1848: p. xi), Rowton in fact provides us with probably the most concise and exhaustive inventory of mid-nineteenth century 'progressive' views on the "woman's sphere" in general and the woman poet in particular. In its emphasis on the "Female mind" (Preface), and in its preliminary declaration that "in these enlightened days it may certainly be taken for granted that women have souls," Rowton's project appears at first to be a direct response to Astell's and Wollstonecraft's. It soon transpires, however, that his panegyric on the "female soul" as containing "inexhaustible mines of precious jewels" notwithstanding, Rowton's project is embedded within an exclusively traditionalist discourse the finality of

which is to circumscribe a constraining, disabling, 'feminine sphere'. Rowton's inability to meaningfully pursue his own aims here, I contend, arises out of his own attempt to 'resolve' the double bind dilemma by subsuming the poetic under the feminine.

Endeavoring to promote the "poetesses" included in his volume, Rowton is well aware of the inevitable objections, taking stock that "on the whole, woman's intellectual efforts have been discouraged. Nay, even the present day, ... has done much to repulse and retard woman's advancement" (p. xii). "Have we not seen," accuses Rowton, "that when young Female Poets have by their genius placed themselves prominently before the public, they have been met with shameful malice and slander?" (p. xii). The crux of the problem for Rowton becomes soon evident, as does his own solution to the double bind. "The doctrine of woman's intellectual inferiority is one which I cannot think upon without an impatience bordering on indignation," Rowton submits, but is quick to add, "I am quite prepared to grant that the mental constitutions of the sexes are different" (p. xiv, italics his). He proceeds to clarify the terms of this "difference" and in one stroke of his pen the whole edifice collapses; "Man rules the mind of the world," he affirms, "woman its heart" (p. xiv). The remainder of Rowton's "Introductory Chapter" is in effect a gloss on this statement, an attempt to dissolve the paradoxical figure of a woman poet (that is, to resolve the double bind) by defining a poetic mode that is specifically feminine.

Since Rowton finds the "intellectual faculties of the sexes" to be different, he takes it upon himself to "note a few of these peculiarities" (p. xv). Not surprisingly, we hear that "to man belongs the sway of FORCE" (p. xiv) while "to woman belongs the sway of INFLUENCE" (p. xv); that "man is self-relying and self-possessed; woman timid, clinging, and dependent" (p. xvi); that "he thinks; she feels. He reasons; she sympathises ... The strong passions are his; ... the mild affections are hers ... his insight into essences is truer than hers, but ... she has a better appreciation of surfaces" (p. xvi). Not Poetic faculties, too, are seen to be inscribed within this predetermined -- 'natural' -- scheme of sexual difference. Women, claims Rowton, have rarely "addressed themselves to the mere understanding," seeking "to impress the feelings of the race ... Man's poetry teaches us Politics; Woman's, Morality" (p. xvii). Like

Tennyson in The Princess, Rowton here idealizes the perfect "union of the two incomplete parts" (p. xviii); yet one shrinks from his utter blindness and self-deception as he enthusiastically concludes: "let us give woman's mind that free scope for its exertions which we have long refused it" (p. xviii). This euphemistic 'freedom' is most glaringly exposed in the course of Rowton's assessment of individual women writers. Here Rowton's evaluation of EBB's work is a particularly relevant case in point.

Rowton regards EBB as being "chief among the learned poetesses of our land," adding that "her poetry is the poetry of pure reason" (p. 500; italics mine). Given Rowton's convictions regarding the nature of the female mind, it is little wonder that he is disinclined towards this "poetry of reason." Rowton feels compelled to justify this rather explicit disinclination, which he does by reiterating his views on the difference between the sexes. We will do well to read the following passage bearing in mind Astell and Wollstonecraft on women and horticultural imagery:

It may perhaps be fairly argued that, as woman's faculties are rather perceptive than investigative, and as her knowledge of truth is rather intuitive than acquired, there is a possibility of her understanding being injured by over-cultivation. Just as some flowers lose their native beauty when forced by horticultural art, may the female mind be spoiled by excess of intellectual culture.

(Rowton, 1848: p. 500)

Threatening women with the loss of their "native beauty," Rowton, in effect, warns women that any rigorous "investigation" of the "truth," any serious intellectual pursuit, will "spoil" their femininity and render them undesirable. Since he identifies femininity with the "perceptive and intuitive faculties," and since he subsumes the poetic under the feminine, Rowton can approve of only a very limiting and constraining poetic project for women.

It thus soon becomes evident that, for Rowton, EBB is indeed a "spoiled," deviant woman. In his critique of her poetry Rowton clearly implies that in employing reason and in pursuing scholarly interests EBB has violated a natural order of things according to which:

the spheres of the sexes are different ... The man -- 'for contemplation formed' -- should learn by study, and reflection, and comparison, and investigation; the woman -- 'for softness formed and sweet attractive grave' -- should acquire knowledge mainly through her rapid instincts, her wide-spreading sympathies, and her quick instantaneous perceptions.

(Rowton, 1848: p. 501)

Concomitantly, although Rowton acknowledges EBB's "genius" to be "of the highest order -- strong, deep thinking," he has praise only for her 'properly' feminine works, her "least belaboured compositions," her "unpretending works," works in which she "gives her soul free unconscious vent," and in which "her womanly faith and trust rise superior to all" (pp. 502-505; italics mine). Finally, Rowton's rhetoric does not fail to expose the very crux of the double bind dilemma. At the very root of the hegemonic perception of woman's "difference" lies the imperative of desirability: woman is desired because (and only as long as) she is different. Since woman can only be desired (she cannot desire), however, any attempt on her part to break away from the constraints would be self-defeating for it will entail forfeiting the only form of intercourse allowed her, that of being desired. Difference, affirms Rowton, is the very mark of desire; and since it is man who occupies the position of a desiring subject, woman, for him, is relegated to the position of the desired object. Rowton warns: "the acquirements of the sexes must be kept unlike, or man will find in woman, not a help-meet, but a rival. Harmony results not from similarity, but from difference; and the law applies as much to the mental as to the physical world" (p. 501).

Writing in the 40's and 50's, EBB belonged to a generation of women writers for whom a particularly successful entrance into the literary market place further aggravated the feminine role conflict. In spite of, or maybe because of, the growing number of women writers, these decades saw the further elaboration of the double critical standard. Elaine Showalter has demonstrated the constraining presuppositional framework determining any critical evaluation of women's writing in the period:

If we break down the categories that are the staple of

Victorian periodical reviewing, we find that women writers were acknowledged to possess sentiment, refinement, tact, observation, domestic expertise, high moral tone, and knowledge of female character and thought; to lack originality, intellectual training, abstract intelligence, humor, self-control and knowledge of male character. Male writers had most of the desirable qualities: power, breadth, distinctness, clarity, learning, abstract intelligence, shrewdness, experience, humor, knowledge of everyone's character, and open-mindedness.

(Showalter, 1977: p. 90)

Women writers were thus caught in an inescapable dilemma: "they felt humiliated by the condescension of the male critics," yet "were deeply anxious about the possibility of appearing unwomanly" (Showalter, 1977: p. 21). For the typical women novelists of the 1840's, however, the answer to the threat posed by the self-centeredness and self-assertiveness implicit in the act of writing (and the will to write, the choice of a profession) lay in "using the novel to demonstrate (by assumption rather than exploration of standards of womanliness) woman's proper sphere" (Ewbank, 1966: p. 41; italics hers). It will be my concern in Chapters Four and Five to explore the magnitude of this conflict for the woman poet for whom the discourse outlined in the present chapter carries even graver consequences.

An attempt, albeit a very tentative one, to break loose of the hegemonic discourse is evident in the thought of the early-Victorian feminists. These early feminists, although often sharing with the traditionalists a middle class ethics of work and the family, on the whole "rebelled against the narrow definitions of a particular 'sphere' reserved for women and asked that they be left free to try their hands in wider fields" (Basch, 1974: p. 12). In many respects, the rise in feminist thought was most closely related to a rise in social consciousness in general. In 1844 Ann Richelieu Land published (anonymously) Can Women Regenerate Society? in which she expressed that humanistic interest which is at the root of feminist thought:

Who can read without a shudder the reports of those who

have lately made inquiry into the state of the morals and education of the lower classes of the people? Has woman nothing to do with this? Ought she to sit with folded hands when she knows that such misery, such fearful degradation, exist in the heart of the country?... Let woman be dumb about her influence so long as such a brutal state of things exists.

(Killham, 1958: p. 134)

Like Wollstonecraft before her, Richelieu displaces the focus of critical attention, leaving behind questions of "sexual distinction" to concentrate on more global and pressing social issues.

Whereas the great part of 'properly' literary prose and poetry of the early Victorian era can be seen as espousing traditionalist views concerning women, it was in journalism that the emerging feminist ideology was most forcefully expressed. The Owenist The Crisis and The New Moral World, the Unitarian The Christian Remembrancer and later The Monthly Repository, all served to promote this new voice. The Westminster Review, being the organ of the young Benthamites, was also advocating female emancipation; J.S. Mill started contributing feminist articles to the journal as early as 1824, and for many years afterwards the journal kept the topic before the public eye.

Two of the leading feminists of the age, who were also personal friends and correspondants of EBB, Harriet Martineau and Anna Jameson, exemplify the changes brought into feminist thought around mid-century. Martineau, besides providing in her own life a model for independent working women, also made a major contribution to feminist thought in her 1837 Society in America. For Martineau, as for the socialist thinkers of her day, the issue of female labor was of utmost importance; in Society in America she insightfully prophesied:

During the present interval between the feudal age and the coming time, when life and its occupations will be freely thrown open to women as to men, the condition of the female working classes is such that if its suffering were but made known, emotions of horror and shame would tremble through

the whole society.

(Martineau, 1837: II, p. 258).

It was not long before these conditions were indeed made public in the 1842 report of the Royal Commission on "The Employment of Women and Young People in Mines." In 1843 The Athenaeum published a series of illustrated articles on the committee's findings, the third of which was contributed by Mrs. Jameson. The moral which Mrs. Jameson draws from the terrible evidence is clear: women need employment, yet society, in its determination to uphold an old ideal of womanhood, blindly deprives them of the proper means for an honorable occupation. With Martineau and Jameson a shift in emphasis becomes evident in feminist thought: having established the absolute necessity for a proper general education for girls and women, the major concern now becomes preparing women for the market place. In her "Woman's Mission and Woman's Position," Jameson calls for a reassessment of the traditional image of woman in favor of a more relevant one: "After all that has been written, sung, and said of women, one has the perception that neither in prose nor in verse has she ever appeared as the labourer. All at once people are startled at being obliged to consider her under this point of view, and no other" (Jameson, 1846: p. 213).

In spite of various anti-feminist manifestations, such as the exclusion of women from the Anti-Slavery Convention held in London in 1840, the feminist voice was growing in volume and confidence. The last decade prior to the publication of Aurora Leigh was in particular one of solidification and further promotion of the feminist ideology. The Infants Custody Act of 1839, passed through the efforts of Caroline Norton, laid down that mothers against whom adultery has not been proved might have custody of their children under seven years of age, and right of access to their older children. In 1843 Mrs. Hugo Reid published A Plea for Women (warmly received by the Athenaeum), and in 1845 Margaret Fuller published Woman in the 19th Century. In 1848 Queen's college for women was founded, and in 1849 the second women's college, Bedford college, was founded. In 1851 Harriet Taylor's "Enfranchisement of Women" was published (Westminster Review, July 1851), and in 1852 Caroline Norton wrote English Law for Women in the 19th Century, which was circulated privately. Reacting against a traditionalist male discourse, women writers were voicing their discontent;

Charlotte Brontë's Jane Eyre, for example, rebels:

Women are supposed to be very calm generally: but women feel just as men feel ... and it is narrow-minded of their more privileged fellow-creatures to say that they ought to confine themselves to making puddings and knitting stockings, to playing on the piano and embroidering bands.
(Brontë, 1847: p. 96)

Indeed, the fundamental issue of early Victorian feminism, though "often obscured by agitation for subordinate ends - the right to vote, to graduate, to dispose of her own property after marriage," was rather the entry of woman "into the sexless sphere of disinterested intelligence, and ... of autonomous personality" (Young, 1936: p. 100; italics mine). This ambition involved a battle with what Emma Goldman has called the "external tyrants" -- institutions, the law, etc. -- but also, and perhaps more importantly, with the "internal tyrants, far more harmful to life and growth -- ethical and social conventions" (Goldman, 1910: p. 227). The battleground for this struggle was, to a large extent, the literary arena. EBB's entire oeuvre, it will be argued, is a monument to one such formidable effort, an effort to reclaim a subjectivity that is both autonomous (creative, imaginative) and feminine.

Having established a context for the controversy over the "woman question" in early-Victorian England, I proceed now to my main concern in this chapter, namely, the investigation of contemporary attempts to deal with this problematics in poetic language. Since EBB's own project is very explicitly inscribed within this poetic tradition, it is necessary to arrive at an understanding of this tradition before embarking on a reading of EBB's canon.

I find the most elaborate and explicit exposition in verse of the mid-nineteenth century hegemonic discourse on femininity in Coventry Patmore's The Angel in the House (1854-6). Patmore is a particularly appropriate figure for our purposes for not only has it been demonstrated that in his 1844 Poems he was "under the spell of certain lyrics published by his elder contemporary, Elizabeth Barrett" (Gosse, 1905: p. 20), but

one could also make a strong case for The Angel as being rather explicitly one of the main targets in Aurora Leigh.⁽¹⁾ Patmore's own criticism of Aurora Leigh, which is exemplary in its clear demonstration of the implications of the ideology expressed in poems such as The Angel for the subsequent critical appraisal of individual women writers, will be discussed in Chapter Six.

Critical studies of The Angel, and of Patmore's work in general, have, on the whole, tended to emphasize and valorize Patmore's ideal of love. Even today, less favourable views, such as the one expressed by Virginia Crawford's complaint in 1901 that "Mr. Patmore never gave a thought to the feminine soul save in its relation to man," are noted only in passing, and usually with a sneer (Crawford, 1901: p. 306).⁽²⁾ Since valorization, in these studies, often precedes the textual analysis proper, the whole interpretive enterprise turns out to be largely tautological. Osbert Burdett's 1921 The Idea of Coventry Patmore is a case in point. The study opens with the declaration that Patmore's "real original contribution to Western mystic literature is to supply the emphasis, elsewhere lacking, on the divine nature of human love" (Burdett, 1921: p. 11). Burdett here not only uncritically echoes what the narrator of The Angel in the House declares his mission to be, but also a priori imprints the seal of utmost value on the poem by associating it with what to him are absolute (taken for granted) values: love and the divine. Consequently, when in the course of his close reading of the poem Burdett comes across evidence which is clearly problematic or disruptive to his pre-conceived scheme, he either suppresses that problematic or attempts to 'justify' it (on behalf of Patmore). Thus, for example, Burdett perpetuates, rather than exposes, a central paradox in the poem when he observes:

Patmore's highest exaltation of woman always resolves itself into praise of her unconscious power of making visible to man spiritual truths to which he would be blind unless they were reflected in the mirror of her body for

(1) For a discussion of The Angel in the House as a target in Aurora Leigh see Paul Turner (1948), and Sister M. A. Weinig (1981), pp. 45-46.

(2) I came across sneering or condescending references to Crawford's critique in Page (1933), p. 65, and Reid (1957), pp. 139-40.

him. Her glory, in fact, is to be the means whereby man may obtain his full perception of Reality.

(Burdett, 1921: pp. 22-23; italics mine)

Clearly, in a context where ultimate value is seen to reside in the active "perception" of "spiritual truths," the relegation of woman to the status of "unconscious ... means" and to the realm of the "body" could be hardly interpreted as expressive of the "highest exaltation." Similarly, in order to justify one of the poem's central tenets, namely, that "Man must be pleased; but him to please/ Is woman's pleasure," Burdett resorts to a highly questionable interpretive procedure which is indeed a travesty of the biographical approach. He comments: "This account of the relation of the two [man and woman], which may sound biased coming from a man, is thoroughly characteristic of Patmore, who was married three times himself, apparently to the complete happiness of his wife on each occasion." It is even more startling to encounter this line of reasoning in a more recent and much more scholarly work. Wishing to absolve Patmore of anything which might compromise the scholar's own deep appreciation for the "magnificent presentation of feminine psychology in The Angel," J.C. Reid counters his own perception of a "Pasha-like stand" in Patmore's statement that "if there's anything that God hates utterly, it is a clever woman," by reassuring us (and of course, himself): "yet there is not the slightest evidence to suggest that Patmore treated any of his wives with the domineering tyranny of the legendary Turk" (Reid, 1957: p. 140).

In total conformity with the hegemonic discourse, Patmore's philosophy of love evolves out of his basic affirmation of sexual difference. In a later work, Religio Poetae (1893), he writes:

between unequals sweet is equal love; and the fact is that there is no love, and therefore no sweetness, which is not thus conditioned; and the greater the inequality the greater the sweetness.

(Patmore, 1893: p. 133)

Accordingly, Patmore greatly dislikes "emancipated women" who forfeit their 'womanly' nature and whose leading feature, he claims, is their emancipation from the Christian faith (Patmore, 1851: p. 526). The

import of this criticism, and indeed of Patmore's whole preoccupation with woman, becomes particularly clear as one realizes its metonymic function within his discourse. "Woman" becomes for Patmore a means by which a whole ideological field can be effectively and successfully claimed, as a rhetoric of persuasion (through metonymy) is put to work. This discursive device is clearly at work in the following passage, where Patmore employs the equation between woman and the natural to defend his basic political stand, that of conservatism. Patmore writes in "The Weaker Vessel" (Religio Poetae, 1893):

It is a great consolation to reflect that, among all the bewildering changes to which the world is subject, the character of woman cannot be altered; and that, so long as she abstains from absolute outrages against nature -- such as divided skirts, freethinking, tricycles and Radicalism -- ...[nothing] can ever really do other than enhance the charm of that sweet unreasonableness.

(Patmore, 1893: pp. 147-8)

For Patmore "woman" is indeed instrumental, functional, for in her man can find a mirror wherein he might see reflected the divine in the human. The import of Patmore's religious framework for his understanding of the relationship between the sexes is made explicit in Canto X of The Angel in the House, entitled "Going to Church"; the poet-narrator rhapsodizes: "I loved her in the name of God,/ And for the ray she was of Him" (I, X, 4) and adds "when we knelt, she seem'd to be/ An angel teaching me to pray" (I, X, 6).⁽³⁾ Since woman herself is 'naturally' that very reflection, Patmore a priori excludes any possibility of female self-knowledge, of a female subjectivity, of an active self-conscious female 'becoming'. This tactic has since found one of its most influential promoters in Sigmund Freud who took the products of Victorian values and mores to be universal

(3) The Angel in the House is divided into two Books, each Book consisting of twelve Cantos, and each Canto consisting of a Prelude (Prelude stanzas are marked by Roman numerals) and a main section (composed of three to four stanzas marked by Arabic numerals). Both Books open with a Prologue, and Book II ends with an Epilogue. In my references, the first Roman numeral indicates the Book (I or II), the second refers to Canto number, the third reference is either a Roman numeral (indicating a Prelude stanza) or an Arabic numeral (indicating a main-section stanza). All references are to Page's 1949 edition of Patmore's Poems.

psychological patterns. "Throughout history people have knocked their heads against the riddle of the nature of femininity," Freud assures us, "nor will you escape worrying over this problem -- those of you who are men; to those of you who are women this will not apply -- you are yourselves the problem" (Freud, 1933: p. 99). Like Freud's "riddle," Patmore's "woman" is the thing itself and is thus ultimately alienated from the status of a subject and from the privilege of self-knowledge.

In sharp contrast with the critical tradition which exults in Patmore's alleged glorification of love, the present work views The Angel in the House as an extended effort -- a jocular and merry one Patmore wanted it to be and thus instituted the octosyllabics -- to establish the alterity of woman in relation to the male poetic subject. From Prologue to Epilogue, I will argue, Patmore's "woman" ultimately serves as a textual magnifying glass through which the poet-narrator's plenitude of self is magnificently redoubled. The Prologue which opens Book I already establishes this relationship of subjectivity exhausted / subjectivity replenished by quickly shifting the focus of attention away from "her" with whom the poet is said to be conversing (but whose voice remains rather mute) not so much to her as the tenor to which the poetry will serve as a vehicle, but rather to the central locus of the narrator's subjectivity as poet, namely to "whence gushes the Pierian Spring" (I, Prologue, 3). That this is the real locus of the poem -- not "love" but the singing of love, not "woman" but a representational act conventionally known as 'A hymn in woman's praise' -- is made particularly clear in the Prologue and Epilogue. Providing closure to the poem's symmetric structure, the Epilogue is but a reinforced, repeated beginning, a triumphant coming back (return) to the "Pierian spring" whence the poem was generated.

First and last, the poem's representational object is not "love" but the tradition of love poetry and that of the panegyric in particular. The initial impetus for the poem, as the Prologue of Book I clearly demonstrates, is the 'discovery' of a theme fit for poetry, a theme as yet (so claims the narrator) "unsung" but "worth the cost of rhyme" (I, Prologue, 3). The narrative thus opens on a scene of poetic anxiety where what the poet desires most is the coming true of his "dream,/ To be delight to many days,/ And into silence only cease/ When those are still, who

shared their bays/ With Laura and Beatrice" (I, Prologue, 4). This desire is conveniently displaced by the narrator as he 'excuses' his desire for the envied "bays poetic" by his desire to satisfy the "angel"'s own wishes: "But, in his heart, his thoughts were rife/ How for her sake to earn a name" (I, Prologue, 2). It is clearly the narrator's own poetic aspirations which serve both to launch the poem and to bring about its closure. The Epilogue which concludes Book II significantly re-enacts the Prologue's dream of desired poetic fame, thus completing the poem's framing narrative and firmly rooting the enclosed poetic project (the poem within a poem) in the same space that has originally generated it -- that of the male poetic subject. In the Epilogue, the omniscient voice carried over from the Prologue has Felix (the narrator) revive the poetic topos:

'How strange,' said he, 'twould seem to meet,
 'When pacing, as we now this town,
 'A Florence or a Lisbon Street,
 'That Laura or that Catherine, who,
 'In the remote, romantic years,
 'From Petrarch or Camoens drew
 'Their songs and their immortal tears!'
 (II, Epilogue, 4)

The Prologue, which 'prepares' us for the reading of the main narrative, significantly ends on an explicit note of dissociation. Having conceived of a subject for his poetic efforts, the narrator duly disengages himself from the avowed source of inspiration -- the woman -- turning to the central preoccupation of his verse: writing. So that we take no offense, Patmore has the omniscient voice (a thinly disguised narrator) reassure us of the sentiments of the "Sweet, ... Mistress, Wife, and Muse":

She laugh'd. How proud she always was
 To feel how proud he was of her!
 But he had grown distraught, because
 The Muse's mood began to stir.
 (I, Prologue, 4)

Turning to his work, Patmore's narrator, like the Hemingway hero of a

century later, has to leave behind the woman; while the woman clings, the male poet breaks free in order to create.

In the poem within a poem which unfolds between Prologue and Epilogue, Felix Vaughan, the poet-narrator, not only recounts the events of his falling in love with, courting, and wedding Honoria, Dean Churchill's daughter, but also advances a philosophical credo centered upon sexual differentiation and the relationship between the sexes. In my reading of the poem I attempt to break away from the central tradition in Patmore criticism, a tradition which uncritically (because too sympathetically) echoes Patmore's (or his narrator's) own mystifications, by scrutinizing the text with view to unraveling not only its system of thought but also the textual strategies employed in communicating it.

I see the overall moral-psychological structure established by the poet-narrator in The Angel to consist of three hierarchically marked planes, whose relative position is irreversible and fixed. The very bottom of this hierarchy -- a space of utter desolation and displacement -- is occupied by the woman who has been rejected by a lover to whom she has avowed her sentiments. This woman's space is marked by a succession of negatives. First, having declared her love, without this being either elicited or reciprocated by the male lover, the woman proves unwomanly, having "o'erstept" the "woman's gentle mood" (I, XI, I). In this woman, "Discrown'd, dejected," we perceive the very antithesis of the idealized "angel in the house"; the essence of her sin lies in her articulation of desire -- an uncalculated, 'selfish,' "unguarded love" -- which in a woman is a "crime" (I, XI, I). This woman's fate, decrees the narrator, is a "blank ruin," an abyss of annihilation, a terror of nothingness, for she is left "with no more a name/ Or place in all the honour'd host/ Of maiden and of matron fame." Akin to this woman whose very desire "withers" the poet's "love" -- desire in a woman is fatal to her for it 'kills' male desire -- is the "Widow," likewise fatally smitten by a desire devoid of its object. Mary, Widow Neale's daughter, tells of her mother's madness:

'O ... she's sinking! For a sign,
'She cried just now, of him that's dead,
'"Mary, he's somewhere close above,

"Weeping and wailing his dead wife,
 "With forceful prayers and fatal love
 "Conjuring me to come to life.
 "A spirit is terrible though dear!
 "It comes by night, and sucks my breath,
 "And draws me with desire and fear.
 (II, Epilogue, 2)

In contrast, we remember that the widower Dean Churchill (Honorio's father)-- "By widowhood more than winters bent" -- very much unlike Widow Neale, is "settled in a cheerful mind,/ As still forecasting heaven's content" (I, I, 3). Stripped bare of all human identity, outcast or mad, the desiring woman is the monstrous negative of the "angel in the house."

In between the monstrous desiring female and the glorified desiring male (of whom more presently), is the highly 'functional' "angel in the house." A woman whose one desire is "her desire to please" (II, VIII, 3; italics mine), the "angel" is she who, "more than he, desired his fame," being proud "to feel how proud he was of her" (I, Prologue, 2, 4). Non-existent, except in mediation, Patmore's "woman," as the following image clearly demonstrates, is ultimately a currency by which only one thing can be measured: the extent of male desire. Patmore has Aunt Maud, who is 'wise in the ways of the world' (being a repository of male common sense), voice this principle so central to Patmore's vision: "A woman, like the Koh-I-Noor,/ Mounts to the price that's put on her" (II, VIII, 1).

This denial of any immanent being-in-herself to woman is thinly disguised in the poem by a mystifying rhetoric which clothes blankness with the images of exotic otherness:

A woman is a foreign land
 Of which, though there he settle young,
 A man will ne'er quite understand
 The customs, politics, and tongue.
 (II, IX, II)

The text is, predictably, at no point concerned with investigating this uncharted area. In effect, the poem makes it abundantly clear that there

is no area to chart for the only depths there are to plumb are those of male desire. Using the symbolic currency of 'womanhood', the poet/narrator ceaselessly explores these depths, obsessively weighing the extent of a male appetite. Patmore puts it most succinctly in Felix's words to Honoria:

'Be man's hard virtues highly wrought,
'But let my gentle Mistress be,
'In every look, word, deed, and thought,
'Nothing but sweet and womanly!
'Her virtues please my virtuous mood,
'But what at all time I admire
'Is, not that she is wise or good.
'But just that thing which I desire.
'

'That seems in her supremest grace
'Which virtue or not, apprises me
'That my familiar thoughts embrace
'Unfathomable mystery.

I answer'd thus; for she desired
To know what mind I most approved;
Partly to learn what she inquired,
Partly to get the praise she loved.
(II, VIII, 1; italics mine)

Significantly here, as in Tennyson's The Princess, it is the woman who, ignorant of her own element, and herself lacking access to the truth, pleads of the man the solution of the riddle which is herself. The man, having exclusive access to knowledge and thus to the truth, becomes godlike in his capacity to name, to bring into being.

Man is indeed godlike in Patmore's highly hierarchical vision of the social order, an order centered upon a fixed mechanism of desire: "Man must be pleased; but him to please/ Is woman's pleasure" (I, IX, I). It is by this 'functional' perspective that Patmore's characterization of woman is determined. In order to rename woman (as a pleaser of man), the narrator has first to annul the existing woman whose independent being

poses a threat to the satisfaction of his desire. Consequently, a metamorphosis -- from woman, back to a newborn child, to a renamed woman totally subservient to man -- constitutes the poet's own miracle of creation:

A rupture of submission lifts
 Her life into celestial rest;
 Back to the babe the woman dies,
 And all the wisdom that she has
 Is to love him for being wise.
 (II, III, I)

Renaming her as that which elicits pleasure in him (in "man"), Patmore denies "woman" all integrity of self; since her finality lies outside herself, her changing moods, faces, behaviour, all relate not to a constant core but to a total absence. In "woman," contraries can unproblematically co-exist as long as they are similarly functional in the gratification of male desire; thus, the ideal woman "To the sweet folly of the dove,/ She joins the cunning of the snake,/ To rivet and exalt his love" (II, VIII, I).

The center towards which all gravitates in the poem is the poet-narrator's desire, his search for the ultimate source of pleasure. While woman is destined to self-oblivion either through dejection or through submission, Patmore's man actively pursues the routes of pleasure. Preempted by male desire, woman is also paradoxically multiplied by the same rule; "In the records" of his "breast" the narrator counts the many routes of pleasure, a multitude of women, "Red-letter'd, eminently fair,/ Stood sixteen, who, beyond the rest,/ By turns till then had been my care" (I, II, 4). The narrator is also free to explore the different tastes of pleasure; with Anne, it is "duty" which colours love, while in an "idle mood" he "worshipp'd Kate" (I, II, III). "At Berlin," he loves "three, one at St. Cloud,/ At Chatteris, near Cambridge, one,/ At Ely four, in London two,/ Two at Bowness, in Paris none," the last perhaps, since "The lack of lovely pride, in her/ Who strives to please, my pleasure numbs" (I, II, 4). It is out of this experience, contrasted with the woman's required innocence/cunning, that the narrator gains wisdom, realizing that "the maid" he most prefers is she "whose care to please with pleasing comes" (I,

II, IV).

The poem thus recreates a highly hermetic system, one whose economy is rigidly controlled and whose flows of energy are strictly regulated. Within this system, the male poet -- sole speaking subject -- desires, first the song, then the woman. He achieves both -- setting in motion a perpetuum mobile of pleasure -- for while woman provides him with a worthy theme for his song (one which gains him a place amongst the greatest), his song without fail wins him the woman, since her "wish to be desired" is 'naturally' "By praise increased" (II, II, I).

In The Princess (1847), as in The Angel in the House and Aurora Leigh, the story, in a nutshell, consists of the transformation of a prearranged marriage into a desired marriage of love. It is already highly indicative of the way in which The Angel in the House differs from these other narratives that, unlike them, Patmore's poem introduces the first (pre-arranged marriage) as reinforcing rather than problematizing the second (marriage of love). Since in Patmore's hierarchical scheme power and knowledge are handed down from man to man, it is only fitting that the marriage desired by the young man will turn out to be the one contemplated by the two senior men (the fathers): "He and my father in old times still/ Wish'd I should one day marry her" (I, VI, 3). Which collective male desire, in turn, the woman is predestined to crave. It is, again, highly significant, that not only is arranged marriage never problematized by the poem, it is also something of which the woman is kept totally ignorant; woman is not only denied access to knowledge, but more fundamentally yet, she is denied access to the problem-contexts which initiate the drive for knowledge. This very ignorance, moreover, is the sine qua non of woman's desirability, as is made clear by the narrator:

And her light-hearted ignorance
Of interest in our discourse
Fill'd me with love, and seem'd to enhance
Her beauty with pathetic force.
(I, VI, 4)

Finally, woman-in-herself is in effect absent from Patmore's narrative, her markers being only negative: self-oblivion, total ignorance. This

absence, we note, is highly functional in respect to the male poet's own reclaimed subjectivity, for it is this absence which gives rise to the highest value in the poem, that of "difference." In the last analysis, the poet's panegyric is in praise not of "woman" but of the poet's divine insight into the nature of love as difference; the poet-narrator thus vows:

to note

'And reverently understand
'How the two spirits shine remote;
'And ne'er to numb fine honour's nerve,
'Nor let sweet awe in passion melt,
'Nor fail by courtesies to observe
'The space which makes attraction felt
'Nor cease to guard like life the sense
'Which tells him that the embrace of love
'Is o'er a gulf of difference.
(I, XI, 1; italics mine)

In Tennyson's The Princess: a medley, the single voice which dominates Patmore's poem gives place to a "medley" of voices, while the panegyric to love as difference is replaced by an exploration of the problematics of similarity. Tennyson's woman (the Princess), like his man (the Prince), actually engages in the double pursuit of self-knowledge and knowledge of the other. Formally, the poem consists of a Romance narrative framed by a contemporary narrative. The contemporary narrative is set in Sir Walter Vivian's "broad lawns" which "all a summer's day" he gives "up to the people," "until the set of sun." The first person narrator of the frame story introduces a cast of characters among whom are six university undergraduates who, together with the narrator, take turns in telling the Romance story. The Romance narrative, although allegedly told by seven different frame-narrators, is in effect unified through the single voice of a first person narrator as each frame character in turn assumes the character of the Prince who is the Romance's first person narrator. The female characters of the frame narrative, Lilia and her "maiden aunt," are said to provide the six intercalary songs. These lyrics, although formally extraneous to both the Romance and the frame narrative, bear a very close

thematic affinity to both.

Very schematically, the Romance tells of a militant Princess who, resisting a pre-arranged marriage to the Prince, goes away to establish an Institute for women into which no man is allowed. The Prince, however, does manage to enter the Institute together with his two friends Cyril and Florian, all disguised as women. The Princess, who still refuses the Prince's advances after his identity is exposed, finally submits, being overtaken by compassion for the injured Prince who has risked his life in battle to win her. In the conclusion of the Romance narrative the Prince expresses what has always been considered as Tennyson's vision of the ideal relationship between the sexes. The Prince tells Ida:

Let her make herself her own
To give or keep, to live and learn and be
All that not harms distinctive womanhood.
For woman is not undeveloped man,
But diverse: could we make her as the man,
Sweet love were slain: his dearest bond is this,
Not like to like, but like in difference.
(VII, 256-262)(4)

Given the Princess' militant character and the Prince's gentle and loving manner, most interpretations of the poem have tended to characterize it as "tracing the complementary movements of the Princess toward true femininity and the Prince toward true masculinity" (Kissane, 1970: p. 95). In thus viewing the poem, critics have been more concerned to make plot and character conform to the Prince's apocalyptic vision in the Romance's conclusion, than to explore conflicts and unresolved tensions. In the discussion that follows I will attempt to uncover the poem's problematics and give a more adequate expression to the poem's "medley" or plurality of voices. I will conclude by pointing out a certain 'complicity' between mainstream Tennyson criticism of The Princess and

(4) The Princess is composed of seven Books, a Prologue, and a Conclusion. In my references I use Roman numerals to indicate Book number, and Arabic numerals to indicate line numbers. All references are to Ricks' 1969 edition of Tennyson's Poems.

elements of the hegemonic discourse in the poem. This complicity, I contend, further highlights the problematics exposed by The Princess and attests to the continued presence of this problematics in the critical discourse to this day.

In The Princess, as in The Angel in the House, the hegemonic discourse is the given of the narrative, constituting the most basic level of its presuppositional framework. The most articulate agent of the hegemony in Tennyson's poem is a character in the Romance narrative, the Prince's father. Having arranged the marriage of the Prince to Princess Ida "by proxy" when both were infants, the King incites the Prince to claim her by force when the Princess' father informs them of her resolution : "certain, would not wed" (I, 49). In the king's bold articulation of the differences between the sexes we discover the very foundation of the psychological bind discussed in the previous chapter; women, according to the hegemony, not only are what this discourse decrees -- by coercion or duty -- but are also destined to desire this condition of subordination:

Man is the hunter; woman is his game:
The sleek and shining creatures of the chase,
We hunt them for the beauty of their skins;
They love us for it, and we ride them down.
(V, 147-150)

The king concludes:

Man for the field and woman for the hearth;
Man for the sword and for the needle she:
Man with the head and woman with the heart:
Man to command and woman to obey;
All else confusion.
(V, 437-441)

While Patmore's poem complacently re-iterates these discursive "commonplaces," however, Tennyson's narrative registers an agitation as the accepted order is threatened and undermined. Subversion, in this respect, is a direct result of sexual 'perversion,' of a violation of the code of sexual differentiation. In the first place, both the frame narrative and

the Romance are precipitated by women who challenge the accepted views of femininity. The chronicle which attracts the narrator's attention in the Prologue, and which inspires the "sevenfold story," tells of a woman who, resisting the king's advances, "Had beat her foes with slaughter from her walls" (Prologue, 34). Relinquishing traditional womanhood, this female character -- whose story is embedded within the frame narrative -- becomes not only aggressive (manly), but also an actual threat to the male, an emasculator. In the second narrative level -- that of the Romance -- the figure of the militant/masculine woman materializes in the character of Princess Ida. In the same way that Ida, however, proves to be a slightly faded reproduction of the original (of the woman in the chronicle) -- a harmless militant -- Lilia, in the frame narrative, is an even paler Ida. While the chronicle character possesses power (physically killing men), the Princess only feigns power, as her inscription on the Institute gates -- "LET NO MAN ENTER IN ON PAIN OF DEATH" (II, 178) -- proves totally inconsequential. At a third remove both textually and ideologically, Lilia is left with only a frustrated longing for power: "Ah, were I something great!" (Prologue, 131). This pattern, in which degree of subversion (sexual reversal) stands in inverse ratio to degree of narrative embeddedness, is exemplary of the poem's overall project. While admitting a subversive discourse into the narrative -- in the form of Lilia's questioning of "womanhood," Ida's militancy (of which more presently), and the chronicle's glorification of female power -- the poem mitigates this discourse through formal devices. In the example cited above, this 'enfeebling' is achieved through narrative embedding in which the subversive is made subservient to, covered up by, a higher narrative level which thus cancels it out.(5) Another such strategy relates to the poem's tactic of closure, to which I will turn shortly.

(5) My understanding of the relative position of narrative levels is indebted to Genette's Narrative Discourse (1980). Genette observes that a second narrative can be "contained within the first one, not only in the sense that the first frames it with a preamble and a conclusion ..., but also in the sense that the narrator of the second narrative is already a character in the first one, and that the act of narrating which produces the second narrative is an event recounted in the first one" (Genette, 1980: p. 228). Thus, the more embedded the event, the 'lower' the narrative level to which it belongs. Embeddedness here also corresponds to distance from the initial narrating instance. Since this initial narrating instance constitutes the most 'powerful' narrative level in the text -- it subsumes all lower (embedded) levels -- degree of embeddedness indicates degree of narrative 'strength.' A lower level (embedded) event is of less consequence, so to speak, than a higher level (framing) event.

The blurring of sexually determined characteristics also affects male figures in the poem. An important link between the frame story and the Romance is established through suggestions of sexual ambiguity attached to the statue of Sir Ralph, in the 'real' world, and to the figure of the Prince, in the Romance world. In the Prologue, Lilia symbolically emasculates the "broken statue" of Sir Ralph -- "Lilia wild with sport/ ... had wound/ A scarf of orange round the stony helm/ And robed the shoulders in a rosy silk" (Prologue, 100-103) -- creating an androgynous figure in the "feudal knight in silken masquerade" (Prologue, 227). What precipitates the Romance narrative, in turn, is the threat of a similarity which unmakes "difference," a blurring of sexual characteristics which unmans the man and desexes the woman. The Prince, "blue-eyed, and fair in face/ Of temper amorous .../ With lengths of yellow ringlets," is "like a girl" (I, 1-3). Princess Ida, on the other hand, chooses to forfeit the woman's role by refusing any association with men; her father tells the Prince: she "loved to live alone/ Among her women; would not wed" (I, 49). Here, again, while the frame narrative registers only a slight and playful inversion of sex roles, the lower (embedded) narrative level -- the Romance -- is marked by a more severe perturbation. It is with view to this 'anomalous' condition, present in the different narrative levels, that one should attempt to understand the poem's avowed resolution and its underlying ambivalence towards sexual difference.

It might indeed be illuminating to read the poem backwards from its resolution, thus resisting an interpretive temptation (to which most studies of the poem have given in) to find in the poem's conclusion a true resolution of the differences and contradictions which otherwise permeate the poem. In the Romance's conclusion, the Prince, like Romney in Aurora Leigh, articulates a prophetic vision of a future where "the statelier Eden [will come] back to men" (VII, 277). This desired future will be brought about by a new and perfect relationship between the sexes, as "in the long years liker must they grow/ The man be more of woman, she of man" (VII, 264; italics mine). Reading the poem back from this vision, however, one realizes that this alleged resolution in effect only perpetuates the poem's central problematics. I understand this problematics to involve the dissolution of sexual "difference," a dissolution sought after by Princess Ida and textually present in the character of the Prince. Throughout the

poem, as I will demonstrate, the Prince's feminine qualities are highlighted. The knowledge gained by the Prince in the poem's conclusion -- his vision -- is but an articulation of his unchanging character throughout the poem. While the poem on the whole accepts the Prince's sexual ambiguity, however, it registers a profound resistance to Ida's subversive questioning of the hegemonic view of "womanhood." The true problematics of The Princess, I contend, resides in Ida's far-reaching critique of the hegemonic discourse, and her attempt to redefine "woman." While the poem does allow a powerful articulation of this critique, I will furthermore argue, it ultimately silences it in the Prince's concluding vision.

Throughout the poem, the Prince's feminine qualities are highlighted. Physically, the Prince not only looks "like a girl," but for the most part is also dressed in "female gear," a dress in which he feels comfortable, having employed it on previous occasions on which all three young men (the Prince, Florian, and Cyril) "presented Maid/ or Nymph, or Goddess" (I, 194-5). In his longing for the Princess, of which he speaks to her (in disguise), Princess Ida 'rightly' perceives a feminine tendency:

Poor boy ... can he not read -- no books?
 Quoit, tennis, ball -- no games? nor deals in that
 Which men delight in, martial exercise?
 To nurse a blind ideal like a girl,
 Methinks he seems no better than a girl.
 (III, 198-202)

Significantly, too, the Prince is the only one of the male characters to sing a lyric, the lyrics being specifically designated (within the larger scheme of the poem) to serve as a "feminine" counterpart to the combined narrative of the seven male story-tellers.

In his lyric, moreover, the Prince clearly attributes to Ida (the "South") traditionally male properties, while he (the "North") assumes feminine ones:

O tell her, Swallow, thou that knowest each
 That bright and fierce and fickle is the South,

And dark and true and tender is the North.

(IV, 78-80)

In terms of the hegemonic discourse, the Prince's reluctance to claim the Princess by "manly" force, choosing to win her "by gentleness than war" (V, 130), is clearly related to this sexual ambiguity. A warrior, one of Ida's brothers, puts it thus: "Like to like!/ The woman's garment hid the woman's heart" (V, 294-5). When the Prince does finally succumb to the taunting pressure and goes out to battle (to prove his manhood), he fails this test too. Falling victim to his "weird seizures" and suffering severe injury in a battle he loses, the Prince is reduced to being totally dependent on and at the mercy of others. It is of utmost importance that in the description of the Prince's (and the other men's) final, and in a sense triumphant, entry into the once all-female Institute, a sexual imagery of active penetration is mitigated by images of death and passivity:

Then us they lifted up, dead weights and bare
Straight to the doors; to them the doors gave way
Groaning, and in the Vestal entry shrieked
The virgin marble under iron heels.

(VI, 328-330)

In spite of the Prince's final claim to success in winning the Princess, the narrative clearly withholds from him any recuperation of a properly 'manly' character.

Finally, the Prince's concluding vision of love, which advocates the crossing of sexual boundaries, is itself characterized as a feminine vision. Having related this vision to Ida, she confesses "A dream!/ That once was mine!" and adds, "what woman taught you this?" (VII, 290-1; italics mine). On the whole, the characterization of the Prince throughout the poem is totally consistent and unproblematic. In fact, the still prevalent critical emphasis on the alleged quest or "education" of the Prince is misplaced.⁽⁶⁾ In my view, the Romance's conclusion consists of a legitimization (not a transformation) of the Prince's sexual ambiguity --

(6) See, for example, Collins (1973), p. 228.

but not of Ida's -- by displacing it from one narrative plane, that of character, to another, that of poetic closure. The knowledge gained by the Prince in the poem's conclusion -- his vision -- is but an articulation of his unchanging character throughout the poem. The Prince is from the very beginning of the Romance narrative, a man already grown to "be more of woman." As Terry Eagleton has pointed out, in the Romance's conclusion the poem's problematics is "at once transcended and preserved," for "in winning her ... [the Prince] is, so to speak, incorporating the female into himself, and thus coming to terms with the 'feminine' aspects of himself in ways fully acceptable to the symbolic order (i.e., in marriage)" (Eagleton, 1978: pp. 100-101). Unfortunately, Eagleton is silent as to the import of the poem's conclusion for Ida's rejection of the accepted sex roles.

Although I share Eagleton's conviction that "it would be mistaken ... to conclude that The Princess triumphantly resolves the contradictions which are the very process of its constitution" (p. 101), I believe that he fails to recognize in Ida's character (and in what I will call her text) a central subversive force in the poem. In concluding his discussion of the poem Eagleton confesses:

I had spotted in re-reading what I have written -- that I have given a good deal more attention to the Prince in The Princess than to Ida herself. But this seems to me to reflect a significant fact about the poem. The poem is mistitled: ostensibly 'about' Ida, it in fact concerns problems of 'masculine' hegemony. There is a revealing discrepancy between the poem's title (which, as with all literary texts, is part of its meaning) and the substance of the poem itself, which the title displaces.

(Eagleton, 1978: p. 106)

Thus although departing in many ways from a tradition established by previous readings of the poem, Eagleton is still totally bound to it in his blindness to the problematics introduced through the character of Ida, and, more specifically, through Ida's, and to a lesser extent Psyche's, speeches throughout the poem. Since I consider these speeches to form an homogeneous narrative unit within the larger framework of the Romance narrative, I will refer to this unit as Ida's text. Although Eagleton's

perception of the poem as "an ideological project" which consists of "an imaginary 'resolution' of a number of contradictions" (p. 97) is illuminating, his analysis is greatly hampered by the fact that he ultimately subsumes all such contradictions under one problem-context, namely the Prince's "Oedipal problem" (which is also, according to Eagleton, the problem of the "Victorian state") (Eagleton, 1978: p. 99). This perception leads Eagleton to deny the existence, in the poem, of an "interplay of voices," claiming that

what is ... evident is that the poem displays no dialectic of discourses whatsoever; the seven male voices are in no sense differentiated, rigorously subjected as they are to a single, dominant narrative discourse whose only alterity is 'feminine' lyrical interlude. There is no sense in which one discourse inheres within, contradicts, interrogates or 'de-centers' another.
(pp. 102-3)

Here Eagleton, despite his Lacanian and Foucauldian framework, is well within the mainstream of Tennyson criticism in totally failing to recognize the profoundly subversive thrust of the discourse generated by Ida. Ida's discourse, I will argue, is a challenge both to the properly "feminine" text of the lyrics and to the Prince's vision of a "true marriage" in the Romance's conclusion.

While allowing a fuller scope of sexual identity to the Prince, the vision which seals the Romance narrative fails in according the same to the Princess. This critique, I submit, is suggested by the overall thrust of Ida's text. Throughout the poem, as the following discussion will demonstrate, Ida challenges the hegemonic perception of "womanhood" and attempts to put forth an alternative vision. Thus challenged, the poetic universe of The Princess registers a recognition that "womanhood" is not the unmediated expression of the 'true' nature of woman, but a set of pre-conceived ideas claiming to reflect such unmediated reality. Consequently, The Prince's recuperation of this hegemonic perception of "womanhood" in his apocalyptic vision -- "let her make herself her own/ To give or keep, to live and learn and be/ All that not harms distinctive womanhood" (VII, 256-258) -- although not explicitly challenged, remains

unacceptable in terms of Ida's critique. Viewed from the vantage point of this critique, the Prince's vision only feigns freedom of self-determination for woman; in his vision of the ideal woman, independent will is still paradoxically contained within and thus made subordinate to the same constraining hegemonic "womanhood." While Ida's text thus indirectly underscores the similarity between the Prince's ideal of love and the hegemonic discourse, the fact that her own voice is silenced in the poem's conclusion points to yet another instance of a higher narrative level suppressing a conflict at a lower narrative level.

As a direct challenge to the Prince's 'pre-arranged' resolution, a resolution which indeed only reaffirms the status-quo, Ida's text -- her assembled speeches throughout the poem -- directly addresses the problematic issue of female subjectivity. Unlike the Prince's vision of the ideal woman as "No Angel, but a dearer being, all dipt/ In Angel instincts, breathing Paradise,/ Interpreter between the Gods and men" (VII, 301-3; italics mine), Ida is not an interpreter or a mediator, but an active pursuer. Her pursuit, moreover, is as much an unlearning as it is a learning, as much a shedding off of a "dead self" (III, 205) as a work to "mould/ The woman to the fuller day" (III, 315).

Ida's pursuit, we note, is significantly framed by a narrative which, disregarding it, seeks to establish certitude and closure. The poem, misleadingly, opens and ends as a panegyric. In the Prologue, the narrator cites from a "gallant glorious chronicle" praising the "miracle of noble womanhood," "a lady, one that arm'd/ ...and sallying thro' the gate/ Had beat her foes with slaughter from the walls" (Prologue, 32-49). The Romance story, likewise, ends with a panegyric to the new relationship between the sexes which will bring "the statelier Eden back to men" (VII, 277). This apocalyptic vision is reiterated in the poem's Conclusion where the narrator affirms "This fine old world of ours is but a child/ Yet in the go-cart. Patience! Give it time/ To learn its limb: there is a hand that guides" (Conclusion, 77-79). The figure of the child in these concluding lines is particularly revealing, exposing in a mise en abyme fashion, the very tenuousness of the apparently conclusive affirmations, and putting in question the validity of the proposed resolution.

When seen in the context of the entire poem, the child-figure proves far from being the unequivocal carrier of value it has been judged to be by generations of Tennyson critics. Already within its immediate context, the figure proves to be functional and relative rather than stable and univocal, as it is appropriated, in turns, by different characters for different (and opposed) ends. The "Tory member's son" uses it to condemn "Revolts, republics, revolutions" -- the "sudden heat" coming from across the "narrow seas" -- which he argues to be "No graver than a school-boy's barring out" (Conclusion, 51-66). Then the narrator turns the conservative's figure on its head, expressing hope in "This fine world of ours [which] is but a child," and can thus, given the appropriate guidance, still 'grow up' to be a better world. The strategy which underlies the narrator's use of the child figure here and elsewhere in the poem (with specific reference to women) is reminiscent of Patmore's. First, the narrator metaphorically reduces the object -- "this world of ours" or "woman" -- to a state of childhood, a state identified with both 'nature' (the inevitable, the nature of things) and ignorance (lack of knowledge which entails lack of self-knowledge, and absence of an independent will). Having thus reduced the object, the narrator can then proceed to mould it -- with a "hand that guides" (Conclusion, 79) -- under the pretext of following the ultimate authority of "Nature." In the poem at large, both the frame narrator and the Prince (as the Romance narrator) attempt to contain the problematic issue of female subjectivity -- independent will -- within the figure of the child. Thus, Lilia in the Prologue is "half child, half woman" (Prologue, 101), and "little Lilia" in the poem's closing lines (Conclusion, 116). The Prince allows woman to gain in "mental breadth" only to circumscribe the horizons of such expansion by a conditional: "She [will gain] mental breadth, nor fail in childward care,/ Nor lose the childlike in the larger mind" (VII, 267-268).

While the framing narrative thus appears to present a consistent front of hegemonic conformity, a front reinforced by the Romance's own conclusion, a different discourse does erupt in the course of the poem, challenging, 'de-centering' this hegemony. Already in the Prologue, in a curious instance of narrative 'mind reading', Lilia, as if in response to the narrator's description of her (as "Half child, half woman") speaks out: "I wish I were/ Some mighty Poetess, I would shame you then,/ That love to

keep us children!" (Prologue, 131-133). And again, as if abiding by the laws of narrative 'wish-fulfillment,' Princess Ida adopts Lilia's cause, as the figure of the child, both as image and as 'real' character, turns to be at the very center of her text. More generally, while the Prince is 'excused' from any active pursuit of the truth, falling victim to disabling "weird seizures" which affect his faculty to "know/ The shadow from the substance" (I, 9), Ida's character gains an heroic measure as she indefatigably scrutinizes, tests, and challenges discourse. Even before the Princess actually appears in the narrative, her struggle is introduced, almost unwittingly, by the "little dry old man" who is her father (I, 116); "knowledge, so my daughter held," this weak father of a strong daughter tells the Prince (weak or absent fathers are a major asset to an aspiring woman in the literary tradition), "was all in all; they had but been, she thought/ As children; they must loose the child, assume/ The woman" (I, 134-137; italics mine). On her first appearance the Princess makes true on the promise glimpsed from these lines of the King. While the Prince-narrator caresses with words the "beautiful female form" -- "breathing down/ From over her arch'd brows, with every turn/ Lived thro' her to the tips of her long hands/ And to her feet" (II, 24-27) -- the Princess, as if in defiance of the narrator's attempt to cast her into a properly feminine role, rises up to speak. She chooses to speak, moreover, of speech, establishing a very clear connection between self, knowledge, and language. To Cyril's words of praise -- "as tho' there were/ One rose in all the world, your Highness that,/ He [the Prince] worships your ideal" (II, 36-8) -- which echo the Prince-narrator's above-cited description of her, Ida answers:

We scarcely thought in our own hall to hear
 This barren verbiage, current among men,
 Like coin, the tinsel clink of compliment.
 (II, 139-41, italics mine).

Still believing Cyril to be a girl out of the Prince's court, she reprimands: "Your flight from out your bookless wilds would seem/ As arguing love of knowledge and of power;/ Your language proves you still the child" (II, 42-44). For Ida the figure of the woman as child -- central to the hegemonic discourse -- can no longer mask the abominable practice of imposed ignorance and denial of power; internalized by women, she argues,

this image and its accompanying practice, have given rise to "the habits of the slave,/ The sins of emptiness, gossip and spite/ And slander" (II, 77-9, italics mine).

For Ida, the hegemonic discourse is "barren" for it stultifies female subjectivity, permitting only "emptiness" in the guise of a childlike being who is never allowed to grow into maturity, into the woman of the "fuller day" (III, 315). The extreme significance attributed to discourse -- to language, knowledge, public speech, the retelling of history, etc. -- is evident from its central function within the women's Institute; the women fight back with words. With words they retell and revise mythological history -- the story of creation -- so that for them the first sin, causing man's fall, consists in "the man/ ...Raw from the prime, ... crushing down his mate" (II, 104-106; italics mine). With words they retell history, redefine justice, speak of the silenced, running down "The Persian, Grecian, Roman lines/ Of empire, and the woman's state in each,/ How far from just" (II, 114-6). With words they redefine "Nature," bring to court "custom" (II, 127); "Let then not fear," Psyche reassures her female students,

Some said their heads were less
Some men's were small; not they the least of men;
For often fineness compensates size:
Besides the brain was like the hand, and grew
With using;
(II, 131-5) (7)

Ida's (and Psyche's) aspirations are to create a new topos, a new feminine identity. Lilia, in the Prologue, already sets up the epistemological basis for such an undertaking by claiming women's present character to be an acquired rather than a natural one: "it is but bringing up" (Prologue, 130). Similarly, Ida fiercely objects to any reiteration of the hegemonic discourse within the Institute, recognizing in it the enemy

(7) The view of natural history advanced by the women at the institute is indebted to Tennyson's reading of Lyell's Principles of Geology and Chambers' Vestiges of Creation. Killham's chapter on "The Princess and Evolution" is particularly illuminating in this regard.

from within and striving to cast it away as that which constitutes the "dead self." Very much in the tradition outlined in the previous chapter, Ida exposes the manipulativeness of this discourse:

Knaves are men,
That lute and flute fantastic tenderness,
And dress the victim to the offering up,
And paint the gates of Hell with Paradise,
And play the slave to gain the tyranny.
(IV, 110-114)

This revisionary practice is undermined, in the poem, by the 'conservatives' of both sexes who perpetuate the very evils condemned by Ida and Psyche. Thus the three men overhear women at the Institute murmuring "that their May/ was passing: what was learning unto them?/ They wish'd to marry; they could rule a house;/ Men hated learned women" (II, 439-442; italics mine). Similarly, Cyril persistently evokes Psyche's "heart" and her appeal to his "heart" in an attempt to shift ground again to the language of the hegemony; he addresses the militant Princess thus: "O fair and strong and terrible!/ ... But Love and Nature, these are two more terrible" (VI, 147-150). The plot of the Romance (narrated by the seven men) proves Cyril to be right; Ida not only gives Psyche's baby back to her but also forgives her her betrayal. Their reconciliation, however, is not brought about by Ida's forgiving affection for her long-standing friend, but is itself an act of self-betrayal to which Ida submits being overpowered by her desire for the Prince. Her last words to Psyche express her anguish at realizing her imminent fall back into the abyss of "emptiness" and childlike effacement from which she had been striving to rise; she calls out to her: "O Psyche ... embrace me, come/ Quick while I melt; .../ .../Come to the hollow heart they slander so!/ Kiss and be friends, like children being chid" (VI, 267-271; italics mine). In total conformity with the hegemonic discourse, woman, even of Ida's stature (and preferably of Ida's stature, to underscore the inevitable), turns her back to anything most dear to her -- and here the male narrator takes particular pleasure in 'exposing' female friendship -- in order to win the man.

Finally, in the Romance's last lines, Ida is completely silenced as the Prince's desire and his vision/resolution suppress all articulation of doubt or resistance. We juxtapose two decisive moments in the Romance. The first moment is Ida's last authentic speech, her last speech as a character, a speech which unlike the rest to come is not a recitation from a book. This speech in effect ends her text. Here Ida pleads with her father and brother to convince the Prince's father to let her keep and nurse the Prince back to health. Her plea, however, is as much a confession of her desire for the Prince as it is an admission of the agonizing and irredeemable conflict engendered by this desire:

Help, father, brother, help; speak to the King:
 Thaw this male nature to some touch of that
 Which kills me with myself, and drags me down
 From my fixt height to mob me up with all
 The soft and milky rabble of womankind.
 (VI, 286-29; italics mine)

The Prince's last patronizing words in the Romance's ending -- the second moment -- are indeed no match to this agony: "come,/ Yield thyself up .../ .../ Lay thy sweet hands in mine and trust to me" (VII, 342-5). The Princess has by now indeed "yielded up," not so much to the Prince but to the hegemonic discourse. Following the Prince's re-entry into the Institute now turned hospital, Ida forfeits her voice, as the 'feminine' lyrics which she reads at the Prince's bedside are allowed to take over her character. Throughout the narrative Ida has adamantly objected to the kind of poetry represented by the lyrics, claiming that "song/ Is duer unto freedom, force and growth/ Of spirit, than to junketing and love" (IV, 122-124). Now, however, this "soft and milky rabble of womankind" takes over her character, speaks instead of her, through her. In this climactic ending, a curious narrative 'conspiracy' takes place. While the Prince subverts Ida's very meanings in attributing a very different sense to her self-perception as battling a "dead self" -- "Glowing all over noble shame; and all/ Her falser self slipt from her like a robe,/ And left her woman" (VII, 145-147) -- the ventriloquist in Ida recites the lyrics to the exclusion of the original character. When Ida does speak in her own voice in this concluding section, her doubt and self-scrutiny clearly attest to a fissure in the Prince's magnificent fabric. Ida's last words, to which her

previous speeches could be seen to serve as a gloss, are words of warning against the blinding effects of discourse. Disentangling herself from the Prince's fantasy in which her complex character is totally dissolved into the combined figure of a mother/desired woman, Ida reprimands him:

It seems you love to cheat yourself with words:
 This mother is your model. I have heard
 Of your strange doubts: they well might be: I seem
 A mockery to my own self. Never, Prince;
 You cannot love me.
 (VII, 314-318)

The import of Ida's words is clear: the self which the Prince can love is a "mockery" to her "own self." Her "own self," we remember, is the self she had attempted to rescue from the debilitating figure of the child, a self for which she desired a "living will," a self the Prince ultimately fails to recognize.

"Whole to ourselves and owed to none" (IV, 130) is the self-knowledge sought by the women in the Institute; but the narrative, with the iron hand of an hegemonic idiom, ultimately crushes this aspiration. Ironically, but also typically, this narrative aggression is couched in the language of the tenderest feelings; systematically, all the women in the poem (save perhaps Blanche) are brought back to the feminine locus proper, the "heart." Here is Princess Ida's metamorphosis, brought about by the Prince's illness:

And then once more she looked at my pale face:
 Till understanding all the foolish work
 Of Fancy, and the bitter close of all,
 Her iron will was broken in her mind;
 Her noble heart was molten in her breast.
 (VI, 99-103)

Significantly, this 'transformation' is presented only indirectly, being reported by the Prince. While leaving Ida's text intact, Tennyson allows the Prince's 'wishful thinking' to take over the narrative. In the last Book, the narrative (the male narrator) coercively renames Ida, transforming her from a militant warrior -- "Too hard, too cruel" (VI, 505) -- to a gentle and loving woman. "There came a change," recounts the

Prince, creating an elaborate narrative to explain this change as coming "out of long frustration of her care," and "out of memories of her kindlier days, ... And out of hauntings of my spoken love" (VII, 77-94). He concludes this narrative by reinstating woman (Ida) in her properly feminine locus, love:

From all a closer interest fourish'd up,
Tenderness touch by touch, and last, to these
Love.
(VII, 98-100)

Having listened carefully to the interplay of narrative voices in the poem, I find it extremely significant that we never hear of Ida's transformation from the Princess herself. As if hard pressed to provide more authentic evidence (to support the approaching resolution), yet incapable in all 'honesty' to make Ida's character conform to these changes, Tennyson (through the narrator) is impelled to 'paraphrase' the key speech Ida never makes in the poem. Instead, in the passage that follows the above-cited narrative relating Ida's transformation, the Prince-narrator proceeds to 'report' her alleged confession to him. The indirect speech mode used in his report is a stylistic device laden with thematic significance, for by employing it the narrative implicitly acknowledges the basic incogruity between Ida's character (as established through her text) and her alleged transformation on which the poem's resolution so heavily depends.

So 'transformed', the Princess is brought down from her former heights; she is now "low toned," "pale," "meek" and "mild," her voice trembling (VII, 208-212). "She said,/ Brokenly," reports the Prince, "that she knew it, she had fail'd/ In sweet humility; had fail'd in all;/ .../ .../[she] sought far less for truth than power/ In knowledge" (VII, 212-222). In this alleged confession the Princess not only repudiates that which has been her driving force throughout -- knowledge -- but also admits to being now overcome with its very antithesis, "something wild within her breast,/ A greater than all knowledge, beat her down" (VII, 222-3). In examining the Prince's narrative, however, we realize that this transformation is in effect anticipated by the text. The strategy here is

again reminiscent of Patmore's; the opening of Book VII signals (or makes way for) Ida's new character by annihilating her former identity. From the heights of her pursuits, Ida is brought down to be engulfed by an abyss of nothingness:

... she as one that climbs a peak to gaze
 O'er land and main, and sees a great black cloud
 Drag inward from the deeps, a wall of night,
 Blot out the slope of sea from verge to shore,
 And suck the blinding splendor from the sand,
 And quenching lake by lake and tarn by tarn
 Expunge the world: so fared she gazing there;
 So blacken'd all her world in secret, blank
 And waste it seem'd and vain.
 (VII, 20-28; italics mine)

Ida's former (rebellious) self is thus obliterated, effaced, made to dissolve into "a great black cloud." The Princess never re-emerges from this abyss which sucks her into narrative oblivion. The figure which replaces her in the Romance's conclusion is a simulacrum of her, a mere projection of the Prince-narrator's desires. As such she, reportedly, admits her folly; as such she forfeits her own voice in favor of the feminine lyrics she now reads to the Prince. However transparent this conjurer's feat seems to be, generations of Tennyson critics have been reluctant to point it out. It is my hope that as I grapple with their readings in the pages that follow, my own claims concerning the import of Ida's text for the poem as a whole will be further substantiated.

All students of the poem today owe a foremost debt to John Killham's remarkable Tennyson and The Princess: Reflections of an Age (1958). Killham's project is to contextualize the poem, and a considerable part of his book is a venture into social and intellectual history in order to reconstruct what he calls "the Feminist controversy in England prior to The Princess." Killham's study is indeed invaluable for its successful "reconstruction and fitting together of the attitudes which provide the key to understanding the poem" (Killham, 1958: p. 6). While Killham's project is contextual rather than textual, and thus less concerned with the complexity of the work itself, most studies of the poem have been greatly

preoccupied with the "contrarious forces" embraced by the poem (Ricks, 1972: p. 189). These inconsistencies have been described either in terms of style (the mixture of Romance, contemporary realism, satire, tragic emotion) or in terms of the poem's "conflicting attitudes toward women's demands for a higher education" (Colley, 1978: p. 38). In most interpretations of the poem, moreover, the child -- both as figure and in the character of Aglaia -- has been considered as a vehicle for both the exposition of the poem's central problematics and its resolution. This interpretive scheme finds one of its best early promoters in the Canadian S.E. Dawson whose 1882 Study: with critical and explanatory notes, of Alfred Tennyson's poem The Princess is still referred to by Tennyson scholars today.

While appreciative of the problematics of Ida's character, Dawson, echoing earlier reviewers of the poem, advances an argument that is still predominantly accepted today, namely, that the poem depicts the Princess' education in the process of which she rids herself of "the two fallacies which mislead [her] ...that the woman is equal in all respects to the man, and that knowledge is all in all" (Dawson, 1882: p. 16). Dawson's understanding of the centrality of the child -- which he sees mainly in terms of the character of Aglaia -- is thus clearly predetermined by what he takes to be the 'givens' of woman's role and nature. Commenting on, and actually identifying with, "Cyril's inward laughter at the lecture of the fair Doctor Psyche, in hood and academic gown, discourse[ing] gravely ... with her baby close at hand in case of need," Dawson explains:

It is the incongruity of opposing functions which excites laughter . It has pleased the Creator to make -- or, to be more scientific, it has pleased the environment to evolve a being -- woman, beautiful, lovable, and altogether admirable. Certain functions are given to her to fulfil ... When, turning from these, she aims to play a part to which she has not been adapted, the moment her theories are put into practice she necessarily becomes absurd.

(Dawson, 1882: p. 22)

Obviously, Dawson's interpretation of Ida's character is perforce coloured by his a priori convictions concerning the route she has to take in order

to right her profoundly mistaken views and actions. We might also note in passing Dawson's 'flexibility' in adapting a new conceptual framework -- that of Darwinian evolutionary theory -- to support and reinforce inferences he draws, with comparable ease, from a prior framework, in this case a religious one.

Given Dawson's a priori convictions -- his presuppositional infrastructure -- it is little wonder that he claims utmost importance to the lyrics which he views as "miracles of workmanship in which consummate art issues in perfect simplicity" (Dawson, 1882: p. 28). From our point of view, the songs -- which are formally extraneous to the poem in that they partake neither of the Romance action nor of the proper story of the frame narrative -- although sung by the women in the frame narrative bear no immediate relation to actual female characters, serving rather as repositories of hegemonic representations of the female. Unlike the man in the lyrics who is inspired by the woman's "face" and the "brood about" her "knee" to action and combat -- "like fire he meets the foe,/ And strikes him dead" (end of IV) -- the woman in these lyrics is passive and dependent for her very spirit of life on another. She either waits for the man -- "Father will come to thee soon" -- or, in his absence, lives only for the child -- "Sweet, my child, I live for thee." In the absence of both, as in the last lyric, she is herself annihilated :

Ask me no more! ...

...

Let the great river take me to the main:

No more, dear love, for at a touch I yield.

Dawson, not surprisingly, revels in this utter dejection: "Thus, in her apparent defeat does she rise to the supreme height of her womanhood" (Dawson, 1882: p. 33).

Dawson's total self-confidence that his own convictions are in absolute agreement with Tennyson's makes him particularly vulnerable to our critique. He points an angry finger at Ida, and at the actual women Dawson thinks her to be modeled after, and is only appeased by reiterating what he regards to be the 'lesson' taught them by Tennyson: "Let her [woman] refuse to play the part for which nature has designed her, and society

suffers in its inmost heart. To this fundamental law all theories of blue-stockinged ladies must conform" (Dawson, 1882: p. 35; *italics mine*). Dawson identifies the child with "Nature herself" (p. 36) and again, in conformity with the hegemonic discourse, not only assigns a feminine gender to "Nature" but also declares woman to be ultimately governed by nature. Dawson's vision is thus that of a tyrant woman ("Nature") within the actual woman, of an enemy from within and a pre-destined self-inflicted tyranny: "O fatal babe! More fatal to the hopes of woman than the doomful horse to the proud towers of Ilion" (p. 37). A double binding clearly arises out of this hegemonic perception, for since the enemy to women's hopes -- hopes for rights, for knowledge and power -- is understood to be their very womanhood, combatting this enemy inevitably entails (within this context) relinquishing gender identity. For Dawson this does not pose a problem since he rejects these "hopes" in the name of a universal truth which claim that "the true sphere of woman is in the family"; he likewise argues that in the poem's conclusion "The Princess ... is worsted by Nature -- by the constituted order of things" (p. 48). Dawson's complacency here, however, is clearly contested by the poem itself; Ida's own discourse, as I have demonstrated, reveals the internal plight of a woman caught in a double bind and aware of the loss of self that it entails. At her most militant, Ida is perfectly willing to cast away that self which binds her to the domestic sphere, a self she regards as a "dead self."

From Dawson to a contemporary critic like Donald Hair, the child has been seen to embody that which inevitably proves Ida wrong in her aspirations. Dawson grounds that inevitability in "Nature" which is "the constituted order of things." Hair chooses to read the Prince's desire into Ida's character, and by taking the Prince's plea for that which will bring forth "the crowning race of mankind" (VII, 279) -- marriage and children -- to be shared by Ida, proceeds to argue that "Aglaia represents the child that Ida must have if she is to achieve her purposes" (Hair, 1981: p. 114). In the poem, Tennyson does indeed employ the hegemonic topos which not only links child-care with women but also attributes to woman a desire for motherhood. While readings of the poem, however, have stopped here, the poem itself, as I have argued, articulates a much more complex problematics. Ida's critique of women's imposed childishness/ignorance, so clearly articulated in her chiding remark to the

disguised Prince: "your language proves you still the child" (II, 44), and her admission of the comforting influence of the child Aglaia (V, 419-427) should be studied in juxtaposition. Ida's attachment to the young girl, in whom she sees the promise of a new and enlightened generation of women, is not to be confounded with either a nostalgia for traditional "womanhood" nor with a repudiation of her insight into the ways in which discourse seeks to dissolve "woman" back into the "child". Hair's failure to grasp this is evident in his inability to relate the discursive context of the child as figure to the plot element of the child as character.

On the whole, even those studies which do recognize Ida's position as problematic fail to grasp the nature of this problematics, being overly anxious to emphasize the pattern of resolution suggested by the poem. Thus, attempts to understand Ida's character (and her text) have been 'overdetermined' by a preconceived (presuppositional) master-narrative which, in conformity with the hegemonic discourse, can only interpret Ida's actions as moving from the pole of denial -- a denial of the hegemonic (accepted) view of womanhood -- to the pole of acceptance -- acceptance of her womanhood (thus understood). It has been impossible, moreover, for readers who themselves support (without due scrutiny) the value of this dominant view of femininity, and consequently uncritically 'approve' of Ida's final submission to it, to conceive of Ida's efforts as attempts to expose and meaningfully challenge "womanhood" itself. Charles Kingsley was perhaps one of the first reviewers to enact such a superimposition of an interpretive master-narrative on the poem. He writes:

The idea ... of The Princess is an essentially modern one. In every age women have been tempted, by the possession of superior beauty, intellect, or strength of will, to deny their womanhood, and attempt to stand alone as men ... Cleopatra and St. Hedwiga, Madame de Staël and the Princess, are merely different manifestations of the same self-willed and proud longing of woman to unsex herself, and realize, single and self-sustained, some distorted and partial notion of her own as to what the 'angelic life' should be.

(Kingsley, 1850: p. 180)

For Kingsley, the denouement of such a plot is already given in its problematics; the woman who "takes her stand on the false masculine ground of intellect" will inevitably work out "her own moral punishment," all her acts being "built up not on the womanhood which God has given her but on her own self-will" (Kingsley, 1850: p. 181).

Likewise, when contemporary critics like Priestly and Hair recognize that "the most heroic part of the story ... is reserved for the account of the struggle within Ida herself" (Hair, 1981: p. 109), rather than investigate that struggle, they remain content with pointing out its effects, prominently Ida's self-willed separation "from men and (as she comes to realize) from woman's proper role in human life" (Hair, 1981: p. 119). Hair chooses to underscore the effects so that they highlight the resolution, his whole reading being directed by his attempt to make the poem conform to a Romance pattern which he regards as predominant in the poem. Hair thus perceives the "Princess' ordeal" as an "heroic struggle between love and duty"; on the one hand there is her pride and her attachment to her ideals; on the other there is her gratitude and human sympathy. The turning point comes with the superb lyric 'Come down O maid, from yonder mountain height'" (Hair, 1981: p. 120; italics mine). Hair's interpretation, which indeed constitutes one of the more committed efforts to guard the complexity of the poem, is clearly overdetermined by a certain 'complicity' with the text, for the Tennysonian text, too, employs the Romance convention to cover up or silence subversive elements. While the preceding discussion has attempted to bring forth these elements and to recuperate that subversion which has eluded readers for so long, it might still be useful to point at some specific elisions in the critical study at hand. Too anxious to move towards the proper resolution, Hair fails to notice that while throughout the poem Ida explores the issues dear to her in her own voice, the poem's conclusion presents her assent to the Prince's scheme only indirectly and, what is more, through the mediation of a form to which the Princess has been hostile all along, the lyric. Ida's main concern, moreover, is less an attachment to an ideal ("duty") and more an attempt to work out an ideal, to find an alternative mode of being, and, most important, to identify the conditions under which such an exploration will be most fruitful. A similar reduction of Ida's character to an attachment to "duty" is present in Richard McGhee's Marriage, Duty, and

Desire in Victorian Poetry and Drama (1980). McGhee's interpretive scheme for the poem is the following: "In simple terms, Princess Ida represents an ideal of duty; The Prince's father, an 'ideal' of desire; and the Prince himself, a principle of harmony, or the ideal marriage that unites duty with desire" (McGhee, 1980: p. 42). What is most glaringly absent from McGhee's scheme is, of course, any consideration of Ida's desire.

Tennyson's iron hand of conventional idiom does indeed seal Ida's exploration by absorbing woman back into the female locus, by crushing her "will" and "mind" while glorifying her "heart"; the Prince reports: "Her iron will was broken in her mind./ Her noble heart was molten in her breast" (VI, 102-3; italics mine). One should not rush in complicity with this 'resolution,' however, to cover up the problematics in response to which such an act of aggression was initiated. In focusing on Ida's self-willed separation from men and from her proper role -- and on its disastrous effects as illustrated through the figure of the child -- Hair, like the Prince in the poem, fails to acknowledge that this separation is only a strategy to deal with certain issues. Like Astell's Academy, Ida's is intended to prepare women for a better future relationship with men. Ida teaches women so that in "Some future time, if so indeed you will,/ You may with those self-styled our lords ally/ Your fortunes, justlier balanced, scale with scale" (II, 50-52). In this respect, her project does not put in jeopardy the future survival of the race and thus does not justify any anxiety regarding children. In expressing this anxiety, however, the critical tradition has only perpetuated the poem's own tactic of evasion.

By dissolving the problematics of female subjectivity back into the child -- from which this subjectivity has, symbolically, tried to free itself -- the poem's conclusion proves to be a tour de force of the hegemonic discourse. In the end, the Prince, whose desire has haunted him throughout the poem -- "every hoof a knell to my desires" (IV, 156) -- experiences satisfaction: "and out of languor leapt a cry/ Leapt fiery Passion from the brinks of death" (VII, 140-141). As we leave Ida, however, she recites a song of longing, a call for love (as yet unanswered), her own speech being tinged with doubt. Similarly, in the conclusion of the frame narrative the narrator takes pleasure in Lilia (who

is now silenced) -- "Lilia pleased me for she took no part/ In our dispute" (Conclusion, 29-30) -- and is also given the narrative 'privilege' of seeing his deepest beliefs affirmed. Lilia herself, however, remains as puzzled in the poem's conclusion as she had been at its inception, the narrative 'forever' withholding the very possibility of an answer to her question -- a question significantly addressed to her "maiden aunt": "you -- tell us what we are" (Conclusion, 34).

Tennyson criticism has, on the whole, remained content to describe the poem's "basic solution to the 'woman problem'" as emerging out of a "tension in opposition," while valorizing the resolution whose main factors are considered to be "equality in diversity, fulfilment in union, and the couple become the race" (Smith, 1964: p. 43). (8) As I hope has clearly emerged from the preceding discussion, both the poem's conclusion and the critical view that such a conclusion constitutes a satisfactory resolution to the poem, only succeed in silencing a very powerful discourse presented in the poem through the characters of Psyche and Ida, the discourse of an emergent female subjectivity. Ida reiterates many of the concerns expressed by the women discussed in the previous chapter and 'anticipates' (not in any chronological sense, of course) the problematics of poetic identity and female self which the following chapters will trace in EBB's canon.

The case of The Princess all the more reinforces the theoretical understanding underlying the present study for it is by regarding the poem in its relation to discourse -- as partaking of the hegemony but also registering dissent -- that one re-discovers elements hitherto obscured by critical efforts. This obscurity, I have argued, has arisen out of a rigid acceptance of certain literary codes which, however successfully employed by the poem itself, should be regarded critically, that is, with view to their relative function within the text. In The Princess, for example, the

(8) A notable exception is Bernard Bergonzi's 1969 essay on The Princess. Bergonzi notes: "in the last analysis, The Princess is a timid poem: Tennyson has raised implications that must necessarily have been upsetting to the habitual assumptions of many of his readers ... and he damps them down when they look like becoming too exigent" (Bergonzi, 1969: p. 48). Bergonzi thus observes an underlying conflictual dynamics, arguing that the poem simultaneously articulates a Victorian "fixation" with the "passive, yielding, tender, feminine image" at the same time that it "may be regarded ... as an attempt to redress its deficiencies" (p. 49).

conclusion of the Romance narrative clearly serves, in the end, to erase the problematics raised by the character of Ida. Rather than repeat that act, in complicity with the text, the critic's task is to remember, to recall those fissures in the narrative fabric, to give voice both to the problematics and to the attempt to dissolve it.

As Killham has pointed out, The Princess is closely connected with a theme already present in early Victorian England, namely, "that the place of women in life is bound up with 'faith in the moral progression and final destiny of the species.'" (p. 106) In EBB's poetry, and in Aurora Leigh in particular, this preoccupation is inextricably woven into a transcendentalist metaphysics the centrality of which to EBB's poetics will be examined in the following chapter. In a very 'real' textual sense, moreover, Aurora Leigh is a response to or a fulfillment of a desire expressed in The Princess but never fully gratified. In the Prologue to The Princess Lilia exclaims:

I wish I were
Some mighty poetess, I would shame you then
That love to keep us children!
(Prologue, 131-133; italics mine)

In the Conclusion, the women plead in favor of a "solemn close," resenting the men's "banter": "A gallant knight, a noble princess -- why/ Not make her true-heroic, true-sublime!" (Conclusion, 17-20; italics mine). As neither of these desires is satisfied, Lilia remains, at the end of the story, as puzzled as she was at its beginning; in a final attempt to elucidate matters, she turns to her "maiden-aunt": "you -- tell us what we are" (Conclusion, 34). Significantly the aunt is very 'violently' silenced by the narrative, for not only is she 'prevented' from speaking -- by means of a temporal deus ex machina (the crowds are asked to leave at sunset) -- but the narrative also does violence to her character by means of irony, as the narrator remarks that she "might have told/ For she was cramm'd with theories out of books" (Conclusion, 35).

In Aurora Leigh, the desires expressed by the women in The Princess are satisfied; the poet-narrator of this grand epic is a woman, a "mighty poetess" whose narrative is indeed "true-heroic, true-sublime." She is

learned, and not "cramm'd with theories out of books," and her learning not only triumphs in full articulation but also issues in a knowledge of "what we [women] are."

CHAPTER FOUR

"Through fissures of the clay":
THE EVOLUTION OF EBB'S POETICS

I have attempted to express in this poem my view of the mission of the poet, ... of the great work involved in it, ... of the duty and the glory ... and of the obvious truth, ... that ... knowledge is power."

Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Preface to Poems, 1844

The subject of the present chapter is the evolution of EBB's poetics from the early autobiographical essays of 1818 and 1820 to Aurora Leigh (1856). In broaching this subject I am acutely aware of the absence of any treatment of EBB's poetics in the vast literature concerning Post-Romantic and early Victorian aesthetics. A recent work in the field, Lawrence Starzyk's The Imprisoned Splendor: A Study of Early Victorian Critical Theory (1977) clearly attests to the continued prevalence of this critical blindness. And yet EBB's poetry, as I shall argue, constitutes a unique contribution to Victorian poetics in that it reveals a sustained effort to construct a poetics specifically centered around a female poetic subject.

The Romantic and early Victorian preoccupation with the unity of the poetic self -- seen as a necessary correlary to a desired universal unity -- has been amply documented. In Natural Supernaturalism: Tradition and Revolution in Romantic Literature (1971), a seminal work in the field, Abrams explores a prominent Romantic "developmental pattern" whose plot involves

the painful education through ever expanding knowledge of the conscious subject as it strives ... to win its way back to a higher mode of the original unity with itself from which, by its primal act of consciousness, it has inescapably divided itself off.

(Abrams, 1971: pp 190-191)

More recently, Starzyk has affirmed the central early Victorian poetic credo to be "the vision of unity as it informs the individual's ceaseless and necessarily imperfect attempts at harmonizing himself" (Starzyk, 1977: p. 119). While EBB's poetry is also marked by an attempt to heal division and attain unity of self, the terms of the dilemma which it reveals differ radically from the paradigm outlined above. No longer an individual attempting "at harmonizing himself" (italics mine), the female poetic persona of EBB's poetry has a different informing vision, that of

Woman and artist, -- either incomplete,
Both credulous of completion.

(AL, II, 4-5; italics mine)

EBB's poetics, moreover, shares with early Victorian aesthetics a belief in the centrality of the poetic self. Starzyk convincingly demonstrates a principal aspect of early Victorian aesthetics to be an effort "at establishing the poet, unified in all his faculties and powers, as the fixed center of existence and of the artistic process" (Starzyk, 1977: p. 78; italics mine). Drawing on the large corpus of early Victorian poetry and poetry-criticism, Starzyk establishes the early Victorians' indebtedness to the Romantics in their conviction "that the center of the artistic enterprise must be the Poet's self" (p. 187; italics mine). This preeminence or "supremacy of the self as the controlling principle" (p. 190) further entails, Starzyk argues, a necessary fusion of poet and poetry: "the man ... is the poem" (p. 119). To this view EBB, too, subscribed wholeheartedly. In The Book of the Poets (1842), her major work of literary criticism, EBB articulates clearly the centrality of the poet to her aesthetic theory and the desired fusion of subject and artistic creation that it entails:

When Milton said that a poet's life should be a poem, he spoke a high moral truth; if he had added a reversion of the saying, that a poet's poetry should be his life, -- he would have spoken a critical truth, not low.

(VI, p. 303)

EBB's poetics, I will argue, evolves out of the essentially biographical (or autobiographical) paradigm suggested above, the paradigm of the "poet's life." This kernel story -- with the poet (self, subject) at its center -- will be seen to involve three sets of relationships:

- (a) between the poet and the world, involving the poet's position vis-à-vis history, the natural world, and spiritual reality;
- (b) between the poet and the predecessors;
- (c) within the poet: between female identity and poetic self.

It is my intention in the present chapter and in the following chapter to explore all three aspects of this poetics as they emerge in EBB's poetry and critical writing. Since all three sets of relationships are intimately

interrelated, and in order to do justice to the individual poems and essays discussed, I will combine a more synthetic-argumentative approach with close textual readings of individual works.

I. From My Own Character (1818) to An Essay on Mind (1826):

"the bird pecks through the shell in it"

Both thematically and structurally, the self-reflexive mode is congenial to EBB's writing; it is the mode in which her earliest autobiographical and poetic efforts are rendered, and it remains a central preoccupation throughout her mature writing. Significantly, both the dawn and the apex of EBB's literary career inhabit the same moment, the moment of self reflexion. In effect, her quite extraordinary My own Character (1818; written at the age of twelve) and its sequel Glimpses into my own Life and Literary Character (1820), form a prologue to Aurora Leigh, prefiguring the major thrust of the poem whose epic dimensions allow an intense exploration of many issues latent in the juvenilia. Already in these two short essays, a pattern emerges, a topos and a narrative strategy devised to accomodate it. The topos is that of the growth of a poet, and its most immediate informing sentiment is that of the anxiety of influence, the apprentice's anxiety in recognizing the omnipotence of the masters/predecessors. Bloom's view of the moment of "poetic misprision" articulates well a thematics which runs through EBB's writing, namely the novice's recognition, at the first moment of creative self-knowledge, of an indebtedness which both jeopardizes and is the very condition of that moment. Bloom writes:

For the poet is condemned to learn his profoundest yearnings through an awareness of other selves. The poem is within him, yet he experiences the shame and splendor of being found by poems -- great poems -- outside him. To lose freedom in this center is never to forgive, and to learn the dread of threatened autonomy forever.

(Bloom, 1973 : p. 26; italics his)

What is at stake, the widely read twelve year old already acknowledges, is

the sense of one's existential autonomy. "I proceed to the investigation of myself with no small anxiety," writes EBB, "hitherto I have forgotten myself, ... I have endeavored to insinuate myself into the windings of other souls, of other characters" (1818: p. 119; italics mine). In the autobiographical essays, the shift from reading to writing already marks a crucial movement from self-effacement, the losing of oneself in the Other, to self-knowledge, the active investigation of oneself.

In this respect, EBB's poetics will be seen to follow a course opposite to that taken by Wordsworth or Carlyle. If the most crucial Romantic purpose is "to explore the transition from self-consciousness to imagination and to achieve that transition while exploring it (and so to prove it still possible)" (Hartman, 1970: p. 307), EBB's overriding purpose is the establishment of a self-consciousness which is quite unproblematically in harmony with poetic vision. While for the Romantics "the traditional scheme of Eden, Fall, and Redemption merges with the new triad of Nature, Self-Consciousness, and Imagination -- the last term in both involving a kind of return to the first" (Hartman, 1970: p. 307), EBB's poetics points not to a nostalgia for an original, natural plenitude anterior to the self, but rather to a drive for self-articulation, for the specifically contemporary in both the individual and the environment. In direct contrast to the "anti-self-consciousness" attitudes underlying the thought of contemporaries like Carlyle, J.S. Mill, and Robert Browning, EBB's life project will be seen to consist of a protracted effort to write the text of self-consciousness as the text of knowledge and transcendence.

Self-knowledge, however, is always, for EBB, embedded in the knowledge of the other, from which it has to be extricated. Thus, the autobiographical essays start where Aurora Leigh, forty years later, will still have to start: with the first conscious effort at self-reflexion, with an initial effort to disentangle Self from Other, with a declaration of Difference. In My Own Character, knowledge of self is undermined, obstructed, by the very model upon which it is conceived, the Evangelical model of self-examination. The writer takes stock of the deterring factors and resolves to proceed: "The investigation of oneself is an anxious employment -- the heart may appear corrupted by vanity, exalted by pride, soured by ill temper, ... but should such weakness prevent us from looking

into ourselves? No" (1818: pp. 119-120). Over the period of time spanning from My Own Character to Aurora Leigh, different models for the self and different scenarios for arriving at self-knowledge are adopted and then discarded, giving way to yet new ones; the determination to know, however, remains unwavering. The act of self-invocation which opens Book I of Aurora Leigh testifies to this determination and to EBB's positive valorization of the self-reflexive act:

Of writing many books there is no end;
 And I who have written much in prose and verse
 For others' use, will write now for mine, -
 Will write my story for my better self.
 (AL, I, 1-4)

The ruling modalities in the two autobiographical essays are the self-reflexive and the intertextual, revealing a mind already engaged in what is to become a lifetime preoccupation: the creation of a self/"phéno-texte" in the face of an overwhelming presence of the other/"géno-texte." In My Own Character and Glimpses, the narrator overcomes the professed anxiety of self-investigation by resisting the confines of the anxiety-promoting Evangelical tradition of self-examination (resisting the critical look of the Fathers), and by reaching for more suitable and sustaining models. In this new 'secular' "géno-texte," the young EBB primarily perceives two viable life-plots for her own text, and her first pieces of writing are indeed exercises in intertextual semiosis, the evocation and reworking of other texts. There is, for this avid reader of novels, a ready-made plot, the feminine plot, in which the mundane "needlework," "drawing," "Dancing" and "the piano" (1818: p. 120) are easily transformed, in "daydreams of bliss," into the adventures of "a forlorn damsel in distress rescued by some noble knight" (1820: p. 123). Rejecting this feminine plot -- "I hate needlework and drawing ... Dancing I consider mere idleness" (1818: p. 120) -- EBB finds far more compelling another ready-made plot, all enchantment and no frivolity, the poetic plot; "at eleven," she writes, "I wished to be considered an authoress" (1820: p. 124). It is the one plot in which a young girl with a scholar's training could aspire to the condition of the "noble knight," forever ready to rescue mankind, forever striving to achieve yet nobler goals. The

protagonist figure is that of the epic bard, of a Homer, a Shakespeare, a Milton; the plot is that of the growth of the poet or "the progress of Genius," forcefully brought home to EBB by the book of which she writes "every stanza excited my ardent admiration" (1820: p. 124), James Beattie's 1777 The Minstrel; or, the Progress of Genius.

The importance of Beattie's poem to EBB will be re-affirmed years later, in her most comprehensive work of literary criticism, The Book of the Poets (1842). Interestingly, Beattie enjoys in this highly critical work a privileged status granted to only one other figure, "the great" Shakespeare. "Of Shakespeare," writes EBB, "we must speak briefly, ... and very weakly too, except for love" (VI, p. 272). Similarly, for Beattie, confesses the poet, "we have too much love to analyze it, seeing that we drew our childhood's first poetic pleasure from his Minstrel" (VI, p. 298). Undoubtedly, it is the poem's accessibility and its exemplary representation of the topos of poetic genius which account for the powerful and lasting impression registered by the poet. Beattie's plot of the growth of poetic genius highlights three moments, or three "lieux communs" (Angenot, 1978: p. 11), which EBB re-appropriates, transforming them to accommodate her own needs and ends. In Beattie's The Minstrel, Edwin, the poet as a young child, shuns the characteristic activities of his peers, thereby renouncing the role of the male child:

Concourse, and noise, and toil, he ever fled;
Nor cared to mingle in the clamorous fray
of squabbling imps; ...
...
Th' exploit of strength, dexterity, or speed,
To him nor vanity nor joy could bring.
His heart, from cruel sport estranged, would bleed
To work the woe of any living thing,
By trap, or net; by arrow, or by sling;
These he detested; those he scorned to wield.
(Bk. I, sts. XVII-XVIII)

Similarly, EBB renounces the female child's role: "I hate needlework and drawing because I never feel occupied whilst I work or draw -- Dancing I consider a mere idleness -- I abhor music ... I have no desire to learn

-- I always feel weary, full of ennui at the piano" (1818: p. 120).

In a second moment, Beattie's Edwin and EBB's autobiographical persona are figures set apart, marked by a superior understanding, a vocation and a commitment which purify and exalt. Beattie reflects on the early stages of initiation:

Ah then, all jollity seem'd noise and folly,
To the pure soul by Fancy's fire refined.
(Bk. I, st. LV)

The fourteen year old Elizabeth Barrett articulates the profound attachment of the poet's "being" to the poetic endeavor, an idea of central importance to her future poetics:

Literature was the star which in prospect illuminated my
future days; it was the spur which prompted me ... the aim
... the very seal of my being.
(1820: p. 125)

Finally, for both figures the model-poet, the Teacher, the future projection of the self, is a prophet, a philosopher-king in whom thought and action, insight and political competence, combine in perfect harmony. Beattie writes of this model-poet:

'Tis he alone, whose comprehensive mind,
From situation, temper, soil, and clime
Explored, a nation's various powers can bind,
And various orders, in one form sublime
Of polity, that, midst the wrecks of time,
Secure shall lift its head on high.
(Bk. II, st. LV)

While for Beattie here, as for Carlyle later, the hero is never identified with the self, always remaining an idealized other, EBB enthusiastically embraces the role: "I always imagine that I was sent on the earth for some purpose! to suffer! to die! to defend! to save by my death my country or some very very dear friends" (1820: p. 132). The melancholic, self-abnegating, martyred tone of this vision is a poetic commonplace which EBB eventually outgrows; the involved, committed strain sobers and matures,

striking ever deeper roots in her poetry.

The two autobiographical essays thus present EBB's poetics in embryo: it is to be a poetics of genius, of the one addressing the multitudes, an involved visionary poetics in which the metaphysical is perceived as subsuming the physical. "If there be any innate principle it is that with which the soul contemplates superior excellence in whatever form it may soar!" affirms EBB, and continues, "after the glowing page of poetic fancy metaphysical knowledge must rank highest in my admiration -- It exalts it inspires it elevates the soul above any worldly views but what is yet better it convinces it" (1820: p. 128). This early conviction articulates a view of the relationship between the poet and the world which will remain constant throughout EBB's poetry. In this view, metaphysical knowledge -- which informs poetry -- helps the poet transcend the "worldly" and achieve a higher vision. As the chapter will demonstrate, however, this transcendentalist philosophy provokes a central dilemma in EBB's writing: that of reconciling the mutually exclusive demands of the "worldly" and transcendent orders.

An attempt to reconcile the conflicting demands of the Actual (the "worldly") and the Ideal characterizes the first set of relationships with which we are concerned: the relationship between the poet and the world. An early manifestation of this conflict involves the issue of religious faith. Here the "worldly" appearance of faith -- as institutionalized religion -- is problematized, as the anti-formalist impulse of EBB's metaphysics undermines any sentiments favoring institutionalized conformity. EBB writes of her early religious meditations:

I revolted at the idea of an established religion. My faith was sincere but my religion was founded solely on the imagination. It was not the deep persuasion of the mild Christian but the wild visions of an enthusiast. I worshipped God, heart and soul but ... my prayers ... were composed extempore and full of figurative and florid apostrophes to the Deity.

(1820: p. 126)

This self-avowed religious conflict -- a conflict which will be carried

into Aurora Leigh -- has to be seen within the context of a wider contemporary phenomenon, the "unprecedented elevation of poetry" which DeLaura has demonstrated to be "correlative to a broadly conceived religious and spiritual crisis" (DeLaura, 1976 : p. 161). This impulse, reinforced by "a central effort of nineteenth-century religion, ... that of separating the 'kernel' of spiritual truth from the 'husk' of its various historical embodiments" (DeLaura, 1976: p. 163), was to find in Carlyle a vociferous champion. In "Characteristics" (1831) Carlyle contends:

Literature is but a branch of Religion, and always participates in its character: however, in our time, it is the only branch that still shows any greenness; and, as some think, must one day become the main stem.

(Carlyle, 1899: III, p. 23)

The centrality of this conception to EBB's thought lies primarily in its affirmation of the artist's privileged position and hence authority, namely, in its legitimation of knowledge as power. It also lies in its essentially un- and anti-historical bias, a bias I will demonstrate to be of utmost significance to EBB's transcendentalist poetics.

While introducing a poetics in embryo, then, the autobiographical essays also expose the chief problematic areas in this poetics. Like the relationship between the poet and the world, the two other sets of relationships with which the present chapter is concerned -- the relationship between the poet and the predecessors, and the internal conflict between poetic identity and female self -- are already problematized in these essays. I approach the issue of the young poet's relationship to the literary tradition first.

"In pursuing these models of glorious poetic excellence," EBB writes of Homer, Shakespeare, and Milton, "I have often felt my soul kindled with the might of such sublime genius, and glow with the enthusiasm of admiration" (1820: p. 126). This admiration, however, only reinforces her own sense of "immense and mortifying inferiority" (1820: p. 125). The great promise is double edged, carrying with it a deadly threat to the self. Thus, while writing here signifies a shift from submersion in

others' texts to emersion of the text of the self, it is also perceived to be the medium through which the poet's wrestling with the precursors is re-enacted, through which the anxiety of influence is exorcised. "A poem is not an overcoming of anxiety," writes Bloom, and concludes: "the meaning of a poem can only be another poem" (Bloom 1973: p. 94). Thus, for him, "true poetic history is the story of how poets as poets have suffered other poets" (Bloom 1973: p. 94). From My Own Character to Aurora Leigh, the poet's work is indeed a revisionary enterprise, but it is an enterprise which is neither restricted to the re-reading of "strong" poets nor is it modeled upon the "Family Romance" which for Bloom is synonymous with "Poetry (Romance). ... the enchantment of incest, disciplined by resistance to that enchantment" (Bloom, 1973: p. 95). EBB's revisionism, as the chapter will attempt to illustrate, is not only a mark of an anxiety but also bears a reconstructive function as it forwards EBB's central concern with the articulation of a comprehensive poetics, a poetics which seeks to reconcile history and aesthetics, female identity and poetic self. EBB's re-writing of the canon has thus to be viewed within a context wider than that of the incestuous Family Romance if we are to understand the evolution of her thought, and the uses to which she puts tradition. In a very profound sense, Bloom speaks the language of a Carlyle or a Robert Browning when he speaks of poetic history as Family Romance, and of Fathers and Sons. Ironically, this is the very language against which EBB had to struggle in order to affirm a female creative subjectivity.

The revisionary thrust of EBB's poetics is already evident in the highly revealing My Own Character. The essay purports to be a Lockean study of the workings of its author's mind, only to introduce a strong rebuttal of the Lockean argument against innate ideas. Although this rebuttal is soon rejected, it is never fully retracted: "I beg pardon of that great philosopher Mr. Locke for having opposed my upstart feelings to his sublime conceptions, which are elevated almost above the greatest effort of human genius. The only amends I can make is ... to resist any objection [to Locke's ideas], till that objection be more fully explored, or till it be obviated entirely" (1818: p. 121). A reverence coupled with an unflinching critical outlook, this ambivalence of tone marks not only the two essays but indeed much of EBB's mature thought. Here, as

everywhere in her writing, tradition is immediately made functional, a means of attaining self-knowledge. As it transpires in retrospect, the mention of Locke in the essays is an early indication of a philosophical/ideological position which is to permeate and indeed overdetermine EBB's thinking and poetry. From the outset, EBB can be seen to take sides in that "omnipresent debate" of the nineteenth century, the debate in which the question of "whether there were mere ideas somehow innate in the mind determinate of good or whether the criteria for good have been constructed by the analysis of human experience, was a question of major portent for it determined the ground of ethical principles and strategies for inculcating ethical action" (Harris, 1981: pp. 6-7). Strategically, EBB's rebuttal of the Lockean precept is a clear demonstration of a way to harness tradition, EBB's way of employing tradition constructively to define her own philosophical space. Ideologically, it is an early indication of a transcendentalist conviction which will grow ever stronger in her writing.

The first moment of self-reflexion thus entails, for the young poet, a confrontation with the predecessors. In a second moment of self-reflexion, the dawn of gender-awareness points at an unexpected turn in the plot: the apprentice is a female, and although the feminine plot has been consciously rejected, the culturally imposed mask clings, resisting both "poetic fancy" and "metaphysical knowledge" (1820: p. 128). Thus, in a first act of self-defensive gender-awareness EBB writes:

My mind is naturally independent and spurns that
subserviency of opinion which is generally considered
necessary to feminine softness. But this is a subject on
which I must always feel strongly for I feel within me an
almost proud consciousness of independence which prompts me
to defend my opinions and to yield them only to conviction!
... It is not -- I know it is not an encroachment on
masculine prerogative but it is a proud sentiment which
will never never allow me to be humbled in my own eyes!!!
(1820: p. 131)

The scheme for Aurora Leigh, the germ of the story which EBB will be determined to make and not take, is already in evidence in the two

autobiographical essays: it is the story of the growth of a poetic genius, set apart from the rest, a committed prophet whose vision is self-sacrificial and all encompassing. It is, moreover, the story of a woman seeking to appropriate this poetic plot, seeking to reconcile it with that other plot which it is her cultural destiny to desire. Feminine softness threatened by the masculine prerogative of a "consciousness of independence"; feminine subserviency threatening the creative imperative of independent thought and undermining the authority of knowledge: it is out of the conflicting and mutually exclusive stories of the two life-plots that the woman poet's own narrative will emerge.

The two autobiographical essays are already marked by their chant-like invocation of the Masters: "Shakespeare Milton Homer and Virgil Locke Hooker Pope" (1820: p. 127). In the early poetic endeavors -- most notably The Battle of Marathon (1820) and An Essay on Mind (1826) -- the list proliferates as the chant becomes more persistent, obsessive, ominous. Here the intertext intrudes to such an extent that indeed all poetic energy is spent on evoking and then exorcising it. Both the figure of the male Teacher and the problematics of female authorship already loom large in these early works which constitute a self-conscious apprenticeship, a mapping of poetic territories. In the Preface to The Battle of Marathon, EBB confesses to "have chosen the rhymes of Pope, and departed from the noble simplicity of the Miltonic verse," as well as "having chosen Homer for a model" (I, p. 8). Her Essay on Mind is reflective of Pope's Essay on Criticism and Essay on Man. The display of erudition, both in the Prefaces and in the body of the two poems, further consolidates the figure of the student literally immersed in the teachings of many masters. The citing of names, in the Preface to The Battle of Marathon, acquires an incantatory character as the poet moves from Homer to Cicero, Horace, Sallust and Virgil, from Dryden to Pope, Scott, Moore and Byron, from the French Montesquieu and Rollin to the Rev. Wakefield, Glover and Lyttleton. Here, as in the autobiographical essays, the acknowledgment of her predecessors' achievements engenders anxiety and ambivalence, an anxiety as yet unmediated by the revisionary bend of the later works:

It would have been both absurd and presumptuous, young and inexperienced as I am, to have attempted to strike out a path for myself ... there is no vanity, but rather wisdom,

in following humbly the footsteps of perfection.
(I, p. 9)

Underlying the humble tone of the Prefaces, however, one already notices the novice's determination not merely to follow in the footsteps of perfection, but indeed to join eventually in the company of the perfect. Thus, conceiving of herself as an imitator of Homer, EBB finds legitimation for her derivative verse in Virgil's "literal translation" of an incident in Homer, and Milton's own attempt to "replenish his imagination from the abundant fountains of the first and greatest of all poets" (I, p. 9). EBB's acute awareness of the inflections of this anxiety surfaces at many points in the Essay on Mind, one such moment being an extended reference, in the footnotes, to Richard Bentley (1661-1742), an English critic of the Classics. EBB cites from Curiosities of Literature where Bentley is quoted as having given his daughter the following reason for not himself becoming an original writer: "as I despaired of raising myself up to their standard upon fair ground, I thought the only chance I had of looking over their heads was to get upon their shoulders" (I, p. 251). Underlying EBB's practice of immersion, of poetic self-forgetfulness and absorption, however, is an active search for self-determination. While the apprentice is paying her dues, she is also, concurrently, cleaning a space for herself, naming a tradition from within which, to which, against which, she could speak.

Both The Battle of Marathon and The Essay on Mind are prefaced by short critical essays in which EBB further pursues issues introduced in the autobiographical essays, as she engages in an activity central to her art, the establishment of a comprehensive poetics. The Preface to The Battle of Marathon reiterates the structure present in the autobiographical essays, a binary oppositional structure which also informs the far more complex Aurora Leigh. Here Poetry, "the noblest of the productions of man, that which inspires the enthusiasm of virtue, the energy of truth," is opposed to the sham productions of an "inferior multitude of the common herd" (I, pp. 2-3). Poetry is seen to subsume "the culture of the soul," in direct opposition to "the form of the body," an opposition which makes possible a distinction by which "man displays his superiority to brutes" (I, p. 2). At this early and unsophisticated stage, the dilemma posed by the dichotomy

body/soul is not yet evident to the poet. Discarding what she regards as merely material -- "form" and "body" -- the poet announces the absolute reign of "poetry" and "soul."

The poetics put forth in the Preface to The Battle of Marathon is a totalizing philosophy which embraces both past and future, ontology as well as history and prophecy. The binary transcendentalist model serves here as an interpretive model and is perceived as being as adequate for the understanding of historical events as for the evaluation of the literary canon. The figure of the bard, the spiritual leader, brings about the merging of the two realms (history and poetry):

It is worthy of remark, that when poetry first burst from the mists of ignorance ... from the period when HOMER, the sublime Poet of antiquity, awoke the first notes of poetic inspiration to the praise of valor, honor, patriotism, and, best of all, to a sense of the high attributes of the Deity, ... Then it was that Greece began to give those immortal examples of exalted feeling, and of patriotic virtue, which have since astonished the world; then it was that the unenlightened soul of the savage rose above the degradation which assimilated him to the brute creation, and discovered the first rayes of social independence.

(I, p. 4)

Thus, good poetry -- which is understood to be inextricably linked to the genesis of Western civilisation -- is perceived as being ideologically committed and immediately linked to political action and social reality. The relation between the social order and poetry is understood to be reciprocal, for while "genius" evokes, for a dormant world, the attributes of the ideal, the ideal state, in turn, follows and shelters genius. The "immortal Republics of Rome and Athens," prior to their disgraceful fall, exemplify for the poet this ideal reciprocity. Celebrating this social order in which she believes social virtue -- "Liberty" -- and "genius" to have been mutually reinforcing, EBB's rhetoric here anticipates the open political intent of Casa Guidi Windows (1851) and Poems Before Congress (1860):

Liberty, beneath whose fostering sun the arts, genius, every congenial talent of the mind, spring up spontaneously, and unite in forming one bright garland of glory around the brow of independence; liberty, at whose decline virtue sinks before the despotic sway of licentiousness, effeminacy, and vice.

(I, pp. 6-7)

The poem itself proceeds to give materiality to this vision, the choice of an historical subject matter clearly serving to comment both on the poet's proposed poetics and on the poem's own standing in a long line of masterpieces of historical inspiration.

The overall thrust of the poetics expounded in The Battle of Marathon, in line with the poetic plot which underlies it, is a visionary thrust, a holding out to a Second Coming in which "glory, fame, and manly virtue" will overcome "effeminacy, and vice" (I, p. 7; italics mine). This vision, consistently held throughout EBB's writing, will be seen to yield at a crucial moment: the moment of gender-awareness. Throughout The Battle of Marathon the language and the poetics are gender marked, weighted down, as it were, by a discourse of male scholars and male poets, of warriors and statesmen. In this cosmic vision of a utopian state, gender is already ominously present, a fissure in the fabric, a rupture in the plot; the poet who upholds "manly virtue" is a female.

In the beginning, for the female child, there is already the shadow of the feminine, the stamp of a culturally determined gender-awareness. For the young poet, there is a premonition of the double bind. For the fourteen year old, however, the threat originates from outside the self, the shadow is not yet one's own, the conflict not yet internalized. As the young EBB observes the contemporary scene, her tone is reassuring, bold, and yet relaxed:

Now, even the female may drive her Pegasus through the realms of Parnassus, without being saluted with the most equivocal of all appellations, a learned lady; without being celebrated by her friends as a SAPPHO, or traduced by her enemies as a pedant; without being abused in the Review, or

criticised in society; how justly then may a child hope to pass unheeded.

(I, pp. 2-3; italics mine).

The extent of the opposition, the scope of the obstacle race in the way of female authorship, is indicated by EBB in the references to "the Review" and "society". In the literary sphere a double critical standard dooms the literary woman to "the comparative respect/ Which means the absolute scorn" (AL, II, 235-6). In society, her literary reputation is taken to signify a defective womanhood. While the young child may indeed pass "unheeded" and rejoice in the fact, however, the woman, as Aurora Leigh will demonstrate, no longer triumphs in passing unnoticed; Aurora thus laments the dear cost of literary fame:

"My Father!" thou has 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!

(AL, V, 438-442)

In An Essay on Mind the topos of the autobiographical essays and of the Preface to The Battle of Marathon re-emerges, as the young poet launches a further investigation into the workings of the poetic mind. The overall impulse of the poem is, again, explicitly self-reflexive, designed to "turn the powers of thinking back on thought/ With mind, delineate mind" (201-2). Looking into her own mind, however, the poet finds not the original genius loci but a hall of mirrors populated by myriad reflections of past masters. This long poem of over a thousand lines is indeed a protracted invocation, a summoning of a civilization's cultural history. The drama of An Essay is multi-faceted but has one major function in the context of EBB's poetic apprenticeship: it constitutes a comprehensive survey of the heritage, a putting in place and a naming of predecessors which will indeed be the last of its kind in verse. Other poems, "A Vision of Poets" and Aurora Leigh among them, will make use of this mode, and critical works such as The Book of the Poets will again attest to the persistence of such 'inventories', but An Essay is EBB's last large-scale attempt to draw directly and extensively upon the materials of literary and

intellectual history for the subject matter of her poetry.

In its general conception, An Essay dramatizes the scene of poetic inspiration, a scene presided over by the Muses -- Mind's children -- and populated by the agents most indebted to Mind: the poets, philosophers, and scientists of times ancient and modern. The plot is the literary plot par excellence, the plot of invocation and execution, the story of a poet emerging out of the great mass of accumulated and heterogeneous knowledge, a poet clearing a space for himself (the poet is explicitly male) in a particular historical moment. The project of An Essay is to chronicle or rather outline an education, to scan the various fields of knowledge, with the aim of defining the poet's relative position within an historical and cosmic scheme. The focal interest is with the character of genius, whose properties are investigated in relation to "Mind" and Mind's "creations." The scope of this investigation is suggested by EBB in her outline of the poem. "Mind," which stands for the totality of human achievement, is seen to consist of "Philosophy" -- under which EBB lists "History, Science, and Metaphysics" -- and "Poetry" (I, p. 246). All three departments of Philosophy are inspected for "errors," and the narrator's criticism involves such judgments as a "condemnation of those who deprive historical facts of their moral inference," "a condemnation of those who would colour the political conduct of past ages with their own political feelings [where, of course, the narrator does not share these feelings]," a warning that "the danger of knowledge originates in PARTIAL knowledge," and a refutation of both Berkeley and Condillac on account of "the extremes into which [these] philosophers have fallen with regard to sensation, and reflection" (I, pp. 246-258).

While Part I of An Essay reviews at length the relative merits and failures of the branches of philosophy, Part II strikes a high note in the introduction of Poetry. Poetry is described as that which "personifies abstractions, and brings the things unseen before the eye of the Mind." Since the narrator considers "Reason" to be "often indebted to poetic imagination," it is concluded that Poetry is "more daring than Philosophy" (I, p. 258). Although Poetry is only formally introduced in Book II (both in the poem itself and in EBB's outline of it), its properties and attributes serve throughout as the privileged norm against which all other

theories and individual achievements are evaluated. Already in the Preface, an elevated conception of poetry is introduced which emphasises Poetry's superiority over all other intellectual pursuits. Writing of the Ideal through one of its agents, EBB invokes Byron to the defense of her proposed poetics: "'ethical poetry,' says that immortal writer we have lost, 'is the highest of all poetry, as the highest of all earthly objects must be moral truth'" (I, p. 56). The poem itself proceeds to reiterate the claim, enlisting an embarrassingly large number of great men to support it. The philosophy expounded here is consistent with the early works, opposing Matter to Mind in a duality resolved by an appeal to a higher order. The invocation of Book I sets in place the underlying premise of the work:

Since Spirit first inspir'd, pervaded all,
 And Mind met Matter, at th' Eternal call --
 Since dust weigh'd Genius down, or Genius gave
 Th' immortal halo to the mortal's grave;
 Th' ambitious soul her essence hath defin'd,
 And Mind hath eulogiz'd the pow'rs of Mind.
 Ere Revelation's holy light began
 To strengthen Nature, and illumine Man --

...

Ev'n then hath Mind's triumphant influence spoke,
 Dust own'd the spell, and Plato's spirit woke --
 Spread her eternal wings, and rose sublime
 Beyond th' expanse of circumstance and time.

(1-16)

The basic transcendentalist tenets are clearly stated here: through the opposition between Mind and Matter the poet identifies a higher reality -- "soul" -- which pervades "all" (that is, subsumes lesser levels) and is not subject to any principle of delimitation. "Soul" (or the Truth) is thus seen to be "eternal," beyond "circumstance and time," beyond history and the particular. Examined against this re-defined "essence," the achievements of Philosophy are found lacking due to an overemphasis on Matter: "So Buffon err'd; amidst his chilling dream,/ The judgment grew material as the theme:/ Musing on Matter, till he called away/ The modes of Mind, to form the modes of clay" (492-5).

An Essay on Mind unfolds an ascending structure which corresponds to one of its informing metaphors, the Great Chain of Being:

In Nature's reign, a scale of life, we find:
 A scale of knowledge, we behold, in Mind;
 With each progressive link, our steps ascend,
 And traverse all, before they reach the end;
 Searching, while Reason's powers may farther go,
 The things we know not, by the things we know.
 (551-6)

From History to Physics (Science) to Metaphysics, this ascending chain reaches its apex in Poetry, as Mind moves from "studying parts, to reason on the whole" (548). While Philosophy's contributions to the study of Mind are acknowledged, her confines are also recognized: "where Philosophy would fear to soar,/ Young Poesy's elastic steps explore!" (900-901). Knowledge, asserts An Essay, is ultimately transcendental knowledge, the ability to find "Essence unseen in objects seen," and to give "single forms an universal name" (778-780). Abstracting "the intellectual from the sensible" (783), Poetry, representing the highest form of knowledge, "abstracts from forms their hidden accidents,/ And marks in outward substance, inward sense" (747-8). The formal character of An Essay reinforces, duplicates, this transcendentalist thematics which valorizes the universal over the particular. While the narrative proceeds by enumeration and listing -- classifying disciplines, naming predecessors, recounting achievements and errors -- it also, simultaneously, moves towards the elimination of the particular in favor of the general, discrediting the visible in favor of the invisible, rejecting the individual (man of genius) in favor of a truth whose provenance is beyond the particular and the temporal.

In An Essay EBB thus goes beyond acknowledging her debt to her predecessors to evolve a strategy for resolving the anxiety of influence. This strategy, which in some respects could be seen to epitomize Bloom's "Daemonization," is indeed a movement "towards a personalized Counter-Sublime ... [in which] the later poet opens himself to what he believes to be a power in the parent-poem that does not belong to the parent proper, but to a range of being just beyond that precursor" (Bloom,

1973: p. 15; italics mine). EBB's strategy, however, is neither in conception nor in function limited to the articulation and resolution of 'family conflicts'. As EBB reaches beyond the individual masters to the 'universal name' -- claiming the truth to be hers because everybody's -- she also shakes off any binding generic (formal) conventions. Since Spirit is seen to subsume all material things, formal distinctions are allowed to blur and blend, as Mind "clings/ Less to the forms than essences of things" (773-4). Consequently, poetry loses its generic distinctiveness in a poetic scheme whose strongest exposition will come in Book V of Aurora Leigh; here, the narrator exclaims:

Oh! silent be the withering tongues of those
 who call each page, bereft of measure, prose,--
 ...
 Forgetting, if the gilded shrine be fair,
 What purer spirit may inhabit there!
 (916-923)

The transcendentalist vein of Aurora Leigh is already in evidence in An Essay: the apotheosis decrees a condition beyond space and time, beyond history and genre, and thus also beyond gender identity.

Inspired by an imposing literary tradition and a transcendentalist philosophy, the plot of An Essay is also gender marked, as female Muses tally with male creators in a prelude to the poet's own rites of passage. In the poem, the ruling principles of knowledge and creativity are all female, a long list of "She"'s affectionately drawn: Genius, Invention, Judgement, Memory, Time, Association, Scholastic learning, Philosophy, History, and Science. A sisterly affection characterises the relationship between these figures: Philosophy "with half a smile, and half a sigh," lifts "old History's faded tapestry" (208-9). The Muses also manifest a sensibility peculiarly feminine: Genius drops "her languid wing -- to weep" (189) at the approach of the "darkling mists, [who] over Time's last footsteps, creep" (198). The human agents of these principles, on the other hand, are all male, often drawn as the Muses' offspring: "sons of Thought" (557), "sons of Science" (591). This gender marked plot becomes particularly dramatic as EBB expands the mother-son figure to portray the son/poet's abuse of the mother/Muse, in the example of Plato (who is also

the Carlyle prototype):

Ungrateful Plato! O'er thy cradled rest,
 The Muse hath hung, and all her love exprest.
 Thy first imperfect accents fondly taught,
 And warm'd thy visions with poetic thought!
 Ungrateful Plato! should her deadliest foe
 Be found within the breast she tended so?
 (926-931)

Although the connection between mistrust of poetry and misogyny is only implied here, it is clearly affirmed in the character of Romney in Aurora Leigh. As my discussion of Aurora Leigh will demonstrate, however, both the transcendentalist discourse -- which elevates poetry -- and the materialist discourse -- which mistrusts poetry -- are seen to share a common ground in denying woman access to knowledge and a speaking subjectivity.

In An Essay, the issue of loyalty to, and indeed identification with, the Muse initiates an alternative plot, one which points to a tentative resolution of the conflicting artistic and feminine plots. The poet/narrator, the "I" of An Essay on Mind, is a gender-free figure whose position in the text, conspicuously unobtrusive, is nonetheless significantly privileged. First, the narrator is a figure of a dual nationality, partaking of both Truth and human action, a citizen of both a worldly England and a spiritual "GraeciaMy other country -- the country of my soul" (144-147). Unmarked by gender, the narrator is also unmarked by mortal bias against which a warning is issued: "For prejudice, or ignorance, is such,/ That men believe too little, or too much" (302-3). To the young poet/narrator the great men are an influence "which with honor'd light/ Beams when I read, illumine me as I write!" (896-7); yet the path to follow and explore is that laid down by "young Poesy's elastic steps" (901). The novice poet thus creates for herself a Muse in her own image, an elder sister whose "fairy foot" and "daring eye," in pursuit of the "light of faith" (902-3), will ultimately guide the poet into the maturity of Aurora Leigh.

The figure of the Muse as the narrator's elder sister or mother is already elaborated in a number of very early poems written in 1814 and 1815. In these poems, many of which were actually addressed to and reviewed by EBB's mother, the young poet can be seen to express a marked ambivalence towards the motherly figure, as inspiration and affection are at times undermined by male authority. The poetic persona in these early poems is often an "Aurora" from whose poetic lips "the fragrant zephyr blows" (HUP, p. 109). This natural poet is blessed with a Mother/Muse to whom she gratefully sings:

A Sweeter theme than this could ne'er uphold my lay.
Was I not nursled on thy tender breast?

...

Who roused my lyre, my Muse's early spell?
(HUP, p. 83)

This relationship between poet (daughter) and Muse (mother), however, is vulnerable. It is most susceptible to disrupting intrusions which threaten to transform the affectionate, harmonious scene into a scene of worship dominated by an overwhelming male figure:

Oh! thou who spread'st the opening bowers
With roses red, and beauteous flowers,
But He, the Parent of Mankind
Will ever have possession of my Mind,
So Flora, Flora flee from me
For God is better still than thee.
(HUP, p. 40)

EBB's own predicament as a woman poet, and her handling of the mutually exclusive plots of femininity (Flora's story) and art (transcendentalist knowledge), are the particular concern of this chapter. Her resolution of these conflicting stories, and of the double bind dilemma, rely partly, as I will further argue, on a metaphysical scheme in which woman-poet-Muse-hero(ine) fuse in the literary woman's apotheosis.

In An Essay the loyalty of the narrator to the Muse, sharply contrasted with the disloyalty of the sons, ultimately leads to an identification of the narrator with the Muse. Privileged with a

gender-free identity, a dual citizenship which encompasses Matter and Spirit, and untouched by human error, the narrator implicitly poses as the perfect carrier of a perfect knowledge. This knowledge is transcendentalist knowledge, the recognition that "while Matter, Spirit rules, and Spirit, God," there is "One service, praise! one age, eternal youth! One tongue, intelligence! one subject, truth" (667-8). Thus, paralleling the surface plot, one in which female Muses and the abstract principles which they represent are totally at the mercy of the male agents, a deeper structure emerges in which narrator and Muse merge to articulate a harmonized vision.

II. From "The Poet's Vow" (1836) to "Lady Geraldine's Courtship" (1844):

"That music of my nature"

In "The Poet's Vow" (1836) (1) and "A Vision of Poets" (1844) a female figure, presented as the carrier of Truth, the poet's teacher and guide, replaces the more abstract characterization of the Muse in An Essay. The two poems, together with a host of other poems in the 1838 and 1844 collections, form a link in the evolution of EBB's poetics between the highly derivative juvenilia and the mature Aurora Leigh. Both poems evolve around a symbolic act -- the poet's self-sacrificial vow in "The Poet's Vow," and the poet's vision in "A Vision of Poets" -- an act whose subsequent effects are moralized to formulate a poetic credo.

"A Vision of Poets," although deemed by Hayter to be "the fullest expression of Mrs. Browning's idea of the poetic character" next to Aurora Leigh (Hayter, 1962: p. 154), is more immediately linked to the juvenilia in its self-denying, self-abnegating philosophy and its heavy traces of an anxiety of influence. The moral of the poem, explicitly stated in the Preface to the collection, is a reiteration of "the obvious truth, ... that if knowledge is power, suffering should be acceptable as a part of knowledge," given the "necessary relations of genius to suffering and

(1) "The Poet's Vow" originally appeared in the New Monthly Magazine, XLVIII (October 1836). It was later published in Poems, 1838.

self-sacrifice" (II, p. 147). In the main part of the poem, lines 1-820, a third person narration opens as a "lady riding slow/ Upon a palfrey white as snow" (34-5) comes to the poet, declaring "I come forth/ To crown all poets to their worth" (56-7). The poet is disenchanted with the present fate of poets -- "They are scorned/ By men they sing for" (59-60) -- but the lady offers to teach him the true meaning of a poet's worth: "Let me free/ Thy spirit into verity" (102). The lady then leads the poet to a succession of pools from which she bids him drink: the pools of "world's use" (149), "world's love" (158), and "world's cruelty" (183). Finally they reach "an altar set/ For sacrament" (215-16) in the middle of a "great church" (221) where the poet first beholds an angel and then "a strange company" (271) of "poets true" (289) in whom the poet recognizes the great masters of the past. Lines 217-790 then describe the poet's vision, the third person narration shifting to the first person at the crucial moment of insight (723), thus indicating that the narrator (the "I"), like the "pilgrim-poet" (679), is privileged with a visionary experience. I will consider the consequences of this privilege shortly.

The purpose of the vision is explained to the poet by the lady as she delivers him to the angel:

World's use is cold, world's love is vain,
World's cruelty is bitter bane,
 But pain is not the fruit of pain.
 (436-8)

The angel then addresses the grand assembly of poets with a long speech the main import of which is:

If all the crown of earth must wound
 With prickings of the thorns He found, --
 If saddest sighs swell sweetest sound, --
 What say ye unto this?
 (547-550)

To the Angel's question the assembly replies "Content." To test their sincerity, however, the angel asks "What living man will bring a gift/ Of his own heart and help to lift/ The tune" (580-82), the "tune" being the measure of the world's goodness. As the responses help distinguish between

the sincere -- who pledge their heart -- and the false -- who refuse the sacrifice -- the poet joins in the company of the true, pleading: "Accept me therefore" (694). The poet has now learned the meaning of true worth, as it has been revealed to him by the "Poet-God" through the grand assembly; this meaning resides in the realization that "pain/ And loss" are "not in vain" (710) but necessary sacrifices which make it possible to "embrace and be embraced/ By [God's] fiery ends" (715-16). It is at this climactic moment of insight that the first person narrator declares himself, sharing in the divine knowledge. The narrator takes over in the "Conclusion" -- lines 820-1005 -- where he recounts his journey through "That same green forest where had gone/ The poet-pilgrim" (824-5). The narrator reiterates the words spoken by the poet after the revelation -- "This poet-God is glad and good" (819; 846) -- and finally finds the poet's child who gives the fullest articulation to the lesson learned by the "poet-pilgrim" and the narrator: "Knowledge by suffering entereth/ And life is perfected by Death" (929-930).

While the moral of the story is conventionally Christian, the poem's interest lies, for us, in its exploration of recurrent concerns in EBB's poetry: a concern with the poet's relationship to the predecessors, and the problematics of the female poetic subject. A very strong undercurrent of anxiety is established in the poem in the very movement from the I/narrator to the third person poet/protagonist (the pilgrim led by the Lady to the tribunal of great poets) to the choir of great poets over which presides the ultimate judge, an angel, the messenger of the "Poet God" (816). An elaborate mediation is thus established between the speaker/narrator and the Truth, as the word of the "Poet-God" is transmitted through the angel to the grand assembly, from them to the "poet-pilgrim," and only indirectly to the narrator who is, furthermore, dependent on the insight of the poet's child. The list of illustrious men of letters is almost as persistent and obsessive here as in An Essay: Homer, Shakespeare, Aeschylus, Euripides, Sophocles, Hesiod, Pindar, Sappho ("O poet-woman!"), Theocritus, Aristophanes, Virgil, Lucretius, Ossian, Spenser, Ariosto, Dante, Alfieri, Boiardo, Berni, Tasso, Racine, Corneille, Petrarch, Camoens, Calderon, De Vega, Goethe, Schiller, Chaucer, Milton, Cowley, Drayton, Browne, Marlowe, Webster, Fletcher, Burns, Shelley, Keats, Byron, Coleridge. "These poets ... and many more" (418), constitute the

tribunal before which the "pilgrim-poet" is brought, to which he confesses, from which he learns the true meaning of art, begging acceptance, and the privilege of a self-sacrificial act: "Only embrace and be embraced/ By fiery ends, whereby to waste,/ And light God's future with my past" (715-17). The center of gravity in the poem is the gallery of great men, a "strange company" of "poets true/ Who died for Beauty as martyrs do/ For Truth -- the ends being scarcely two" (284-91). This grand assembly, however mixed and diverse, speaks with one voice, the voice of the Precursor, the One, the "Poet God." To the angel's elaborate question, we recall, the "mourning men" can but answer "Content." In effect, the lesson taught to the "poet-pilgrim" is not of their own making. The moral of knowledge gained by suffering is not one devised by the poets of the grand assembly, but one dictated by Divine precept, by the Poet-God. The original locus of anxiety here, as in the early My Own Character, thus proves to be a religious one: the earthly poet/creator is but an agent in the Divine creator's story, a teller of a tale not his own, the involuntary bearer of the innate idea of the One.

The tracing back of the anxiety of influence to its original theological locus is symptomatic of EBB's transcendentalist poetics and constitutes a strategy for overcoming the immediate manifestations of that anxiety. The argument is most explicitly stated where the influence is most apparent, in the Preface to the highly derivative The Battle of Marathon and in the Preface to EBB's most ambitious work of translation, the translation from the Greek of Aeschylus of Prometheus Bound (1833). In the Preface to the translation, EBB justifies her presumption in associating herself with the great precursor (Aeschylus) by relying on a transcendentalist philosophy which identifies the source and inspiration of all artistic endeavors with the divine Creator. "All beauties," writes EBB, "whether in nature or art, whether in physics or morals, whether in composition or abstract reasoning, are multiplied reflections, visible in different distances and under different positions, of one archetypal beauty" (VI, p. 83; italics mine). The Platonic overtones here are totally functional: by making originality solely an attribute of the divine, and by promoting a Platonic perception of all human creativity as mimetic, EBB counteracts the anxiety-causing drive for personal distinction. Moreover, since a work's distinction is not inherently its

own, being but a reflection of "His goodness and His power" (p. 83), the author's own "contemplation of excellence" in others is seen to "produce excellence, if not similar, yet parallel" (p. 82). Since the substance of all Truth and Beauty resides beyond/outside human effort, individual artistic identities retain their character only as respective approximations of the Ideal, and are thus in effect complementary rather than rival in that they allow a consideration of the "Creator under every manifestation of His goodness and His power" (p. 83).

Although EBB's mimetic model posits a binding correspondence between the "archetypal" and its many reflections, it does not totally surrender the poet's individual mark. Reconciling originality -- the mark of the individual artist -- with mimesis, EBB argues:

it is the nature of the human mind to communicate its own character to whatever substance it conveys, whether it conveys metaphysical impressions from itself to another mind, or literary compositions from one to another language.

(VI, p. 81)

While artistic creation is thus seen to be stamped with the individual poet's "own character," any conflict between differing representations is a priori resolved in the affirmation not of relativism, but of the original and indisputable sameness of the thing imitated, the object of all creative art. While there is only "one archetypal beauty" (p. 83), "a mirror may be held in different hands; and, according to the position of those hands, will the light fall." Similarly, in "A Vision of Poets," the individual poet is both exalted and effaced as his vision establishes his, and all poets', ultimate indebtedness to the Poet-God. From Poet-God to angel, from angel to great men, from great men to poet, from poet to narrator, the poem closes on a note of continuity through repetition. Closure is achieved as the poet's (male) child reiterates the words of his father/poet which are the words of the Father/God:

"Glory to God! ...
 KNOWLEDGE BY SUFFERING ENTERETH,
 AND LIFE IS PERFECTED BY DEATH"

An explicit religio-philosophical statement is made in "A Vision of Poets" through the metaphysical conceit of a "life perfected by death." Both structurally and thematically, however, the poem embeds the conceit within a larger narrative framework, one whose active agents are "a lady riding slow/ Upon a palfrey white as snow," and the gender-free narrator/I who walks "down/ That same green forest where had gone/ The poet-pilgrim." In a manner already evident in An Essay, "A Vision of Poets," too, establishes a correspondence and a symmetry which constitute an alternative story line: the queen "who seemeth gay/ From royal grace alone" (46-7), and who reveals herself to the poet as an emissary "come forth/ To crown all poets to their worth" (56-7), parallels the narrator/I whose own pilgrimage, in the footsteps of the poet, brings about the climactic crowning of the poet's child at the poem's conclusion. Thus, while the Lady brings about spiritual regeneration in leading the poet to his vision, the narrator ensures both physical and spiritual regeneration by reaffirming the poet's vision -- "This Poet-God is glad and good" (846) -- and by searching out the future poet. The symmetry is strongly suggestive and anticipates the total fusion of speaker (narrator) and Muse (carrier of knowledge) which, in the later poetry, occurs through the introduction of the female poetic subject.

The narrator of An Essay is implicitly identified with the Muse-like figure, assuming the prophetic voice of transcendence. In "A Vision of Poets," a different vision begins to unfold, ever so discreetly: the story of a woman poet's relationship with her Muse. In this family romance, the predecessors are all male, with the all the more striking exception of a Sappho -- "O poet-woman." The central figure, the poet who is a pilgrim and a supplicant, is a man too, while both the lady -- who is a personification of the Muse -- and the first person narrator stand impervious to the burden of the past, and are divinely inspired. An omnipotent "SHE" (208) -- "holy, pale and high" -- is the overwhelming presence which initiates the poem. In the conclusion of the poem, as the Muse -- whose kiss "bound him [the poet] first/ Beyond senses," now "reversed/ Its own law and most subtly pierced/ His spirit with the senses of things/ Sensual and present" (778-82) -- leaves the scene, the poet's story, too, is terminated. Now the narrator takes over, as a third person narration is replaced by the narrator's first person account in the "Conclusion." Infused with the

lady's teaching, the narrator follows in the now dead poet's footsteps, prepared to pursue the sacred mission -- the lady's mission -- of appointing the coming poet. Although on a first, linear reading the narrator's position appears marginal to the plot of the poet's visionary experience, on a second, reconstructive reading the narrator's story emerges as central to the poem's structural and thematic dynamics. Moreover, while the poem's surface plot draws upon the commonplaces of Christian ethics and visionary poetics, the poem's deep structure points at an emerging new text, the woman poet's text. Unable to reconcile the feminine plot with the metaphysical one, EBB here creates a gender-free narrator whose detachment from the male poet/protagonist and strong affinity with the Muse-like female figure, source of knowledge and inspiration, bespeak a future text.

In "The Poet's Vow" (1836) we hear the poet's other voice, a voice reminiscent of Tennyson's "Palace of Art" (1832). In "A Vision of Poets" the poet is withdrawn from the reality of the present and transported into an otherworldly landscape where he is visited by a vision whose meaning is reiterated by the poet's child at the poem's very conclusion: "knowledge by suffering entereth/ And life is perfected by death." "Poetry is essentially truthfulness," reaffirms EBB in the Preface to "A Poet's Vow," but the truth revealed by the poem is not that of a remote, dead, grand assembly of poets, nor that of suffering and death as perfectioners of life. The poem's truth lies rather in an affirmation of the importance of human relationships and love, the final realization being that "the creature cannot be isolated from the creature" (I, p. 168; italics hers). The poet in "A Vision of Poets" has to taste the bitter waters of the pools of "World's Use," "World's Love," and "World's Cruelty" in order to gain knowledge: "Be praised for anguish which has tried/ For Beauty which has satisfied" (896-7). In "The Poet's Vow," on the other hand, the poet's vow -- which comprises a renunciation of worldly pleasure and pain and all social intercourse with a view to personal redemption -- has to be broken in order for true knowledge to reveal itself.

The five parts of "The Poet's Vow" are subtitled so as to suggest the story line: "Part the First: showing wherefore the vow was made"; "Part the second: Showing to whom the vow was declared"; "Part the Third:

showing how the vow was kept"; "Part the Forth: showing how Rosalind fared by the keeping of the vow"; "Part the Fifth: showing how the vow was broken." The last part also includes an autonomous unit entitled "The Words of Rosalind's Scroll." Seeking to disengage himself from sinful humanity to better know and worship God -- "for your sake, the bondage break/ That knits me to my kind" (90-91) -- the poet renounces all human sentiments, sending away Rosalind, who was to be his bride, and Sir Roland, his "oldest friend" (136). Pleading with the poet, Rosalind evokes their friendship and love, and scenes of human beauty: the time of childhood, and a "mother's look" rising "like the thought of God" (182-3). Unmoved, the poet remains deaf to Rosalind's and Sir Roland's supplications, passing his days in isolation in "Courland hall." He remains, however, unsuccessful in relieving that "pressure of God's infinite/ Upon his finite soul" (281-2).

While the poet's "rejection of humaneness" makes him "grow/ Of his own soul afraid" (266-7), it ultimately kills Rosalind. Acting upon Rosalind's last wish, friends convey her body to the poet's hall. Reading the scroll which Rosalind left for him -- a plea for the poet to admit his "humaneness" -- the poet breaks, and is transfigured into "a wailing human creature." Thus having broken his vow, the poet dies reconciled to his humanity. In the poem's last stanzas, the moral of Rosalind's scroll is reiterated by Sir Roland who addresses his son:

Hold it in thy constant ken
That God's own unity compresses
(One into one) the human many.
(501-3)

Desired unity, argues EBB in the poem, cannot be achieved through the exclusion of "humanity" (40), however tainted this "brotherhood" (53) appears to be by "weights and shows of sensual things" (57).

Significantly, in "The Poet's Vow" the conflict between the desire for ultimate knowledge and the demands of human love is dramatized through a conflict between a male poet and a female lover. The present chapter will further demonstrate the persistence of this gender-marked pattern in EBB's poetry, and its eventual fusion with the conflictual drama of the female

poetic subject. As in "A Vision of Poets," the narrator in "The Poet's Vow" is closely identified with the Muse-like figure. Here the gender-free narrator becomes the disembodied double of the poem's living Muse, Rosalind. This effect is achieved through a third person narration which, throughout the poem, reinforces Rosalind's point of view. Commenting on the poet's brow, for example, the narrator's observation, couched in the idiom of omniscience, echoes Rosalind's plea for human friendship and love: "It lacked, all need, the softening light/ Which other brows supply" (37-8; italics mine). Although initially rejected by the male poet, Rosalind's "living, loving" truth is ultimately recognized by the poet whose "long-subjected humaneness" finally rebels in "his living mind" (463-66). The narrator's voice, however, anticipates this moment of revelation from the outset, condemning the poet's isolation and inhumaneness:

The self poised God may dwell alone
 With inward glorying,
 But God's chief angel waiteth for
 A brother's voice, to sing;
 And a lonely creature of a simple nature
 It is an awful thing.
 (270-75)

Both "A Vision of Poets" and "A Poet's Vow" end with the introduction of a character of particular significance in EBB's writing, the character of the child as the poet to be. In "A Poet's Vow," as in "A Vision of Poets," the narrator merges with the Muse figure as a new poet is symbolically crowned, a boy to whom the narrator would, in turn, serve as a woman/Muse. While assuming the role of the Muse to the poet/boy in these poems, however, the narrator of EBB's early poetry is often a young child, herself a poet in the making. The moment of childhood, the first revelatory insight into the secret of the world, the early-life initiation into the priesthood of poetry, is indeed a central element of the artistic plot both in the early poetry and in Aurora Leigh. Ministrelsy (1833) relates the theme of the poet's almost involuntary commitment to poetic art, and her fascination with both the natural world and the world of books:

For ever, since my childish looks

Could rest on Nature's pictured books;
For ever, since my childish tongue
Could name the themes our bards have sung;
So long, the sweetness of their singing
Hath been to me a rapture bringing!
Yet ask me not the reason why
I have delight in Minstrelsy.

Both "Minstrelsy" and "To a Poet's Child" (1833) constitute a powerful contrast to the exalted, universalizing, and all encompassing vision of the earlier meditations, by evoking the figure of the poet as woman, and by illustrating, through her, the conflicting demands of poetry and human love. In "The Poet's Vow" the conflicting demands of the poetic impulse -- the impulse for ultimate knowledge -- and the feminine plot -- the need for love -- are dramatized through a conflict between two characters: the poet and Rosalind. In "Minstrelsy" and "To a Poet's Child," this same conflict is internalized as the young female poet becomes the locus of antagonistic drives.

In "Minstrelsy" the female poet/narrator not only acknowledges art's all too slight hold over life, but proceeds to make a strong plea for a recognition of "her love," if only by "the dear and few," a recognition she knows could only be posthumous. The conflicting demands of earthly love and poetic creation are also made explicit in "To a Poet's Child," where the narrator endeavors to discourage the young girl, a poet's child, from touching "the harp" herself: "Touch not the harp to win the wreath;/ Its tone is fame, its echo death" (49-50). The narrator -- a poet attuned to the harp's "melodie" (5) -- cautions the aspiring female poet that poetic pursuits will doom her to a loveless, joyless existence: "So genius (fatal gift)! is doom'd/ To leave the heart it fired, consumed" (55-56). The narrator advises the young child: "Think not too deeply ... Feel not too warmly" (41-45), reinforcing the traditionalist identification of woman with nature and domesticity by pleading: "Be streams thy music; hills, thy mirth;/ Thy chiefest light, the household hearth" (63-4). The narrator's advice here closely resembles the aunt's program for female education in Aurora Leigh, and constitutes (as Chapter Two argues) a clear mark of the double bind dilemma, evidence of an internalized feminine plot at odds with

the coveted (masculine) artistic plot. In Aurora Leigh, this feminine plot, advocated by Aurora's aunt, is internalized by Aurora herself, who at moments of self doubt wishes herself a "common woman."

The narrator of "To a Poet's Child" issues an injunction against all poetic pursuits:

Be happy; strive not to be great;
And go not, from thy kind apart,
With lofty soul and stricken heart.
(37-9)

The paradoxical nature of a poet's injunction against all poetical pursuits is exposed in EBB's "Felicia Hemans -- dedicated to L.E.L., referring to her monody on the poetess" (1835).(2) The poem's central argument is presented in stanza V, as EBB addresses Laetitia E. Landon whose eulogy of Felicia Hemans has triggered this poem:

Nor mourn, O living one, because her part in life
was mourning:
Would she have lost the poet's fire for anguish of the
burning?
The minstrel harp, for the strained string? the tripod
for the afflated
Woe? or the vision, for those tears in which it shone
dilated?

Here EBB rejects the narrator's advice in "To a Poet's Child," arguing that however great the suffering, it is justified by the "poet's fire" and a privileged "vision." "Perhaps she shuddered while the world's cold hand her brow was wreating" (st. VI), admits EBB, recognizing that the poet's gain (in "vision") is the woman's loss (in love). Unlike Landon, however, she finds the gain to outweigh the loss, and celebrates Hemans' "mystic breath which breathed in all her breathing/ Which drew, from rocky earth and man, abstractions high and moving/ Beauty, if not the beautiful, and love, if not the loving" (st. VI).

(2) "Felicia Hemans" originally appeared in New Monthly Magazine, XLV (September 1835). It was later published in Poems, 1838.

Thus, between the tongue in cheek advice to the poet's child and the recognition in another woman poet of the conflicting demands of art and love, lies the personal history of a child-poet who grows into womanhood herself to face the anticipated paradox. In Aurora Leigh, elements from the early poetry -- the child as the poet-to-be, the disembodied narrator, the figure of the Muse -- all fuse in the character of Aurora who combines the Muse's knowledge and inspiration with the woman's desire for love. In "To A Poet's Child," as in Aurora Leigh, moreover, abandonment of poetry is abandonment of self. Pleading with the poet's child to renounce her poetic aspirations, the narrator of "To a Poet's Child" spells out the disastrous alternative: "Forget!." The poem thus implies that to relinquish the poet's vision is to lose all vision, as the poet's insight is replaced by "shallow thought" (41) and the inability to see through appearances: "and ever dream/ That all are true who truly seem" (59-60; italics mine).

While relinquishing poetic pursuits is deadly to the self, the poet's task -- as "The Poet's Vow" already indicates -- can be deadly to his or her human identity. Here lies the chief problematics regarding the relationship between the poet and the world. Within the overall transcendentalist scheme which informs EBB's poetics, the conflicting demands of life and art, the deadly side of the poet's and the student's exalted occupation, constitute a recurrent theme of the early poetry and anticipate the more gender-bound dilemma of the double bind. In "The Student" (1838), the narrator agonizes over the student's spent life:

Is it thus,
Ambition, idol of the intellect?
Shall we drink aconite, alone to use
Thy golden bowl? and sleep ourselves to death -
To dream thy visions about life?
(57-61)

Blessed with "ecstasy" and the vision of "beauteous mysteries" (in the 1838 "Earth and her Praisers"), but also reduced to a corpse "embraced/ Close, cold, and stiff, by Death's compelling sleep" ("The Student," 36-7), the poet's destiny involves an unresolved conflict. The model -- the same one exalted in the early autobiographical essays -- is that of the heroic bard, a figure one recognizes by the "ecstasy-dilated eyes/ ... a sense of

lonely power/ .../ By the lip which words of fire/ Overboiling have burned white/ While they gave the nations light" ("Earth and her Praisers," 106-16). An intermediary between God's truth and man's mortal existence, the poet is a recipient of "the sign/ From the Father-soul," and thus a transmitter "of all beauteous mysteries,/ Of all perfect images" (122-25). He is the "poet-priest/ By the high altar, singing prayer and prayer/ To the high heavens" ("On a Portrait of Wordsworth by B.R. Haydon," 9-11).(3) Now, however, he is also seen to be singing "upon the earth grave-riven,/ Before the naughty world," laden with "sorrow" and "woe" ("The Seraph and The Poet").(4) Thus, long before the reality of the double bind materializes in the poetry in the form of an explicit conflict between female identity and poetic self, an acute sense of an irreparable split between body and soul -- another kind of double bind -- becomes an overwhelming preoccupation. In "The Soul's Expression" (1843)(5) the poet laments:

I strive and struggle to deliver right
That music of my nature day and night
With dream and thought and feeling interwound,
And inly answering all the senses round
With octaves of a mystic depth and height
Which step out grandly to the infinite
From the dark edges of the sensual ground.
This song of soul I struggle to outbear
...
But if I did it, -- as the thunder-roll
Breaks its own cloud, my flesh would perish there.
(2-13)

In aspiring to "a mystic depth and height," to a knowledge of "the infinite," in striving to disengage "soul" from "the sensual ground," the poet risks perishing in the "flesh."

(3) "On a Portrait of Wordsworth by B.R. Haydon" first appeared in the Athenaeum (29 October 1842). It was later published in Poems, 1844.

(4) "The Seraph and the Poet" first appeared in Graham's Magazine, XXIII (August 1843). It was later published in Poems, 1844.

(5) "The Soul's Expression" originally appeared in Graham's Magazine, XXIII (July 1843). It was later published in Poems, 1844.

The 1844 and 1850 poems continually rework the themes of the poet's character and the nature of the poetic employment. In poems such as "The Dead Pan" (1844), "The Poet and the Bird" (1844), "A Lay of the Early Rose" (1840)(6), "Bertha in the Lane" (1844), "The Poet" (1847)(7), and "Confessions" (1850), the paradox underlying the poet's desire to transcend the Actual in order to attain the Ideal is explored with a specific extension to what I have termed the feminine plot. In "The Poet's Vow" and "The Dead Pan" EBB argues that the poet's involvement in the real world is a measure of his commitment to the Ideal: "God himself is the best poet/ And the Real is His song./ Sing His Truth out fair and full,/ And secure his beautiful" ("The Dead Pan," 248-51). The paradoxical nature of this dual commitment, however, remains a major preoccupation in the treatment of the poet's nature and role. The conflict is openly explored in "The Poet and the Bird" where the "people" say to the "poet": "'go out from among us straightway!/ While we are thinking earthly things, thou singest of divine'" (st. I). Choosing the earthly, sensually pleasing "little fair brown nightingale" (st. I), the people expel the poet whose exile and subsequent death, however, silence the bird. The bird's last song vindicates the poem's theme: "I cannot sing my earthly things, the heavenly poet wanting,/ Whose highest harmony includes the lowest under sun" (st. II). Since the spiritual -- the poet's "heavenly harmony" -- is seen to subsume the sensual, the poet's expulsion is disastrous, annihilating both the "earthly" and the "heavenly." The lasting nature of true (immortal) poetry, however, is asserted in the poem's concluding lines in which the narrator recounts:

And when I last came by the place, I swear the music
left there
Was only the poet's song, and not the nightingale's.

In "The Lay of the Early Rose" EBB again argues that the presumption of the sensual leads inevitably to its destruction, but is more positive in affirming the poet's endurance. In "the Early Rose," "misknown/ .../ In

(6) "A Lay of the Early Rose" first appeared in Monthly Chronicle, VI (July 1840). It was later published in Poems, 1844.

(7) "The Poet" first appeared in Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine, LXI (June 1847). It was later published in Poems, 1850.

her loneliness, in her loneliness,/ All the sadder for that oneness!" the poet (who is male) recognizes his own condition: "It chanches too with us/ Poets, singing sweetest snatches/ While that deaf men, keep the watches:/ Vaunting to come before our own age evermore,/ In a loneliness, in a loneliness,/ And the nobler for that oneness" (118-24; italics hers). The poet's commitment, however, finds its reward in that quality of vision which elevates him above the "sensual eyes" of the deaf men, allowing him "sights of things away/ Through fissures of the clay" (201-2).

While the poet's conflict is resolved in a higher vision which transforms him into a "godlike, childlike" figure who "sees all new" ("The Poet"; italics hers), the woman caught up in the Sensual vs. Ideal dilemma is a victimized figure whose only salvation is a Christian faith in the after-life. In "Bertha in the Lane" the man chooses Bertha, "rose-lined from the cold,/ And meant verily to hold/ Life's pure pleasures manifold" (st. XXV), over the speaker/sister who is "pale as crocus grows/ Close besides a rose-tree's root" (st. XXVI). In "Confessions" the condemnation of the Bertha-like figure is explicit and bold, the woman perceived as "unthankful and impotent creature" (st. V) who has "chosen the Human, and left the Divine" (st. IX). Thus, for the woman who says "I have loved .../.../ I saw God sitting above me, But I *** I sat among men,/ And I have loved these" (st. V), there is "the wrath of His judgment-seas" (st. IX). No better destiny, however, awaits her who is "like May-bloom on thorn-trees" (in "Bertha in the Lane," st. XXVI), for the pleasures of the world are denied her, and death seals life with the somewhat ambiguous promise of Divine understanding. Frustrated female love, rather indifferently observed by Tennyson's Lancelot in The Lady of Shalott, takes on particular significance in EBB's poetry. In poems such as "The Romaunt of Margaret" (1836)(8), "Bertha in the Lane," "Confessions," and others, the central female figure is denied worldly fulfillment within the larger Actual vs. Ideal scheme which informs and resolves the poet's predicament. Unlike Tennyson's Lady of Shalott, however, EBB's Margaret is the woman in the poet, the woman in the Woman poet, whose surfacing, although long and painful, will be inevitable.

(8) "The Romaunt of Margaret" first appeared in the New Monthly Magazine, XLVII (July 1836). It was later published in Poems, 1838.

The conflicting demands of the spiritual and the sensual, and their respective implications for the female subject, are the underlying concerns of "Psyche Apocalypse" (1841-?), planned as a collaborative effort with Richard Hengist Horne. Although the plan never materialized, we have EBB's preliminary sketch of the drama in a series of letters to Horne, subsequently included in Porter and Clarke's 1900 edition of EBB's Works. The plan introduces as a central figure Medon (or Cymon) -- "a man self-supposed to be complete in all experiences, and prepared for all events; wise and strong" (VI, p. 326) -- and projects a drama which is precipitated by Medon's confrontation with Psyche, the "manifestation of the Inward" (p. 326). The man and Psyche are said to be "the one, yet contrarious," and express "their mutual horror of the unity" (pp. 326-7). The drama is further precipitated by an irreconcilable conflict between the two female characters, Medon's soul (Psyche) and Medon's bride, Evanthe. "Beautiful Evanthe" symbolizes Love, is "full of affection," and is associated with sensual pleasures and the natural world (p. 332). Psyche, who appears to Medon saying "I hear myself in thee -- and I appear" (p. 332), "haunts Love with mystic and mournful voices" (p. 334). Overcome by Psyche, "the bridal singing" being "broken by the wail of psyche," Medon abandons his bride in the midst of the "marriage festival" as he is "irresistibly attracted" to that call "from within" (p. 335). Evanthe, for her part, is completely "paralysed, and stands like one of the marble statues" (p. 335). Medon, "flying from Psyche -- into nature," finds there only Psyche's echo and "the dead body of his abandoned bride" (p. 342). In this conflict between an idealized, spiritualized female and an earthly living woman, the latter is perceived by Medon to be "the victim of his condition with relation to Psyche," as "every woman would most likely be made a victim under such circumstances" (p. 342).

Seeking to rid himself of Psyche's haunting presence, Medon appeals to the Philosopher and the Poet, representatives of human knowledge and achievement. The Philosopher, who reduces "all things to the perception of the external senses, and all knowledge to analysis," argues for "a rigid exclusion of all transcendental speculations, and a close adherence to utilities in their most literal sense" (p. 336). He is mocked by Psyche who proves to him that "the analytical mind is not the finest order of mind," by making him deny "the evidence of his senses" and thus contradict

himself (pp. 336-7). This Benthamite philosopher, whose position represents one end of EBB's binary ideological paradigm, is contrasted with "the Poet [who] refuses to help him [Medon] against Psyche" (p. 337). Clearly, the poet is identified with the mystical transcendental pole represented by Psyche, and has no sympathy for the "feminine" Evanthe whose passivity, "deficiency of intellect -- of mental sympathy -- [whose] ... gentleness, timidity, and helplessness," render her "incapable of an effort ... to do something to help the poor troubled man" (p. 337).

In Psyche Apocalypse the two life plots -- the feminine and the artistic -- are brought into direct opposition, the result being a rough draft of yet another plot. Conceived in mutual opposition, both plots lose their initial self-sufficiency: while the feminine protagonist (Evanthe) is destroyed rather than rescued by a chivalrous knight, the male poet (Medon) is haunted rather than inspired by a mournful, tortured Muse (Psyche). Here, as in "The Poet's Vow," the earthly female has to be sacrificed for the male protagonist to attain his visionary experience.

Acts of expulsion and sacrifice indeed recur in EBB's poetry. The difference in outcome, however, points to an important aspect of EBB's aesthetics. While the poet's expulsion in "The Poet and the Bird" is disastrous, annihilating both the "earthly" and the "heavenly," Evanthe's sacrifice in Psyche Apocalypse issues in the highest harmony, the unity of "the one yet contrarious." Since the natural (sensual) is understood to be subsumed under the Ideal, its expulsion or sacrifice only releases the Ideal from its material bonds; without the Ideal, however, both the natural and the spiritual shrivel and die.

The character of Psyche, moreover, introduces a new element to the poetics of the female subject. Unlike the victimized Evanthe and Rosalind, Psyche finally triumphs as a female poetic figure who embraces both spiritual transcendence (the poetic plot) and love (the feminine plot). EBB writes the conclusion of the drama thus:

Love has its first issue in unity and self-reconcilement
... Medon and Psyche reciprocated in lyrics, their sense
of reconciliation and unity, crowned chorally by the

Heavenly Spirits, and the song of the beautiful Evanthe
(through whose sufferings the reconciliation had been
effected on earth) .

(p. 344)

The scheme is essentially Aurora Leigh's: both lady Waldemar and Marian will have to be sacrificed (that is, denied their 'natural' feminine destinies) in order for Aurora, a materialized Psyche, and Romney, an avatar of the Cymon-Medon figure, to sing their final hymn of reconciliation and unity.

In Psyche Apocalypse, then, we find a first attempt to work out a plot that will explicitly confront the conflicting demands of the two initial life plots vital to the constitution of a female poetic identity. "In the ghastly light of that divine agony" which seals the projected work, Psyche is "softened and beautified, and Medon purified and exalted" (p. 343). A perfect reunion of the sexes, attained through suffering and doubt, is also the outcome of "Lady Geraldine's Courtship," a poem which although not as explicitly concerned with the dilemma of the woman artist, does introduce a further important development in the artistic plot.

"Lady Geraldine's Courtship" (1844), in which EBB saw a first approximation to her projected novel-poem of contemporary life, is both a recapitulation of earlier concerns and an anticipation of the later work. The poem is motivated chiefly by the theme of unrequited love, a male poet's impossible love for "all things set above [him] ... all of good and all of fair" (st. VIII), epitomized in his love for "a lady--an earl's daughter" (st. II). The situation of "A Poet's Vow" is reversed here, with the male poet in the position of the rejected yet yearning lover, and lady Geraldine as the unapproachable beloved, while wealth and social class constitute the barriers in the way of communication and fulfillment. Like Rosalind of "The Poet's Vow," the poet Bertram is consumed by his frustrated love, approaching, ever so rapidly, Rosalind's destiny of a great spiritual fire quenched by deadly human indifference. Bertram's narrative, however, ends on a much happier note, already anticipating the resolution of Aurora Leigh.

The tone of "Lady Geraldine's Courtship" is heterogenous, as the poem combines stereotypical representations of class and sex and high pitched exclamations of love with serious social and philosophical observations. Its structural and ideological make-up, however, closely anticipate Aurora Leigh's. Structurally, the poem follows the poet's gradual movement from a state of inspired creativity but frustrated love to a state of total fulfillment. This final and utopian state is arrived at after an intervening phase of misunderstood intentions which further enhance the dramatic shift from darkness to light, from lack and frustration to bliss and fulfillment. This pattern, as we shall see, is re-activated in Aurora Leigh. Ideologically, the poem's focal figure is a poet whose transcendentalist and involved poetics echo EBB's earlier poetic personae. Bertram's story, moreover, which is to become Aurora's, is the story of a poet's struggle to reconcile life and art, and his subsequent triumph in approaching life through art, in becoming one with art for the beloved, in fusing text with self and with desire.

Lady Geraldine's character clearly exists as a projection of Bertram's driving desire -- the narrative, with the exception of the 'Conclusion,' is in the first person -- a figure in "virginal white" and "golden ringlets" (st. XXIV), who can also "threaten and command" (st. III). Bertram, on the other hand, is a thinly disguised projection of the poet/narrator of EBB's early verse. "Born of English peasants" (st. IV), Bertram sees through the cruel injustice of a class society and with Carlylean excitement condemns it: "Madam, in this British islands,/ 'Tis the substance that wanes over, 'tis the symbol that exceeds" (st. XXXIII). Although lowly born, the poet partakes of a higher wisdom, a wisdom likewise shared by "Wordsworth's solem-thoughted idyl,/ Howitt's ballad-verse, ... Tennyson's enchanted reverie," or by "[Robert Browning's] Blood-tinctured Pomegranates" (st. XLI), for indeed "books are men of high stature" (st. XLIX).(9) His is the wisdom of the soul which exposes the "self-thanking, self-admiring" (st. LI) folly of a mechanical age, an age crying "progress ... amid the incense-steam, the thunder of ... cars" (sts. XLIX-L). "O the wonderous wonderous age," recites

(9) Bertram here anticipates Aurora who will exclaim: "the world of books is still the world" (AL, I, 748).

Bertram to his beloved lady Geraldine, "Little thinking if we work our SOULS as nobly as our iron,/ or if angels will commend) us at the goal of pilgrimage" (st. LI).

Bertram's philosophy -- which informs his poetry and is articulated through it -- is a plea for universal brotherhood under the banner of spiritual achievement. It is this philosophy and the poetry which celebrates it that win over Geraldine's heart. Overhearing Geraldine's refusal of the Earl's marriage proposal, and her declaration that: "Whom I marry, shall be noble,/ Ay, and wealthy. I shall never blush to think how he was born" (st. LXVI), Bertram is prompted to conceive of his masterpiece, speaking "out wildly, fiercely, brutal truths of her and others!" (st. LXXI). The text which he is thus prompted to create -- sts. LXXIII to LXXX -- is a bitterly ironic text, an inspired text which oscillates between larger social issues and his own agonized love: "what right have you, madame, gazing in your palace mirror daily,/.../ ... to vow gaily/ You will wed no man that's only good to God,--and nothing more?" (st. LXXVI). He concludes:

As it is--your ermined pride,I swear, shall feel this stain
upon her,
That I, poor, weak, tost with passion,
scorned by me and you again,
Love you, Madame, dare to love you.
(st. LXXX)

Bertram's apology for loving a woman of a higher social rank recalls EBB's apology for 'competing' with the grand masters of the literary tradition. In both instances an appeal to a universalizing, impersonal Ideal -- an "archetypal beauty" (VI, p. 81) or here "God" -- elevates the speaker by abolishing the very hierarchy which has defined his or her inferiority.

The denouement of "Lady Geraldine's Courtship" presents a perfect resolution to the story of a poet's desire and a woman's search for the perfect match. Moved by his text to love him, Geraldine echoes her earlier enigmatic statement to the Earl, now telling Bertram: "It shall be as I have sworn./ Very rich he is in virtue, very noble -- noble, certes;/ And I shall not blush in knowing that men call him lowly born!" ("Conclusion,"

st. XI). Now, however, the true meaning of her statement is disclosed, and the third person narration of the "Conclusion" brings the lovers together under the sign of poetic repetition -- repetition of Geraldine's statement -- which is also the sign of desire gratified. Geraldine's expression of love, in turn, transforms Bertram's negatively charged (ironic) text -- his doomsday prophecy -- into the shared text of their reunion. Bertram's text, like Aurora's book, thus becomes an extension of the poetic self -- an articulation of his "poet-heart" -- which heals ruptures and reunites life, love, and art. Finally, In Bertram's character EBB can be seen to have succeeded in creating the true poet of whom she speaks in The Book of the Poets: a poet whose poetry is "his life" (VI, p. 303). In Bertram's story poetry is no longer antithetical to life and love; on the contrary, it is through poetry that the poet not only articulates but also wins love. The implications of this resolution for the problematics of the female poetic subject, I will argue, are far-reaching.

III. From The Book of the Poets (1842) to A New Spirit of the Age (1844):
 "a spiral line of still expanding and ascending gyres"

In The Book of the Poets (1842) and A New Spirit of the Age (with R.H. Horne, 1844), a fuller, more explicit treatment is given to the ideology which already permeates the early poetry.(10) In these works, EBB continues to explore the relationship between the poet and the world by openly engaging in what has been called the "omnipresent debate" of the nineteenth century, the debate between empiricism and transcendentalism. The opposing philosophies are broadly sketched out by Harris:

According to one view [empiricism], the discovery of truth

(10) A similarity between The Book of the Poets and A New Spirit of the Age has been remarked by David Paroissien who argues that "the resemblances, in fact, are so close that one may argue that the Athenaeum articles [The Book of the Poets] provided both the catalyst for Horne's own ideas and a paradigm for the essays of A New Spirit of the Age" (Paroissien, 1971: p. 276). Paroissien describes EBB's critical method, which he views as paradigmatic of A New Spirit of the Age, as "a synthetic approach to literary criticism in which she [EBB] avoided intellectual analysis of a poet but concentrated on capturing the true feeling of works and authors" (Paroissien, 1971: p. 276).

depends on the analysis of relations between those things which make up our experience, relations not always directly observable, but deducible by logic; according to the other [transcendentalism], it depends on insight into a structure which is not only invisible but which cannot be deduced from the phenomena of experience.... The essential difference is that those who hold the latter view regard human experience as necessarily misleading as long as it is uninformed by a higher kind of knowledge which sees beyond all observable phenomena and is governed by something beyond logic.

(Harris, 1981: pp. 7-8).

As the preceding discussion has already demonstrated, EBB's writing, starting with the early autobiographical essays, is clearly marked by an advocacy of transcendentalist tenets. In "A Thought on Thoughts" -- an allegorical Tatler-like tale published in the Athenaeum (23 July 1836) -- EBB again addresses this philosophical debate which is more fully treated in The Book of the Poets and A New Spirit of the Age.

The premise of "A Thought on Thoughts" is a family romance; here the narrator -- "idle thought" -- introduces "to the reader's attention certain ancient acquaintances" of the family. Beyond the witty commentary on clichés concerning the nature, uses, and abuses of words, the essay focuses essentially on an ideological opposition between "Scientific thought" and "Poetical thought," "philosophical thought" being simply dismissed as "a lordly personage of retired habits and eccentric disposition" who is "full of noble caprices," and is "the loving associate of high abstractions; and then, turning on his heels, denies their very existence" (VI, p. 354). Scientific thought, clearly a Benthamite, is a figure of the new mechanical age: he meddles with "the wheel, and steam, and water, and wind engines, ... and with all the printing machines, and thrashing machines, and calculating machines" (p. 355). Totally absorbed by matter, he is reduced to it: "the iron which he is always at work upon, enters into his soul and becomes part of it." Poetical thought, at the opposite end of this ideological spectrum, is the very antithesis of the former; while Scientific thought is an iron man, Poetical thought is a spiritual female

Muse, "the glory of the earth ... burning in her eyes with a deep, mystical, unquenchable fire" (p. 355). While technical terms carry out Scientific thought's "dirty work" (p. 356), Poetical thought's "lashes are wet" as she weeps bitterly over "human Truth, which is begrimed with dust, and human love, which is pale" (p. 356).

While the narrator of "A Thought on Thoughts" affirms the antagonism between Scientific thought and Poetic thought to be profound and irreconcilable, he (or she) affirms that "Philosophical thought and Poetical thought used to be warmly attached friends," and indeed "in secret and congenial friendship they bear one heart between them," though "they have always been subject to chance estrangements" (p. 356). In one such serious quarrel involving Plato, adds the narrator: "I can't help saying that Philosophical thought was entirely in the wrong." The allusion is to Plato's rejection of poetry, and the general context invokes the figure of the poet malgré lui, a Plato or a Carlyle, in whom EBB sees the disloyal son turning against the mother/Muse, source of life and knowledge.

The Book of the Poets is a survey of English poetry from Langland to Wordsworth, which EBB wrote as five review essays for the Athenaeum in 1842.⁽¹¹⁾ A review of an anthology of English verse from Chaucer to Beattie (entitled The Book of the Poets), EBB's The Book of the Poets rises above the constraints of the form to become a comprehensive statement of its author's own "heroic genealogy" (VI, p. 242). The naming of predecessors which runs through the early works, from My Own Character and An Essay on Mind to "A Vision of Poets," finds in the present work a natural and fitting form. The impressive scope and depth of EBB's historical treatment of English poetry, furthermore, highlights the particular significance of this endeavor to EBB's thought and writing. Of the utmost importance here, as in the earlier works, is a recognition of the fundamental affinity between the critical faculty and the creative faculty, between the poet and the critic, between reading and writing.

(11) "The Book of the Poets": Athenaeum, 4 June 1842; 11 June 1842; 25 June 1842; 6 August 1842; 13 August 1842.

Imbued with this understanding, The Book opens with a truly literary invocation, declaring the textual nature of both experience and knowledge: "what book shall we open side by side with Nature's? First, the book of God. 'The Book of the Poets' may well come next" (VI, p. 240). Textuality, moreover, is understood here, and throughout EBB's writing, as diametrically opposed to materiality. The poet's invocation is primarily a defence of poetry, conceived within the transcendentalist opposition of spirit and matter, truth and appearance; EBB declares:

let this book therefore accept our boon, ... while we ...
may be thankful too, that in the present days of the
millennium of Jeremy Bentham -- a more literally golden age
than the laureates of Saturnus dreamed withal -- any memory
of the poets should linger with the booksellers, and 'come
up this way' with the spring.
(VI, p. 241)

It is through the Book of the Poets, she argues, that one can gain access to the Book of Nature and the Book of God; from this knowledge Benthamite followers -- who have opted for "gold" -- are debarred.

The enterprise undertaken by EBB in The Book could perhaps be best understood through the figure of the Palimpsest, a figure of central importance to EBB's transcendentalist epistemology. In Sartor Resartus (1838), a book EBB was later to review, Carlyle writes: "Great men are the inspired (speaking and acting) Texts of that divine BOOK OF REVELATIONS, whereof a Chapter is completed from epoch to epoch, and by some named HISTORY" (Carlyle, 1838: p. 134). For Carlyle, as for EBB, history, like the creative product, is a text, to be read, deciphered, re-written. Reading and interpretation thus always precede writing, for both history and experience are conceived as a "complex Manuscript, covered over with formless inextricably entangled unknown characters, -- nay ... a Palimpsest ... [which] had once prophetic writing, still dimly visible there, -- some letters, some words may be deciphered" (Carlyle, 1830: p. 89). Similarly, EBB's poetic persona in Aurora Leigh is born into the "world of books" which "is still the world" (AL, I, 792), and appropriates the palimpsest figure to reiterate the poet's original indebtedness. Aurora's challenge here is particularly evocative as it recalls EBB's never

fully withdrawn rebuttal of Locke in My Own Character (1818). Aurora reflects:

Let who say
 'The soul's a clean white paper,' rather say,
 A palimpsest, a prophet's holograph
 Defiled, erased and covered by a monk's,-
 The apocalypse, by a Longus! poring on
 which obscene text, we may discern perhaps
 Some fair fine trace of what was written once,
 Some upstroke of an alpha and omega
 Expressing the old scripture.
 (AL, I, 824-32)

The poet's indebtedness, then, is twofold, for the poet is entrusted with the world's text, to be read and deciphered before it is re-written, and the predecessors' texts, which can either facilitate or obstruct the process of interpretation (or deciphering). The figure of the palimpsest thus crystalizes EBB's transcendentalist conception of both the relationship between the poet and the world and the relationship between the poet and the predecessors. This understanding is clearly articulated in The Book of the Poets where the literary tradition, as well as "the Book of God" and the natural world, are perceived as texts which the poet is called upon to interpret (the poet thus functioning as critic) before proceeding to write.

Rereading literary history, the first person narrator of The Book labours tirelessly at detecting sham, casting away the "obscure text" in order to decipher the original Manuscript, the "old scripture." While Truth is one, however, its tellers are many, and although in Aurora Leigh they speak in one voice "of essential truth,/ opposed to relative, comparative, and temporal truths/" (AL, I, 860-61), it is the individual styles and stories of the "truth tellers" that The Book strives to comprehend. The central tension around which the work evolves is twofold, resulting as much from the individual poets' degree of approximation to the one true Manuscript, as from their position vis-à-vis predecessors, contemporaries, and future followers. The narrator's own vested interest is apparent, for this survey of literary history is indeed a search for

allies as well as enemies, a further mapping out of poetic territories, and a creation of a personal past out of the collective heritage.

Beyond being a scholarly survey of English literary history, The Book of the Poets is also, in my view, an elaborate re-telling of the poetic plot: the story of poetic "genius" forever "thrust onward to a new slope of the world" (VI, p. 243). It is the story of Fathers and Sons, and some Daughters gone astray, as we shall see. Like Carlyle's On Heroes and Hero Worship (1841), it is the story of great men and their worlds, a story opening (as in Heroes) with "the gathering cry of Persian Odin," and closing with a reiteration of its sustaining principle, a plea for "Hero Worship" (VI, p. 304). It is, more specifically, the story of the hero as a man of letters and a poet, whose work, the ultimately superior work, is that of "observation, of meditation, of reaching past models into nature, of reaching past nature unto God" (p. 310). Reaching past models into nature, and past nature unto God, or the Truth, is also the narrator's itinerary here. First, there are the models and an inevitable anxiety of influence which the narrator unfailingly detects. An early, and quite extended example is that of Gower, "who is ungratefully disregarded too often, because side by side with Chaucer" (p. 246). EBB finds the root of the conflict between the two contemporaries in a form of anxiety, Gower's message to Chaucer, according to EBB, "being 'I have done my poem, and you cannot do yours because you are superannuated'" (p. 249). Although EBB's critical admiration goes to Chaucer, her sympathies lie with Gower, whom she sees as being mistreated by a critical tradition too caught up with a 'family romance' plot: "could Gower be considered apart, there might be found signs in him of an independent royalty, however his fate may seem to lie in waiting for ever in his brother's antechamber" (p. 246).

In a second moment, the narrator looks "past models into nature, ... reaching past nature unto God" (p. 310). Although the sympathy for Gower looks backward to the young EBB's own grappling with the giants of the "world of books," The Book's overall orientation exceeds the dictates of a 'Family Romance' narrative. While recording history, this long and meticulous work persistently strives to transcend it; while acknowledging influences and individual talent, it consistently overshadows them by appealing to abstract ideals. Of Shakespeare's predecessors and

contemporaries EBB writes:

through them, like a lens, we behold the light. Of them we conjecture ... these are the experiments of Nature, made in her solution of the problem of how much deathless poetry will agree with how much mortal clay -- these are the potsherd vessels half filled, and failing at last, -- until up to the edge of one the liquid inspiration rose and bubbled in hot beads to quench the thirsty lips of the world.

(VI, p. 270)

Although ostensibly interested in recording Nature's "experiments" -- the many accidents of history by which lesser poets have come into being -- the focus of critical attention in The Book constantly shifts from the accidental to the Ideal, from individual poets to the impersonal "light" or "inspiration." Similarly, although The Book is much preoccupied with "poetical influences" (p. 287), its chief protagonists are regarded as being, like Milton, "high above the current of poetical influences." These giant figures are portrayed as "Isolated in the contemporaneous world," outstanding figures endowed with intimations of the other world and capable of seeing through and beyond the visible.

Recalling the giants of the drama of literary history, from minor figures to Shakespeare -- "the greatest artist in the world" (p. 272) -- The Book's narrative evolves around "the majestic personality of a poet": "He is the student, the deep thinker, the patriot, the believer, the thorough brave man, breathing freely for truth and freedom under the laden weights of his adverseries" (p. 287). Be it a Chaucer, a Shakespeare, or a Milton, the great man's destiny is the articulation of the one Truth, an a-temporal, a-historical, transcendent truth, independent of the clay vessel. Of Shakespeare, EBB writes, "we must speak briefly, ... and very weakly too, except for love" (p. 272). The humbleness, however, is deceiving, for the narrator is most outspoken and self-assured where it matters most, in the articulation of that one truth:

Nature is God's art -- the accomplishment of a spiritual significance hidden in a sensible symbol. Poetic art

(man's) looks past the symbol with a divine guess and reach of soul into the mystery of the significance,-- dissolving from the analysis of visible things the synthesis or unity of the ideal, -- and expounds like symbol and like significance out of the infinite of God's doing into the finite of man's comprehending.

(p. 272; italics mine)

EBB's strategy for resolving the anxiety of influence here recalls her earlier attempts: claiming to share with her predecessors a limitation which even the greatest cannot transcend -- all poets are bound by "the finite of man's comprehending" -- the poet is emboldened to declare what she purports to be but a self-evident truth (it is self evident since it is God's): the "unity of the ideal."

The distrust of "the visible," of the empirical world, is at the root of the transcendentalist a-historicity which is also an anti-formalism. Within the transcendentalist scheme, history is flattened out and compressed as temporal reference points are altogether discarded. EBB contends: "we have no leaning to the popular cant of Romanticism and Classicism, and believe the old Greek BEAUTY to be both new and old" (VI, p. 272). Likewise, there is no room in this scheme for generic or formal differentiations; EBB argues: "the whole theory of accent and quantity held in relation to ancient and modern poetry stands upon a fallacy ... the poet sings by time" (p. 246). All encompassing, of all time and space, truth, however, is found to reside in an individual -- the poet: "Nature is where God is. Poetry is where God is," and that genius loci is nowhere else but in the poet's heart. "Sidney," writes EBB, "true knight and fantastic poet, ... left us in one line the completest 'Ars Poetica' extant, -- Foole, sayde my Muse to mee, looke in thine heart,/ and write.--" (p. 294). Thus, the categories which hold for poetic excellence are not generic categories, but ideas inscribed in True Being. Since the poet stands "halfway between the light of the ideal -- and the darkness of the real" (p. 294), his or her poetry should be viewed with regard to its relative position in this scheme. The pertinent criteria for classification are rendered through a series of queries concerning the poet's victory over the "necessary conflict" between the real and the

ideal, namely,

whether they accomplish it [victory] by looking bravely to the good ends of evil things, which is the practical ideal, and possible to all men in a measure -- or by abstracting the inward sense from sensual things and their influence, which is subjectivity perfected -- or by glorifying sensual things with the inward sense, which is objectivity transfigured -- or by attaining to the highest vision of the idealist, which is subjectivity turned outward into an actual objectivity.

(pp. 260-61)

Here lies the very essence of the ideology of genius: although self-consciously partaking of the historical process, of the "sensible symbol" (p. 272), the transcendentalist subject forever looks past it, "with a divine guess and reach of soul into the mystery of significance" (p. 272). Ultimately, the idealist, who is the ideal poet, writes "from within -- the beautiful; and we recognize from within -- the true" (p. 274; italics mine). The ideology of genius thus leads to a perfect fusion of self and text: the model poet, a Wordsworth, "is eminently and humanly expansive; and, spreading his infinite egotism over all the subjects of his contemplation, reiterates the love, life, and poetry of his peculiar being in transcribing and chanting the material universe" (p. 302).

EBB's poetics thus makes two essential claims, one regarding the totalizing nature of art, a second regarding the perfect fusion of the poet's personal and artistic identities. The poet is seen not only to create art, but to embody it in his own life:

when Milton said that a poet's life should be a poem, he spoke a high moral truth; if he had added a reversion of the saying, that a poet's poetry should be his life, -- he would have spoken a critical truth, not low.

(p. 303)

Thus, since truth is all-encompassing, "the ribald cry" of the vox populi notwithstanding, its inscription on the heart of the "poet-hero" who is also a "poet-prophet" makes possible the articulation of the infinite in

the finite.

EBB's uncompromising faith in the poetic genius and in the ability of genius to reconcile the public with the private, the actual with the ideal, making text and desire one, informs her conception of the relationship between the poet and the world and underlies her literary endeavors from "My Own Character" to Aurora Leigh. In The Book, however, as in the earlier works, the literary plot, despite its universal aspirations, is clearly gender marked. While poetry here is conventionally a "she" (p. 293), its practitioners, the great men of letters, are extolled for their manly handling of the Muse. The great men are "strong passionate men," and a golden age for poetry is an age in which "to write like a man [is] a deed accomplished by many" (VI, p. 275; italics mine). Viewing Beaumont and Fletcher against the backdrop of the 'manly' Elizabethans who had "strong enough invention to include judgement," EBB searches for a descriptive title: "we cannot say of these poets, as of the rest, 'they write like men;' we cannot think they write like women either: perhaps they write a little like centaurs" (p. 277). While the manly men write the great poetry, and the centaur-like men hold up a vexed "mirror ... with a thousand cracks" (p. 277), the women poets altogether offend the writer's sensibility: "and oh, how sick to fainting grew the poetry of England! Anna Seward 'by'r lady,' was the 'muse' of those days ... and Hannah More wrote our dramas, and Helen Williams our odes, and Rose Mathilda our elegiacs, ... and Lady Millar encouraged literature at Bath, with Red taffeta and 'the vase'" (p. 298).

For EBB, "poetry ought to be the revelation of the complete man;" her failure to recognize female predecessors is not an oversight but a conscious act of critical judgment. In a letter of January 3 1845, we recall, EBB writes to Chorley what could indeed be seen as a footnote to The Book, an explicit statement concerning the women poets which is so glaringly absent from this otherwise comprehensive and scrupulous work. EBB confides in him:

It is a strong impression with me that previous to Joanna Baillie there was no such thing in England as a poetess;

... Where is our poetess before Joanna Baillie -- poetess in the true sense? Lady Winchilsea had an eye, as Wordsworth found out; but the Duchess of Newcastle had more poetry in her -- the comparative praise proving the negative position -- than Lady Winchilsea. It has been long a 'fact,' to my view of the matter, that Joanna Baillie is the first female poet in all senses in England. (Kenyon, 1898: pp. 229-230)

In a second letter to Chorley of January 7 1845 EBB pursues the topic:

England has had many learned women, not merely readers but writers of the learned languages, in Elizabeth's time and afterwards -- women of deeper acquirements than are common now in the greater diffusion of letters; and yet where were the poetesses? The divine breath which seemed to come and go, and, ere it went, filled the land with that crowd of true poets whom we call the old dramatists -- why did it never pass, even in the lyrical form, over the lips of a woman? How strange! And can we deny that it was so? I look everywhere for grandmothers and find none. It is not in the filial spirit I am deficient, I do assure you -- witness my reverent love of the grandfathers. (Kenyon, 1898: I, pp. 231-2)

As The Book of the Poets makes clear, for EBB manly strength and "heroic impulse" are the characteristics of great poetry; "restraint of slavery, weakness and emasculation" lie at the other end. Carlyle's eulogy of Goethe could be seen to epitomize this view of the poet. "In Goethe," writes Carlyle in his essay of 1828,

we discover by far the most striking instance, in our time, of a writer who is, in strict speech, what philosophy can call a Man. He is neither noble nor plebeian, neither liberal nor servile, nor infidel nor devotee; but the best excellence of all these, joined in pure union; 'a clear and universal Man.' Goethe's poetry is no separate faculty, no mental handicraft; but the voice of the whole harmonious

manhood; nay it is the very harmony, the living and life-giving harmony of that rich manhood which forms his poetry.

(Carlyle, 1828: p. 208; italics his).

EBB's Chaucer, Milton, and Wordsworth, like Carlyle's Goethe, are such men; the protagonist of the poetic plot, "spreading his infinite egotism over all the objects of his contemplation," can only be a man (VI, p. 302). It will take the writer of Aurora Leigh nine books and over ten thousand lines of blank verse to undo the plot, to explode it from within, and reinstate a "printing woman," a "perfect artist" who is no longer an "imperfect woman" (AL, IX, 646-49), in the place of the "whole man" (VI, p. 309).

Prior to Aurora Leigh, EBB's poetics and her conception of the poet's nature and role find their clearest articulation in A New Spirit of the Age (1844), a collaborative effort with R.H. Horne.⁽¹²⁾ In her contributions to the essays on Landor, Wordsworth, Tennyson, and Carlyle, EBB carries on earlier concerns with the nature of the poetic endeavor, and further clarifies her position within the context of the "omnipresent debate" in general and the debate concerning the future of poetry in particular. "From about 1820, well into the 1850's," DeLaura writes, "the continuous context for the discussion of poetry in England was a fear that it was nearly defunct, combined with sometimes wistful, sometimes extravagant hopes for its future" (DeLaura, 1976: p. 148). EBB's position in this debate is clearly expressed in the conclusion to The Book of the Poets:

It is advantageous for us all, ... to know what a true poet is, what his work is, and what his patience and successes must be. So as to raise the popular idea of these things. ... There is a plague of poems in the land

(12) Since Horne never fully documented the extent of EBB's (anonymous) contribution to A New Spirit of the Age, it is still difficult to determine what Horne contributed and what EBB did. In the case of the essays on Tennyson and Carlyle, however, EBB's contribution has been substantiated by William Robertson Nicoll and Thomas J. Wise who, by examining the manuscripts in Buxton Forman's library, were able to separate EBB's opinion on Tennyson and Carlyle from Horne's. For the rest, one has to resort to Mayer's edition of the Horne-EBB correspondence (1877). Horne's many omissions and inaccuracies in preparing these letters for publication, however, make this source an unreliable one. More light on this issue will be shed by Ronald Freeman's project, now under way, of editing the Horne-EBB letters in the Pierpont Morgan Library.

apart from poetry; and many poets who live and are true do not live by their truth, but hold back their full strength from art because they do not reverence it fully; and all booksellers cry aloud and do not spare, that poetry will not sell; and certain critics utter melancholy frenzies, that poetry is worn out for ever, -- as if the morning star was worn out from heaven.... In the meantime, the hopeful and believing will hope,--trust on; and, better still, the Tennysons and the Brownings, and other high-gifted spirits, will work, wait on.

(VI, p. 309)

The spirit of the statement characterizes EBB's attitude to the subject throughout her career; it underlies her tireless scholarly tributes, her reworking of the poet theme, and her lively and generous interest in the work of her contemporaries. The statement evidences EBB's strong convictions concerning the relative merits of different kinds of poetry, her concern with the state of popular reception, and beyond these, her one sustaining faith in the constancy, indeed immortality, of the poetic spirit. The vision which seals The Book of the Poets is the same one that has generated An Essay on Mind and that will inform the far more complex Aurora Leigh.

EBB's defense of poetry in the above-cited excerpt from The Book of the Poets and in the essays she contributed to A New Spirit of the Age can best be understood against the backdrop of early Victorian attacks on poetry. These attacks were becoming particularly alarming in the first half of the nineteenth century, coming as they did not only from the ideological opponents, such as the Benthamites, but also from within the literary and intellectual camp itself. Figures like Hazlitt, Macaulay, and Carlyle were delivering warnings and dark prophecies concerning the future of art. In "On Poetry in General" (1818) Hazlitt contends: "It cannot be concealed ... that the progress of knowledge and refinement has a tendency to circumscribe the limits of the imagination, and to dip the wings of poetry" (Hazlitt, 1818: p. 9). While Hazlitt argued that "it is not only the progress of mechanical knowledge, but the necessary advances of civilization, that are unfavourable to the spirit of poetry" (Hazlitt,

1818: p. 9), Carlyle went on to proclaim that even "the tolerable semblance" of poetry was impossible "in this generation" (Carlyle, 1832: p. 51). EBB's response to these charges, in A New Spirit and throughout Aurora Leigh, is an extended attempt to counter them by striving to bridge the gap between history and poetry, between the artist and the immediate social and political environment, between creativity and "the spirit of the age." To do so, EBB draws on the rich heritage selectively, allying herself with Wordsworth whom she sees as tearing "away from his art the encumbering artifices of his "predecessors" (Horne, 1844: p. 223). She finds inspiration in a Wordsworth, a Macaulay, a Shelley or a Carlyle, assimilating whatever she finds desirable and discarding the rest.

In her essay on Wordsworth in A New Spirit of the Age, EBB hails him as "a great moralist and teacher," who "laid down fixed principles in his prefaces, and carried them out with rigid boldness" (Horne, 1844: p. 223-5). While thus indirectly recommending her own practice of laying down principles in her prefaces and carrying them out in the poetry, EBB's praise for Wordsworth further highlights her attachment to his poetic theory. In particular, it is Wordsworth's conception of poetry's comprehensiveness of insight which is particularly consonant with what I have described as the totalizing character of EBB's poetics. In his Preface to the Lyrical Ballads (1800-1802) Wordsworth writes:

Aristotle, I have been told, has said, that Poetry is the most philosophic of all writing: it is so; its object is truth, not individual and local, but general, and operative; ... Poetry is the breath and finer spirit of all knowledge ... the Poet binds together by passion and knowledge the vast empire of human society, as it is spread over the whole earth, and over all time. The objects of the Poet's thoughts are everywhere ... Poetry is the first and last of all knowledge -- it is as immortal as the heart of man.

(Wordsworth, 1802: pp. 166-168)

In the essay on Wordsworth EBB specifically defends the centrality accorded the poet in Wordsworth's poetics. She counters Hazlitt's attacks on Wordsworth -- whom he denounces as "the greatest egotist" (Hazlitt, 1822:

p. 44) -- by privileging this "sublime egotism, disinterested as extreme," by which the poet "makes a subjectivity of his objectivity" (Horne, 1844: pp. 224-5).

Although EBB's own poetic credo reiterates Wordsworth's view, in the Preface to the Lyrical Ballads, of the poet as "a man who, being possessed of more than usual organic sensibility, had also thought long and deeply," she detects in Wordsworth's poetics a flaw which her own attempts to correct. The flaw regards the poet's role in society, and its correction is greatly inspired by, or rather akin to, the poetic theories expounded in Shelley's Defence of Poetry (1821) and Carlyle's early writing. In a letter to Horne concerning their collaboration on the essay on Wordsworth, EBB adds in a footnote: "have I taken a note of my admiration of your estimate (in one respect) of Wordsworth, as no-prophet? It seems to me both subtle and true" (Mayer, 1877: I, p. 185). Horne's statement to that effect (the one alluded to by EBB) further highlights EBB's particular attachment to the Carlylean model of the poet as a prophet-hero. Horne writes:

W. Wordsworth is now regarded by the public as the prophet of his age, and this is not the right view -- after all. Wordsworth's feeling for pastoral nature, and the depths of sentiment which he can deduce from such scenes, and the lesson of humanity he can read to the heart of man, are things, in themselves for all time; but as the prophet spirit is essentially that of a passionate foreseeing and annunciation of some extraneous good tidings to man; in this sense Wordsworth is not a prophet ... he does not cry loud to mankind like a 'voice in the wilderness' ... that a golden age will come ... His futurity is in the eternal form of things, and the aspiration of his own soul towards the spirit of the universe; but as far as the destinies of mankind, he looks back upon them with a sigh, and thinks that as they were in the beginning, so shall they be world without end.

(Horne, 1844: p. 235)

EBB's approval of Horne's critique is a clear indication that, like Horne,

she was coming into the realization that transcendentalist knowledge -- knowledge of "the eternal form of things" -- has to be supplemented by an awareness of the particular and the historical -- "the destinies of mankind." Both EBB's essay on Carlyle in A New Spirit of the Age and Aurora Leigh, as well as her Casa Guidi Windows and Poems Before Congress with which we do not deal here, demonstrate EBB's commitment to the pressing social and political issues of her day. As my discussion of Aurora Leigh will bring out, however, this social commitment is essentially at odds with EBB's overall transcendentalist metaphysics.

Using the critical platform of A New Spirit anonymously, EBB writes her own poetic credo into the essay on Carlyle. In the essay, EBB conceives of the poetic project in terms closely akin to those contemplated by Shelley in his 1821 Defence of Poetry (not published until 1839-40). Shelley's Defence, having as its immediate occasion Peacock's essay on "The Four Ages of Poetry" (1820), addresses itself directly to a contemporary ideological conflict; Shelley writes:

poets have been challenged to resign the civic crown to reasoners and mechanists on another plea. It is admitted that the exercise of the imagination is most delightful, but it is alleged that that of reason is more useful. Let us examine, as the grounds of this distinction, what is here meant by utility.... There are two kinds of pleasure, one durable and universal, and permanent, the other transitory and particular. In the former sense, whatever strengthens and purifies the affections, enlarges the imagination, and adds spirit to sense, is useful. But a narrower meaning may be assigned to the word utility, confining it to express that which banishes the importunity of the wants of our animal nature.

(Shelley, 1821: p. 188)

Defending himself against a utilitarian philosophy, Shelley grants the "promoters of utility, in this limited sense," an "appointed office in society," but unequivocally declares their subserviency to the poets: "Their exertions are of the highest value, so long as they confine their administration of the concerns of the inferior powers of our nature within

the limits due to the superior ones" (p. 189).

A similar perception of an essential antagonism between "poets" and "reasoners and mechanists," between the advocates of "utility" in the name of "our animal nature" and those intent upon adding "spirit to sense," underlies EBB's essay on Carlyle. In conception and in valorization EBB's essay on Carlyle is consonant with The Defence. EBB's articulation of the ideological conflict, however, is coloured by a topicality absent from Shelley's Defence. At the outset of her essay, EBB establishes the binary opposition which informs her vision:

we have named Carlyle in connection with Bentham, and we believe that you will find in 'your philosophy' no better antithesis for one, than is the other ... And as from the beginning of the world, the two great principles of matter and spirit have combatted, -- whether in man's personality, between the flesh and the soul, -- or in his speculativeness, between the practical and the ideal, -- or in his mental expression, between science and poetry, -- Bentham and Carlyle assumed the double van on opposite sides -- Bentham gave the impulse to the material energies of his age, ... while Carlyle threw himself before the crashing chariots, not in sacrifice but deprecation ... 'Go aside -- there is spirit even in the wheels!' (VI, p.319; italics mine).(13)

For EBB -- as for Shelley and the Carlyle of On Heroes -- the transcendentalist subject regards human experience -- "matter," "flesh," "the practical," "science" -- as necessarily misleading as long as it remains uninformed by a higher kind of knowledge which sees beyond all observable phenomena, and operates through the faculties of "spirit," "soul," and "poetry."

(13) The text of EBB's "Essay on Carlyle" in the Porter and Clarke edition of the Works, to which I refer here and throughout, is indebted to William R. Nicoll and Thomas Wise, "Carlyle: a disentangled essay by EBB" (Nicoll and Wise, 1896: Vol. II, pp. 105-119).

Both Shelley's Defence and EBB's essay on Carlyle are powerful pronouncements of what Raymond Williams has called the "theory of the 'superior reality' of art" (Williams, 1958: p. 50). More specifically, both essays promote a vision of the social order as unified by an underlying and unchanging reality which it is the artist's task (and privilege) to uncover and make visible. For Shelley, the singers of "eternal music," the likes of "Shakespeare, Dante, and Milton, ... are philosophers of the very loftiest power," since their poetry is "universal ... the creation of actions according to the unchangeable forms of human nature, as existing in the mind of the Creator which is itself the image of all other minds" (Shelley, 1821: p. 168; italics mine). Similarly, for EBB, Carlyle is "so poetical as to be philosophical," for he recognizes "the oneness of the God-made man through every cycle of his individual and social existence" (VI, p. 319; italics mine). Clearly, Shelley and EBB here draw on the same Platonic text for their own poetics, rejecting Plato's attack on poetry but creating their poets in the image of the Platonic Philosopher who sees through appearances and shadows into the real nature of things. For Shelley, it is "the first principles which belong to the imagination" (Shelley, 1821: p. 189), as poetry "strips the veil of familiarity from the world, and lays bare the naked and sleeping beauty, which is the spirit of its forms ... it purges from our inward sight the film of familiarity which obscures from us the wonder of our being" (p. 195). This Platonic vision also informs EBB's conception of the ultimate goal of poetry:

to do this is the aim and end of all poetry of high order,-- this,-- to resume human nature from its beginnings, and return to first principles of thought and first elements of feeling; this,-- to dissolve from eye and ear the film of habit and convention, and let Beauty and Truth run gushing upon unencrusted perceptive faculties. (VI, p. 317; italics mine).

Both essays, moreover, ultimately affirm the poet's social and political responsibilities, advocating a version of the poet as philosopher-king. For Shelley, "poetry ... is at once the center and circumference of knowledge," and thus "poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world" (Shelley, 1821: pp. 192-199). For EBB, "general progress implies

and indeed essentially consists of, individual progress, men of genius working." Having asserted the artist's privileged access to "first principles," both Shelley and EBB advance a view of history as an uninterrupted succession of "men of genius" whom "the multitude" inevitably follow. "A great poem is a fountain forever over-flowing with the waters of wisdom and delight," writes Shelley, "and often one person and one age has exhausted all its divine effluence ... another and yet another succeeds, and new relations are ever developed" (Shelley, 1821: pp. 187-8). EBB concludes, "a man of genius gives a thought to the multitude, and the multitude spread it out as far as it will go until another man of genius brings another thought, which attaches itself to the first" (VI, p. 321).

Shelley's model is a transformed, renamed Plato, a philosopher renamed poet -- "Plato was essentially a poet," he writes (Shelley, 1821: p. 167). Similarly, EBB's model is a renamed Carlyle -- "this prose poet," as she calls him (VI, p. 321). While Shelley's poets, however, seem to "have a high destiny but a quite unclear contemporary function" (DeLaura, 1976: p. 157), and while for Carlyle, too, poetry and the poet are for the "unknowable future," EBB concludes the essay on Carlyle with an optimistic recognition of his influence and of the "outspread of ... [Carlyle's] thought" (VI, p. 321). Indeed there is evidence to support the view that EBB disagreed with Shelley on the issue of the poet's involvement in contemporary issues. In her marginalia to Shelley's Defence, which EBB wrote shortly after being presented with a collection of Shelley's works in 1840, EBB singles out Shelley's contention that

A poet therefore would do ill to embody his own conceptions of right and wrong, which are usually those of his place and time, in his poetical creations, which participate in neither.

Her comments on this passage, reproduced in an MLN article of 1951, read:

I do not think so -- But if I did and if everybody did What poet could avoid the "ill" -- did Shelley?
(Thorpe, 1951: p. 456)

As her further comments in the marginalia reveal, however, EBB's advocacy

of historically specific "conceptions of right and wrong" is at odds with the transcendentalist faith which she shares with Shelley and which elevates "passionate emotion" for its "tendency to break down that defence of habits and conventionalism which the finite has erected between itself and the infinite" (Thorpe, 1951: p. 457; italics mine). Since the historically specific is "finite," its significance within this transcendentalist framework is a priori undermined by the desire to "display the infinity over beyond" (Thorpe, 1951: p. 457).

Interestingly, in their joint essay on Carlyle (the one published in A New Spirit of the Age), this conflict between a perception which favors the historically present and one which privileges the transcendently immanent is re-enacted as Horne advocates the first position and EBB the latter. Since we possess today both a record of EBB's original contribution to the essay on Carlyle and the final version which appeared in A New Spirit (under Horne's name), we are in a position to distinguish between EBB's narrative and Horne's occasional interventions. As it happens, Horne's interventions constitute a counter-argument which surfaces at critical points in EBB's narrative. Without identifying itself as such, and while never openly disrupting the essay's formal appearance of consistency and cohesion, Horne's argument clearly undercuts EBB's. Most importantly, EBB's deprecation of "that ideal of utilitarianism which Jeremy Bentham ... had set up," and her valorization of "the voice of the prophet" are first travestied by Horne's comment on "many a great transcendentalist, who never read a page of Bentham's works, ... loftily resolved to narrow to his own misconceptions of this philosopher," and then outrightly criticized:

a man who is starving is not in a fit state for poetry, nor even for prayer ... the wants of the body will win the day -- the movements of the present age show that plainly. The immortal soul can well afford to wait till its case is repaired.

(Horne, 1844: pp. 437-8)

Siding with the "present" and "the body," Horne condemns Carlyle's (and by implication EBB's) preoccupation with the "immortal soul" as socially irresponsible. Thus while EBB concludes with a vision of Carlyle as a man of genius promoting the "popular advancement," Horne speaks of the "Prophet

of the circle" who displays a "cloven tongue" (p. 443), a philosopher of "dissatisfaction" (p. 448), an "unsystematic" prophet of doom: "a dead man with a promoted spirit seems our only chance in this philosophy" (p. 441). The differences of opinion in this case are closely related to differences in purpose and approach: while Horne is more concerned with situating Carlyle's thought in the context of contemporary political thought, and as a consequence is more alert to ambiguities in political content and more open to opposing ideological positions, EBB's advocacy of Carlyle serves to reinforce a prior ideological position and a commitment already evident in the early poetry and prose.

The presence of the Carlyle whom EBB re-creates in her "Essay on Carlyle" is particularly evident in her magnum opus Aurora Leigh. This presence plays a central role in what I regard to be the poem's major project: the construction of a poetics of the female subject. Principally, EBB appropriates from Carlyle -- and in particular from Sartor Resartus (1838) and On Heroes and Hero Worship (1841) -- a transcendentalist discourse which informs the poetic (as opposed to the female) pole of the poetics expounded in Aurora Leigh. Although Carlyle is by no means the originator of this discourse -- being himself greatly inspired by German Idealist philosophers such as Fichte -- both EBB's close familiarity with his texts and her self-avowed indebtedness to his thought suggest the exemplary nature his critical writing has assumed by mid-century. In what follows I employ the Carlylean text in order to shed light on the transcendentalist philosophy which informs EBB's poetics in Aurora Leigh. In Chapter Five I will explore the revisions which this philosophy undergoes in Aurora Leigh and the uses to which it is put as the poem strives to reconcile the antagonistic poetic and female poles.

IV. Aurora Leigh, Carlyle, and Hero(ine) Worship:

"The artist's part is both to be and do"

Carlyle, thought EBB, was "the great teacher of the age," himself a model poet, filling "the office of a poet ... by analyzing Humanity back into its elements" (Kintner, 1969: p. 29). EBB's own admiration for Carlyle, itself a fine example of the latter's doctrine of hero-worship, is indicative of her recognition of a profound affinity between their respective metaphysical schemes. EBB's Carlyle, moreover, is another genius figure in a poetic plot, a "truth-teller" and a philosopher-poet like herself. The importance of Carlyle's thought and writing to EBB's, although consistently overlooked by Carlyle scholars, has been generally acknowledged by students of EBB's work. Alethea Hayter, for example, stresses EBB's indebtedness to Carlyle, particularly in relation to Aurora Leigh:

It was Carlyle, by his attacks on the Mechanical Age in which all individual endeavor is lost, and his preference for the days when wise men, 'moralists, poets or priests, did, without neglecting the Mechanical province, deal chiefly with the Dynamical; applying themselves chiefly to regulate, increase and purify the inward primary sources of man,' who gave her her belief that poetry could save mankind through the individual.

(Hayter, 1962: p. 159)

Hayter's analysis, however, is scattered and very fragmentary, failing to account for any dynamic interaction between the two texts. Similarly, Cora Kaplan's excellent introduction to the modern edition of Aurora Leigh argues that the poem's "political analysis ... is ... over-dependent on the vacillations of Barrett Browning's favorite thinker, Carlyle" (Kaplan, 1977: p. 35), but stops short of any detailed examination of the issue. In the following observations, I propose to investigate the nature and significance of the affinity between Carlyle's thought (with particular emphasis on Heroes and Hero-Worship) and EBB's Aurora Leigh, not with the aim of fixing sources or detecting "powerfull influences" (Hayter, 1962: p. 124), but rather as a strategy which will ultimately allow me to unravel EBB's revisionist employment of the transcendentalist discourse.

The Carlylean text is germane to an understanding of Aurora Leigh essentially for its exemplary representation of the ideological structure from within and against which EBB tells her own story. My concern here is therefore not with the accuracy of EBB's reading of Carlyle, but rather with the function of the Carlylean text within EBB's evolving metaphysical scheme. Both Carlyle and EBB engage in a transcendentalist metaphysics; while Carlyle's predicament, however, is, as Bloom would no doubt agree, that of being "in the Father without knowing him" (Bloom, 1973: p. 13), EBB's motivating drive in Aurora Leigh is a sense of "mother-want about the world" (AL, I, 40). In the discussion that follows and in Chapter Five I attempt to measure the distance between these two positions.

In Goethe Carlyle finds, we recall, "'a clear and universal Man.' Goethe's poetry is no separate faculty, no mental handicraft; but the voice of the whole harmonious manhood; nay it is the very harmony, the living and life-giving harmony of that rich manhood which forms his poetry" (Carlyle, 1828: p. 208). Carlyle's essay on Goethe (1828) makes it abundantly clear: whatever the writer, the Hero, is not, there is one thing he would always be -- a man. Let not the universalizing tone mislead us: the Hero's properties are properly manly and could never be womanly. A wholly different metaphorical scale is required, and duly evoked, in Sartor Resartus for example, to portray the "woman of genius" (Carlyle, 1838: p. 111); she is the "Queen of Hearts," the "Earth-angel" (p. 106) and the "Rose-goddess" (p. 107). Teufelsdröckh's Blumine is a "Morning Star," his "fairest of orient Light-bringers," his "Aurora ... all Fire and humid Softness, a very Light-ray incarnate" (p. 110). Aurora-Blumine's light, however, is short-lived, and not surprisingly so; for it never shone in its own right, being but one of Teufelsdröckh's Fantasies, a stimulus to his organic growth. Blumine herself could hardly be said to exist. She seems bereft of speech, Teufelsdröckh's fantasy being that "if he speak, she will hear it" (p. 107; italics mine). She is nothing in herself, but that which allows "the new Apocalypse of Nature" to unroll itself to him (p. 110). The celebrated woman here, as almost everywhere in Romantic and post-Romantic discourse, is the Other, devoid of self and of a speaking subjectivity; she is Mother Nature and the Muse but could never be the Poet, the Speaker. Her otherness is doubly reinforced in Sartor, for "kind nature, that art to all a bountiful mother," and her fair daughter Blumine,

ultimately stand for a lost memory of a time before the fall into self-consciousness and into subject-object relations with nature. It is with the Father that the speaker identifies, for "with a Father we have as yet a prophet, priest and king, and an obedience that makes us free" (p. 68). The Hero is both worshipped and a worshipper, and the obedience that he preaches and in turn practices is unequivocally under the sign of the Logos -- the Father.

Carlyle's ethics of manliness, his call for a poetry "which exalts the expression of manly or heroic force," constitutes an important feature of his literary criticism, establishing, as P. Dale has argued, "a criterion of strength in poetry that was to plague Victorian criticism for many years to come" (Dale, 1977: p. 62; italics his). And yet, when in 1844 EBB first conceived of a plan for Aurora Leigh, her epic of the woman-artist, she quite explicitly conceived of it in Carlylean terms. One notes a curious coincidence in her letter to Robert Browning of February 1845. The letter opens with a reference to Carlyle as "the great teacher of the age" whom EBB sees to fill "the office of a poet ... by analyzing Humanity back into its elements, to the destruction of the conventions of the hour" (Kintner, 1969: I, p. 29). EBB thus crowns Carlyle as a model poet who not only "fills the office of a poet," but indeed "discharges it fully -- and with a wider intelligibility perhaps as far as the contemporary period is concerned, than if he did forthwith 'burst into a song'" (p. 29). The reference here is to an earlier correspondence in which Robert Browning brings up an issue of great concern to both poets, namely Carlyle's forbidding "all 'singing' to this perverse generation which should work and not sing" (p. 24). EBB's expression of indebtedness here is clearly double edged, for by nominating Carlyle a model poet she is not only settling an account with the man who has advised both Robert Browning and herself to give up poetry in favor of prose, but is also aiming at the already disillusioned author of Heroes who has claimed Cromwell, his Hero as King, to be "the summary ... of all the various figures of Heroism," being "more than Shakespeare" in doing "harder things than writing of Books" (Carlyle, 1841: pp. 443-4).

Having set up the Carlyle she wishes to see as her mentor, EBB then proceeds, in the same letter of February 1845, to confide in Browning her own plans for a new poem:

My chief intention just now is the writing of a sort of novel-poem -- a poem as completely modern as "Geraldine's Courtship," running into the midst of our conventions, and rushing into drawing-rooms and the like "where angels fear to tread"; and so, meeting face to face and without mask the Humanity of the age, and speaking the truth as I conceive of it, out plainly.

(Kintner, 1969: I, p. 31; italics hers)

The terms EBB employs to describe Carlyle's project -- "analyzing Humanity back into its elements, to the destruction of the conventions of the hour" -- are strikingly similar to the ones she uses to delineate her own future work. The appeal to the contemporary scene, the preoccupation with the breaking down, stripping bare of conventions, the prophetic appeal to Humanity over and beyond superficialities and appearances, the refusal to give in to form (the song) at the expense of intelligibility and the truth, these are to her the endearing characteristics of Carlyle's preaching and practice, and the essential features of her own projected work.

In Aurora Leigh EBB addresses the contemporary scene by engaging in 'debates' over three major issues: gender differences (the woman question), class warfare, and the relation of art to politics. Although the issues of class warfare and the relation of art to politics are central to the poem, they are stated rather than problematized in the context of the poem. Basically, Aurora's suitor Romney's leftist politics, his utopian socialism adapted from "Fourier" (VIII, 434), "Proudhon, Considerant, and Louis Blanc" (III, 585), are rejected, from the beginning, in favor of Aurora's metaphysical program, a transcendentalist poetics carried over from the earlier works and definitively argued in Aurora Leigh. Into this static structure -- it is static since the superiority of Aurora's vision is maintained throughout -- EBB introduces one dynamic element: the woman poet's search for wholeness, her attempt to reconcile the antagonism inherent in her very position as a woman poet, her attempt to recuperate a speaking subjectivity long denied her. Aurora's quest,

however, is strongly marked by the transcendentalist philosophy which informs her vision. In effect, the transcendentalist metaphysics whose emergence was already under way in My Own Character achieves here its fullest and finest expression, providing the poem with its central unifying structure.

Like Carlyle's Aurora-Blumine, EBB's Aurora Leigh is regarded by her cousin-suitor Romney as his "earliest of Auroras," sent to aid him in his noble work (social reform). The conflict between Aurora and Romney, which constitutes the poem's narrative backbone, re-enacts the central ideological conflict informing EBB's poetry at large: the conflict between an empiricist and utilitarian philosophy -- coupled here with a traditionalist view of woman -- and a transcendentalist visionary metaphysics. Here genre and ideology coincide, as this "poetic art novel," as EBB described it (Kenyon, 1898: II, p. 228), reiterates the novelistic quest pattern, identified as "une quête démoniaque de valeurs authentiques menée par un héros problématique dans une société dégradée" (Angenot, 1973: p. 83).⁽¹⁴⁾ Within this framework, moreover, one notes that "le roman est organisé en deux isotopies, celle du monde empirique (... au regard de la valeur, sphère de l'inauthenticité), et celle du monde idéal visé par le héros" (Angenot, 1973: p. 94). In the poem, the empirical degraded world is a post-industrialist materialistic society, a society in which the source of social evil as well as the means for its reformation are conceived in purely materialistic terms. This ideology, perceived as degraded by the heroine Aurora, is opposed to the "isotopie des valeurs," the valorized transcendentalist metaphysics promoted by Aurora. The materialism of the degraded society, coupled with its traditionalism as concerns women, constitute the "anti-monde" against which Aurora, as poet (i.e., representative of the spiritual order) and woman, has to struggle.

Underlying both Carlyle's On Heroes and Hero-Worship (1841) and EBB's Aurora Leigh is a vision characterized by a binary opposition whose terms contrast the Actual with the Ideal. In Heroes the True, Divine, Eternal, and Spiritual is seen as being undermined by spiritual paralysis and

(14) Angenot's definition is indebted to the work in the sociology of the novel of Georg Lukacs and Lucien Goldmann.

Scepticism, by "hollow Formulism, gross Benthamism, and other unheroic atheistic insincerity" (Carlyle, 1841: p. 403). In Carlyle's view, faith and Hero-Worship have been replaced, in the present age, by the mentality of "a steam-engine utilitarianism" which says to itself "well then, this world is a dead iron machine, the God of it Gravitation and selfish Hunger; let us see what, by checking and balancing and good adjustment of tooth and pinion, can be made of it" (p. 400). But the spirit of Heroes is not yet the self-defeating one of the latter works; "Meanwhile," Carlyle goes on to argue in Heroes, "since it is the spiritual always that determines the material, this same man-of-letters hero must be regarded as our most important modern person. He, such as he may be, is the soul of all. What he teaches, the whole world will do and make" (p. 384; italics mine). In Aurora Leigh EBB offers a similar diagnosis of the ills of the body politic, and proposes a similar cure; Aurora tells Romney:

For 'tis not in mere death that men die most,

...

We are apt to sit tired, patient as a fool,
while others gird us with the violent bands
Of social figments, feints, and formalisms,
Reversing our straight nature, lifting up
our base needs, keeping down our lofty thoughts.

(III, 12-20)

Aurora's message to Romney is clear and recalls Shelley's warning to the "mechanist" and the "political economist" of the inevitable failure of "their speculations, for want of correspondence with those first principles which belong to the imagination" (Shelley, 1821: p. 189). Aurora challenges Romney:

I hold you will not compass your poor ends
Of barley-feeding and material ease,
Without a poet's individualism
To work your universal.

(II; 477-479)

The opposition spirit/matter, already transcendently resolved in An Essay on Mind, is allowed to surface in Aurora Leigh only to be resolved again by an all-encompassing metaphysics. Since for EBB, as for Carlyle, "it is the

spiritual always that determines the material," Aurora's thoughts "On life and art" inevitably lead her to reflect

...whether after all
 A larger metaphysics might not help
 Our Physics, a completer poetry
 Adjust our daily life and vulgar wants
 More fully than the special outside plans,
 Phalansteries, material institutes,
 The civil conscriptions and lay monasteries
 Preferred by modern thinkers, as they thought
 The bread of man indeed made all his life.
 (VI, 205-213)

Aurora Leigh resounds with echoes of the early works as, once again, a transcendentalist ideology is advocated with an ever growing conviction. Surpassing Wordsworth, and siding with Shelley and Carlyle in her hopes for the poet as philosopher, social critic, and leader, EBB tirelessly counters (through Aurora) Romney, whose own ancestors are "Scientific Thought" and the Utilitarian Philosopher of "Psyche Apocalypse," or a Buffon, mistaking matter for spirit. Aurora tells Romney in the crucial birthday scene (Book II) which brings to the fore their conflicting needs and convictions:

What then, indeed,
 If mortals are not greater by the head
 Than any of their prosperities? what then,
 Unless the artist keep up open roads
 Betwixt the seen and unseen,- bursting through
 The best of your conventions with his best,
 The speakable, imaginable best
 God bids him speak, to prove what lies beyond
 Both speech and imagination? A starved man
 Exceeds a fat beast: we'll not barter, sir,
 The beautiful for barley.

...

It takes a soul,
 To move a body: it takes a high-souled man,
 To move the masses, even to a cleaner sty:

It takes the ideal, to blow a hair's-breadth off
 The dust of the actual. - Ah, your Fouriers failed,
 Because not poets enough to understand
 That life develops from within.
 (II, 465-485)

Aurora's advocacy of "the ideal" which lies "beyond/ Speech and imagination," however, is not regarded by her to come at the expense of attention to pressing "actual" problems. Indeed, Both Carlyle in Heroes and EBB in Aurora Leigh are profoundly preoccupied with contemporary issues and problems. "on the whole," Carlyle argues in Heroes, "a man must not complain of his 'element', of his 'time', or the like; it is thriftless work doing so. His time is bad; well then, he is there to make it better" (Carlyle, 1841: p. 406). Great importance is assigned to the Hero's ability to read the signs of the time, as the relationship between him and the society within which he is to operate becomes a major determining force:

Given your Hero, is he to become Conqueror, King,
 Philosopher, Poet? It is an inexplicably complex
 controversial-calculation between the world and him. He
 will read the world and its laws; the world with its laws
 will be there to be read. What the world, on this matter,
 shall permit and bid is, as we said, the most important
 fact about the world.
 (Carlyle, 1841: p. 313)

EBB, too, insists on this reading of the contemporary world, although she rejects what seems to her Carlyle's profound disillusionment with the present:

Ay, but every age
 Appears to souls who live in't (ask Carlyle)
 Most unheroic. Ours, for instance, ours:
 ...
 That's wrong thinking, to my mind,
 And wrong thoughts make poor poems.
 (V, 155-166)

We note that EBB's dissent from Carlyle's eventual disillusionment with the poet's role in contemporary society is already evident in the mid 40's, when she writes to Robert Browning:

But I do not forgive him [Carlyle] for talking against the "ideals of poets" ... opposing their ideal by a mis-called reality, which is another sort, a baser sort, of ideal after all. ... Then his praise for dumb heroic action as opposed to speech and singing, what is that? when all earnest thought, passion, belief, and their utterances, are as much actions surely as the cutting off of fifty heads by one right hand. As if Shakespeare's actions were not greater than Cromwell's.

(Kintner, 1969: p. 433; italics hers).

In Aurora Leigh EBB is still taking issue with Carlyle; Aurora contends: "if there's room for poets in this world/ A little overgrown (I think there is)," (that is, malgre Carlyle) "their sole work is to represent the age,/ their age, nor Charlemagne's" (V, 200-203).

It is indeed on the contemporary stage that Aurora's drama is enacted. To Carlyle's question - "Given your Hero, is he to become Conqueror, King, Philosopher, Poet" -- EBB answers: she is to be a woman poet. As a poet, Aurora's ideal is the male Carlylean ideal of the poet as prophet and leader. It is this ideal, however, which precipitates the double bind, setting in motion the paradoxical (hegemonic) injunction by which Aurora's gender is seen to exclude her from access to transcendentalist knowledge, at the same time that her aspirations to this knowledge are understood to jeopardize her femininity. While it is the aim of the next chapter to explore in depth the poem's articulation and resolution of the double bind, I will here briefly outline this problematics as it is dramatized in the poem through the characters of Romney and Lady Waldemar. My objective in the following is to suggest the centrality of the Carlylean-transcendentalist scheme to both the formation and the partial resolution of the dual problematics of the woman poet.

Portrayed as a disciple of the great French socialists, after the fashion of Saint Simon and Enfantin, Romney seeks in Aurora "a helpmate, not a mistress," "a sister of charity" (II, 402, 417). He is also made, however, to voice views closely resembling those of a Mrs. Ellis or a Patmore, the added implication being that whatever the underlying ideological position, a traditionalist view of women predominates. "If your sex is weak for art," argues Romney, "it is strong/ For life and duty. Place your fecund heart / In mine, and let us blossom for the world/ That wants Love's colour in the grey of time" (II, 373-378). Romney's strategy is essentially traditionalist: it is as a servant that woman is entitled to a magnificent apotheosis; and, as of old, love is offered as the bait. Romney's appeal to Aurora to exercise her womanly nature -- for he takes "The woman to be nobler than the man,/ ... in the use/ And the comprehension of what love is" (II, 421-424; italics mine) -- seems to come right out of a Mrs. Ellis book. In The Women of England (1843), for example, Mrs. Ellis recites: "But woman's love is an overflowing and inexhaustible fountain that must be perpetually imparting from the source of its own blessedness" (Ellis, 1843: p. 14). Similarly, Romney returns Aurora's book, which he refuses to read, claiming:

The chances are that, being a woman, young
 And pure, with such a pair of large, calm eyes,
 You write as well *** and ill *** upon
 the whole,
 As other women. If as well, what then?
 If even a little better, *** still, what then?
 We want the best in art now, or no art.

...

... You, you are young
 As Eve with nature's daybreak on her face,
 But this same world you are come to,

....

... this same world,
 Uncomprehended by you, must remain
 uninfluenced by you.- Women as you are,
 Mere women, personal and passionate,
 you give us doating mothers, and perfect wives,

Sublime Madonnas, and enduring saints!
 We get no Christ from you,- and verily
 We shall not get a poet, in my mind.
 (II, 144-225)

As Romney reiterates the terms of her exclusion from the transcendentalist discourse, an abyss of self-doubt engulfs Aurora's project. Her text becomes self destructively ironic for the "perhaps" that it is driven to introduce becomes the enemy from within: "perhaps, I am not worthy, as you say,/ Of work like this: perhaps a woman's soul/ Aspires, and not creates" (II, 486-488). While Romney grants Aurora a womanly nature but refuses her the poet's comprehensive vision, Lady Waldemar, the "feminine" woman in the poem, the agent of feminine desire, grants Aurora the artist's share but only at the dear cost of the woman's. "You stand outside/ You artist women, of the common sex," she reminds Aurora of yet another exclusion, "You share not with us, and exceed us so/ Perhaps by what you're mulcted in, your hearts,/ Being starved to make your heads: so run the old/ Traditions of you" (III, 406-411).

From initiation to resolution, then, the poem's central conflict is threefold. First, Aurora's visionary poetics is challenged by an opposing ideological position -- a utilitarian materialism -- which seeks to refute its metaphysical tenets. Second, Aurora's right to this visionary poetics -- to a transcendentalist subjectivity -- is challenged by a discourse which denies women access to privileged knowledge. Finally, Aurora is denied fulfillment as a woman -- denied the feminine telos of love -- by a discourse (internalized by her) which claims her visionary aspirations to be at odds with a feminine character. I see Aurora Leigh as a complex attempt to articulate these conflicts, address the paradoxical injunction which engenders them, and resolve the double bind dilemma. In the process, I submit, EBB has created her own feminized version of the Hero as a Woman Poet, this time telling Blumine-Aurora's own mythical journey into the abysmal Everlasting No, through the Center of Indifference, to emerge triumphant, prophesying the Everlasting Yea. The poem, I moreover argue, reveals a layered structure, addressing the problematics of the female poetic subject -- the threefold conflict -- on a number of levels.

Although the conflict between Aurora's and Romney's respective ideological positions constitutes a central unifying element in the poem, its import for an emerging poetics of the female subject is slight since the superiority of Aurora's vision is maintained throughout the poem. Significantly, in the climactic scene which prepares for Aurora's and Romney's final reunion (Book VIII), Romney literally quotes Aurora's earlier pronouncements (in Book II) concerning the relative merits of utilitarianism and transcendentalism. In this respect the poem ends on a note of repetition as Romney, failed in his socialist mission, blind and repentent, reiterates Aurora's creed:

oh, I recollect

...

Even these, -- 'You will not compass your poor ends,
'Of barley-feeding and material ease,
'Without the poet's individualism
'To work your universal. It takes a soul
'To move the body, -- it takes a high-souled man
'To move the masses, even to a cleaner sty:
'It takes the ideal, to blow an inch inside
'The dust of the actual: and your Fouriers failed,
'Because not poets enough to understand
'That life develops from within.' I say
Your words.
(VIII, 421-437)

While the opposition between the conflicting ideological positions thus proves essentially unproblematic, Aurora's position as a woman aspiring to transcendentalist subjectivity forms one aspect of the dual problematics of the woman poet. In what follows I examine the way in which Aurora attempts to resolve this issue which is proper to the poetic plot. In chapter Five I will proceed to situate this resolution, which is proper to the poetic plot, within EBB's larger project in Aurora Leigh of merging the poetic and feminine plots.

To resolve the paradox inherent in her position as a woman aspiring to transcendentalist knowledge Aurora draws on the same philosophy which has precipitated it. Carlyle's On Heroes -- which serves here as our exemplary transcendentalist text -- reveals a structure which originates in opposition (Actual vs. Ideal) and attains its finality in the affirmation of a transcendence which shuns specificity. In EBB's reading, this transcendence, which is defined through a series of negations, for it is a-historical, a-institutional, and a-generic, is also understood to be beyond gender specificity. Essentially, it is Carlyle's distrust of forms, and his appeal to an order which transcends the particular, which enable EBB to add to Carlyle's list of "Hero-Gods, Prophets, Poets, Priests," and "the Hero as Man-of-Letters" (Carlyle, 1841: p. 383), the figure of the hero(ine) as a woman poet. It is Carlyle's faith in what Lehman has called the "mutability of the hero stuff" (Lehman, 1928: p. 126) -- namely, the characteristic ability of the heroic to assume different shapes in different times while remaining essentially the same -- to which EBB thus turns in order to announce yet a new shape of the heroic.

In Heroes the emphasis constantly shifts from the particular political, social, or religious configurations within which the individual heroes operate, to the function of the hero in history, which remains the same whether he be "Poet, Prophet, King, Priest, or what you will," for Carlyle fancies that "here is in him the Politician, the Thinker, Legislator, Philosopher in one or the other degree, he could have been, he is all these" (Carlyle, 1841: p. 312). He is all these, we should remember, by virtue of his having seen into "the open secret," having penetrated "into the sacred mystery of the universe ... that divine mystery, which lies everywhere in all Beings, the divine idea of the world, that which lies at the bottom of Appearances" (p. 313). Consequently, "Literature," for Carlyle, is an "apocalypse of Nature, a revealing of the 'open secret' ... a continuous revelation of the Godlike in the Terrestrial and Common" (p. 317). EBB all too gladly embraces these metaphysical tenets:

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.
 (V, 367-372)

Endowed with this vision, Aurora counters Romney's charge that being a woman she will never make a poet by appealing to the great leveller -- the transcendental Ideal. The same interpretive model that has enabled EBB, as a young poet, to defeat the anxiety of influence by claiming her art yet another reflection of the "archetypal beauty," now sanctions Aurora's declaration "That every creature, female as the male,/ Stands single in responsible act and thought/ As also in birth and death" (AL, II, 437-9).

As Aurora Leigh nears its climactic ending, this transcendentalist vision claims an ever growing importance. The resolution of the conflict on this level is strikingly Carlylean: the essentially mystic, transcendental quality of the universe is asserted, overshadowing, covering up the central problematics whose terms are of the order of the social, the temporary, the physical. In Heroes the resolution takes place within the one, the Hero, the Seer - who serves as a guiding light to the eyeless many, those who cannot see the source of light but could see its refraction in the hero. In EBB's case, Aurora drops the first person plural of the "we women," the voice of the socially oppressed, the voice of the times, in favor of a prophetic, transcendental voice, whose responsibility is to the divine and eternal but not to the presently pressing and controversial. "The Hero," contends Carlyle, "is he who lives in the inward sphere of things, in the True, Divine and Eternal, which exists always, unseen to most, under the Temporary, Trivial ... His life ... is a piece of the everlasting heart of nature itself: all men's life is, - but the weak may know not the fact" (Carlyle, 1841: p. 384). From this Carlyle concludes the Hero's inevitable hold over his fellow-men, for "what he [man of letters] teaches, the whole world will do and make" (p. 384). Similarly, in the poem's conclusion, Romney, who plays Carlyle's part in calling forth the Heroine as poet and prophet, exclaims:

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.
 (IX, 900-923)

A significant inversion takes place, however, as the Carlylean scheme is transposed into Aurora Leigh. Within the Carlylean scheme, "the 'aesthetic' critic's principal function is to direct attention to the metaphysical meaning of poetry and the relation of that meaning to absolute truth" (Dale, 1977: p. 20). Carlyle's figure for this mediatory function is, not surprisingly, gender-marked: "Criticism stands like an interpreter between the inspired and the uninspired; between the prophet and those who hear the melody of his words ... She pretends to open for us this deeper import: to clean our sense that it may discern the pure brightness of this eternal Beauty" (Carlyle, 1827: p. 52; italics mine). In Aurora Leigh gender marks are reversed as a male "interpreter" mediates between the "inspired" female prophet and the "uninspired" many.

While Aurora's problem is that of the many, of woman in Victorian society, the threat which her gender poses for the poetic plot is resolved, on one level, as privilege is conferred upon the one who purports to establish, over against the present state of society, a higher order which transcends alienation and restores unity. This assimilation of what Robert Currie has called "the ideology of genius" (Currie, 1974), entails the inevitable repudiation of the present, alienated realm, in favor of another and higher realm of unity and perfection. This ideology, which claims the indisputable hold of genius over the mass of man, is clearly articulated in Carlyle's first Lecture in Heroes: "Universal history, the history of what man has accomplished in this world, is at bottom the History of the Great Men who have worked here" (Carlyle, 1841: p. 239). This conviction was early assimilated by the poet-scholar from Wimpole street who in her 1844 essay on Carlyle drives a point home: "the public mind - that is, the average intelligence of the many, - never does make progress, except by imbibing great principles from great men, which, after long and frequent

reiteration, become part of the moral sense of a people. The educators are the true and only movers" (VI, p. 312). Thus, while Carlyle believes that in the wake of the Hero's discovery of the "open secret," "many men, all men, must by and by come to know it" (p. 403), EBB, too, affirms that Aurora's clarion call is certain to generate "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" (IX, 945-949; italics mine). As the Divine third person takes over in the poem's concluding lines, the feminine first person disappears, leading one to believe that another apocalyptic, naturally supernatural tour de force has reached its predestined ending.

As the following chapter will demonstrate, however, in Aurora Leigh this apocalyptic moment is subsumed under a larger vision which celebrates the apotheosis of the poet as woman. While the Carlylean-apocalyptic scheme outlined above allows the woman to claim the poet's vision, it still leaves unresolved the poet's desire to be reconciled to her womanhood, to the feminine plot of love. In the next chapter I will examine EBB's exploration of this other facet of the double bind, an exploration which forms part of her attempt to construct a more satisfying poetics of the female subject.

CHAPTER FIVE

"Now press the clarion on thy woman's lip":
THE LITERARY WOMAN'S APOTHEOSIS

As the previous chapter has demonstrated, EBB's poetics evolves out of an essentially biographical (or autobiographical) paradigm, the paradigm of the "poet's life." Significantly, EBB conceived of Aurora Leigh as being "in the autobiographical form" (Kenyon, 1898: II, p. 112), explaining:

I have put much of myself in it -- I mean to say, of my soul, my thoughts, emotions, opinions; in other respects there is not a personal line, of course.

(Kenyon, 1898: II, p. 228)

Prior to Aurora Leigh, and with the exception of the two early autobiographical essays (and, of course, such personal material as the diary of 1831-32 and the letters), EBB's one other self-avowed attempt at autobiographical writing was in the form of a "Biographical Sketch" submitted to Richard Hengist Horne upon his request.

When in 1843 R.H. Horne requested from EBB a "Biographical Sketch" which he intended to use for his essay on her in their joint The New Spirit of the Age, EBB answered: "I have no biographical sketch ... yet I could write an autobiography, but not now, and not for an indifferent public" (Mayer, 1877: I, pp. 157-163). She did, however, provide him with a brief biographical note and a firm injunction: "if you say anything of me ... it must be as a writer of rhymes, and not as a heroine of a biography" (Mayer, 1877: I, pp. 157-8; italics mine). EBB's forewarning, however, could do little to change an ingrained critical habit which Horne unfortunately shared with many of his contemporaries; EBB comments on this double standard with restraint when she reviews his essay on her in the first edition: "the notice as it stands can be called 'inadequate' only in one way -- that you enter on no analysis of my poetical claims in it" (Mayer, 1877: II, p. 21).

While Horne's essay subsumes the poet under the woman -- choosing the feminine plot over the poetic plot -- EBB's "Biographical Sketch" constitutes a clear articulation of the artistic plot the evolution of which the previous chapter has delineated. EBB is quick to point out to Horne that as a "writer of rhymes" her life-story is a narrative of the growth of a poet's mind. She assures him that for her life has been identified with the life of the mind and the accomplishments of the

creative faculty, the bodily frame being, in a metaphor she particularly favors, but a bird's cage. "Most of my events, and nearly all my intense pleasures, have passed in my thoughts," she tells Horne, "I wrote verses ... very early ... But, ... the early fancy turned into a will, and remained with me, and from that day to this, poetry has been a distinct object with me -- an object to read, think, and live for" (Mayer, 1877: I. pp. 158-9; italics hers). For the poet thus self-conceived, literary history is personal history, and in the case of EBB it is populated with the Greek "demi-gods," "Plato and the dramatists," "Pope's Homer," as well as "Pope, and Byron and Coleridge" (I, pp. 159-163). The one plot line which EBB discerns in her own life story -- the core of this autobiographical sketch -- thus involves the emergence of an authentic poetic voice. It concerns the evolution of a poet's mind and art as individual achievement disentangles itself from tradition and influence. Autobiography, at this stage, is the account of an anxiety of influence, and the gradual emergence of a separate artistic identity. EBB sees this process to have started with that "curious production," The Battle of Marathon, which "gives evidence only of an imitative faculty and an ear, and a good deal of reading in a peculiar direction," taking a first turn in the Essay on Mind of which EBB estimates that "it is imitative in its form, yet not without traces of an individual thinking and feeling -- the bird pecks through the shell in it" (pp. 159-160). This drama of poetic conception and birth, beautifully crystalized in the bird metaphor, reaches at the time of the correspondence with Horne an important evolutionary stage, for of her most recent production, The Seraphim (1838), EBB contends: "my voice is in it, in its individual tones, and not inarticulately" (p. 163).

As the previous chapter has demonstrated, however, this exclusively artistic self-conception is problematic, for it comes at the expense of a more integrated self-awareness that would reconcile female identity and poetic self. Aurora's desire for a more integrated awareness, moreover, expresses an essential aspect of EBB's poetics. As I have argued in Chapter Four, the biographical paradigm which informs EBB's poetics calls for the fusion of self and text, "poetry" and the "poet's life." In the Preface to the 1844 Poems EBB articulates this vision with great clarity:

Poetry has been as serious a thing to me as life itself; and life has been a very serious thing ... I have done my work, so far, as work, -- not as mere hand and head work, apart from the personal being, -- but as the completest expression of that being to which I could attain.

(II, pp. 148-9; italics mine)

The premise underlying this vision is a key to the understanding of EBB's poetics of the female subject in general, and of Aurora's quest in particular. EBB's poetics posits a subject who strives for a fullness of being, for a state in which "hand," "head," and "personal being" will reach their "completest expression." In Aurora Leigh, Aurora, who is aware of an hegemonic injunction which decries her initial self-definition as both woman and poet to be paradoxical, sets out to resolve the double bind, determined to achieve the "completest expression" of her "being." Book II of Aurora Leigh, as we will see, announces this project as Aurora contemplates her position as "Woman and artist, -- either incomplete/ Both credulous of completion" (II, 4-5).

Prior to Aurora Leigh, the clearest manifestation of the double bind dilemma can be found in two 1844 sonnets, "A Desire" and "A Recognition," both dedicated "To George Sand." In these sonnets EBB attempts her own version of what Ellen Moers has called the "Corinne myth," the myth of female genius already celebrated, in an exemplary fashion, in Mme de Staël's Corinne, or, Italy (1807). As Chapter Four has illustrated, the transcendentalist metaphysics expounded by EBB dictates a polarized vision of the world in which head and heart, spirit and matter, man and woman, assume essentially antagonistic positions whose reconciliation can only occur on a higher, visionary plane. The sonnets are governed by this polarized vision which provides the terms of the poems' central enigma as well as the means of its resolution.

Both sonnets open with an affirmation of a paradox and a simultaneous affirmation of its resolution. "Thou large-brained woman, and large-hearted man,/ Self called George Sand!" exclaims EBB in "A Desire," and in "A Recognition" she apostrophizes: "True genius, but true woman!." Sand is thus seen to be, in one respect, an anomaly, a feminized man (for

genius is male) and a manly woman (for genius is unnatural in a woman's body). "A Recognition," in particular, exposes the problematics of this anomaly which is the very condition of the double bind. Genius, "pure" and "sanctified," is manly and thus revolts against and scorns "the woman's nature." This "woman's nature," however, is denied but in vain, for the heart and the senses undermine the mind's dominion: "Ah, vain denial! that revolted cry/ Is sobbed in by a woman's voice forlorn,--/ Thy woman's hair, my sister, all unshorn/ Floats back dishevelled strength in agony." Similarly, in Aurora Leigh, the yearnings of the heart are represented in chiefly sensual terms and constitute the alternative, feminine plot line whose own internal necessities clash with the overall structure of the transcendentalist poetic plot. In the sonnets, however, the resolution of the conflicting plots is far more limited than in Aurora Leigh. In the sonnets genius and femininity, art and life, ultimately come together under the sign of the angel: gender-free, a-human, beyond the sensual and the material. To resolve the antagonism between the two terms -- man : woman -- EBB introduces in the sonnets a third term which purports to subsume both and thus dissolve conflict. "A Desire" establishes Sand's "stainless fame" by claiming that the 'impurity' of the man-woman hybrid has been "sanctified," since Sand "to woman's claim/ And man's, mightst join beside the angel's grace" (italics mine). The double bind is thus 'resolved' as gender identity is relinquished; "beat purer, heart, and higher," is EBB's injunction in "A Recognition," "Till God unsex thee on the heavenly shore/ Where unincarnate spirits purely aspire."

In between the sonnets "To George Sand" and Aurora Leigh lie the The Letters of Robert Browning and Elizabeth Barrett Barrett and EBB's immense personal effort at reconciling the conflicting identities of woman and artist. While the previous chapter dealt with the evolution of EBB's poetics and the centrality of transcendentalist metaphysics to Aurora Leigh, the present chapter proposes to examine the ways in which a "woman's voice" makes itself heard in the poem, a voice that can no longer be silenced simply with an injunction to "unsex" itself, a voice that claims part in the poet's identity. "when/ I speak," Aurora tells Romney in the scene of mistaken identities which prepares for the final recognition, "you'll take the meaning as it is,/ And not allow for puckerings in the silk/ By clever stitches. I'm a woman, sir --/ I use the woman's figure

naturally,/ As you the male license" (VIII, 1127-1132; italics mine). The irony of this woman's figure is manifold, and indeed crucial to the plot. Aurora uses the "woman's figure naturally," but is an 'unnatural' woman, by others' and her own account, being "a printing woman" (V, 806). The silk of her feminine narrative (her natural destiny) has indeed suffered, and by her own hand, more than "puckerings ... by clever stitches;" determined to mute the woman's voice, Aurora often resorts to negatively charged images of feminine dress: "This vile woman's way/ Of trailing garments shall not trip me up" (V, 59-60). The irony of the "woman's figure," moreover, is as much self-directed as it is aimed at Romney, provoked as much by his disparaging views of women's art as by Aurora's conscious though involuntary submission to a feminine idiom. Significantly, Aurora is prompted to use the "woman's figure" by jealousy, mistakenly believing Romney to be courting her while already married to her rival, Lady Waldemar. Ironically, too, the poem proves Aurora's "woman's figure" to be -- at least on one level -- falsely so, that is falsely a woman's, and Romney's "male license" a truer silken fabric, for it is Romney who ultimately releases in Aurora the true woman, who brings about feminine self-knowledge and the realization that she is "so wrong, so proud, so weak, so unconsolated,/ So mere a woman" (IX, 712-712).

As this chapter will demonstrate, the feminine plot in Aurora Leigh -- the plot aimed at constructing a female subject -- is an ironic narrative marked by ambivalence. Within the poem's overall metaphysical scheme, moreover, it proves to be an agent of subversion, a threat to the transcendentalist tenets outlined in the previous chapter. The terms of this subversion are already established in the opening lines of Book I. The poem opens with an act of self-invocation as Aurora declares in the present tense of narration:

I who have written much in prose and verse
For others' uses, will write now for mine,--
Will write my story for my better self.
(I, 2-4)

These expository lines already iterate the poem's chief project: the search for a fullness of identity, a plenitude of self, a reconciliation of "self" to "better self." The extended simile that follows, however,

immediately casts a disturbing shadow over the initial promise, suggesting a ruptured present and a self alienated both from itself and from the other. "I... will write my story for my better self," the autobiographical voice reassures us, only to relinquish the personal tone in the very next line, introducing a bizarre story:

As when you paint your portrait for a friend,
 Who keeps it in a drawer and looks at it
 Long after he has ceased to love you, just
 To hold together what he was and is.
 (I, 5-8)

What exactly are the terms of the analogy, we are left to wonder at the outset of this fictional autobiography. Is the "better self" like the "friend" in that it is now alienated from "self" but still guards memories of an harmonious, integrated, unitary identity? Or is the "better self" indeed an agent external to the self, once united with the self through love and now forever lost to the self except in memory? What is more disturbing yet in this extended simile is the unsettling shifting of the object of desired knowledge. The narrator promises to write her story for her better self; yet, in the simile the self-portrait rather than augmenting self-knowledge is totally dissociated from self-knowledge, for the portrait reveals to the other (the friend) what "he was and is." The extended figure, thus understood, connotes estrangement, alienation, and epistemological doubt, all of which significantly undermine the narrator's faith (which is a transcendentalist faith) and intention (which is an autobiographical one).

As the narrative unfolds, we realize that this initial figure of alienation and epistemological doubt both anticipates and is, in turn, elucidated by, the poem's threefold project of constructing a poetics of the female subject. This project is threefold for it involves not only a definition of female identity and a definition of female self, but also the construction of a larger framework within which the two will no longer be regarded as mutually exclusive. A first aspect of this threefold problematics which the poem's exposition anticipates relates to the feminine plot. Through the figure of the "friend" EBB indicates that in the feminine plot estrangement from love and the man by necessity involves

estrangement from the self. Later on in the narrative, Aurora will cry out in despair, believing to have lost Romney forever: "Well, I'm glad;/ Or should be, if grown foreign to myself/ As surely as to others" (VII, 1214-6; italics mine). Consequent upon this estrangement, the second aspect of this problematics involves the disparity between Aurora's past self which is seen as full and harmonious but oblivious to its own plenitude -- "In those days, though, I never analysed,/ Not even myself. Analysis comes late" (I, 954-5) -- and an analytical self which seems to know itself only as a willfull producer of arbitrary signification: "I write" (I, 29). This concern is reinforced by the autobiographical form of the poem, a form which gives rise to a split subject: a narrated past self and a narrating present self. In the two opening Books of the poem an intense drama issues as the disillusioned, fallen, narrating self contemplates with reverence mingled with despair a past plenitude of self identified with a pre-lapsarian transcendentalist knowledge of the world.

While the extended figure of the "friend" thus implies loss of self through loss of love, it also implies recuperation of writing through loss of love. Aurora can finally write her story for her "better self" now that the friend has ceased to love her. This linking of artistic expression with absence of love -- the third aspect of the problematics -- also underlies the account of Aurora's childhood which follows the exposition. No sooner does the narrator recall her mother's love than she records its premature loss; no sooner does she call forth her father's caresses than she laments "I'm still too young, too young, to sit alone" (I, 28). "Unmothered child of four years old," Aurora grows into consciousness feeling "Left out, .../As restless as a nest-deserted bird/ Grown chill through something being away, though what/ It knows not" (I, 42-5). She feels "a mother-want about the world" (I, 40) but is at a loss to define the desired 'mother-presence.' Aurora well knows the signified of woman to be love -- "Love's Divine/ which burns and hurts not" (I, 57-8) -- but her text can only recall the signifiers of lack and absence, of deadly love, frustrated love, love denied, monstrous love. In the figure of her mother Aurora witnesses love which is deadly to the self, love which gives life at the cost of its own; "She was weak and frail," writes Aurora, "She could not bear the joy of giving life,/ The mother's rapture slew her" (I, 33-5). Whatever recollections Aurora has of mother-love, however, these clearly

imply an antagonism between thought and calculated words -- which are the poet's tools -- and love. Valorized feminine sensibility is thus contrasted not only with "heavier brains" and "wills more consciously responsible" (I, 61-62), but also with the poet's tools of the trade, words:

Women know
 The way to rear up children ...
 ...
 ... Stringing pretty words that make no sense,
 And kissing full sense into empty words,
 Which things are corals to cut life upon.
 (I, 47-53)

Thus, even before Aurora's ambivalence towards the hegemonic representations of woman is articulated, the poem acknowledges the mutually exclusive demands of a feminine sensibility (and love) and the poet's vocation. In this self-embedded, self-reflexive poem, writing is only possible in the absence of feminine sensibility and love: the book which brings about Romney's conversion is significantly the book written before Aurora's reconciliation with femininity. This reconciliation, occupying the very last scenes of the poem, is immediately followed by a significant shift in narrative voice: in recognizing her femininity Aurora loses her identity as a distinct artistic voice. In the poem's conclusion, Romney's and Aurora's gospel of "the love of wedded souls" (IX, 882) translates into an expansive artistic consciousness in which Aurora's and Romney's voices, no longer distinct and separate, merge and blend.

I will eventually propose an alternative reading of the poem's conclusion. For the moment, it suffices to say that the poem opens on a complex problematic, for while Aurora deplores a loss of self through loss of love, she also simultaneously declares the lack (lack of love) as a precondition of poetic selfhood: where there is love there cannot be art. In the poem, the movement from the pole of absence and lack to the pole of fulfillment and plenitude thus proves to be paradoxical and self-cancelling. Inasmuch as the act of writing is involved, any movement towards the completion of the feminine plot -- the plot of love -- is a

self-defeating one. The poem indeed registers resistance to this movement through a meta-critical discourse and through the complex figure of writing, both of which will be examined at the conclusion of the present chapter.

The poem's autobiographical project -- the woman poet's self-reflexive narrative -- significantly starts within the context and constraints of the feminine plot. Aurora's introspective journey, carried out for her "better self," starts with the mother, source of life, source of "Love's Divine" (I, 57). It is initiated, however, by an early alienation from love, for "unmothered little child of four years old" (I, 94), Aurora survives her mother's ironic death -- "the mother's rapture slew her" (I, 35) -- to carry with her a "mother-want." Cut off from the maternal source/model, Aurora retains a sense of loss, the loss of a natural and elemental love, and a subsequent fall from knowledge of self. What is woman, Aurora asks at the outset of her journey, and the text/intertext answers:

Abhorrent, admirable, beautiful,
 Pathetical, or ghostly, or grotesque,
 ... by turns,
 Ghost, fiend, and angel, fairy, witch, and sprite,
 A dauntless Muse who eyes a dreadful Fate,
 A loving Psyche who loses sight of Love,
 A still Medusa with mild milky brows
 All curdled and all clothed upon with snakes
 whose slime falls fast as sweat will; or anon
 Our Lady of the Passion, stabbed with swords
 Where the Babe sucked; or Lamia in her first
 Moon lighted pallor, ere she shrunk and blinked
 And shuddering, wriggled down to the unclean.
 (I, 149-163)

In place of desired knowledge and a definition of "woman," Aurora's text reproduces or reflects dispersion and paradox. Here lies the magnanimity of Aurora's project: her task will be to instate a full, "complete," subject in a space which has been preempted by an hegemonic discourse and its many oxymoronic figures for femininity which affect dispersion and paradox.

Already in this initial exposition, the diversity of the intertext is reduced to an underlying ironic statement of lack and frustration. While the signified of the text of womanhood is understood to be love, all its signifiers mock this content, subvert its meaning. The stories of Psyche, Medusa, "our Lady of the Passion," and Lamia, are all narratives of distorted, unfulfilled, frustrated and sometimes monstrous love. "A loving Psyche who loses sight of love" -- jealousy and suspicion making love forever inaccessible, alien (Apuleius, The Golden Ass); "A still Medusa with mild milky brows" -- the once fair maiden whose excessive concern with beauty, the mere appearance of love, dooms her to the ironic fate of becoming a deadly appearance, fatal to love (Ovid, Metamorphoses, IV, 608-739). The Lamia too is a figure of love turned into a devourer of love, a bride turned serpent (as also in Keats' "Lamia"). While desire is monstrous, motherhood, too, is paradoxically both life-giving and deadly: "Our Lady of the Passion, stabbed with swords/ Where the babe sucked."

In place of a definition of "woman," then, Aurora finds in the hegemonic discourse -- the intertext -- an oxymoronic figure of dispersion and paradox: "ghost, fiend, and angel, fairy, witch, and sprite." Instead of a definition of "love" -- which the hegemonic discourse claims to be woman's proper telos -- Aurora finds in the intertext the many narratives of love frustrated, denied, distorted. Thus, even before attempting to recover love for herself in order to recover self, Aurora has to re-define, re-name, "love." Even before she attempts to reconcile "woman" with "artist," she has to re-define, re-name, "woman." In the poem, the characters of Marian Erle and Lady Waldemar represent the opposing poles of the oxymoron of femininity constructed by the hegemonic discourse. In my reading of the poem, Aurora writes the twin narratives of Lady Waldemar and Marian in order to re-read and re-write (or revise) this paradoxical hegemonic figure. It is through these narratives, in my view, that Aurora explores the feminine plot of love, motherhood, and desire, in order to arrive at a re-definition of herself as a woman. In what follows I will first identify the problematics which gives rise to Aurora's need to re-write the feminine plot. I will subsequently proceed to examine first Marian's narrative and then Lady Waldemar's narrative. I see these narratives, I again submit, as Aurora's motivated reading of the oxymoronic figure of femininity and her attempt to translate dispersion and paradox

into wholeness of identity. I will then turn to unravel Aurora's proper narrative, a narrative involved, as I have already pointed out, in the threefold project of constructing a poetics of the female subject. While Chapter Four has delineated the poetic plot in Aurora Leigh, the present chapter proceeds to explore the feminine plot, the conflict which arises out of Aurora's attempt to reconcile the two plots, and the eventual resolution of this conflict. EBB's resolution of the double bind in Aurora Leigh, I will conclude by arguing, resides neither in her affirmation of the superiority of the transcendentalist-poetic plot, nor in her blind acceptance of the feminine plot, but in her re-naming of both love and knowledge. In my reading of the poem, Books VIII and IX propose an alternative story, one in which the woman poet's knowledge (art) gains for her love, thus fusing poetic identity and female self.

From the outset, Aurora's self-perception involves a recognition of her dual citizenship: born of an Italian mother and an English father, she learns the passion of love on Italian soil but achieves artistic maturity in England. Motivated by her father's injunction to "Love ... love, love!" (I, 212), Aurora arrives in England to find absence of love and denial of passion: the "frosty cliffs" look cold upon her (I, 251-2) and her new guardian, her father's sister who is also her "mother's hater" (I, 360) -- her "brown hair pricked with gray/ By frigid use of life" -- proves the antithesis to the Florentine gospel of love, a woman living a "cage-bird life" and determined to tame the "wild bird" Aurora (I, 305-310). Valorized womanhood, associated with her mother's passion (but weakness too) and her father's transformation and renewed faith, is left behind in Italy (to be later retrieved), while an English ideal of the 'womanly woman' is artificially imposed on Aurora by her aunt. This ideal is a reflection of the dominant discourse on femininity, whose restricting, hypocritical, and paradoxical nature Aurora is quick to point out. The aunt's program for feminine education is oppressive to body and mind alike: Aurora breaks her "copious curls" upon her head "into braids," because the aunt likes "smooth ordered hair" (I, 385-6) (but the hair will be let loose again), and reads the prescribed "score of books on womanhood, ... books that boldly assert/ Their [women's] right of comprehending husband's talk/ When not too deep," books arguing women's "angelic reach/ Of virtue, chiefly used to sit and darn,/ And fatten household sinners" (I, 427-440).

For Aurora, trivialization begets loss of control over one's life and over the resources of life -- "This hurts most, this -- that after all, we are paid/ The worth of our work, perhaps" (I, 464-5) -- and thus ultimately leads to death, annihilation of self: "I did not live" (I, 374). Aurora, however, finds regeneration in a transcendentalist faith, in her "relations in the Unseen," in an "inner life" which is also a sensuous life, drawing "The elemental nutriment and heat/ From nature" (I, 473-478).

Prior to the crisis of the double bind, initiated by her introduction to the codified game of love (Book II), Aurora can be seen to succeed in reconciling desiring self and artistic identity, heart (which is also body) and brain, in that "world of books [which] is still the world" (I, 748), a world in which "Pure reason [is] stronger than bare inference" (I, 807), an intensely sensuous world in which "rhythmic turbulence/ Of blood and brain" sweeps "outward upon words" (I, 897; italics mine). Aurora's initial vision resolves the paradox inherent in the hegemonic representation of woman and rejects the trivialization and life-denying program of the 'womanly woman' by appealing to a "higher realm" understood to transcend the terms of lack and paradox. This vision clearly echoes the androgynous creed of the George Sand sonnets; Aurora attains plenitude of self in the figure of the angelic poet:

The poet, speaker, he expands with joy;
The palpitating angel in his flesh
Thrills innly with consenting fellowship
To those innumerable spirits who sun themselves
Outside of time.
(I, 911-915)

Aurora's own images for this self and its sphere of action here are derived from the dialectical transcendentalist structure outlined in the previous chapter. The poet's "inner life" is seen to inform the "outer life" (I, 1058), while in the poetic utterance gender marked identities -- "A man's mere 'yes', a woman's common 'no' (I, 903) -- are eliminated. Poets, claims Aurora, are "the only truth-tellers now left to God,/ The only speakers of essential truth,/ opposed to relative, comparative, / And temporal truths" (I, 859-862), and thus speak with one voice, a voice not tainted with the relative marks of gender. For the young Aurora, the poet,

like an angel, exists within the order of the transcendent: "life in life! cognisant of life/ Beyond this blood-beat, passionate for truth/ Beyond these senses" (I, 916-918).

While the beginning of this epic of the artist as a woman reveals an instance coextensive with the artistic plot, the body of the poem unfolds an alternative narrative the origins of which can be traced back to such early poems as "Bertha in the Lane" and "The Rauman of Margaret." In this drama, the mark of femininity is the mark of desire, of the sensual, and of the need for a man's love. In this plot, female characters and their destinies are defined in relation to the feminine telos: the attainment of a man's love.

Significantly, Aurora's initiation to desire occurs within the artistic, and not feminine, plot, and is brought about by the "revelation" of poetry in Book I. The images are of physical contact, of energy building up and being released in explosive moments, an imagery of love: "My own best poets," confesses Aurora, "thus I love you" (I, 881-2). Poetry's "finger-touch" (I, 851) has an effect upon the poet which is likened to earth's "internal fires" (I, 846) and an earthquake, later echoed in the imagery of Aurora's and Romney's final reunion: "And, as we sat, we felt the old earth spin" (IX, 838). Echoed too, in the final scene, are images of joy, intoxication, and excitement; in Book I Aurora speaks of the poet/herself: "The palpitating angel in his flesh/ Thrills inly" (I, 912), and in Book IX she writes of her consuming passion for Romney and the effect of his presence, "so close my very garments crept and thrilled with strange electric life" (IX, 821). Aurora is "ravished" by poetry (I, 1920), "half drunk," her "fervent soul" (I, 942) and "quickenning inner life" sweeping "blood" and "brain" alike (I, 898).

Book II opens with a reaffirmation of this state of awakened desire and anticipated pleasure:

Came a morn
I stood upon the brink of twenty years
And looked before and after, as I stood,
Woman and artist -- either incomplete

Both credulous of completion.

(II, 1-5)

It is the man, however, who obstructs the way of pleasure by alienating creativity from femininity and desire from both. Returning Aurora's book in which he sees "witchcraft" (II, 78) -- and which he refuses to read -- Romney confronts Aurora with his image of womanhood. Significantly, Romney's preliminaries to a marriage proposal involve a spelling out of the terms of Aurora's exclusion and thus of the double bind:

Thanks to you

My cousin! that I have seen you not too much

Witch, scholar, poet, dreamer, and the rest

To be a woman also.

(II, 84-87)

Romney's extended hand here is thus "not so much" a gesture of generosity as an act of deprivation. Romney sees women as "personal and passionate,/ ... doating mothers, and perfect wives,/ Sublime Madonnas, and enduring saints!" but denies them any part in that knowledge which is power: "We get no Christ from you, -- and verily/ We shall not get a poet, in my mind" (II, 224-5). Being "personal and passionate" women are, according to this hegemonic discourse, "incapable/ Of deepening, widening a larger lap of life/ To hold the world-full woe" (II, 187-8). In terms of the poem's internal chronology as a crisis autobiography, Romney's highly stereotypic declarations reactivate the problematics of female identity already introduced through the characters of Aurora's mother and aunt. By refusing Aurora that transcendentalist space where desire and knowledge are one, Romney re-engages Aurora in the text of feminine self-reflexion proper. It is his act of expatriation which sends Aurora on a quest for an identity/text which would inhabit that paradoxical "pair of nationalities" represented by "the poet's heart" and the "woman's breast" (VI, 50-53).

Through the character of Aurora, feminine self-reflexion becomes an ironic text as feminine attributes are simultaneously invoked and rejected, assumed and discarded, called forth from the intertext -- often in the form of clichés -- only to be subverted. As we have already noted, within the binary structure informing the poem, Aurora's first intimations of

fulfillment are signalled by a merging of brain (knowledge) and heart (desire). Like George Sand, whom she sees as a "large-brained woman and a large-hearted man," Aurora before the fall into debilitating gender-awareness feels her "pulses set themselves/ For concord; when the rhythmic turbulence/ Of blood and brain swept outward upon words" (I, 896-8; italics mine). The apocalypse is thus seen as a condition of perfect union of intellect and desire, a condition Aurora experiences in writing: "I lived, those days,/ And wrote because I lived -- .../ My heart beat in my brains" (I, 960-1; italics mine). Romney denies her that fulfillment by reiterating the traditionalist distinction between feminine sensibility and masculine understanding, a perception which Aurora can never accept; she chides Romney:

The headache is too noble for my sex
 You think the heartache would sound decenter,
 Since that's the woman's special, proper ache,
 And altogether tolerable, except
To a woman.
 (II, 111-115; italics mine)

To Aurora, this traditionalist discourse inevitably internalized is a cause both of a "heartache" and a "headache," for the perception of women as incapable of comprehensive understanding (as opposed to personal sympathy) threatens her visionary metaphysics, while her submission to the text of feminine desire -- the yearning for the man's approval and affection -- reinforces that threat and creates new narrative necessities.

The scene which opens Book II (the confrontation between Aurora and Romney on her twentieth birthday) serves to throw Aurora back into a feminine space -- literally back into the space of the mother. Romney, who obsessively repeats the accepted notions of femininity -- "If your sex is weak for art/ .../ ... it is strong/ For life and duty" (II, 372-5) -- collapses all the terms of female selfhood into the superimposed figure of a daughter/mother. He thus not only refuses Aurora the metaphysical project but also denies her proper subjectivity, projecting an image of an identity totally submerged in and reclaimed by a feminine principle (the mother) and a feminine discourse (love):

sweet, come down
 And hand in hand we'll go where yours shall touch
 These victims, one by one! till one by one
 The formless, nameless trunk of every man
 Shall seem to wear a head with hair you know,
 And every woman catch your mother's face
 To melt you into passion.
 (II, 385-391; italics mine)

Romney takes "the woman to be nobler than the man,/ ... in the use/ And comprehension of what love is" (II, 421-23), and his valorized image of femininity compulsively merges femininity with motherhood (II, 189-190; II, 390) and with a selfless love which is immersed in the "personal" (II, 185) and is totally oblivious to the "universal" (II, 209). In response, Aurora undermines Romney's superimposed figure (of a daughter lost in the mother lost in love) by substituting for it the figure of lack (loss of the mother, loss of love); "I am a girl," she answers back, "you do well to name/ My mother's face. Though far too early, alas,/ God's hand did interpose 'twixt it and me" (II, 400-403). Aurora's power to resist the hegemonic discourse lies thus in her experience of absence and an estrangement that liberates. Since Aurora is estranged from the mother and thus from love she is free to rewrite both these figures in her own text.

Aurora's unfolding narrative, however, reveals not so much an outright rejection of as a profound ambivalence towards the valorized figure of woman-as-mother evoked by Romney. As Barbara Gelpi has noted, mothers in the poem, with the exception of Aurora's mother and Marian, are "presented as cold, self-centered, and destructive" (Gelpi, 1981: p. 39). Aurora's aunt, a surrogate-mother, is a cold unloving woman who is motivated by "hate" (I, 354); Marian's mother, when beaten by her husband "turned/ (The worm), and beat the baby in revenge" (III, 868-69). Another mother, who makes but a cameo appearance in the poem, is yet another instance of womanly cruelty and selfishness. When Lucy Gresham, a poor seamstress whom Marian befriends, dies of consumption, her grandmother, mistaking Romney for the undertaker, laments:

If Lucy here *** Sir, Lucy is the corpse ***
 Had worked more properly to buy me wine;

But Lucy, sir, was always slow at work,
 I shan't lose much by Lucy.
 (IV, 71-74)

To Romney's vision of a mother bent over her baby Aurora responds with the gruesome description of the crowd at Romney's wedding: "Faces! ../ ... men's and women's/ *** ay, and children's; -- babies, hanging like a rag/ Forgotten on their mother's neck,-- poor mouths,/ Wiped clean of mother's milk by mother's blow/ Before they are taught her cursing" (IV, 574-9). Similarly, Marian's account (to Aurora) of her misfortunes abounds with ironic statements regarding the nature of motherly love and devotion (VII, 8-10; VI, 1001-3).

Thus, in a first moment, Aurora exposes Romney's text of womanhood by translating its rhetoric of value into what she believes to be the reality occulted by that very rhetoric. Romney's traditionalist claim that "the woman ...[is] nobler than the man,/ ... in the use/ And comprehension of what love is" (II, 421-3), and his exhortation to Aurora to assume her womanhood, "Place your fecund heart/ In mine, and let us blossom for the world/ That wants love's colour in the grey of time" (II, 375-7), are translated by Aurora as

..."Come,
 I have some worthy work for thee below.
 Come, sweep my barns and keep my hospitals,
 And I will pay thee with a current coin
 Which men give women."
 (II, 537-541)

Although Romney protests against this strategy -- "you translate me ill" (II, 369)-- Aurora insists on rejecting the terms of this exchange, refusing Romney's "current coin" -- the hegemonic idiom -- with which she believes women's lives have been bought and sold.

This irony, however, partly disintegrates as Aurora writes into Marian's story a valorized image of motherhood. Like Romney's sentimental mother figure, Marian is self-sacrificial and totally committed, and her single minded dedication to the male child is the epitome of a selfless

vision hardly capable of seeing beyond the individual instance. Woman, according to Romney, is "passionate," and Aurora echoes this view (which she internalizes) in describing the climactic moment of her reunion with Marian: "I .../ With woman's passion clung about her waist/ And kissed her hair and eyes" (VI, 778-780; italics mine). Thereafter, Aurora avows that together they will be "two mothers" to the child (VII, 129). Aurora's profound identification with Marian in her role as a mother is plainly expressed in her vision of their future together, herself a "sister" to Marian (VI, 455) and a second mother to the child. Aurora's proposition to Marian to come live with her in her ancestral Italy, thus making up for the loss of the original family, constitutes a crucial turning point in the feminine plot. The proposition indeed embodies an alternative plot for the feminine narrative, a manless plot in which Divine Father and an earthly father/knight are substituted by a female "saint" and a female friendship fortified by love and made complete in mothering. Aurora appeals to Marian:

Come, -- and henceforth thou and I
 Being still together will not miss a friend,
 Nor he a father, since two mothers shall
 Make that up to him.
 (VII, 122-125)

The prophetic, visionary language which marks this alternative plot -- Aurora reflects how "in gravity and holy calm,/ We two may live on toward the truer life" (VII, 131-2) -- anticipates the apocalyptic tone of the scene celebrating the reunion of Aurora and Romney in the poem's conclusion. This similarity in tone clearly suggests the centrality which both motherhood and her relationship with Marian assume for Aurora.

Aurora, however, is a mother to the mother. Very early in the narrative, scrutinizing her own behaviour and taking blame for Marian's misfortunes, Aurora reflects: "I might have held that poor child to my heart/ A little longer" (V, 469-470; italics mine). This distinction seems crucial for while Marian's own plot is eventually denied the feminine telos -- motherhood coming at the cost of wifehood -- it is by this sacrifice itself that Aurora's own feminine destiny is fulfilled. Indeed Marian's function in the poem is not so much to represent an ideal of femininity

towards which Aurora strives as to anticipate, make possible, and declare Aurora's reconciliation to her femininity. Thus, true to her character as a "saint" (IX, 187)-- the epithet forcefully recurs in Aurora's meditations on her -- Marian's letter to Romney prophesies Aurora's final reconciliation with the feminine destiny. The letter ends with an image of Aurora as wife and mother; "I almost told her," Marian writes to Romney of Aurora, "that you would not lose/ By taking her to wife: though ever since/ I've pondered much a certain thing she asked .../ .../ As a mother asks/ Her babe" (IV, 939-949; italics mine). In the poem's denouement, Marian not only renounces wifehood by turning down Romney's renewed vow of commitment -- thus making possible Aurora and Romney's final reunion -- but also foresees that reunion: "Her instinct's holy," says Aurora. Moreover, by first pretending to accept Romney's proposal and then appealing for Aurora's approval, Marian enables Aurora to manifest a selfless love -- for Aurora does give her her blessing. Finally, Marian's last words in the poem are a tribute to Aurora: "Thanks, my great Aurora!" (IX, 275). Marian's tribute and blessing thus signal Aurora's reconciliation to her femininity, coming, as they do, from this composite figure of femininity in which child, mother, and saint all merge.

Although Aurora writes Marian's narrative as a valorized feminine narrative, she cannot appropriate it for her own life-story. Following a torturous course of self-doubt, of which more presently, Aurora rejects the alternative feminine plot enacted by Marian. This inevitable consequence is already signaled by the text in the very moment of valorization. Valorized womanhood, represented by the character of Marian, is conceived within the constraints of the dominant discourse. However acceptable to the woman Aurora, this view of femininity can never be reconciled with the poet's free and independent spirit. Aurora's description of Marian leaning over the baby and immersed in love, the very epitome of valorized womanhood, exposes through its language a threat to the self and to self-knowledge which the narrative never explicitly acknowledges. In her love, which is all encompassing, which "Includes the whole of nature," Marian is "self-forgot, cast out of self,/ And drowning in the transport of the sight" (VI, 602-5; italics mine). In Marian's tale, motherly love is gained at the expense of the woman's self knowledge, a knowledge vital to the artist. Thus, although twice a mother, to the child and to the

child/sister Marian, Aurora fails to achieve fulfillment and acknowledges her hunger, her frustrated desire: "I should certainly be glad,/ Except, God help me, that I'm sorrowful/ Because of Romney" (VII, 957-9). Unable or unwilling to forget herself in the feminine fashion represented by Marian, Aurora is compelled to acknowledge a driving desire. Significantly, she understands this desire to be "natural," a truly binding feminine desire; shifting to the first person plural, she speaks in the name of "women": "We're made so,-- not such tyrants to ourselves/ But still we are slaves to nature" (VII, 966-7; italics mine).

Even more haunting to Aurora than the figure of woman-as-mother, then, is the figure of the "Lamia-woman," the Margaret-like woman (we recall the "Romaunt of Margaret") who pursues and commands desire. In this woman power and beauty conspire to satisfy the demands of that tyrant Master, nature. Lady Waldemar, "the most significant villainess of the poem" (Gelpi, 1981: p. 39), like Marian, is a narrative embodiment of yet another representation of the feminine, here of woman as "abhorrent," "ghastly," "fiend, and ... witch" (I, 149-154). Her character, however, poses an even greater threat to Aurora's quest for female poetic subjectivity. Marian's valorized womanhood, although failing to restore to Aurora a sense of fulfillment -- Book VII ends with the articulation of an agonizing alienation from the self -- embodies supreme love and can thus be ultimately incorporated into the poem's resolution. Feminine desire, however, represents a major threat that cannot be easily assimilated.

Commenting on Aurora's deep ambivalence towards her womanhood, Barbara Gelpi has argued that this ambivalence stems from Aurora's realization of her paradoxical position, from "the thought that if as woman she [Aurora] is to be an artist, she will betray her role as mother; yet the mother in her will also in turn betray and transfix the artist" (Gelpi, 1981: p. 38). I will argue, on the other hand, that it is not motherhood, but rather wifhood and the feminine plot of desire -- exemplified by Lady Waldemar -- which precipitate the narrative and further problematize Aurora's quest.

As Gelpi is quick to note, the narrative establishes suggestive figurative links between the mother's portrait and Lady Waldemar's portrayal; through the red and white imagery, the associations of heavenly aspiration attributed to the mother (I, 139-142) are ironically linked to images of worldly enfleshment applied to Lady Waldemar (V, 618-624). More strikingly still, the image of a Lamia (I, 161-3) becomes obsessively associated with Lady Waldemar. Gelpi's incisive observation, however, that "some of Lady Waldemar's attitudes and reactions are uncomfortably and unadmittably close to Aurora's own" (p. 40), remains unsupported, for her essay fails to account for Lady Waldemar's narrative as an alternative feminine text which has to be balanced against the text of motherhood, on the one hand, and the text of artistic creation, on the other. While motherhood is God sent and Divine ("Love's Divine," I, 57) -- and thus ultimately reconcilable with Aurora's transcendentalist poetics -- feminine desire, as represented by Lady Waldemar, is "natural" and thus profoundly disturbing to the transcendentalist subject. It is through Lady Waldemar that Aurora further experiences the necessities of this plot, and is driven to the realization that "We're made so -- not such tyrants to ourselves/ But still we are slaves to nature" (VII, 966-7).

Lady Waldemar, with her cunning and manipulative plottings, is herself a character totally overdetermined by the plot of "nature." In her text, the figure of love, that peculiar stamp of womanhood which the dominant discourse posits as preemptive of all other identity, is no longer a carrier of a nurturing motherly presence but the mark of a "coarse," "vulgar," "natural" sensibility motivated by desire (III, 455-8). Appropriately, it is Lady Waldemar who complements the articulation of the double bind by adding to Romney's rejection of the artist in the woman, a rejection of the woman in the artist. While Romney grants Aurora a womanly nature but refuses her the poet's comprehensive vision, Lady Waldemar grants Aurora the artist's share but is quick to add the woman's loss:

You stand outside
 You artist women, of the common sex;
 You share not with us, and exceed us so
 Perhaps by what you're mulcted in, your hearts,
 Being starved to make your heads: so run the old

Traditions of you.

(III, 406-411)

Lady Waldemar's driving passion is love, not a motherly sentiment but a "coarse" "natural" love. Like Marian's narrative, however, Lady Waldemar's too is bound by the constraints of a super-imposed scheme. Like Marian's, Lady Waldemar's is a narrative of compulsion and enslavement. Her manipulative strategies notwithstanding, Lady Waldemar is herself at the mercy of a feminine destiny which controls her, for the same "old traditions" which decry Aurora's 'abnormality' dictate Lady Waldemar's total absorption by the discourse of love. Although at first sight appearing to Aurora to be "out of nature" (III, 358), Lady Waldemar -- herself highly self-conscious throughout -- acknowledges her being, as it were, overwritten by an outside script:

Am I coarse?

Well, love's coarse, nature's coarse -- ah, there's the rub.

We fair fine ladies, who park out our lives,

From common sheep-paths, cannot help the crows

From flying over, we're as natural still

As Blowsalinda. Drape us perfectly

In Lyons velvet,- we are not, for that

Lay-figures, look you: we have hearts within,

Warm, live, improvident, indecent hearts,

...

We catch love,

And other fevers, in the vulgar way:

Love will not be outwitted by our wit

Nor outrun by our equipages: --mine

Persisted, spite of efforts.

(III, 455-469)

Lady Waldemar submits to being "a mere woman" (III, 490), a phrase whose significant recurrence in Aurora's own plot will be shown to further reinforce the plot common to both characters.

Her first confrontation with this "natural" woman leaves Aurora close to an identification with the force of love represented by Lady Waldemar. She opposes Lady Waldemar's love to what she perceives to be Romney's inability to love, denouncing him as a calculating, un-natural, hubris-ridden man. To Lady Waldemar she reiterates her words to Romney (II, 409-418); "Who tells you that he wants a wife to love?" she sarcastically interrogates her visitor, "He gets a horse to use, not love, I think:/ There's work for wives as well" (III, 724-6). At this point in the narrative, Lady Waldemar is not yet the Lamia-woman but a "lily," a woman graced with natural love who "breaks the social system up/ For love" (III, 739-40). In this she is seen as being unlike Romney "who lives by diagrams" and rejects love which, for Aurora, is life, for "the spontaneous love/ [is] Still proof and outflow of spontaneous life" (III, 756-7). Love for Aurora, however, can not be tainted with the materialism of utility, and she distrusts Lady Waldemar's love for being a scheming, manipulative love: "what, love and lie!" (III, 708).

Following Lady Waldemar's first appearance, the second mention of her appears significantly in the present tense of narration, in one of those rare moments in the text where intrigue (plot, action) is brought to a halt and meta-commentary is introduced. Contemplating her guilty failure to act on Marian's behalf and warn Romney of Lady Waldemar's schemes, Aurora re-moulds the figure of natural love into the hateful self-love which will be Lady Waldemar's mark from this point on. Here Lady Waldemar is presented as a character motivated by "self-love and self-will," her love being "a re-adjustment of self-love,/ No more, -- a need felt of another's use/ To her own advantage, as the mill wants grain/ The fire wants fuel, the very wolf wants prey" (IV, 516-525). The figure of the beast of prey, the Lamia-woman recurs from this point in the narrative with a persistency that is matched by the centrality of Lady Waldemar's text to Aurora's own plot.

This shift in Aurora's perception of Lady Waldemar is followed by a crucial development in Aurora's own narrative. Book V opens with a triumphant cry: "Behold, at last, a book" (V, 352). It is the book, the artistic climax of this poet's autobiography, a book which is also the poet's life, for Aurora contends: "a book ... is a man too" (V, 399), and

adds "If life-blood's necessary, which it is,--/ ... / If life-blood's fertilizing, I wrung mine/ On every leaf of this" (V, 352-7). While this book within a book is complete, the other book, the one being written, is yet incomplete, for its narrator still stands "woman and artist,--either incomplete,/ Both credulous of completion" (II, 4-5). Aurora's transcendentalist poetics dictates a condition of harmony between the personal and the universal; for Aurora, the artist stands

'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.
(V, 376-380)

While Aurora's metaphysics remains unchanged from beginning to closure, it is perceived as incomplete and lacking as long as the personal is incomplete and lacking. This personal life involves a profound ambivalence towards the plot of femininity and no less profound a desire to experience the completion of this plot, to re-enact it to its satisfying end. Following Marian's departure and Aurora's subsequent fears that Romney is about to marry Lady Waldemar, Lady Waldemar's narrative becomes a willfully distorted feminine text, a projection at once of Aurora's desire and of her anxiety at being frustrated in that desire. Since Aurora and Lady Waldemar share the same text -- the text of feminine desire -- Aurora's anxiety is aggravated by a sense of being read and re-read, like an open book, by this archetypal female; Aurora reflects:

What vexes me, after all,
Is just that such as she, with such as I,
Knows how to vex. Sweet heavens, she takes me up
As if she had fingered me and dog-eared me
And spelled me by the fireside half a life!

...

Of course she found that in me, she saw that,
Her pencil underscored this for a fault
And I, still ignorant.
(V, 1051-1061; italics hers)

Upon hearing Marian's story and thus gaining knowledge of Lady Waldemar's scheme, Aurora's agony intensifies and the tension caused by her mistaken apprehension of Lady Waldemar's fortunes -- her belief that Romney is to marry Lady Waldemar -- will not be relieved until the poem's very last scenes. Aurora's misreading of Lady Waldemar's narrative as one ending on a note of fulfillment (marriage to Romney) is so overwhelming that it releases all inhibitions. "He loves/ The Lamia-woman" (VII, 152), Aurora has to admit to herself, and overtaken by the feminine text of "yearning passion" (VII, 182), vainly groping in the dark, blaming "these foot-catching robes of womanhood" (VII, 150), she inadvertently lets out her secret. Here Aurora is literally overtaken by that other text which she in vain tries to suppress, erase. "No, Lamia!/ ... /I will not let thy hideous secret out/" she declares, referring to her knowledge of Marian's fate, but is led to let out another secret, her own: "To agonize the man I love -- I mean/ The friend I love" (VII, 170-181; italics mine).

Writing to Lady Waldemar -- whom she thinks married to Romney -- from Florence, Aurora blames her for Marian's misfortunes. Significantly, however, Aurora acknowledges: "I had writ my heart" (VII, 377; italics mine), for indeed it is the heart which is the proper locus of the feminine text. In this respect, both Aurora and Lady Waldemar are written by this text, set characters reiterating discursive commonplaces. Yet, in the poem the commonplace is problematized, for both figures are destined to enact a deficient text, denying each other the fulfillment ideally written into their shared text. Thus, while Lady Waldemar names Aurora as standing "outside/ ... of the common sex" (III, 406-7), Aurora reads into Lady Waldemar the Lamia-woman, wistfully invoking for her an ironic feminine destiny she herself struggles to avoid. "The works of women are symbolical," contemplates Aurora as she resists her aunt's "womanly" education, a preemptive education which denies woman self and desire, "This hurts most, this -- that, after all, we are paid/ The worth of our work, perhaps" (I, 456-465). Yet Aurora's blackmail letter to Lady Waldemar decrees just such ironic fate for her: "keep warm his hearth and clean his board, and, when/ He speaks, be quick with your obedience" (VII, 345-346). Although now relegated to the realm of the material, to a destiny of servitude, Lady Waldemar persists in Aurora's "heart," a sign that cannot be written off. When Romney reappears in Florence, their reunion is

withheld by Aurora's misconception, for Lady Waldemar's (supposed) fulfilled desire writes alienation into Aurora's own text; Aurora muses: "A woman stood between his soul and mine/ And waved us off from touching evermore" (VIII, 1039-40).

Lady Waldemar's letter to Aurora, which seals her narrative in the poem, recapitulates the arguments of her plot. She speaks to Aurora of their common womanhood; "We both had mothers," she writes, "lay in their bosom once" (IX, 17). In the context of her character, however, this figure of motherhood becomes ironic. When Marian tells of her abduction, a consequence of Lady Waldemar's scheming, she recalls what in her ignorance had seemed true maternal affection coming from Lady Waldemar: "She wrapped me in her generous arms at once,/ And let me dream a moment how it feels/ To have a real mother" (VI, 1001-3). Like Marian's natural mother, like Lucy Gresham's mother, like the St. Gilles' mothers, Lady Waldemar, too, is a figure of irony, a monstrous mother. Once exposed, Lady Waldemar's function in the narrative is fulfilled. It is the text of the heart, she now realizes, that she has failed to acknowledge in Aurora's narrative: "Could I think,/ The Muse I pulled my heart out from my breast/ To soften, had herself a sort of heart" (IX, 25-26). Now that Aurora's "heart" has surfaced, however, Lady Waldemar's "naked heart," the place of "human" and "coarse" passions running "with blood i' the veins" (IX, 125-7), is negativized, love turning into "a place to curse by" (IX, 172). Lady Waldemar's narrative thus ends recalling the last abyss, prophesying the demise of the woman artist, reiterating the curse of the double bind:

'A woman who does better than to love,
'I hate; she will do nothing very well:
'Male poets are preferable, straining less
'And teaching more.'
(IX, 63-6)

"An active kind of curse," writes Aurora, "I stood there cursed,/ Confounded" (IX, 173-4). Out of perplexity, however, comes a "sweep of eyesight" (IX, 176), and the narrative that follows is a narrative of revelation, a reaffirmation of Divine order which brings about a merging of texts in which Aurora's narrative of feminine and poetic revelation is no longer distinguishable from the original Book of Revelation:

"Jasper first," I said;
 "And second, sapphire; third, chalcedony;
 The rest in order: --last, an amethyst."
 (AL, IX, 962-4; Revelation, xxi, 18-20).

The oxymoronic figure of womanhood which initiates Aurora's narrative is thus reworked in the twin narratives of motherhood and desire. Marian and Lady Waldemar re-enact these two plots, the ironic plots of love as motherhood and love as desire. Lady Waldemar, like Psyche, loses sight of love in her self-absorbed manipulativeness; like Medusa and Lamia, she turns into a figure for whom love is a place to curse by, a poisonous serpent who devours love, both Marian and Aurora being the victims. Marian, like Aurora's mother, is the figure of deadly motherhood, of a motherhood in whom love is simultaneously regenerative and annihilating, for it gives life to another but is deadly to the self. Marian's own narrative, her confessions to Aurora and Romney, obsessively state this death of the self. Marian's misfortunes drive her "mad" (VI, 1235) and render her helpless and submissive -- "I tried to take the cast-off life again,/ And stood as quiet as a beaten ass/ Who, having fallen through overloads, stands up/ To let them charge him with another pack" (VII, 18-21). It is not her trials and misfortunes, however, that bring about loss of self. Significantly, the preempting of self occurs only at the moment of valorized motherhood, when Marian's perception of her ironic destiny -- "When mothers fail us, can we help ourselves?" -- gives way to a self-sacrificial commitment to her child. Motherhood is thus accomplished at the expense of selfhood; "Marian's dead," she tells Aurora, referring to herself in the third person; "I'm dead," she persists, "I'm nothing more/ But just a mother" (VI, 813-824). Marian then re-tells the story to Romney:

It may be I am colder than the dead,
 Who, being dead, love always. But for me,
 Once killed, this ghost of Marian loves no more
 No more *** except the child! *** no more at all
 I told your cousin, sir, that I was dead.
 (IX, 387-391)

Aurora's own story, to which we now turn, is a meta-text which subsumes the ironic plots of womanhood as love delineated above. Aurora reads this irony in the intertext invoked by her mother's portrait, re-writes it in the twin narratives of Marian and Lady Waldemar, and proceeds to re-read and re-write all these texts for her own life-story. Aurora's entry into the world of books, which the poem insistently claims "is still the world" (I, 748), is presented in Book I as consequent upon her withdrawal from the world of womanhood. Fleeing from a feminine destiny which forbids women "to think at all" (I, 428), granting their "Potential faculty in everything/ Of abdicating power in it" (I, 441-2), Aurora chances "upon the poets," there to find a life for body and soul, an identity and a vocation, work and love: "And so, through forced work and spontaneous work,/ The inner life informed the outer life,/ .../ Whoever lives true life will love true love" (I, 1057-1068). It is the man, however, who shatters the harmony of this world of books by re-introducing with new forcefulness the text of womanhood, the text of love as love of a man. This "personal and passionate" love (II, 221) which destines woman to the love of "such a child, or such a man" (II, 190) also bars her from the poet's prophetic vision, the vision which "instructs mankind" by speaking the one "essential truth" (I, 860-4). Romney's text of womanhood is thus Aurora's text of the double bind, a text she strives to erase by renouncing the man, rejecting her femininity, and re-appropriating the angelic, gender-free identity of the poet in the world of books. All too soon, however, Aurora finds herself a foreigner in her own land; an Italian in England, an Englishwoman in Italy, a poet and a woman: "let it be -- a poet's heart/ Can swell to a pair of nationalities,/ However ill-lodged in a woman's breast" (VI, 50-53). Aurora's malaise is indeed that of conflicting loyalties, and her narrative vacillates between vows of poetic commitment and self-directed ironic meditations on her incompetence "because a woman"; between feminine desire and a frustrated, self-derogatory, mocking feminine awareness. The narrative becomes a battle-ground on which two discourses, a transcendentalist discourse -- profoundly male-oriented yet potentially gender-free -- and a traditionalist discourse on women, vie for the woman poet's text.

Aurora writes for her "better self" and indeed the narrative is a protracted effort to create a better self, a full and harmonious self. This effort, in turn, is necessitated by the obstacles to complete selfhood, by discursive conflicts which fragment and undermine wholeness. These discursive conflicts can be seen to operate on a number of interrelated planes which constitute the narrative threads of which the text is woven. In the narrative of selfhood -- the narrative constructing the "better self" -- the ideological conflict between transcendentalist metaphysics and utopian socialism remains a static element, for the poem consistently rejects Romney's utilitarian text, gradually demonstrating the inevitable collapse of a socialist enterprise. A discursive conflict emerges, however, out of the clash between Romney's denial to women of comprehensiveness of vision (II, 182-225) and Aurora's own aspiring text: "I write so/ Of the only truth-tellers now left to God,/ The only speakers of the essential truth" (I, 858-60). The hegemonic discourse of woman as the incapacitator of the artist (in her) is internalized by Aurora, tainting her originally full text of Book I. Furthermore, as long as her artistic aspirations exclude her from the female telos of love, Aurora remains "incomplete," her initial self-definition demanding completion of both "woman and artist."

The irony which ensues is as much directed against the hypocrisy of the dominant discourse as it is self-directed and debilitating. To Romney's proposal of "life in fellowship/ Through bitter duties" (II, 354-5), Aurora responds:

"What help? ...

"You'd scorn my help, -- as Nature's self, you say

Has scorned to put her music in my mouth

Because a woman's."

(II, 345-49)

Aurora echoes Romney's stereotypic perceptions of womanhood, of woman as weak, forever young as a child, a natural being divorced from the common affairs of the world at large: "I am young,/ And peradventure weak -- you tell me so --/ Through being a woman" (II, 250-252); "you think a woman ripens, as a peach,/ in the cheeks chiefly" (II, 334-5). Irony here serves to make opaque that which the dominant discourse poses as transparent,

"natural," inevitable; "you tell me so," stresses Aurora, "you think" (italics mine). Aurora can thus re-read Romney's text of womanhood as a discourse of a gender held captive: "A woman [is] always younger than the man/ At equal years, because she is disallowed/ Maturing by the outdoor sun and air,/ And kept in long-clothes past the age to walk" (I, 325-333). Aurora, moreover, recognizes the doubt as already internalized, as already self-doubt, while still sounding the battle cry: "perhaps a woman's soul/ Aspires, and not creates: yet we aspire,/ And yet I'll try out your perhappes, sir" (II, 487-490).

Aurora's first resort is to her "vocation" (II, 455) as a truth teller, a teller of a truth which is heaven-sent and thus in a sense -- a sense later scrutinized -- independent of the person. "Poets needs must be/ Or men or women -- more's the pity" (II, 90-91), Aurora instructs Romney, "For the truth itself,/ That's neither man's nor woman's, but just God's" (VII, 752-3). Thus, in a first moment the (Divine) inscription of the transcendentalist text in the poem's own text, the Divine gracing of the poet with the one Truth, is the only stable point of reference to which the woman poet can turn. In speaking "of truth, which is His own" (VII, 760), the poet is thus only a mouthpiece, a vehicle, and can excuse ineptitude in execution -- "I have written truth,/ And I a woman, feebly, partially,/ Inaptly in presentation, Romney'll add,/ Because a woman" (VII, 749-52) -- by the magnanimity of the divinely inspired message.

Aurora's immersion in the transcendentalist discourse in order to reclaim the transcendentalist subjectivity denied her as a woman, however, only aggravates the double bind in prompting Aurora to reject the feminine text of love and desire. She attempts to cast off this "natural" feminine longing for a man's love and approval:

This vile woman's way
 Of trailing garments shall not trip me up:
 I'll have no traffic with the personal thought
 In Art's pure temple.
 ...
 We'll keep our aims sublime, our eyes erect,
 Although our woman-hands should shake and fail.

(V, 59-72)

The shifting of pronouns is most significant: the first person singular of the narrating "I" is torn between the two codified discourses which aspire to appropriate it, namely, the "we" of the (internalized) hegemonic discourse on women and the "we" of the transcendentalist discourse. A momentary dissolution of self ensues, and a most telling rephrasing of the question: "And if we fail *** But must we? -- Shall I fail?" (V, 73; italics mine). The shift from the collective "we" to the "personal I" is indeed a signal that, at least on one level, Aurora will resort to an individualistic ethics -- the ideology of genius -- to resolve the conflict.

The resolution of the conflict at this level is relatively unproblematic: transcendentalist metaphysics simultaneously valorizes the personal/individual as the figure of genius and generalizes the individual as a recipient of a superior wisdom which is "neither man's nor woman's, but just God's" (VII, 753). Aurora uses this paradox to reconcile her femininity (an imposed innocence/ignorance) and her visionary vocation:

I'm young in age, and younger still, I think,
 As a woman. But a child may say amen
 To a bishop's prayer and feel the way it goes,
 And I, incapable to loose the knot
 Of social questions, can approve, applaud
 August compassion, Christian thoughts that shoot
 Beyond the vulgar white of personal aims.
 (II, 386-342)

A temporary resolution is thus achieved as Aurora brings about the convergence of the discourse of femininity -- an internalized discourse of the personal, the compassionate, the emotive and anti-materialist -- and the transcendentalist discourse -- which opposes insight to material action and a supernaturally chosen and inspired agent to the pragmatics of social and political agencies. As Chapter Four has demonstrated, this strategy, which subsumes the feminine under the poetic, constitutes an overall framework for the poem.

As the feminine plot of desire gains in intensity, however, deep cracks appear in the poem's constitutive frame. As a transcendentalist subject Aurora claims the position of a privileged mediator between the truth and other less privileged subjects. In this role, she is often only metaphorically a mediator, for the line between the two idealist impulses which inform this vision -- one locating the idea in a spiritual reality independent of the self, the other placing it within man's spiritual power and finite will -- is often blurred. Thus, Aurora regards poets as "interpreters" who should "Exert a double vision; should have eyes/ To see near things as comprehensively/ As if afar they took their point of sight,/ And distant things as intimately deep/ As if they touched them" (V, 184-8; italics mine). This vision, however, is clearly more than the property of sight and perspective, being a "power" which the artist possesses: "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, .../ ... the thing/ He feels the inmost" (V, 367-372; italics mine). Diametrically opposed to this self-perception as a transcendentalist subject is Aurora's self-perception as a woman. As woman, Aurora is bound within the constraints of a discourse that denies her direct knowledge (of herself and the truth), decreeing her subjection to a mediating agency -- man -- and a mediating discourse -- love. "There it is," exclaims Aurora at the moment of insight, seizing her paradoxical condition within discourse:

There it is
 We women are too apt to look to one,
 Which proves a certain impotence in art.
 We strain our natures at doing something great,
 Far less because it's something great to do,
 Than haply that we, so, commend ourselves
 As being not small, and more appreciable
 To some one friend. We must have mediators
Betwixt our highest conscience and the judge.
 (V, 43-50; italics mine)

Here the enigmatic figure of the "friend," already introduced in the poem's opening lines, re-appears, undermining Aurora's twofold quest for transcendentalist truth and self-knowledge.

Aurora's feminine self-disclosure in the above-cited passage reveals a crucial aspect of the discourse of female subjectivity. Reviewing diaries and autobiographies by women, Patricia Meyer Spacks has observed

on the one hand we see from the diaries the female preoccupation with avoiding wrong; on the other hand we can hardly fail to note how much the notion of goodness is entangled with that of pleasing others, how personal is the female orientation toward virtue, how little women ... seem to examine the rules they support.

(Spacks, 1977: p. 33; italics mine)

Spacks thus identifies in women's autobiographical writings a tendency to confuse (by equating) virtue with pleasing, goodness with gaining approbation. In acknowledging this tendency, in articulating and problematizing it -- "We must have mediators/ Betwixt our highest conscience and the judge" -- Aurora's/EBB's text signals the possibility of breaking away from its binding (blinding) constraints.

"Must I work in vain,/ Without the approbation of a man?" (V, 62-3; italics mine), Aurora chides herself, but it soon transpires that in seeking "approbation" she seeks love, being now totally overtaken by that text of personal love and passion which the intertext holds up to her as her proper feminine text. "My Father," Aurora cries out to "God, my God,/ O Supreme Artist," but also to her own father (who has deserted her not without the injunction to "love!"), as well as to Romney who in the name of love (her womanly nature) has trampled over her art: "He has shot them down,/ My Phoebus Apollo, Soul within my Soul,/ .../ Has struck down all my works before my face/ While I said nothing" (V, 413-18). "My Father!" Aurora cries out,

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! ...

...

To have our books

Appraised by love, associated with love,
 While we sit loveless! it is hard, you think?
 At least 'tis mournful.
 (V, 438-477)

Made to see only the personal, woman becomes enslaved by it, dependent on it; for woman, recites the feminine ventriloquist in Aurora, "the love of all/ (To risk in turn a woman's paradox)/ Is but a small thing to the love of one" (V, 479-80). This need for "the love of one" is feminine desire proper, and its textual markers are the images of hunger and sucking, and of sensual turbulence. The dynamics of this plot depend on an impulsive articulation of desire and a simultaneous attempt to suppress or undo it. Overcome by yearning, a longing to be loved, while refusing to compromise, Aurora's text metaphorically registers a regressive helplessness, a nostalgia for a mode of gratification forever lost to the adult. Aurora contemplates the fate of the woman artist: "To have our books,/ Appraised by love, associated with love,/ While we sit loveless" (V, 474-6; italics hers), but then retaliates "but it's pitiful/ To wail like unweaned babes and suck our thumbs/ Because we're hungry" (V, 488-9; italics mine).

Frustrated love, moreover, in giving rise to regressive desire degenerates into a complicity with the oppressor (hegemonic) text which manifests itself in a desire for the man's restrictive text of womanhood. In her fantasies of happiness as a woman, Aurora is always loved as a "common woman":

If he had loved,
 Ay, loved me, with that retributive face, ***
 I might have been a common woman now
 And happier, less known and less left alone,
 Perhaps a better woman after all,
 With chubby children hanging on my neck
 To keep me low and wise.
 (II, 511-517)

Significantly, the passage is in the present tense of narration; the desire for a fulfilled feminine destiny clearly overwhelms the unfolding

narrative. Aurora does not so much reproach herself for a longing that jeopardizes her poetic convictions as for her vain hope of ever becoming the subject of Romney's love:

O woman's vile remorse,
 To hanker after a mere name, a show,
 A supposition, a potential love!
 Does every man who names love in our lives
 Become a power for that?
 (II, 523-527)

Rejecting the feminine telos of love, Aurora nonetheless recognizes the disastrous, deadly effects of this deprivation. "It seemed no sun had shone on me," Aurora contemplates as she consoles Romney after Marian's disappearance, "So many seasons I had missed my springs,/ My cheeks had pined and perished from their orbs,/ And all the youth-blood in them had grown white" (IV, 1141-1144). Since at this point, however, Romney is not yet ready to grant her both the poet's share and the woman's -- he reiterates the double bind as he tells Aurora: "Your printer's devils have not spoilt your heart:/ That's well" (IV, 1111-1112) -- love has to remain the poet's curse. The antagonism between desire and writing is clearly articulated in the following passage in which Aurora strives to subdue her hair, symbol and reminder of her desire, with the iron hand of thought and writing:

My loose long hair began to burn and creep,
 Alive to the very ends, about my knees:
 I swept it backward as the wind sweeps flame,
 With the passion of my hand. Ah, Romney laughed
 One day *** (how full the memories come up!)
 " --Your Florence fire-flies live on in your hair,"
 He said, "it gleams so." Well, I wrung them out,
 My fire-flies; made a knot as hard as life
 Of those loose, soft, impracticable curls,
 And then sat down and thought ***

...

And drew my desk and
wrote.

(V, 1126-1136; italics mine)

We note the irony underlying this antagonism as we reflect back on Aurora's revolt against her aunt's repressive program and the aunt's dislike of Aurora's "copious curls" which Aurora is forced to break "into braids," because the aunt likes "smooth ordered hair" (I, 385-6). Ultimately, Aurora's rejection of feminine desire in the name of poetic integrity is as unacceptable to her as is the aunt's oppressive ideal of the 'womanly woman.'

While compulsively re-writing the feminine telos in the stories of other female characters -- but also compulsively aborting it -- Aurora herself knows the feminine text only as the text of self-forgetfulness, identifying desire with loss of self. The "we" of the feminine text is a voice of weakness, vulnerability, irrationality, loss of control. Rebuked and teased by her aunt who tells Aurora "you love this man" (II, 691), the young Aurora blushes and the mature narrator still agonizes over the blush (and the absence of love): "Most illogical/ Irrational nature of our womanhood,/ That blushes one way,/ And prays, perhaps another. After all,/ We cannot be the equal of the male/ Who rules his blood a little" (II, 701-6).

Unable to escape the captivity of a desire which locks her in a feminine destiny, Aurora's text becomes impersonal as the narrative shifts from the first person singular of a narrator/autobiographer to the first person plural of a collective impersonal feminine consciousness:

The man's need of the woman, here,
Is greater than the woman's of the man,
And easier served; for where the man discerns
A sex, (ah, ah, the man can generalize,
Said he), we see but one ideally
And really: where we yearn to lose ourselves
And melt like white pearls in another's wine,
He seeks to double himself by what he loves,
And make his drink more costly by our pearls.
(V, 1073-1081)

Aurora's frustrated desire for the text of love further manifests itself in her obsessive 'misreading' of Romney's relationships with the other female characters in the poem. Throughout the poem Aurora consistently misconstrues evidence regarding Romney's amorous intentions, creating 'fictions' of fulfilled love and gratified desire which her text then proceeds to undermine and prove 'false'. Aurora first misreads Romney's interest in Marian; she tells herself "he loves her then profoundly" (IV, 275), and reassures Romney not without a measure of self-directed irony: "You please me, Romney, when you please yourself;/ So, please you, be fanatical in love,/ And I'm well pleased" (IV, 294-6). In 'reading' Lady Waldemar's narrative, Aurora realizes she has twice misinterpreted the relationship between Romney and Lady Waldemar (V, 1109; VII, 60), and yet fails to let go of the fantasy which is a direct projection of her desire -- the fantasy of love and marriage. Her 'misreading' is only exposed when her own narrative finally gives rise to a materialization of her desire. Even when informed of Carrington's marriage to Kate, Aurora cannot help the urge to re-enact that vicarious wish-fulfillment and reflects: "Had he [Romney] married Kate,/ I surely, surely, should be very glad" (VII, 926-7; italics hers).

For Aurora, however, both love and denial (or lack) of love entail dissolution of self. In love, women "melt like pearls in another's wine"; in frustrated love, woman is

Most like some passive broken lump of salt,
Dropped in by chance to a bowl of oenomei,
To spoil the drink a little and lose itself,
Dissolving slowly, slowly, until lost.
(VIII, 1308-1311).

Aurora tries to fight this "poor conscious trouble of blood/ That's called the woman merely" (VII, 231-2), by calling out the poet/man in her: "It seemed as if I had a man in me,/ Despising such a woman" (VII, 213-14). Significantly, this poetic invocation is not of a female Muse but of a male poet-figure: "If, as I have just now said,/ A man's within me, -- let him act himself" (VII, 229-30), "I'm not too much/ A woman, not to be a man for once" (VII, 984-5).

A route out of the impasse, however, suggests itself early in the narrative. Romney takes "the woman to be nobler than the man/ ... in the use/ And comprehension of what love is" (II, 421-3), and Vincent Carrington the painter echoes this view when he writes to Aurora: "Most women (of your height even) counting love/ Life's only serious business" (VII, 575-6). Aurora, too, acknowledges the text of love but refuses to accept Romney's selfishly utilitarian ends in love, claiming her share in what she submits has to be a reciprocal act. She tells Romney and will retell Marian and Lady Waldemar:

What you love
 Is not a woman, Romney, but a cause:
 You want a helpmate, not a mistress, sir,
 A wife to help your ends, -- in her no end.
 Your cause is noble, your ends excellent,
 But I, being most unworthy of these and that,
Do otherwise conceive of love.
 (II, 400-406; italics mine)

Aurora recognizes the need but refuses to be subsumed by the need; for her love/desire has to be reconcilable with work/knowledge, or else is a mere deception. "Women of a softer mood," Aurora corrects Romney, "Surprised by men when scarcely awake to life,/ Will sometimes only hear the first word, love,/ And catch up with it any kind of work,/ Indifferent, so that dear love go with it" (II, 443-447; italics mine). Aurora is not content with just "any kind of work," and thus cannot accept the love which denies her her work.

Where Romney reads a "fecund heart" (II, 375), a "mother's face" (II, 390), and the "personal pang" (II, 185) as the woman's proper text, Aurora discerns a "heartache" ironically considered "the woman's special, proper ache,/ And altogether tolerable, except/ To a woman" (II, 112-115). Aurora subverts the commonplace with a vengeance; granting Romney that "the headache is too noble for my sex./ You think the heartache would sound decenter" (II, 111-2), she pledges for love, but of a different order:

I may love my art.
 You'll grant that even a woman may love art,

Seeing that to waste true love on anything
is womanly, past question.
(II, 495-7)

Thus Aurora allies -- through transcendentalist love -- head and heart, body and soul. Throughout the poem, Romney will be regarded as a threat to this unity, a fragmenting force; "If I had married him," Aurora consoles herself in her solitude, "I should not dare to call my soul my own/ Which so he had bought and paid for" (II, 785-7). Her rejection of Romney thus becomes a rejection of a contractual marriage which debases for it deals in love with a "common currency." The imagery reveals a further threat to the text of feminine desire, an abuse to the desiring body: "He might cut/ My body into coins to give away/ Among his other paupers; change my sons,/ While I stood dumb as Griseld, for black babes/ Or piteous foundlings" (II, 790-794). The agent of destruction and fragmentation, moreover, is himself a disjoint figure, himself kept captive: "He made one day an almshouse of his heart,/ Which ever since is loose upon the latch/ For those who pull the string" (V, 576-8). Himself a prisoner, yet in turn a captor, a jailor; "If I married him," Aurora has to tell herself, "I could not claim/ The poor right of a mouse in a trap, to squeal,/ And take so much as pity from myself" (II, 798-800).

Aurora's feminine text is a "womanly" text with a difference: while apparently an internalized hegemonic discourse, it is more properly an inversion of that discourse. While both Marian and Lady Waldemar embody the hegemonic perception of woman as preempted by love -- Marian is "nothing more/ But just a mother" (VI, 823-4), and Lady Waldemar is but an instrument for the enactment of the plot of love -- Aurora chooses to read the figure of love literally, indeed "counting love" a "serious business," although not, as Vincent Carrington will have it, "Life's only serious business" (VII, 575-6; italics mine). Thus taken 'seriously', love is love given as well as received, and never indiscriminately so; as long as Romney holds love to be "the love of all" (V, 479), while Aurora desires "the love of one" (V, 481), their respective texts remain antagonistic and in themselves unfinished, lacking. For Aurora love cannot be divorced from work as the two constitute the full person and the full poet. Aurora's metaphysics allows for no discontinuities or ruptures since for her generic

"MAN" is "the microcosm, the adding up of works,--/ Within whose fluttering nostrils, then at last/ Consummating Himself the Maker sighed" (VI, 156-159). Since generic man, like the world, is "complete, consummate, undivided" (VII, 839), Aurora cannot but reject immersion in the reductive, fragmenting text of feminine love.

"Does every man who names love in our lives/ Become a power for that?" (II, 526-7; italics mine) Aurora agonizingly questions herself, resisting an internalized traditionalist discourse which binds woman to man's desire. A way out of this impasse, however, lies in her very question. The figure of naming, with its immediate connection to power, is of utmost importance here: the eventual coming together of the two conflicting plots, of the feminine and the metaphysical, will occur under the sign of a re-naming, a re-naming of love and a re-naming of art. This revisionary practice is brought forth in the poem by a discourse of textuality and inscription, a rhetoric of reading and writing, of deciphering and naming. It is through this practice of re-naming -- by assigning new meaning -- and its corollary rhetoric of reading and writing, that a more complete poetics of the female subject finally emerges. It is through this discourse of textuality, moreover, that a more satisfying resolution of the double bind is achieved.

Most readings of the poem's resolution focus on Aurora's celebration of the "woman" in her. Barbara Gelpi, for example, sees Aurora's reconciliation to her womanhood to be precipitated by Marian and the women worshippers at the church (VIII, 1230-1256):

her [Aurora's] identification with Marian as woman both in the sexual humiliation Marian has endured and in the ecstatic joy of motherhood she has experienced reconciles Aurora more than ever before in the poem to her own womanhood; .. the final reconciliation with her womanhood comes in a Florentine church as she watches the women.

(Gelpi, 1981: pp. 45-46)

Similarly, Gilbert and Gubar retell the denouement thus: "Softened by her affection to Marian and chastened by this news [Romney's discourse], Aurora finally concedes to her Victorian audience that 'Art is much; but love is more'" (Gilbert and Gubar, 1979a: p. 577). This retelling, however,

overlooks Aurora's profound ambivalence towards Marian's narrative, her recognition of the threat to the self embodied in the figure of selfless motherhood, and Aurora's refusal to accept a selfless commitment in marriage which Marian upholds, arguing against Marian (and Romney): "If marriage be a contract, look to it then,/ Contracting parties should be equal, just" (IV, 191-2). Gilbert and Gubar also misrepresent Aurora's ultimate valorization of love, overlooking textual evidence in failing to note that it significantly occurs prior to Romney's appearance in Florence and is crucially triggered not by an external turn of events but by a climactic merging of the poem's two informing plots, the plot of feminine desire and the artistic/transcendentalist plot. This intense merging of antagonistic forces, I submit, is accomplished through one of the poem's central figurative and thematic codes, the code of textuality. Although the figures of textuality -- of reading, writing, inscribing, deciphering -- are already singled out in the poem's opening lines and play a central role in the narrative, this aspect of the poem has remained virtually unnoticed. In the discussion that follows, I examine the textual code as a chief unifying principle, an index of both ideological ruptures (the mark of an ideological collapse) and narrative cohesion.

Acts of writing -- the narrator's past and present writing, books, from the Book of Revelation to the narrator's contemporaries' -- permeate, indeed shape this autobiographical epic of the woman poet. The immediate context of the work, as well as its first declared intent, is writing. In the poem's opening lines we already observe this attachment to books and writing which anticipates the poem's self-reflexive project:

Of writing many books there is no end.
 And I who have written much in prose and verse
 For other's uses, will write now for mine,--
 Will write my story for my better self,
 ...
 I, writing thus, am still what men call young;
 ...
I write.
 (I, 1-30; italics mine)

In the account of Aurora's childhood, early loss of love -- loss of the mother -- entails early exposure to books and learning. Most significantly, the poem opens on a dual sense of absence (failure) and scepticism, as the narrator simultaneously introduces and undermines the poem's two informing stories: the feminine plot and the artistic plot. Thus, the introduction of the mother as source/model of love is immediately followed by the description of her portrait in which love is preempted by its oxymoronic signifiers. Similarly, Aurora's introduction into the world of books is not only consequent upon her 'banishment' from the world of love, but is also marked by an early initiation into philosophical scepticism and doubt:

Out of books

He [Aurora's father] taught me all the ignorance of men,

...

He sent the schools to school, demonstrating

A fool will pass for such through one mistake,

While a philosopher will pass for such,

Through said mistakes being ventured in the gross

And heaped up to a system.

(I, 189-198)

Throughout the poem, this distrust is mostly directed at the empiricism and utilitarianism espoused by Romney, while Aurora's own transcendentalist metaphysics proceeds to bestow the highest values -- both figurative and conceptual -- on the Poet and the Book. This valorization of the transcendentalist discourse, however, is eventually undermined, allowing a new discourse -- a poetics of the female subject -- to supersede the antagonistic plots of art and femininity.

Fallen from Edenic love -- having lost both mother and father -- and cognizant of human error, Aurora rediscovers love and discovers truth in the poets. Re-reading her father's books, but no longer bound by his interpretation, Aurora discovers "hope" (I, 730) where there had been criticism. From this point in the narrative, writing and reading become both reigning metaphors and conceptual tools by which to grasp and interpret the world; Aurora affirms and re-affirms: "Yet, behold,/ Behold! -- the world of books is still the world" (I, 747-8), "the world of books

is still the world, I write" (I, 792). Appropriately, Aurora uses the figure of the Palimpsest as the paradigm for all knowledge and all consciousness. We discern a clear echo of the twelve year old refuting Locke's rejection of innate ideas in the mature artist's firm contention:

Let who say
 "The soul's a clean white paper" rather say,
 A palimpsest, a prophet's holograph
 Defiled, erased and covered by a monk's, --
 The apocalypse, by a Longus! poring on
 Which obscene text, we may discern perhaps
 Some fair, fine trace of what was written once,
 Some upstroke of an alpha and omega
 Expressing the old scripture.
 (I, 824-832)

Throughout the poem, an aesthetic/metaphysical discourse engages in an interpretive task which finds its culmination in the poem's apocalyptic ending. This discourse strives to name the truth by identifying poet with "truth-teller" and by merging aesthetics with philosophy and knowledge with poetry. This discourse is introduced in Book I and is effectively foregrounded by the use of the present tense of narration: "I write so/ Of the only truth-tellers left to God,/ The only speakers of essential truth" (I, 858-860). As I have demonstrated, these metaphysical tenets are reiterated throughout the poem, allowing Aurora to advocate an Ideality that is beyond gender and the historically specific. Aurora's conviction is eventually undermined, however, by her growing need and desire for the completion of the feminine plot, her need for love. Consequently, her narrative records a gradual shift by which a transcendentalist discourse -- which claims to subsume all other 'realities' -- is in effect relegated to a secondary, subsidiary position, being ultimately subsumed by Aurora's own story, the story of a "woman and artist" now no longer "incomplete."

I am thus arguing that as a self-reflexive poem Aurora Leigh capitalizes on three moments. The first is the moment of knowledge and writing. The book which Aurora celebrates on her twentieth birthday, as well as the book she ceaselessly writes throughout the poem and the book

that is to become Aurora Leigh, all attempt to know and write "woman and artist,-- either incomplete,/ Both credulous of completion" (II, 4-5). In refusing to read the book -- the second moment -- Romney denies Aurora the possibility of knowledge in writing and of knowledge through writing, for by withdrawing reading he also withdraws love. In the poem's resolution -- the third moment -- love (the feminine plot) and knowledge (the artistic plot) are restored through Aurora's book, as EBB writes (through Aurora) the story of the literary woman's apotheosis.

The opening of Book II sets up a pre-lapsarian Edenic scene. In the lushness of a June morning in the dewy garden the poem recreates its own myth of creation; "There I held/ The whole creation in my little cup" (II, 5-6), recalls the narrator, an omnipotent Aurora. In this scene, however, it is the man who sins and falls, bringing down with him wholeness and innocence. "My book. You found it ... Thank you," is Aurora's intended gesture of love, her appeal for the union of love and knowledge that will crown her creation. "Thanks to you my cousin!" retorts a Satanic Adam who fails to grasp the wholeness, "that I have seen you not too much/ Witch, scholar, poet, dreamer, and the rest,/ To be a woman also" (II, 84-7). In choosing the "woman" over the "poet," in refusing to read Aurora's book, Romney rejects the knowledge of wholeness articulated in it. Romney's sin consists, then, according to this revisionary reading of the story of the Fall, in his refusal to eat from the tree of knowledge.

For Romney's sin both are punished, expelled from the garden, exiled from love. Their salvation can only be brought about by a reversal of the original condition of sin, by the restoration of the book and of reading, a restoration of love and knowledge through the book. Banished from Eden because of Romney's refusal to read Aurora's book -- Romney confesses: "I sinned by her" (VIII, 1214) -- Romney and Aurora can only be graced again by the book. Significantly, Romney's appearance in Florence, which precipitates the climactic scenes of Books VIII and IX, follows immediately after the moment of crisis proper, the moment of ultimate dejection but also of true insight; "Let us go," Aurora cries out in her despair, "The end of woman (and of man, I think)/ Is not a book" (VII, 882-4). Book VII closes with Aurora who cannot "write, nor read, nor ever think" (VII, 1306), and Book VIII opens with a reaffirmation of this alienation: "I sat

alone .../ .../ A book upon my knees to counterfeit/ The reading that I never read at all" (VIII, 1-4; italics mine). Romney's first words to her, however, already signal the recovery of the book -- the third moment in our scheme -- the restoration of writing through reading. First, however, it is Romney's text that has to be read: "First, I must be heard a little, I,/ Who have waited long and travelled far for that,/ Although you thought to have shut a tedious book/ And farewell" (VIII, 74-7).

The book that Romney now re-opens, it soon transpires, is the book rejected by him in the original scene of sin, a book to which they are both ultimately bound for in it is already inscribed, as in the palimpsest, the script of their salvation. The opening scenes of Books II and VIII are thus posed in a perfect symmetry. In Book II Romney gives Aurora back her book, unread, thus rejecting both its knowledge -- the transcendentalist union of "heart" and "brain" -- and love -- since for Aurora work and love are one. In Book VIII Romney recovers both knowledge and love through Aurora's book:

I have read your book, Aurora

...

The book is in my heart,

Lives in me, wakes in me, and dreams in me:

...

... this special book,

...

It stands above my knowledge, draws me up;

'Tis high to me.

...

A man may love a woman perfectly,

And yet by no means ignorantly maintain

A thousand women have not larger eyes:

Enough that she alone has looked at him

With eyes that, large or small, have won his soul.

And so, this book, Aurora, -- so, your book.

(VIII, 261-297)

Although the book which brings about Romney's transformation and the desired union of the lovers is a book expressive of transcendentalist knowledge, the resolution of the double bind, I submit, resides neither in Aurora's reconciliation to a traditionalist view of "woman," nor in a final re-affirmation of a transcendentalist vision. I have already demonstrated that through the characters of Marian and Lady Waldemar Aurora establishes the unsatisfactory and problematic nature of the hegemonic notion of "woman." In what follows I suggest, moreover, that Aurora's ironic reading of this hegemonic text of femininity poses a further threat to the metaphysics she strives to uphold. This threat, already introduced through the figure of the "friend" in the poem's exposition, in effect undermines the transcendentalist/Carlylean resolution I have outlined at the end of the previous chapter.

Throughout the poem, Aurora's self-reflexive project can be seen to generate irony. Indeed, by the time we reach Book VIII, transcendentalist knowledge has been undermined by a series of misinterpretations, by a faulty hermeneutics which generates error and thus undermines the status of Aurora's narrative as a locus of divinely inspired meaning. To better define the terms of this irony we first turn to Kierkegaard's The Concept of Irony (1841).

From a rhetorical definition of irony as "a figure of speech ... whose characteristic is this: to say the opposite of what is meant," Kierkegaard extrapolates to "a determination present in all forms of irony, namely, the phenomenon is not the essence but the opposite of the essence" (Kierkegaard, 1841: p. 264). Kierkegaard identifies two essential features of the ironic text which are particularly pertinent to an understanding of irony in Aurora Leigh. First, irony is defined as being generated by a perception of discrepancy, a gap: "it is essential for irony to have an external which is the opposite of an internal" (p. 273). Thus, for the "ironic subject" the "given actuality has completely lost its validity ... he only knows the present does not correspond to the Idea... The ironist is in one sense prophetic, too ... for he constantly points to something future; but what it is he knows not" (p. 278; italics mine). As a narrator of the feminine plot, Aurora, it has been argued, is at the outset such an ironic subject. Rejecting an "external," an "actuality" --

the hegemonic representations of women -- Aurora implies the possibility of an "internal" which she seeks by the way of irony. The resolution of this structure in Aurora Leigh is also consonant with Kierkegaard's perception of the end of irony as manifest in "true poetry," "the truth of irony," and "irony as a mastered moment" (pp. 336-342).

In his reflections on romantic poetry, Kierkegaard articulates the transcendentalist structure the centrality of which to Aurora Leigh has been noted; "on the one hand," contends Kierkegaard, "there is a given actuality with all its wretched Philistinism; on the other hand, there is the ideal actuality in dawning shapes" (pp. 319-20). Aurora Leigh's conscious project coincides perfectly with Kierkegaard's definition of "true poetry" as that in which

the true ideal is not in any way beyond: it is behind us insofar as it is a driving force, in front of us insofar as it is an inspiring goal, but through all this it is within us and this is its truth.

(Kierkegaard, 1841: p. 320; italics his)

Kierkegaard thus perceives a final movement structurally inherent in irony, a moment in which "irony renders both the poem and the poet free" (p. 336). This is the moment of "mastered irony" (p. 337) in which "the essence must exhibit itself as the phenomenon" (p. 341), a moment in which irony "teaches us to actualize actuality" (p. 340), and in which "the content of life must become a true and meaningful moment in the higher actuality whose fullness the soul desires" (p. 341). In Aurora Leigh, I submit, this final valorization of "actuality" is neither a valorization of the hegemonic discourse on "woman," nor a valorization of the Book of transcendentalist knowledge. Rather, it is a valorization of an "actuality" created by Aurora to resolve the double bind. This "actuality," moreover, involves a re-naming of both love and knowledge, and emerges out of an epistemological crisis.

Unlike the book which Romney reads -- and which Aurora writes prior to her climactic experience of love -- the book that Aurora proceeds to write (in Books VIII and IX) celebrates not so much transcendentalist tenets as the triumph of a woman poet whose book reconciles her to both love and

knowledge. Books VIII and IX of Aurora Leigh, then, tell a new story, a story which subsumes the narratives of paradox, dispersion, and frustration which precede it. In this story woman and poet, the "one yet contrarious," no longer express "their mutual horror of the unity" (as in Psyche Apocalypse: VI, pp. 326-7). Woman and poet become one, moreover, not by relinquishing either of their respective identities, but through a redefinition of both. In this new story knowledge (constitutive of poetic identity) and love (constitutive of female self) become one: Romney comes to love Aurora through the knowledge which is in her book.

In order to be able to tell this new story, to write the text of the literary woman's apotheosis, both plots constitutive of the double bind have to be undermined. This is achieved through an intensification of irony which brings about an epistemological collapse, a state in which epistemological certainty is no longer possible. The dynamics of irony outlined above depends for its operation on the sine qua non of all ironic structures: a shared presuppositional framework which makes possible a complicity between sender and receiver, author and reader. Kierkegaard observes:

the ironic figure of speech cancels itself, ... for the speaker presupposes his listeners understand him, hence through a negation of the immediate phenomenon the essence remains identical with the phenomenon.

(p. 265)

Similarly, Wayne Booth has more recently argued that "the whole thing [stable irony] cannot work at all unless both parties to the exchange [author/reader] have confidence that they are moving together in identical patterns" (Booth, 1974: p. 13). Booth's model uses the criterion of knowledge -- that is, knowledge which makes reconstruction possible -- to distinguish between the two essentially distinct types of irony: stable irony and unstable irony. In stable ironic works, "the authors have offered us an unequivocal invitation to reconstruct, and the reconstructions have not themselves been later undermined" (Booth, 1974: p. 233). Unstable irony Booth defines as "ironies in which the truth asserted or implied is that no stable reconstruction can be made out of the ruins revealed through irony" (p. 240). In unstable ironic texts, author

and reader do not come together in a conspiracy of knowledge for "the author ... refuses to declare himself, however subtly, for any stable proposition, even the opposite of whatever proposition his irony vigorously denies" (p. 240).

Aurora's narrative -- both feminine and transcendental -- although constantly pointing to discrepancies and gaps, eludes the oppositional structure of rejected meaning/reconstructed meaning by which Booth characterizes stable irony (Booth, 1974: pp. 10-12). While Aurora rejects, for example, Romney's traditionalist view of femininity, her ironic rendering of his views -- "you think a woman ripens, as a peach, / In the cheeks chiefly" (II, 334-5) -- is not, in its turn, accompanied by an affirmation of the 'true' nature of "woman." Aurora has no "Ideal" to counter Romney's "actuality" with. Instead, her own attempts to reconstruct such an "Ideal" are undermined by epistemological doubt, as is most forcefully illustrated in the passage describing her mother's portrait. The many oxymoronic figures of femininity which Aurora invokes in order to define "woman" only defy her search for an authentic, unified being, demonstrating the futility of her search for knowledge of the true feminine identity.

EBB's text, however, can no more be said to reiterate simply the ironic principle, forever shifting grounds in a determination not to disclose any stable proposition (Booth's infinite instability). Rather, Aurora's text can be seen to put in question and make problematic the basic constitutive element of the concept of irony: the assumed complicity between sender and receiver, author and reader. Both Kierkegaard and Booth, working at the different ends of the critical field, share an understanding of the "communal achievement" (Booth, 1974: p. 13) represented by the author/reader complicity of knowledge. In their respective definitions of irony it is this shared presuppositional framework which makes it possible for both sender and receiver to distinguish accurately between "appearance" and "essence," between "actuality" and "the Ideal." In Aurora's narrative, however, this complicity itself is undermined for Aurora herself is both a reader -- of the dominant discourse -- and an author -- of her own text -- so that incongruities in the texts she reads only magnify the ruptures which mark

her own text.

The prime cause of this epistemological collapse is Aurora's ambivalence towards the feminine plot. Striving to reject the feminine plot in order to assume the artistic plot, Aurora is driven to the realization that she is bound to it, that her text is no longer her own. Provoked by Lady Waldemar to feelings she deems alien to her text, failing to recognize herself in the text she herself is authoring, Aurora is driven to reflect on the authenticity of the written:

We poets always have uneasy hearts,
 ...
 We are used to dip our artist-hand in gole
 And potash, trying potentialities
 Of alternated colour, till at last
 We get confused, and wonder for our skin
 How nature tinged it first.
 (V, 1180-1187)

The 'reasons' for Aurora's confusion, for her inability to tell the 'real' from the 'fictional', the skin-colour from the "gole and potash," are manifold. In a first moment, the poet-narrator is constantly defeated in her poetic-interpretive project as she fails to 'read' the other characters' texts. Most fatal of these misreadings is the one eloquently indicted by Romney in the scene which precedes their reconciliation. Accepting the blame for his sin, Romney confesses:

I came convicted here,
 ...
 Because this woman from her crystal soul
 Had shown me something which a man calls light:
 Because too, formerly, I sinned by her.

He is quick, however, to point out Aurora's own failure to read his text:

But here again
 I'm buffled ...
 ...there's no room left for me
 At any woman's foot who misconceives

My nature, purpose, possible actions.
 You stand so less than woman through being more,
 And lose your natural instinct (like a beast)
 Through intellectual culture? Since indeed
 I do not think that any common she
 Would dare adopt such monstrous forgeries
 For the legible life signature of such
 As I, with all my blots -- with all my blots!
 (VIII, 1210-1235)

Motivated by her frustrated desire, Aurora has misread Romney's text, believing him to have married Lady Waldemar. This misreading, together with Aurora's misreading of both Marian's and Lady Waldemar's stories (discussed above), further undermine the status of the truth Aurora has set out to uncover. A more serious collapse, however, is indicated as Aurora is forced to affirm the illusory character of all perception and experience, the ultimate arbitrariness of assumed identities and shared values. With such irony Aurora responds to her first glimpse of Marian in the streets of Paris:

O world, O world,
 O jurists, rhymers, dreamers, what you please,
 We play a weary game of hide-and-seek!
 We shape a figure of our fantasy,
 Call nothing something, and run after it
 and lose it, lose ourselves too in the search,
 Till clash against us comes a somebody
 Who also has lost something and is lost,
 Philosopher against philanthropist,
 Academician against poet, man
 Against woman, against the living the dead, --
 Then home, with a bad headache and worse jest.
 (VI, 283-293)

To reconstruct a feminine self Aurora looks to the intertext evoked by her mother's portrait, only to find there an ironic, oxymoronic figure of frustrated desire. Her attempt to withdraw to a metaphysics which cancels irony through faith (faith in essence as opposed to a play of appearances)

fails too, for the necessities of the feminine plot -- which Aurora is culturally destined to reiterate -- conflict with and undermine the presuppositional stability necessary in order to bring about a resolution (or "mastery") of irony. Thus Book VII ends again on a note of epistemological collapse as Aurora explicitly refutes what has been her project's sustaining faith, her faith in the truth inscribed in the Book (as in the Palimpsest). She reflects:

Books succeed,
And lives fail.

...

"A good book" says he [Carrington]
"And you a woman." I had laughed at that,
But long since. I'm a woman, it is true;
Alas, and woe to us, when we feel it most!
Then, least care have we for the crowns and goals
And compliments on writing our good books.
The book has some truth in it, I believe,

...

Truth, so far, in my book;
(VII, 704-762; italics mine)

"some truth," "Truth, so far": the repetition is of a promise that has failed, as the qualifying adjectives all the more ironically expose a totalizing scheme that has betrayed. The narrator subtly builds up to the moment of total disillusion by insinuating the relativizing qualifiers: "Truth, so far, in my book a truth which draws/ From all things upwards./ ... / Art's the witness of who Is/ Behind this show/ .../Self-magnified in magnifying a truth" (VII, 827-855). The collapse is finally introduced through a metaphor which inextricably links the feminine and the metaphysical. Contemplating the Actual, this "hieroglyphic of material shows," Aurora's thoughts almost imperceptibly wander from the metaphysical to the personal:

...God is sad in heaven
To think what goes on in His recreant world
He made quite other; while that moon He made
To shine there, at the first love's covenant,

Shines still, convictive as a marriage-ring
 Before adulterous eyes.
 (VII, 867-872)

The "adulterous eyes" are of course Romney's, whom Aurora believes married to Lady Waldemar, and the ensuing loss of faith is thus clearly the effect of the feminine on the metaphysical:

Let us go.
 The end of woman (or of man, I think)
 Is not a book. Alas, the best of books
 Is but a word in Art,
 ...
 ... Art itself
 We've called the larger life, must feel the soul
 Live past it. For more's felt than is perceived,
 And more's perceived than can be interpreted,
 And Love strikes higher with his lambent flame
 Than Art can pile the faggots.
 ...
 ... We talk, talk,
 Conclude upon divine philosophies,
 And get the thanks of men for hopeful books,
 Whereat we take our own life up, and *** pshaw!
 Unless we piece it with another's life.
 (VII, 882-914)

As Books VIII and IX unfold the terms of the poem's resolution, however, it becomes evident that while the disillusionment is with the metaphysical text proper -- the reading of the Palimpsest -- Aurora's own book, the one she writes in the course of Books VIII and IX, ultimately emerges as the true script. Setting out to write her story for her "better self" (I, 4) as "woman and artist" (II, 4), Aurora has employed the figure of the "Palimpsest" to describe her quest. She attains desired fullness of self, however, when her book not only succeeds in articulating transcendentalist knowledge --- deciphering the original Book -- but also recovers for her love. In Romney's declaration of love -- which immediately precedes and in effect brings about the apocalyptic conclusion

-- EBB thus writes the literary woman's apotheosis; "I have read your book, Aurora," confesses an enlightened Romney who has been converted both to transcendentalism and to Aurora's creed of love, "the book is in my heart,/ Lives in me, wakes in me, and dreams in me" (VIII, 261-266).

Thus, underlying and undermining the poem's avowedly transcendentalist framework is a tripartite narrative structure which effectively subsumes, and makes use of, the binary model. In a first moment, it is as a transcendentalist subject that Aurora comes to know the self as both knowledge and desire. The introduction of the double bind then imposes an alienation of desire (the feminine plot) from knowledge (the transcendentalist plot). It is finally by restoring desire to knowledge -- Romney comes to know and love Aurora through her book -- that the paradoxical injunction is defeated. I thus argue that the resolution of the double bind -- a resolution which makes finally possible the articulation of a "complete" female poetic subjectivity -- does not lie in the re-affirmation of a transcendentalist metaphysics. Although this metaphysics is instrumental in bringing about the resolution -- it informs the book which Romney reads -- its failure to generate the terms of the resolution is evident from the epistemological collapse discussed above. It is this epistemological collapse, moreover, which finally frees Aurora to write into her own text a satisfactory resolution, a full articulation of a female poetic voice, a new apocalypse which celebrates the literary woman's apotheosis.

In the poem's conclusion, then, transcendentalist knowledge is superseded by the triumphant discourse of female poetic subjectivity. The apocalyptic/transcendentalist ending is thus radically transformed by the context of the poem. While the poem's last lines literally repeat the Book of Revelation, the story which they seal greatly transforms the original script. "I John saw the holy city," reads the Scripture, "new Jerusalem ... prepared as a bride adorned for her husband" (21: 2). In EBB's text not only is the visionary "I" a woman, the vision itself is feminized, for in this new Jerusalem it is the prophet/speaker who will be the bride in the dawning "new, Near Day." Reinstating herself as a transcendentalist subject, Aurora not only feminizes the speaking subject but also the tale itself. At the same time that it claims the totalizing meaning of the

Book, Aurora's own text in effect usurps the old script. While the transcendentalist doctrine of the "twofold world" (VII, 768) is a constitutive element of this new text, it is no longer its reigning paradigm. Rather, this text, which tells of the "woman and artist, -- either incomplete,/ Both credulous of completion," itself achieves completion when a new paradigm is introduced: that of the complete "woman and artist."

The distribution of voices in the two concluding books complements this transformation. While the double bind was a condition generated by the conflicting demands of a metaphysics -- which posits the subject as a privileged mediator -- and a feminine discourse -- which posits woman's self and knowledge as mediated -- its resolution lies in the final affirmation of woman's (Aurora's) direct access to knowledge as Romney assumes the mediatory role, becoming a mouthpiece, an echo. As Romney takes over the narration in Book VIII, reiterating the "truth" (the metaphysical tenets), Aurora's silence (a virtual narrative absence) underlies an anticipation, for her true interest now is not in the Book (the metaphysical book) but in the new story she is in the process of writing, not in the original script, but in this new story which tells of an act of love made possible through her book. Thus, when Aurora's voice does surfaces in Book IX, it is to celebrate the triumph of a poetics of the female subject, a poetics which announces the recovery of love/self through a recovery of world/transcendence. The poem's very last lines are Aurora's:

My Romney!-- Lifting up my hand in his,
 ...
 He stood a moment with erected brows,
 ...
 ... and when
 I saw his soul saw, -- "Jasper first," I said;
 "And second, sapphire; third, chalcedony;
 The rest in order: -- last, an amethyst."

"I love your verses with all my heart, dear Miss Barrett," wrote in 1845 the author of "Pippa Passes" to the reclusive and already much acclaimed poet, "so into me has it gone, and part of me has it become, this great living poetry of yours ... I do, as I say, love these books with all my heart -- and I love you too" (Kintner, 1969: I, p. 3; italics mine). On this note of fusion of self and text, eros and poetic telos, opens the fascinating and elaborate co-production which is The Letters of Robert Browning and Elizabeth Barrett Barrett 1845-1846 and ends Aurora Leigh,

work which was to express its author's "highest convictions upon Life and Art" (Dedication, AL). At the other end of both monumental works lies fragmentation, alienation of self from text, of eros from poetic creation. Robert Browning's lines, although initially rejected, are retrieved, re-appropriated, in Aurora Leigh, as EBB writes the apotheosis of the woman poet. In this new text reading is reconciled to loving, as the poet's knowledge gains for her love. Echoing Robert Browning's words, Romney tells Aurora:

I have read your book,
Aurora,
...
... the book is in my heart,
Lives in me, wakes in me, and dreams in me:
My daily bread tastes of it, -- and my wine
Which has no smack of it, I pour it out
It seems unnatural drinking.
(VIII, 261-269)

Now that text and self have become one for Romney, as they have been throughout for Aurora, his love no longer dissociates the woman from the poet. Rather, it is through the poet that he comes to love the woman, acknowledging them to be one:

A man may love a woman perfectly,
And yet by no means ignorantly maintain
A thousand women have not larger eyes:
Enough that she alone has looked at him
With eyes that, large or small, have won his soul.
And so, this book, Aurora, -- so, your book.
(VIII, 292-297)

CHAPTER SIX

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF AURORA LEIGH:
Critical Recognition as Literary History

In surveying the critical literature on Aurora Leigh from the date of its publication to the present date, it is my purpose in this chapter to examine the other intertextual pole -- the intertext proper to the act of interpretation. Here I derive my central preoccupation from recent hermeneutic thought, principally that of Gadamer and Jauss. For Jauss,

Significance, which is unlocked through aesthetic experience, arises from the convergence of effect and reception. It is no atemporal, basic element which is always already given; rather, it is the never-completed result of a process of progressive and enriching interpretation, which concretizes -- in an ever new and different manner -- the textually immanent potential for meaning in the change of horizons of historical life-worlds.

(Jauss, 1979: p. 183)

While I do not unqualifiedly share Jauss' optimism -- his faith in the necessarily "progressive" and "enriching" nature of the interpretive process -- I find his emphasis on the historicity of the critical event useful. Citing H. Blumenberg's work on myth in order to support his definition of "significance," Jauss claims that texts "do not 'always already' signify what they are interpreted or made out as being, but rather arrive at this out of the configurations into which they enter or into which they are brought" (Jauss, 1979: p. 222; italics mine). It is my aim here to try to unravel the different "configurations" which have given rise to the many interpretative acts which constitute the "significance" of Aurora Leigh -- its literary history.

While Foucault's plan tends to leave out the interpretive agent, from whose particular epistemological position the analysis of discursive practices is carried out, Jauss' and Gadamer's revised hermeneutics strives to introduce an understanding of the historicity of the interpretive act. Gadamer thus views as an essential step in the interpretive process the attempt to "make conscious the prejudices" which govern any given critical understanding (Gadamer, 1975: p. 258). My examination of the critical literature on Aurora Leigh, then, has a twofold purpose, for I undertake not only to re-read literary history critically, but also to better define

the position of my present critical endeavor.

"Most scholars today know more about the critical commentary on the poem than they do about the work itself," commented Virginia Radley in 1972, foreseeing no brighter future for Aurora Leigh: "it [Aurora Leigh] will never have much appeal ... for the mass of graduate students in English who seek a thesis topic with the urgent specter of 'Time's winged chariot' behind them" (Radley, 1972: pp. 120-125). Radley was of course wrong, and on two accounts. Firstly, since 1972 at least three doctoral dissertations have been completed which deal exclusively with EBB's canon, while a recent MLA convention (December 1981) hosted a special session on Aurora Leigh (chaired by Sandra Donaldson) where students and professors alike demonstrated the utmost interest and enthusiasm.

Graver yet, however, is Radley's misconception in assessing the work accomplished concerning the EBB critics. We have yet to see the first comprehensive treatment of the EBB critics; nothing comparable to The Browning Critics (1965) or Tennyson: The Critical Heritage (1967) exists as yet in EBB scholarship.⁽¹⁾ Both Radley's Elizabeth Barrett Browning (1972; Twayne series) and A. Hayter's Mrs. Browning (1962) -- the only two modern, scholarly, full-length studies of EBB's canon -- fail to account for the critical tradition. In both studies we find the by now clichéd references to Edward FitzGerald's notorious statement (in a letter) -- "Elizabeth Barrett Browning is dead. Thank God, no more Aurora Leighs!" -- as well as to Swinburne's high praise -- "No English contemporary poet by profession has left us work so full of living fire." While Radley ventures no further, Hayter extends the scope of sources mentioned quite considerably in a chapter entitled "Case for Reassessment," but does not attempt comprehensiveness or a systematic reading of the texts mentioned.

While bibliographical aids which make the critical corpus accessible do exist, no attempt has as yet been made to investigate the corpus systematically. Furthermore, while modern students of EBB's canon have thus been hampered by not knowing enough "about the critical commentary on

(1) The closest thing we have to such studies dates back to 1900 and consists of excerpts from reviews which Porter and Clarke affixed to their edition of EBB's Works.

the poem," mainstream Victorian criticism has been virtually blind to the work itself. When in 1969 Isobel Armstrong published The Major Victorian Poets: Reconsiderations, for example, her choice of Alfred Tennyson, Robert Browning, Matthew Arnold, Arnold Clough, and G.M. Hopkins as the major Victorian poets meriting reconsideration was clearly, overwhelmingly, supported by mainstream Victorian criticism. Whatever scruples Armstrong had concerning her choice were articulated in her "Introduction," in which she endeavored to explain the omission of Meredith, Swinburne, and the Rossettis from her Reconsiderations. In 1972 Armstrong published Victorian Scrutinies, aimed at examining critical reviews of Victorian poetry in order to suggest "what kinds of demands were made on the poet during this period ... and to give a coherent indication of attitudes to poetry at this time [1830 to 1870]" (Armstrong, 1972: p. 1). Not surprisingly, we find the sample corpus, intended to represent "Victorian scrutinies," to consist of reviews of poetry by Tennyson, Robert Browning, Arnold, and Clough. Quite expectedly, then, there is no trace in Armstrong's formulation of the "terms of the critical discussion" in the period under consideration, of any of the preoccupations which so explicitly mark Victorian reviews of poetry by women. Certainly, both Victorian women poets and their reviewers shared the concerns expressed by Tennyson, Browning, Arnold, Clough, and their reviewers: concerns with the "proper materials of poetry," with "psychological, human (social) or moral reference," with "sympathy," and "the moral function of poetry" (Armstrong, 1972: pp. 6-13). But what of the deep-rooted anxiety, peculiar to women poets, to which EBB gave voice in her plea to a fellow-poet and a reviewer of her poetry, R.H. Horne: "your best compliment to me is the truth at all times, without reference to sex"? (Mayer, 1877: II, p. 21; italics mine). The gap in Armstrong's formulation of the chief Victorian critical concerns is glaring. It involves both a failure to articulate the different critical standards by which Victorian women poets were evaluated, and a failure to grasp the women poet's own preoccupation with a poetics of the female subject.(2)

(2) A similar oversight also flaws a more recent work, Lawrence J. Starzyk's The Imprisoned Splendor: A Study of Victorian Critical Theory (1977). Although EBB's poetry is extremely relevant to the central issues discussed in Starzyk's study -- such as "poetry and the modern element" and "poetry and the new spiritual cult" -- she is nowhere mentioned.

As Elaine Showalter has amply demonstrated in A Literature of Their Own (1977), arguments ad feminam were indeed highly characteristic of Victorian periodical reviewing, their damaging effects on the women writers being "serious and extensive" (Showalter, 1977: p. 477). Showalter's is a pioneering work which goes a fair way towards rectifying a pervasive critical oversight represented here by Armstrong's failure to include the problematics of female authorship -- and its correlate, the double critical standard -- in her formulation of the "Victorian scrutinies." I propose to carry on in this spirit, extending the scope of investigation, which in Showalter's study is limited to the critical reception of the women novelists, to include the reception history of a major work by a major Victorian woman poet, EBB's Aurora Leigh. More specifically, I propose to look at the critical literature on Aurora Leigh as it relates to the two major concerns of the present work, namely, the poem's exploration of the problematics of a female poetic subject, and the relative position of this endeavor both within the hegemonic context and within the context of a tradition of self-reflexivity in women's writing. In other words, I will be concerned to find out what readers of the poem -- Victorian and modern -- have thought its central preoccupations to be, as well as how they have conceived of its relative position within the literary tradition.

Every actual reader of Aurora Leigh has first to contend with the poem's first virtual reader, the explicit addressee of Aurora's tale whom she implores: "Deal with us nobly, women though we be,/ And honour us with truth if not with praise" (V, 82-3). Anticipating what Showalter has called the "double standard" in periodical reviewing of women's works, EBB has Romney parody the typical review Aurora, as a woman poet, could expect; Romney forewarns her:

You never can be satisfied with praise
Which men give women when they judge a book
Not as mere work but as mere woman's work,
Expressing the comparative respect
Which means the absolute scorn. "Oh, excellent,
"What grace, what facile turns, what fluent sweeps,
"What delicate discernment ... almost thought!
"The book does honour to the sex, we hold.

"Among our female authors we make room
"For this fair writer, and congratulate
"The country that produces in these times
"Such women, competent to ... spell."
(AL, II, 232-243).

Although EBB's contemporary reviewers could have hardly ignored such open provocations, they did, on the whole, fail to grasp their larger implications in the context of the poem. Failing to understand the concern with the critical double standard as part of the larger problematics of female authorship explored in the poem, most reviewers regarded it condescendingly as a woman's personal plea for fair judgment.

As the following discussion will amply demonstrate, the critical literature on the poem, and well into our century, is shockingly silent on the poem's central theme: the dilemma of the woman poet. It will be my concern in this chapter to examine the critical displacement which accompanies this silence, a displacement by which a different thematics -- superimposed from without -- is made to usurp the poem's own avowed concerns.(3) As will become clear, however, this superimposed thematics is anything but unrelated to the poem's own project of combatting a paradoxical hegemonic injunction; the superimposed thematics is the very thematics which has provoked that project in the first place.

Although the critical tradition presents a degree of homogeneity due to the repetition of certain arguments, my objective in the following is not so much to arrive at a synthesis as to describe the dynamics underlying individual acts of interpretation. It has been a common practice with EBB scholars to cite from the critical literature out of context in order to present a certain unified climate of opinion. However informative, this procedure often leaves one at a loss as to the logic underlying the critical judgment discussed, and not infrequently leads to a misreading of the arguments thus taken out of context. By proceeding in a more

(3) A similar phenomenon has been observed by Carol Ohmann in relation to the critical literature on Emily Brontë's Wuthering Heights. She notes that in the critical accounts "the novel has indeed become stereotypical. But ... the stereotypes are imposed from without rather than dramatized within the poem itself" (Ohmann, 1971: p. 911).

comprehensive manner, and by paying close attention to the networks of reasoning which constitute individual readings, I hope to achieve a more complete understanding of the critical discourse on Aurora Leigh.

By the time Aurora Leigh was published, EBB had already attained a very solid critical reputation, as is most evident from the fact that she was considered for the laureatship after Wordsworth's death. This on the whole laudatory critical consensus seems to me to have played an important role in the subsequent reception of Aurora Leigh, often compelling reluctant reviewers to search out the poem's merits in spite of their overall dissatisfaction with it. In order to understand, then, the background for the critical reception of Aurora Leigh we turn, for a brief moment, to a representative text, H.T. Tuckerman's review of EBB's 1844 Poems, originally published in Thoughts on the Poets and later appearing as a critical preface to the 1854 edition of the 1844 Poems. The review is particularly pertinent to my present project for it articulates a view of EBB's poetry which was later to underlie much of the criticism of Aurora Leigh. Tuckerman's review, as we shall see, introduces the arguments pro and con in terms which, in retrospect, we realize to have become the commonplaces of EBB criticism.

Tuckerman firmly roots his reading of EBB's poetry in gender-related categories, affirming that

authorship, as a career, is undesirable for a woman. Only when duty lends her sanction, or preeminent gifts seem almost to anticipate destiny, can the most brilliant exhibition of talent add to the intrinsic graces or true influence of the sex.

(Tuckerman, 1854: p. x)

Thus opening his review by asserting the conflict between "intrinsic [feminine] graces" and "authorship," Tuckerman's project remains throughout an attempt to reconcile EBB's "masculine" achievement with a desirable feminine character (p. xii). In the case of EBB the task is all the more difficult, for here the reviewer has to do with a learned woman poet, whose poetry is "remarkable" for a "predominance of thought and learning;" Tuckerman declares: "the scholar is everywhere co-evident with the poet"

(p. xii). Tuckerman clearly implies that while in a male poet this blending of "thought" with "the most inartificial overflow of ... the muse" would have been most welcome, in a woman poet it constitutes a basic flaw. Consequently, he cannot wholly approve of an otherwise highly regarded poetic "labor," that of the poet reconciling himself "to life through wisdom and ... religious creed," for here it is the poet laboring to "reconcile herself to life through wisdom" (p. xii; italics mine). The reason for the disapproval is clearly stated: "This is a rather masculine process" (p. xii).

Thus, the critic constantly bestows praise only to withdraw it on grounds of gender incompatibility. He admits to appreciating "Mrs. Browning's lofty spirit and brave scholarship" (p. xiii), but promptly qualifies the praise by adding

we incline to and have faith in less systematic phases of woman's character. There is a native tenderness and grace, a child-like play of emotion, a simple utterance, that brings more genial refreshment.

(p. xiii)

Tuckerman is ultimately ill-at-ease with the poetry (and the poet). Regarding EBB as a woman poet, he places her primarily in the context of other women poets. The comparison, uncritically established since taken for granted, proves EBB deficient because different; while in the "effusions" of "Mrs. Hemans and Mrs. Norton" Tuckerman perceives "enthusiasm" to give "the tone and color," resulting in a "glowing development," EBB's poetry gives rise to a "statuesque ... development" (xi-xii). Different from other women poets, EBB is also, inevitably in Tuckerman's understanding, different from the male poets because a woman. Ultimately, Tuckerman's project is self-defeating, and one which denies the poetry any possibility of being understood on its own terms. Rejecting what he himself finds the poetry to excel in on the grounds of it being "masculine," while also condemning the poetry for failing to embrace the properly feminine, Tuckerman ends on a paradoxical note. Discarding that which he himself has praised as most remarkable in the poetry, he finally suggests that what is "most interesting" in EBB's poetry is exactly that which he has found it most deficient in: "tenderness ... that divine

reality of the heart" (p. xvi). Limiting the critical endeavor to an attempt to "trace the woman beneath the attainment and reflection" (xvi), Tuckerman condemns the critical project to a self-willed blindness.

Eulogizing on the poet's death in 1861, the reviewer for the Atlantic Monthly crystalizes for us this critical project of collapsing EBB's poetry into a pre-conceived prototype of feminine expression. Speculating on precious stones as symbolic representations of "souls of men and women," the reviewer fancies "the opal ... to be a concentration of Mrs. Browning's genius. It is essentially the woman-stone, giving out a sympathetic warmth, varying its colors from day to day, as though an index of the heart's barometer" (Atlantic Monthly, 1861: p 374; italics his). While the poetry is thus collapsed into the woman, the woman is, in turn, reduced to the ever shifting vagaries of the heart; at the "opal's center" -- as at the woman's -- the reviewer finds to lie "the deep crimson of love" (p. 374). The Atlantic Monthly reviewer posits a perfect circle: woman is characterized by a "sympathetic warmth," by "purity" and "delicate, perpetual ... hope," her whole being subsumed by "the heart," the locus of an ever shifting, "varying," sentiment of love (p. 374). EBB, in turn, is "a great woman," a "large-hearted" woman whose poetry is the perfect articulation of womanhood for it translates masculine "lessons" -- reflection -- into the feminine "heart's verse" (pp. 368-9). Seeking out "the woman more than the poet" (p. 369), the reviewer thus silences the voice of the woman poet.

While Tuckerman's essay might be 'excused' for its misguided effort to "trace the woman beneath the attainment" -- after all, it did precede Aurora Leigh -- the Atlantic Monthly reviewer stands guilty of totally disregarding EBB's chief project in the poem when he seeks out "the woman more than the poet." He was not alone, however, in thus turning his eyes away from Aurora's heroic endeavor of achieving wholeness as "Woman and artist." Another exemplary case is a 1857 review of the poem in Westminster Review.

The reviewer for the Westminster Review writing in January 1857, only few months after the poem's appearance, has the highest praise for Aurora Leigh, arguing that

the most striking characteristic of 'Aurora Leigh,' distinguishing it from the larger proportion of that contemporary poetry which wins the applause of reviewers, is, that its melody, fancy, and imagination -- what we may call its poetical body -- is everywhere informed by a soul, namely, by genuine thought and feeling.

(Westminster Review, 1857: p. 307; italics his)

The review is very brief, devoting a page and a half to a critical assessment of the poem and three pages to direct quotations. The reviewer introduces the citations in the form of independent short pieces of verse, and entitles them "Mother Love" (AL, I, 47-63), "A Portrait" (of Aurora's aunt; I, 270-308), "Seriousness of Art" (II, 227-259), and "Italy from the Sea" (VII, 453-489). Although the excerpts bring out the poem's central preoccupation with the definition of "woman" (in "A Portrait") and "woman poet" (in "Seriousness of Art"), the reviewer is totally silent on these issues in the critical assessment. One wonders, however, whether in selecting the passage entitled "Mother Love" -- "Women know/ The way to rear up children ..." -- and an excerpt in which Aurora agonizes "I might have been a common woman now,/ And happier, less known and less left alone ...," the reviewer does not implicitly address this preoccupation by suggesting that the poem resolves the problematics of the woman poet through recourse to traditional feminine virtues.

What is striking in the reviewer's critical assessment is that while there is no mention of the problematics explored in the poem -- the conflicting demands of "woman" and "poet" -- the reviewer's own project seems to be an attempt to reconcile these opposing terms. The reviewer praises the poem for embracing "so wide a range of thought and emotion," but immediately adds "Mrs. Browning is, perhaps, the first woman who has produced a work which exhibits all the peculiar powers without the negations of her sex" (Westminster Review, 1857: p. 306; italics mine). The statement is fraught with internal contradictions which underlie both the reviewer's unquestioning acceptance of the woman poet's condition as anomalous and his desire to argue 'normalcy' for EBB. First, the reviewer, who clearly reads Aurora Leigh in the context of women's poetry, simultaneously asserts and negates this very association by taking the poem

to be exceptional in terms of the class to which he nonetheless claims it belongs. The reviewer thus paradoxically chooses to praise the poem by associating it with a literary class he views as essentially defective; Aurora Leigh's singularity lies in its excellence ("peculiar powers") and its avoidance of the "negations" characteristic of women's poetry. The paradox, as the reviewer's further comments reveal, is in effect a double bind. The reviewer's characterization of women's poetry -- the "negations" -- is double-edged, for while excellence is seen to be threatened by the feminine character (of the poet and the poetry alike), excellence also threatens femininity, being masculine in nature. The reviewer resolves this bind by declaring Aurora Leigh exceptional in that it "superadds to masculine vigour, breadth, and culture, feminine subtlety of perception, feminine quickness of sensibility, and feminine tenderness" (p. 306). This vision of harmonious coexistence notwithstanding, one hears a distinct echo of Aurora's problematics in the reviewer's observation that "it is difficult to point to a woman of genius who is not either too little feminine or too exclusively so" (p. 306). Clearly, the reviewer here implies the tension between "woman" and "poet" to be the rule, a rule to which EBB (but not Aurora) is the exception; in Aurora Leigh he finds EBB to be "the greater poet because she is intensely a poetess" (p. 306).

The argument put forth by the Westminster Review writer will prove to be a stock one with sympathetic reviewers of EBB's generation. While Aurora is often disliked by these reviewers -- who use this dislike to justify an unwillingness to deal with the issues raised by her character -- EBB is loudly hailed as a supreme poetess. By regarding her canon as maintaining a perfect balance between feminine characteristics and artistic exigencies, these reviewers cover up the poem's disturbing questioning of both terms of the opposition. Reinscribing the poem (and the canon at large) within an hegemonic discourse from which we have seen the poem strive to disengage itself, this critical praise comes at the high cost of an oppressive silencing of the vital issues raised by the poem.

Clearly, then, a major preoccupation of EBB's contemporary reviewers was with her position within what to them was a recognizable tradition of women's poetry. Bearing in mind EBB's disavowal of female precursors -- "I look everywhere for grandmothers and find none" -- we now turn to examine a

similar disavowal or ambivalence in the critical tradition. Reviewing Aurora Leigh for the North British Review few months after the poem's publication, Coventry Patmore writes:

[in Aurora Leigh] the development of her [Aurora's] powers as a poetess is elaborately depicted; but as Mrs. Browning is herself almost the only modern example of such development, the story is uninteresting from its very singularity.

(Patmore, 1857: p. 242)

Patmore's pronouncement is intriguing. Given his active involvement in periodical reviewing, it is highly unlikely that he was unaware of the women poets publishing in the first decades of the century. Indeed, Patmore's statement will not bear close scrutiny and seems to conceal more than it discloses. Firstly, Patmore's verdict of singularity here is clearly tautological, for it is his initial description of the story of Aurora Leigh as one concerning the development of a poetess that enables him to make the charge of singularity. Since, however, Patmore is at no point in the review either concerned with EBB's exploration of the problematics of the woman poet or with the way in which Aurora's story differs from the male poetic pattern, it is clear that his classification does not relate to the poem's thematics. Rather, Patmore's perception of singularity has its roots in a bias altogether extrinsic to the work itself. His classification owes nothing to Aurora's quest and everything to a pervasive bias by which the sex of the author a priori colours the reading of the work itself. In the case of Aurora Leigh this situation is doubly magnified, for both the actual author and the fictional poet-narrator are women.

The presupposition or 'unsaid' underlying Patmore's argument becomes all the more evident as we re-read the review's expository paragraph. Patmore's initial statement already indicates that his concern is not with the "development of her [EBB's or Aurora's] powers as a poetess," but rather with EBB's (and by implication Aurora's) singularity relative to the very class the existence of which he has denied: that of women poets. As it clearly transpires from this opening paragraph, the singularity lies with EBB rather than with the story, bearing not so much on the poem as on

the poet. I quote this first paragraph in full:

The poetical reputation of Mrs. Browning, late Miss Barrett, has been growing slowly, until it has reached a height which has never before been attained by any modern poetess though several others have had wider circles of readers. An intellect of a very unusual order has been ripened by an education scarcely less unusual for a woman; and Mrs. Browning now honourably enjoys the title of a poetess in her own right, and not merely by courtesy. (Patmore, 1857: p. 237; italics mine)

It is of prime importance that although in the body of the article Patmore finds some of EBB's poetry deserving "to rank with the very best of Milton and Wordsworth" (p. 239), in these very opening lines EBB is chiefly introduced as a "poetess," and in the context of women's literary achievements. The contrast set up in these lines is clear-cut: a female tradition lacking in "intellect" and "education," to which the title of poetry is affixed "merely by courtesy," is set against this particular woman poet (EBB) whose "intellect" and "education," as well as "poetical reputation" honourably gained, thus render her an "unusual" woman, singular, different. The scheme is but another reiteration of the double bind: while the "usual" woman can only be a fake poet -- enjoying "the title of poetess ... merely by courtesy" -- to "honourably enjoy the title" is "unusual for a woman" (italics mine).

While Patmore's review thus perpetuates the terms of the double bind, it remains totally oblivious to the poem's own articulation of this problematics. A recognition of Aurora's agonizing quest for an harmonious selfhood in which "poet" and "woman" will be reconciled is totally missing from Patmore's rather extensive plot-summary. Patmore offers no comment as he briefly alludes to the crucial 'birthday scene' in Book Two, in which "the young poetess, indignant at being sought as a mere helpmate, refuses the offer [of marriage]" (p. 243).

Significantly, Patmore raves about "Casa Guidi Windows" which he believes "the happiest of Mrs. Browning's performances, because it makes no pretensions to high artistic character, and is really 'a simple story of

personal impressions'" (p. 240; italics mine). Conveniently echoing EBB's own words, Patmore twists them to support the hegemonic view of women's literature as expressive of the feminine character: simple (unsophisticated, 'natural') and personal (lacking in intellectual breadth and generalization). Accordingly, he finds it to be the chief misfortune of Aurora Leigh that it is "written chiefly for the advocacy of distinct 'convictions upon Life and Art'" (pp. 240-241). As it soon becomes clear, moreover, this objection owes more to Patmore's "dissent ... from certain of the views advocated" (p. 241), than from any coherent theory of poetic excellence. That Patmore dotes on these points of contention even before embarking on a "simple analysis" (p. 241) of the poem, and that these objections constitute the sole properly critical venture in the whole review, further confirm us in attributing his ambivalence (towards the poem) to an ideological conflict. Patmore charges: "We think that 'conventions,' which are society's unwritten laws, are condemned in too sweeping and unexamining a style" (p. 241). His indignation at the condemnation of one such "unwritten law" is evident in his comment on the passage in Aurora Leigh describing "Aurora's English school program, which," Patmore announces "with many hundreds of lines like them, have certainly no right to be called verse" (p. 242). We will do well here to remember that the passage alluded to includes one of the most poignant criticisms levelled by Aurora at the hegemonic view of the 'womanly' woman. Patmore's choice of this passage as an example of flawed form is strategic, for it serves the double purpose of disguising an ideological conflict as an aesthetic judgment, while also silencing the opponent by displacing the focus of critical attention. Here we find ourselves at the center of what Jehlen has termed the "feminist fulcrum," which is

not just any point in the culture where misogyny is manifested but one where misogyny is pivotal or crucial to the whole. The thing to look for ... is the connection, the meshing of a definition of woman and a definition of the world.

(Jehlen, 1981: p. 586)

Patmore's irritation at Aurora Leigh stems from his profound disapproval of EBB's critique of the traditionalist discourse on woman, and is aggravated by his recognition that this critique indeed involves, directly

or indirectly, the social order at large, social "conventions." We also note in passing that, as Paul Turner has demonstrated, "the violence of Patmore's own reactions to Aurora Leigh" may be further explained by Patmore's realization that the passage alluded to above, and especially its reference to "a score of books on womanhood" (AL, I, 427), could be understood as a direct attack on his own recently published (and far less popular) The Angel in the House (Turner, 1948: p. 233).

The writer for Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine of January 1857 finds Aurora Leigh to be "a remarkable poem; strong in energy, rich in thought, abundant in beauty" (p. 41), and EBB to be "a lady whose rare genius has already won her an exalted place among the poets of the age," and who is "endowed with a powerful intellect" (Blackwood's, 1857: p. 25). These words of praise notwithstanding, the reviewer disagrees with much in the poem. Firstly, he regards the "story" of the poem -- which he reconstructs at some length -- to be "such ... which no admirer of Mrs. Browning's genius ought in prudence to defend.... it is fantastic, unnatural, exaggerated; and all the worse, because it professes to be a tale of our own times" (p. 32). As the reviewer's further comments demonstrate, however, he takes issue with the poem not on grounds of unrealistic portrayal but rather on unattractive (i.e., ideologically unwelcome) characterization. Here again, there is the condescending reference to Aurora's plea for fair criticism -- "she challenges a truthful opinion, and that opinion she shall have" (p. 25) -- while the spirit of Aurora's statement is totally disregarded. As with Patmore's review, the Blackwood's reviewer not only totally fails to recognize the problematics at the core of the poem, but in his own discussion unwittingly or deliberately perpetuates the very terms of the dilemma exposed in the poem. Here the reviewer disapproves of the character of Aurora for "she is not a genuine woman; ... what we miss in her is instinctiveness, which is the greatest charm of women" (p. 33). As so often happens in contemporary reviews of the poem, a difference of view is paraded as pertinent and objective criticism of the work discussed. The real point of contention surfaces as the reviewer admits:

With all deference to Mrs. Browning, ... we must maintain
that woman was created to be dependent on the man, and not

in the primary sense his lady and his mistress. The extreme independence of Aurora detracts from her feminine charm.

(p. 33)

Similarly, the reviewer denounces the poem's treatment of "mean" subjects: "to dignify the mean, is not the province of poetry -- let us rather say that there are atmospheres so tainted that in them poetry cannot live" (Blackwood's, 1857: p. 36). The reviewer's failure to grasp EBB's concern with problems of class -- a concern he dismisses as treatment of "mean" subjects -- parallels his unwillingness to pursue the poem's exploration of contemporary aspects of the 'woman question.' Here a sympathy for the "conventions" evoked earlier by Patmore, as well as a leaning towards a conservative aesthetics, prevent the reviewer from meaningfully reading the poem. Provoked by the poem's call for a less formalistic aesthetics and for the portrayal of contemporary issues, the reviewer dismisses them by labelling the one "carelessness of ... construction" and the other "a symptom of literary decadence" (p. 40). Averting his look away from the concerns of the poem, the reviewer silences them by claiming them inappropriate to the genre: "it is not the province of the poet to depict things as they are, but so to refine and purify as to purge out the grosser matter; and this he cannot do if he attempts to give a faithful picture of his own times" (p. 34).

When all is said and done, the Blackwood's Magazine reviewer has appreciation for only a miniscule part of the poem, anticipating many other reviewers to come with his high praise for "the passages which refer to Marian and her babe" (p. 36). Although the reviewer nowhere explicitly associates EBB's work with women's poetry, an underlying assumption concerning the particular values to be found in women's poetry is evident in his critique of Aurora Leigh. Indeed, the only passages of which the reviewer wholeheartedly approves involve valorized images of motherhood as exemplified by Marian. The reviewer, who elsewhere praises the poem for being "rich in thought" (p. 41), betrays a deep rooted bias when he enthusiastically declares: "whenever she [EBB] deserts her theories, and touches a natural chord, we acknowledge her as a mistress of song" (p. 39).

Another reviewer for Blackwood's Magazine, writing few months after EBB's death, encapsulates for us what was to become the prevalent critical view of EBB in the decades to come. The reviewer strikes a note of high praise when he claims EBB's poetry to exhibit a rare "union of the emotional and intellectual, both at a high degree, yet neither stifling the other, each intensifying each" (Blackwood's, 1862: p. 451). This praise, however, is significantly qualified by the frequent and insistent references to the feminine character of the poetry, in which a traditional view of femininity is uncritically viewed to coincide with the total effect of the poetry. Thus the reviewer emphasizes the "beneficent effect which flows" from EBB's poetry "in stirring the nobler emotions," as well as the heightened sense of "the presence of a genuine and delicate womanhood" (p. 451). He declares that it is "a soul speaking, not a talent" (p. 451), and further insists that it is the soul of "a sensitive, impressionable, saddened, but loving woman" (p. 451).

This 1862 review epitomizes a critical judgment of EBB's canon -- including Aurora Leigh -- which was to remain prevalent well into our own century. In this judgment, laudatory expressions quickly give way to a reductive characterization of EBB's poetry through an association with what the reviewer considers an inferior tradition, that of women's poetry; the Blackwood's reviewer concludes: "In no previous age has such a singer been found among women" (Blackwood's, 1862: p. 451; italics mine). Conceiving of her poetry within the limits of the very tradition they claim it surpasses, critics have not only perpetuated a double critical standard but have also virtually silenced EBB's monumental project of challenging the hegemonic definitions of "woman" and "poet." Searching out her properly 'womanly' moments, they have chosen to ignore a central thrust of her poetry, her persistent questioning of this same "genuine and delicate womanhood." Reading through the critical literature, one is overwhelmed by the persistence of various strategies by which the critical tradition has bypassed, remained silent on (or silenced) the problematics of the female poetic subject so explicitly explored in the poem. Often, a displacement of focus occurs as critics pursue one or the other (or both) of two main preoccupations: with the poem's violation of formal conventions and with the story's violation of narrative verisimilitude. From Patmore to a modern EBB scholar like Alethea Hayter, readers of the poem have indirectly

justified their unwillingness to deal with the disturbing problematics of the woman poet (as well as with other issues such as class) by searching the poem for unpoetic (prose-like) elements, by pointing out its jumbled narrative structure, by condemning its improbable or unattractive characters. As we shall see, however, these critical strategies of evasion have not been without their price, coming back to plague the critic with the paradox of his or her own making.

The Edinburgh Review's rather extensive review of EBB's work in the October 1861 issue offers only a most cursory commentary on Aurora Leigh, presumably due to the fact that the reviewer considers the poem "a splendid failure" (Edinburgh Review, 1861: p. 530). The review makes no mention of the fact the poem's protagonist is a woman and a poet, and indeed the reviewer's summary is hardly informative:

The whole of the interest of the story consists in the intellectual and moral development of two personages, both of whom are projections of Mrs. Browning's own nature; ... the history of these two chief persons is embarrassed with many indelicate and inconceivable incidents ... The romance, as far as it is a novel, is utterly bad.
(pp. 530-531)

The reviewer's reduction of Aurora Leigh's "two personages" to "Mrs. Browning's own nature" is symptomatic of his overall project of assessing not so much the poetry as the poet, or rather the poetess. The reviewer reiterates the accepted relative praise, hailing EBB as "a woman of rare genius," "a woman of singular genius," and rather reluctantly admitting "that no woman has ever handled the English tongue with greater force and spirit" (pp. 525-532; italics mine). The reviewer is reluctant in admitting EBB's achievement for he ultimately rejects much of the poetry, what he considers to be the poet's "extravagances" (p. 534): EBB's "error" in assuming that "her Being alone is sufficient to make good poetry" (p. 519), her "utter incapacity which she possesses for seeing how far beyond her powers ... were the subjects which she chose for her chief poetic efforts" (p. 520), her "constant harping upon the dignity and sufferings of the poet" (p. 524), her "questionable task ... in continually declaiming on the superiority of her craft" (p. 524), her

"inflated" style and lack of "simplicity, taste, or good sense" (p. 524). Significantly, the reviewer adds to this list of EBB's deficiencies the charge that she is "often more coarsely masculine than any known female writer" (p. 525). This charge goes to the very heart of the paradox which underlies the reviewer's critique, for while he finds EBB at fault for not being feminine enough, much of the aforementioned criticism stems directly from his convictions regarding women's intellectual deficiencies.

In the reviewer's attempt, in the concluding paragraphs, to point out "the reason and nature of her [EBB's] failure to achieve that excellence which might have been anticipated from such exalted powers" (Edinburgh, 1861: p. 532), we in fact glimpse at least a partial explanation for the hostility with which he attacks EBB's treatment of weighty subjects. Relying on the few highly popularized biographical details concerning EBB's illness, the reviewer seeks to substantiate his charge of intellectual presumption in EBB by arguing that "in Mrs. Browning's case the constant confinement to a sick chamber prevented her from attaining to any real knowledge of the world at all. She lived on the outside of it like a spirit" (p. 533). It soon transpires, however, that the reviewer regards this condition not as peculiar to the alleged invalid, but indeed as endemic to the whole female sex:

Men, whether they will it or not, get their minds disciplined in the world; but women, who require it most of all, if they would become great writers, are entirely cut off from this kind of experience.
(p. 533)

Overall, the Edinburgh review is very much a tour de force in which the reviewer sets out to demonstrate that apparent evidence of excellence notwithstanding, EBB's "career may be accepted as a sore proof of the impossibility that women can ever attain to the first rank in imaginative composition" (Edinburgh, 1861: p. 533). The reviewer's lesson to aspiring female poets is clear: a "sweeter, truer, eternally grateful" poetry like that of Lady Anne Lindsay's ballad Auld Robin Gray "will last as long as there is a book printed in the English Language" (p. 534); any presumption to "self-conscious ambition" turns in women's poetry into an

hysterical advocacy (like that of EBB) of "soul banquets of aetherial luxuries" (p. 534).

A peculiar anxiety is thus evident in the critical tradition as the critics, who are compelled to acknowledge EBB's excellence, remain reluctant to accept the implications of this judgment for their theory of an inferior women's poetry. Rather than regard EBB's poetry (with its intellectual thrust) as evidence of the changing nature of women's poetry, the Edinburgh reviewer sacrifices its excellence by condemning its presumption, so that his view of the inferiority of women's poetry can remain intact. For the critic who is sympathetic to EBB's endeavor, however, the dilemma is more acute. Since in the hegemonic discourse women's poetic inferiority is identified as specifically feminine -- and is thus, paradoxically, condemned and valorized at the same time -- the sympathetic critic bears the further burden of reconciling his subject's (masculine) accomplishments with the accepted view of femininity.

Peter Bayne's study of the poem, first appearing in 1857 and going into its seventh edition in 1881, demonstrates the problematics of the sympathetic critic and represents a view of the poem prevalent in the last decades of the nineteenth century. A clear note of ambivalence is struck as the study opens and ends with a statement of relative praise. Avowing his deep appreciation for EBB, Bayne launches his overview of her poetry with the following statement:

I cannot claim instant assent, when, though allowing that between her and Shakespeare, as well as many other men, there can be instituted no comparison, I yet deliberately assign her the same place among women as Shakespeare occupies among men.

(Bayne, 1857: p. 149)

The concluding paragraph reiterates this qualified praise:

In the poems of Mrs. Browning are qualities which admit of their being compared with those of the greatest men; ... with the few sovereigns of literature, the Homers, Shakespeares, Miltons, she will not rank. ... I yet hold

her worthy of being mentioned with any poet of this century. She has the breadth and versatility of a man, no sameliness, no one idea, no type character: our single Shakespearean woman.

(p. 209)

In a fashion representative of the critical tradition, Bayne here perpetuates the double bind, for at the same time that EBB is regarded within the exclusive context of women's poetry -- the praise is always relative -- she is also denied true membership in that class by being considered to possess the "breadth and versatility of a man" (p. 209; italics mine).

Being "our single Shakespearean woman," it soon transpires, is indeed an unnatural, unlikeable position to be in, and the critic's dislike soon surfaces in his discussion of the poet's autobiographical persona, Aurora Leigh. Bayne considers Aurora to be "an essentially defective character," the reason being that "we do not love her, we cannot love her" (Bayne, 1857: p. 199). Aurora is unlovable for she fails as a woman; while she does possess an "intellectual character" and "a certain bare and masculine sense of justice, and willingness to be kind, ... real warmth of heart, true womanly tenderness, she has not" (p. 199). Sole among EBB's "other female characters" Bayne finds Aurora to be "different" (p. 199), and rather than reconsider the other characters in the light of EBB's expression of her "highest convictions upon Life and Art" in Aurora Leigh (Dedication, AL), he explains away the problematics by declaring Aurora Leigh's character and the poem as a whole "a failure" (p. 204). Thus, as the problem and the poem are critically buried, the poet can survive. Ultimately, Bayne's tribute to EBB is a sustained critical effort to re-create her in the image of a revered "Christian poetess" (p. 172).

For Bayne, EBB is "the greatest woman of all" (p. 209), having written poetry which proves her to be "at the head of her sex" (p. 172). He characterizes her poetry by "two things ... The first ... [being] earnest and essential Christianity; the second ... intense and pathetic womanliness" (p. 172). His acceptance of the poet thus clearly depends on his ability to perceive in the poetry a recuperation of the hegemonic

discourse; EBB is not only "in the highest sense, and always, a Christian poetess" (p. 172), but her very excellence (for which she is deemed "at the head of her sex") lies in her heightened sense of the (traditionally defined) feminine. Of EBB's poetry prior to Aurora Leigh, Bayne has particularly high praise for A Drama of Exile, finding it to exhibit a "powerful truth" concerning the "distinctive characteristics of the female nature" (pp. 173-4; italics mine).

In Bayne's essay, EBB's revisionist telling of the Creation story in A Drama of Exile as well as Charlotte Brontë's incredible anger in Jane Eyre are mercilessly put out of discursive existence as he rhapsodizes:

The heart of woman, I suppose, never laid bare as it has been by Charlotte Brontë and Mrs. Browning. And in the Drama of Exile ... the mission of woman to the world ... her angelic privilege of being the incarnation of peace above conflict, of gentleness mightier than anger, of love stronger than hate -- is defined and illustrated.

(Bayne, 1857: p. 174)

Bayne finds EBB "unrivalled" in the "delineations of feeling peculiar to the female heart. The passion of love in the maiden heart, the devotion of the wife, and the affection of the mother" (p. 183; italics mine). He concludes by declaring De Quincey's view that women will never create great poetry a thing of the past: "Mrs. Browning has exalted her sex; this ... was true" (p. 210; italics his). His reading of the poetry, however, only succeeds in recuperating it for a specifically female tradition, a tradition Bayne sees as celebrating the traditional (hegemonic) view of femininity. Interestingly, in a modified version of the essay, published in 1881, Bayne makes this intention explicit. Referring to his earlier dismissal of De Quincey's views on women's creativity, Bayne now withdraws his high praise of EBB's poetry, attributing it to his "young-mannish enthusiasm" (Bayne, 1881: p. 158). He contends: "I now see that De Quincey might have maintained the negative on that question [concerning women's poetic capabilities] with more weighty reasoning than I then surmised" (p. 153). In this study's "Conclusion" the praise is doubly qualified, as Bayne declares EBB "first among women," only in "fervour, melodiousness, and splendor of poetic genius" (p. 153); in all other

respects, adds Bayne "she was not the equal of George Eliot" (p. 154).

The specter of a deep-rooted prejudice -- that which holds it an "impossibility that women can ever attain to the first rank in imaginative composition" (Edinburgh Review, 1861: p. 533) -- haunts all nineteenth century readings of EBB's poetry. Bayne's ambivalence and anxiety are echoed by another critic of women's poetry, Eric Robertson. Robertson prefaces his English Poetesses: A Series of Critical Biographies (1883) with a meditation on the "distinction between the poetical capabilities of the sexes," claiming that his "psychological analysis" has revealed "a sexual distinction lying in the very soul" (Robertson, 1883: p. xiii). It is in this difference of psychological make-up that Robertson finds the "great reason why the man has excelled the woman as an artist" (p. xii). This 'analytical finding' notwithstanding, the doubt persists; Robertson is compelled to reiterate the question both in the introduction -- "have women been clearly excelled by men in poetry?" (p. xv) -- and in the opening of his essay on EBB. On broaching the subject of EBB's poetry he reflects:

Critically to approach the work of EBB is to test once for all the question whether, throughout the literature of the whole world, there is any evidence to show that woman can equal man in the sustained expression of poetical ideas.
(p. 255)

The answer to both questions is in the negative: "women have always been inferior to men as writers of poetry; and they always will be if the explanation here attempted is the correct one" (p. xv). The "explanation" involves Robertson's affirmation of "a very old-fashioned doctrine ... that children are the best poems Providence meant women to produce" (p. xiv).

Not surprisingly, then, the highest praise that Robertson (and Bayne) can bestow on EBB's poetry is that it is expressive of feminine attributes, chief among which is the maternal sentiment. Both Bayne and Robertson celebrate the portrayal of maternal love in the character of Marian Erle. Bayne finds Marian "in all respects worthy of Mrs. Browning's genius" by virtue of her "tenderness ... loveliness" and "inexpressible pathos" (Bayne, 1857: p. 195). Robertson concludes a lengthy essay on EBB by

claiming that "perhaps after her love poetry, the note of singing which most endears her to the English-speaking public is the beautiful sympathy with child-life which so constantly makes itself felt throughout" (Robertson, 1883: p. 313). This preoccupation with Aurora Leigh's treatment of properly feminine concerns is evident in other critical works of the period. Amy Sharp, writing in 1891, although departing from the critical tradition in asserting that "much interest ... lies in her [EBB's] treatment of the place and work of women," fails to pursue this "interest" and joins with the tradition in claiming that "the poet is on almost her strongest in her lovely drawing of Marian Erle's motherhood and infant child" (Sharp, 1891: pp. 118-9). Similarly, Edmund Stedman declares the poem a "marvellous illustration of the development ... of an aesthetical, imaginative nature," only to proceed with a eulogy of the poet as the "apotheosis of womanhood" (Stedman, 1875: pp. 142-147).

Although the present chapter does not deal with biographical accounts of EBB's life, I propose to look at Stedman's essay for it interestingly combines biography with criticism to pronounce a view of EBB's poetry commonly expressed in the last decades of the nineteenth century. Stedman declares that "he is but a shallow critic who neglects to take into his account of a woman's genius a factor representing the master-element of love," and pronounces EBB "doubly fortunate" in being blessed by a marriage of love (Stedman, 1875: pp. 132-5). At the core of Stedman's biographical narrative, then, is the happy narrative of EBB's attainment of "complete womanhood": "love, marriage, ... the sacred and mysterious functions of maternity" (p. 133). This, in turn, becomes the core of his critical narrative, a narrative celebrating "female genius" (p. 135), and exulting in a poetry which Stedman regards as "eminently that of a woman" (pp. 115-116). In Stedman's essay biography indeed determines critical assessment, the end-result being a practice we have already noted as common: that of tracing the woman beneath the artist.

Unaware of the irony of using one of EBB's target-texts in Aurora Leigh -- Tennyson's The Princess -- to praise her with, Stedman commends EBB for being "a luminous example of the fact that 'woman is not undeveloped man, but diverse'" (Stedman, 1875: p. 148). Oblivious to EBB's and Aurora's pleas, he expresses praise in terms openly parodied in

Aurora Leigh: "Her [EBB's] delicate genius was purely feminine and subjective, attributes that go together" (p. 147). Stedman's bias is indeed all the more glaring for his essay provides at times instructive insights. He points out the Platonic aspect in EBB's aesthetics (p. 149), and observes -- over a century before Borg (see my discussion below) -- the affinity with "the teachings of Emanuel Swedenborg" (p. 148). But since for Stedman EBB is "the greatest female poet that England has produced" (p. 115), the highest praise he can ultimately confer upon her is encapsulated in the epithet "a Christian Sibyl" (p. 116). As a woman, her life story, for Stedman, evolves around the hunger for and satisfaction of love. As a woman poet, her best art is that in which one witnesses the "outpourings of a woman's tenderest emotions" (p. 137). Quite expectedly, Stedman hails the Sonnets from the Portuguese -- "a portion of the finest subjective poetry in our literature" (p. 137) -- as the work in which "the singer rose to her height" (p. 137). Aurora Leigh, on the other hand, he declares "a failure" (p. 141).

Exceptional among nineteenth century appreciations of the poem, George Barnett Smith's essay of 1876 offers an altogether different perspective on the issue of EBB's singularity within the female tradition. For Smith, as for Bayne in 1857, "one grand result of Mrs. Browning's literary career has been to disprove the assertion that women cannot write true poetry" (Smith, 1876: p. 106). Smith shares EBB's view regarding the absence of "grandmothers," and indeed echoes her conviction that "the divine spirit ... never pass[ed] ... over the lips of a woman" (Kenyon, 1848: I, pp. 229-232), in his claim that "no woman, as yet, has written a great epic, or dramatic poetry of the highest order; ... genius, the dower of the gods, in its most transcendent manifestation, has, up to the present, been bestowed [only] upon man" (Smith, 1876: p. 106). Unlike Patmore or the Edinburgh reviewer of 1862, however, Smith does not attribute woman's failure to produce great art to a feminine presence but rather to an absence: to a constricting "personal sphere" and the absence of "experience -- which, in its greatest depths and most extended scope, has hitherto largely pertained to man" (p. 107). Since Smith's valorization of a "wider personal sphere" and "experience" is not gender-bound, his praise of EBB's poetry -- in which he detects both -- remains unqualified. Interestingly, Smith's concluding statement becomes a re-enactment of the

climactic ending of Aurora Leigh; here Smith assumes Romney's role in pronouncing the literary woman's apotheosis: "Her apotheosis follows of Divine right with that of all the leaders of mankind: God endowed her, and we exalt her" (p. 109).

The motto for Germaine Marie Merlette's full-length study of La vie et l'oeuvre d'Elizabeth Barrett Browning (1905) is from EBB's "To George Sand. A Recognition" : "True genius, but true woman!" If, from reading this motto, one is led to entertain hopes for a more scrutinizing look at the poem's concern with the dilemma of the woman poet, these are quickly dispelled by Merlette's introductory paragraph:

'Vrai génie, mais vraie femme!' Ces paroles, adressées à George Sand par Elizabeth Barrett Browning, peuvent aussi bien s'appliquer à celle-ci. Nous trouverons dans ses oeuvres le génie du poète et le coeur de la femme; jamais, en effet, la plus célèbre poétesse de l'Angleterre ne fut mieux inspirée que par les sentiments qui dominant chez la femme, l'amour et la pitié.

(Merlette, 1905: p. 1)

Reinscribing EBB's poetry within the hegemonic dichotomy which opposes the poet's genius to the woman's heart, Merlette resolves this conflict -- which she never acknowledges -- by subsuming the poetry under the woman. In Merlette's "poetesse" the poet's genius ("génie du poète") is sacrificed so that the woman -- defined through the traditional sentiments of love and pity -- may survive.

Merlette devotes three chapters to the study of Aurora Leigh, the first of which is a simple and rather detailed plot summary. The second chapter deals with characterization in this novel-in-verse, while the third chapter treats the aesthetic theory expounded in the poem. Merlette identifies Aurora Leigh as "un roman moderne a thèse" (p. 25), believing the creed advocated in the poem to be "une protestation ... contre le matérialisme du XIX siècle. ... c'est surtout un sursum corda qui nous invite a nous élever au-dessus des penseurs terrestres, vers les régions de l'Idéal" (p. 274). Merlette accords great importance to this idealist aspect, devoting a whole chapter to a summary of Aurora's aesthetic theory.

Although Merlette seems to address herself to the two plots (of "poet" and "woman") by asking herself "en parlant d'Aurora, pouvons-nous répéter le mot: 'Vrai génie, mais vraie femme!'" (p. 265), she fails to detect their coexistence in the poem as a problematizing context. While in treating Aurora's aesthetic philosophy Merlette makes no mention of the problematics of female poetic voice, she finds Aurora's character (as a woman) deficient, arguing that her transformation into a true woman occurs too late in the plot:

Mais ce n'est que lorsqu'elle s'accuse, lorsqu'elle aspire
à descendre de son piédestal de femme de génie pour devenir
une femme ordinaire, pour aimer et être aimée, c'est alors
seulement que nous commençons vraiment à nous intéresser à
elle. Mais il est trop tard: le poème va finir.
(p. 266)

For Merlette a female character is interesting only as long as she fulfills her proper feminine destiny of loving and attracting love. Aurora's transformation from 'genius' to 'woman,' Merlette claims, comes too late in the poem to elicit true interest in her.

Unable to make the poem conform to a pre-established standard of novelistic verisimilitude and unity -- she speaks of the lack of action, synthesis, unity, and organization of a whole (pp. 282-287) -- Merlette, like so many reviewers before her, fails to understand the poem on its own terms. Her dissociation of aesthetic theory (the poetic plot) from characterization (which involves the love plot), and her judgment of the latter on the basis of "sympathique" and "antipathique" characters, ultimately blind her both to the dynamics of the love plot -- of which Aurora's 'coming down' from the pedestal is only one aspect -- and to the vital part played by this plot in the poem's overall aesthetic preoccupations.

Although Aurora Leigh announces its preoccupation with writing at the very outset, Merlette, like most reviewers until recently, fails to see in the act of writing a major aspect of the poem. Consequently, she treats the long self-reflexive passages as digressions which however enlightening are damaging to the poem's unity of action and character (p. 283).

Similarly, Merlette perceives the long exchanges between Aurora and Romney concerning their conflicting ideologies as totally extrinsic to the love story. Her complaint that the long theoretical meditations "affaiblirait l'intérêt que nous inspirerait leur amour, si nous avions pu lire dans leur coeur" -- is subversive in view of the poem's sustained effort to disprove the accepted dichotomy love (heart)/knowledge (brain).

By the first decades of our century, there seems to have emerged a new awareness of the issues at stake in women's writing. Kathleen Royds prefaces her book-length study of EBB and her poetry with a twofold insight:

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 ... The woman poet came to self-consciousness in a world that was already old.

(Royds, 1912: pp. 11-12)

Royds thus not only identifies an emergent self-consciousness in women's greater literary productivity in the nineteenth century, but also understands that self-realisation to have emerged against the backdrop of an already established knowledge, the self-knowledge of the Other (of men). Having thus characterized the insurgence of women's writing in the nineteenth century, Royds proceeds to describe Aurora Leigh in terms which imply her view of the poem as exemplary. Royds in fact sees Aurora Leigh as epitomizing the nineteenth century woman writer's passage into self-consciousness. She claims of Aurora Leigh:

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.

(p. 114)

Like Patmore, Royds believes that the poem is "the spiritual autobiography of England's greatest woman poet" (p. 114), but unlike him she proceeds to

place this achievement not only within the context of poets like Tennyson and Browning, but also "in relation to other women poets" (p. 129).

Royds argues insightfully that in the poem's conclusion "theories of life and art, the woman's and the poet's, meet and find consummation" (p. 120; italics mine). Her insistence on EBB's poetry as an expression of "a woman's point of view" at odds with "social conventions," however, finally leads only to a reiteration of hegemonic commonplaces. While she does outline at some length Aurora's aesthetics of commitment -- "her idealist philosophy" (p. 122) -- Royds' reading of the poem uncritically accepts the "woman's" theory to be an affirmation of the traditionally ascribed feminine attributes, a spontaneous expression of EBB's "tenderest woman's passions" (p. 114).

Royds opens her study with the general conviction 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" (Royds, 1912: p. 13). Not surprisingly, Royds concludes her study by praising EBB for being "essentially the poet of the emotions" (p. 131). Although throughout the study we glimpse an attempt on Royds' part to understand the difference (in relation to "conventions") of "woman's point of view," and of what EBB, in particular, had to "say as a woman" (p. 130), hers is ultimately a failed effort. The awareness that the poetry brings to Royds is no new self-consciousness but the reflected image of the "old world" (p. 12). She, too, is ultimately insensate to the poem's profound questioning of "conventions," to its exploration of the paradoxical position of the woman poet. Like so many other readers of the poem before her, Royds, in the final account, chooses EBB over Aurora, siding with the woman against the poet. For Royds EBB is "the greatest of women poets" because "she was a woman before she was an artist" (p. 129).

The pitting of EBB against Aurora has indeed been a common practice with readers of the poem, being a strategy of resolving the critic's own double bind. In this manner the critic seeks to explain away the offensive (masculine) properties of the poetry by attributing them to the unsympathetic character of Aurora. This tendency is evident even in more

sympathetic accounts of the poem, and most clearly in the numerous EBB biographies. Although this body of material is outside my scope of study here, I will briefly examine an exemplary case. Louise Schutz Boas' biography, published in 1930, contains a rather detailed plot summary of Aurora Leigh which ends with an interesting observation. Boas detects among the many issues raised in the poem the centrality of "a defence of women's mental abilities and independence," and points out the crucial difference between Tennyson's The Princess and Aurora Leigh (Boas, 1930: p. 198). The Princess, contends Boas, "was a light tale lightly told, not exactly complimentary to women. Tennyson's heroine having tried an intellectual experiment, yielded to the first masculine onslaught" (p. 198). Boas clearly grasps the profound difference which underlies the apparent similarity in the celebration of "wedded souls" which concludes both poem. While in The Princess the resolution comes at the expense of the heroine's "experiment," implies Boas, in Aurora Leigh it is the woman's project which triumphs: "Aurora Leigh having climbed to success and fame yielded to love only when she had undeniably reached her goal and her suitor had pathetically failed to reach his" (p. 198). Although Boas is far from understanding the intimate links between Aurora's "success" and her "love," she clearly detects in the poem an innovative turn of events, what Nancy Miller has called a different "emphasis" (Miller, 1981). It is, however, this very perception of Aurora's affirmation of "mental abilities and independence," her "success and fame," which are disturbing to the biographer. Lest these dubious (because unfeminine) accomplishments cast a shadow over EBB -- the heroine of the biographer's tale -- Boas hastens to comment: "the success of Aurora Leigh did not make Elizabeth vain. Penini [EBB's son], as she herself said, was more to her than twenty Auroras" (p. 201).

The critical preference for the poet over the poetry, already evident in the early reviews of Aurora Leigh, consolidated in the early decades of this century, resulting in a number of highly fictionalized biographies and almost total critical silence. These biographies, focusing on the 'feminine' aspect of EBB's life story -- her physical vulnerability, her love and marriage to Robert Browning -- seemed, for a time, to be the poetry's downfall. Writing in 1932, Virginia Woolf found that "the only place in the mansion of literature that is assigned her [EBB] is downstairs

in the servants' quarters, ... where ... she bangs the crockery about and eats vast handfuls of peas on the point of her knife" (Woolf, 1932: p. 203). Woolf's essay, with all its ambivalence towards the poem, is nonetheless on a rescue mission; and rescue EBB from the servants' quarters it did, or at least for a certain public. Woolf's ambivalence is many faceted. She praises the poem for its "speed and energy, forthrightness and complete self-confidence" (p. 204), but balks at EBB's "pervasive ... presence" in the poem: "Mrs. Browning could no more conceal herself than she could control herself, a sign no doubt of imperfection in an artist" (pp. 205-6). We receive contradictory messages, moreover, for immediately following this charge, Woolf retracts it, reminding her readers (but indeed herself) that at the time of the poem's conception "the connexion between a woman's art and a woman's life was unnaturally close" (p. 206). Similarly, while Woolf first goes into considerable length to argue that EBB's mind was "not the mind to profit by solitude" (p. 207), and that consequently "the long years of seclusion had done her irreparable damage as an artist" (p. 208), she finally concludes by hailing EBB as the creator of *Aurora*, "the true daughter of her age" (p. 212).

It soon becomes clear that Woolf's ambivalence arises out of her particularly acute perception of the poem, for it is where her insights are most penetrating that her ambivalence is most pronounced. Declaring Aurora Leigh a failed novel, Woolf recognized its unique form as "one long soliloquy" in which "the only character that is known and the only story that is told us are the character and story of Aurora Leigh herself" (p. 212). This story Woolf further sees to involve Aurora's "conflict as artist and woman, her longing for knowledge and freedom" (p. 212). It is this very story, the story of her own literary mother, as it were, which unsettles Woolf. Shifting to a metaphorical register, Woolf gives away her sense of experiencing, through her reading of Aurora Leigh, her own birth as a literary woman. For Woolf, the work's "genius ... floats diffused and fluctuating in some pre-natal stage waiting the final stroke of creative power to bring it into being" (p. 208). The poem thus becomes for her a locus of conception as well as the birth-place of the woman artist; the woman poet giving birth to herself -- and her daughter -- in a true union of "art" and "life," of "flesh" and "page" (p. 208).

It is Woolf's perception of Aurora Leigh as a metaphorical account of the conception and delivery of the woman artist which ultimately triggers her ambivalence. She writes of Aurora Leigh: "Stimulating and boring, ungainly and eloquent, monstrous and exquisite, all by turns, it overwhelms and bewilders" (p. 208). Woolf's text here conceals more than it discloses, sharing its secret with EBB's text (which it echoes) and with the reader who can hear the 'mother' (EBB) through the 'daughter' (Woolf). In Aurora Leigh young Aurora stares at her dead mother's portrait there to behold with anguish and fascination the many (oxymoronic) figures of femininity:

In years, I mixed, confused, unconscious,
Whatever I last read or heard or dreamed,
Abhorrent, admirable, beautiful,

...

With still that face ... which did not therefore change,
But kept the mystic level of all forms,
Hates, fears, and admirations, was by turns
Ghost, fiend, and angel, fairy, witch, and sprite.
(AL, I, 147-154)

Woolf's ambivalence is also Aurora's and EBB's: it is the literary woman's ambivalence at inspecting her own uncertain origin, an origin both hated and beloved, by turns feared and desired. Woolf's anxiety, moreover, is as much retrospective as it is prospective. While the essay opens with an image of herself (in the editorial plural) as a reader musing over Aurora Leigh "with kindly condescension," as "we toy with the fringes of our grandmother's mantles" (p. 203; italics mine), it ends on a note of maternal concern as Woolf wonders "why it [Aurora Leigh] has left no successors" (p. 213).

Woolf's own succession, we note, was immediately secured. Martha H. Shackford's essay on Aurora Leigh (1935) and Mildred Wilsey's article on "Elizabeth Barrett Browning's Heroine" (1944), further consolidate the vision of the poem articulated by Woolf. Shackford's essay clearly draws critical attention to EBB's exploration, in Aurora Leigh, of issues regarding "women's rights, women's duties, women's sufferings, and women's potential capabilities," and to EBB's "passionate desire for the liberation

of womankind" (Shackford, 1935: p. 14). Her essay, however, is most valuable for suggesting (though not venturing to examine) a broad context within which to understand Aurora Leigh. With regard to the poem's form, Shackford proposes to see the poem "in comparison with other narrative poems of the nineteenth century" (p. 6). With regard to EBB's departure from a conventionally feminine verse, she evokes "such popular authors as L.E. Landon, Mrs. Norton, Mary Howitt, Mrs. Barbauld, Mrs. Hemans, Jean Ingelow" to suggest that "Mrs. Browning grapples with ideas more frequently than do these other women poets" (p. 7). Shackford does not, however, limit the critical context to the 'feminine sphere'. Acknowledging EBB's familiarity with a vast and heterogeneous body of literature and philosophy, she claims its immediate relevance to Aurora Leigh. The company she sees EBB (and Aurora) to keep is mixed, made up of men and women, ancient and modern, novelists and poets, dramatists and philosophers. Shackford opens up the poetry to the Greek tragedies and the dialogues of Plato, to the writings of Tom Paine, Voltaire, Hume, Rousseau, as well as to those of Mary Wollstonecraft, Madame de Staël, George Sand, Mrs. Jameson, Harriet Martineau and others. She contends that "Mrs. Browning has read to a good purpose Dryden, Pope, Byron, the best of Chaucer" (p. 11), but also points out EBB's indebtedness to French novelists such as Dumas, Balzac, and Sand. "All these aspects of her reading and study are seen reflected in Aurora Leigh" (p. 8), contends Shackford, as her study not only challenges a nineteenth-century gender-related critical bias but also prepares the way for such contemporary explorations of the poem's intertextual space as the one undertaken in the present work.

Mildred Wilsey's treatment of "Elizabeth Barrett Browning's Heroine" is a further gloss on Woolf's perception of the story of Aurora Leigh as involving Aurora's "conflict as artist and woman" (Woolf, 1932: p. 212). Like Shackford, Wilsey comments on those "gifted women" (Shackford, 1935: p. 15) whom she sees to have inspired the character of Aurora. Here the evocation of a female tradition stands in direct opposition to the nineteenth century practice of subsuming the poet under the (properly feminine) woman. Wilsey re-claims a female tradition with a vengeance. Mary Wollstonecraft is essential to the character of Aurora, Wilsey claims, because of her appeal, in The Vindication of the Rights of Woman, "to all

women searching for freedom" (Wilsey, 1944: p. 78). Harriet Martineau epitomizes for EBB, Wilsey contends, "woman's whole struggle to maintain her convictions against a mocking world" (p. 78). Anna Jameson, she further suggests, was crucial to the characterization of Aurora for her "stimulating thought on the 'woman question'" (p. 78), and George Sand for proving "it possible to be both a great artist and a true woman" (p. 79).

Wilsey, then, recovers for Aurora Leigh a female tradition, but with a difference. No longer seen as a singular woman deficient in those "less systematic phases of woman's character ... a native tenderness and grace, a child-like play of emotion" (Tuckerman, 1854: p. xiii), Wilsey sees Aurora to belong in the ranks of those "living women who fought the prejudices of their time" (Wilsey, 1944: p. 79). No longer seen as an "uninteresting" character because "singular" -- for Patmore, we remember, EBB was "herself almost the only example of such a development [of the powers of a poetess]" (Patmore, 1857: p. 242) -- Wilsey finds in Aurora an active member of a large class: "she is ... the woman of temperament and imagination, struggling for professional recognition and self-expression" (p. 79). Wilsey, moreover, notes the interrelationship between Romney's and Aurora's conflicting ideologies ("philanthropy" vs. "art"), on the one hand, and Aurora's struggle "for her integrity as a woman" (p. 76), on the other, insights that still seems to elude some contemporary readers of the poem (see my discussion of Hayter and Raymond in this chapter).

Free of the constraining nineteenth century obsession with "tracing the woman beneath the attainment," Wilsey realizes the poem's major preoccupation to be "the right of woman to self-realization" (p. 80). Significantly, Wilsey understands the celebration of "matrimony" and the "womanly" in the poem's conclusion not as a relapse into "the Victorian prejudices against the freedom of women" but rather as an affirmation of a new vision, a vision now possible since "certain bold clarifications of what these terms [matrimony and womanly] might mean" have been achieved (p. 81).

Patmore's blindness to the issue at stake in Aurora Leigh might be attributed to his and his contemporaries' total immersion in the very discourse that created for EBB and for Aurora the dilemma of the double bind. It is far more difficult to explain such a critical blindness on the part of a contemporary EBB scholar like Alethea Hayter. Hayter's Mrs. Browning: A Poet's Work and its Setting (1962) is the first book-length critical assessment of EBB's canon in English to answer contemporary standards of scholarship. Informative and suggestive as this study still proves to be, its treatment of Aurora Leigh is greatly flawed by Hayter's inability to grasp the interrelationship between what she treats as two distinct plots: "the story of Aurora's development as a writer," and the "love story" (Hayter, 1962: p. 170). Although Hayter cannot help but recognize that such a dissociation "in Mrs. Browning's eyes .. would have made her heroine incomplete as a writer, as well as being incomplete as a woman," -- bearing well in mind Aurora's realization that "No perfect artist is developed here/ From any imperfect woman" (IX, 648-9) -- she still fails to comprehend the vital link, wishing that "if Mrs. Browning had to have a story as framework for what she wanted to say in Aurora Leigh, she had chosen to concentrate on the story of Aurora's development as a writer and had not tried to work in a love story" (p. 170). Hayter understands "what she [EBB] wanted to say in Aurora Leigh" to be an argument for "the power of poetry to better mankind" (p. 156). She is totally oblivious to the sexual politics underlying the "duologues" between "the poetess Aurora and the philanthropist Romney Leigh" (pp. 15-16), able to perceive in Aurora's key speeches to Romney in the 'birthday scene' only "an angry claim for poetic idealism as the prime mover" (p. 156). Regretting the inclusion of the "love story" in the poem, Hayter wishes it away in her interpretation.

Hayter's oversight is partly attributable to her very sketchy treatment, a flaw which characterizes many studies of the poem. Carrying over the theme of "The Poet's Vocation" from the previous chapter, the chapter which Hayter devotes to Aurora Leigh -- while offering no further insights into this theme -- also fails to identify any other important preoccupations in the poem. Instead, Hayter launches a doubtful argument -- clearly directed at earlier criticisms of the poem -- to justify the poem's apparent formal incoherence. This she does by claiming that while

"any judgment of Aurora Leigh as a novel must recognize it as a failure" (p. 163), "it is the pattern of imagery that holds Aurora Leigh together" (p. 164). Unfortunately, while Hayter's impressionistic observations of the poem's failure as a novel lack scholarly rigor -- what does it mean, for example, that "Romney is, on the whole, a stick, though not a noodle" (p. 171) -- she likewise fails in examining the "pattern of imagery that holds Aurora Leigh together."

Throughout her study of EBB's poetry, Hayter reveals great interest in EBB's poetics, failing to recognize the problematics of female poetic subjectivity so central to it. This failure could perhaps be best understood as an inability to see through the dazzling glare of EBB's own transcendentalist rhetoric and into the issues which this very rhetoric is called upon to resolve. Although Hayter does admit to some ambivalence -- "How could Mrs. Browning have claimed so much power for poetry, have thought that this sort of uplift could save the world?" (p. 157) -- she ultimately 'sides' with EBB, claiming that hers "was a consciousness spreading farther than human life and human time, a range of sympathy from the chaffinch to the cherubim" (p. 245). Hayter is clearly echoing here Aurora's own inspired words in defense of a transcendentalist faith:

But man, the twofold creature, apprehends
 The twofold manner, in and outwardly,
 And nothing in the world comes single to him
 ...
 No pebble at your foot, but proves a sphere;
 No chaffinch, but implies the cherubim.
 (AL, VII, 802-817)

As I have demonstrated, Aurora's transcendentalist vision, by which she seeks to embrace high and low, is inextricably linked to her search for wholeness as both woman and poet. In the process of this search, metaphysical tenets are scrutinized and revised, giving rise to a drama whose dimensions totally elude Hayter.

Overall, Hayter seems to be greatly hampered, in her discussion of Aurora Leigh, by a need to explain away EBB's failure as a novelist, a need presumably provoked by EBB's own statements, in her letters, that Aurora

Leigh was intended as a verse novel. Thus, from beginning to end, the chapter on Aurora Leigh is sustained by an internal polemic, with the argument con -- "any judgment of Aurora Leigh as a novel must recognize it as a failure" (p. 163) -- being finally resolved by an appeal to a different form: "Aurora Leigh has to be enjoyed as one enjoys an opera ... One must listen to the great arias, and be thankful" (p. 174). While Hayter is thus handicapped by an over-concern with the poem's conformity to a prior standard of formal excellence, Ellen Moers' very different focus in Literary Women -- as she attempts "to listen as women writers do to each others' voices in literature" (Moers, 1977: p. 99) -- yields a much richer interpretive harvest.

Before we proceed, however, to examine Moers' path-breaking study of Literary Women, we will do well to inspect an essay that seems to have inaugurated a new stage in the understanding of the poem, J.M.S. Tompkins' Fawcett Lecture "Aurora Leigh" (1961-2). Tompkins finds it "worth while to look again at the work of this woman poet, who, some hundred years ago, debated and exemplified what it was to be both a woman and a poet" (Tompkins, 1961: p. 4; italics mine). She finds the poem's "master-theme" to be "the woman with a vocation" (p. 5), and clearly perceives this as a problematics. Like readers of the poem before her, she follows EBB's own lead -- her declaration that the poem is one in which her "highest convictions upon Life and Art have entered" (Dedication, Aurora Leigh) -- in reading EBB's experience into the poem. Unlike these other readers, however, Tompkins exposes the problematic nature of this experience and explores EBB's treatment of this problematic experience in poetic form. Tompkins' perception of this problematics is very much akin to my description of the double bind. In speaking of EBB, Tompkins finds her "introspective mind" continually moving "in between these two poles of genius and womanhood" (p. 8). In relation to Aurora Leigh, she finds EBB and Aurora asking in one voice: "What is the nature of a woman's genius? ... Granted that it is genius ... how does this relate to the rest of their natures? ... Does it starve or prevent some essential part of their womanhood?" (p. 7; italics hers). Tompkins notes Aurora's oscillation between a biological determinism -- "we're made so, not such tyrants to ourselves/ But still we are slaves to nature" -- and her faith -- "I too have my vocation." She points out Aurora's questioning of the critical

double standard and Aurora's (as well as EBB's) ambivalence towards propaganda for women's rights (pp. 7-9). Tompkins' description of Aurora's complex response to Romney's charge that women are unable to generalize is illuminating: "all through the poem she is plucking at it [the charge], claiming the capacity, renouncing it, questioning its value" (p. 16; italics mine).

Against the backdrop of earlier readings of the poem, Tompkins' stands out for its new understanding of the poem's plot as no mere miscellany of "real, romantic, and fantastic" scenes, but rather as comprising of scenes "held together by the questions they ask and the answers they examine" (Tompkins, 1961: p. 15). Tompkins understands these questions and answers to include two major issues. The first is a political/philosophical issue relating to the conflict between Aurora -- who values the "individual" and the "poet" -- and Romney -- whose point of view is that of the "generalizer" and the "economist" (p. 18). Tompkins considers the second issue to involve a conflict internal to the character of Aurora, for, she claims, "Aurora the poet and austere witness of truth and Aurora the mere woman are locked in struggle throughout the poem" (p. 14). Although lack of space prevents Tompkins from elaborating on her insights, her understanding of the import of the poem's resolution for the poem at large is most suggestive. Seeking to understand the resolution in terms of the "questions" and "answers" raised in the poem, Tompkins points out not only the poem's final affirmation of the "interdependence of spiritual and natural" (p. 20), but also its working out of the conflict internal to Aurora's character. Acknowledging that in the poem's conclusion "the lovers are given to each other in reciprocal faultiness" (p. 20), Tompkins nonetheless recognizes in it a celebration of a particular triumph, the triumph of the woman poet. In Romney's avowal of love Tompkins rightly perceives what I have called the literary woman's apotheosis, observing that EBB makes Romney give Aurora "what should be the sweetest praise, that her last poem was no mere expression of her personality, but showed him truths separate from herself" (p. 19).

What remains an unfulfilled promise in Hayter's Mrs. Browning -- a promise to show how "it is the pattern of imagery that holds Aurora Leigh together" (Hayter, 1962: p. 164) -- becomes a source of inspiration for

Ellen Moers' treatment of the poem in her truly ground-breaking Literary Women (1977). Hayter intriguingly proposes, without however taking up this line of inquiry, that "the great image of the bird ... reaches from end to end of the nine books of Aurora Leigh; the whole poem could have sheltered under those wings far more safely than under the jerry-built roof of her plot" (Hayter, 1962: p. 164). In "Metaphors: A Postlude," the final chapter of Literary Women, Moers suggests a line of inquiry concerned with recurrent images in women's writing and pronounces the "caged bird" metaphor as one "that truly deserves the adjective female" (Moers, 1977: p. 380). She finds the metaphor in Aurora Leigh and elsewhere in EBB's poetry, and following her typical procedure in the book evokes clusters of the metaphor in different works by women. Hayter's and Moers' readings of Aurora Leigh indeed intersect here and at a number of other points, the most important of which being the observation that Aurora is "a cross between Madame de Staël's Corinne and George Sand's Consuelo" (Hayter, 1962: p. 161). Whereas Hayter, however, remains content to point out a possible source, Moers proceeds to chart a network of thematic preoccupations and formal properties which traverse women's texts and mark their creative self-explorations.

If Virginia Woolf, in A Room of One's Own (1929), represents for us the first phase of a modern feminist criticism, a criticism which exposes the problematics of a female subject, Moers could be seen to initiate a second phase, one which succeeds in addressing the question of women's rage so powerfully evoked by Woolf without giving in to Woolf's own incapacitating anger. Moers identifies the rage in Victorian women's writing as characteristic of a period in women's literary history which she calls "the epic age" (p. 21). Moers cites, among others, Charlotte Brontë, George Sand, and Harriet Beecher Stowe as writers of the epic age and re-defines Aurora Leigh as the epic of the epic age (p. 59). It is an epic, Moers argues, for the social causes that it takes up, by virtue of its form -- "a long narrative in verse of heroic deeds" (p. 59) -- but, more essentially yet, "in another sense: it is the epic of the literary woman herself" (p. 60).

It is Moers' understanding of the poem as primarily concerned with the "literary woman herself," with Aurora's "rebellion against convention and family pressure, ... her rejection of marriage on the usual terms, and principally her determined, self-critical slugging away at the work a writer does" (p. 60), that underlies virtually all recent studies of the poem. In my view, however, Moers falls short of grasping the most crucial aspect of this "epic of the woman poet," an aspect likewise central to the self-reflexive explorations of other literary women of whom she writes. This aspect, which concerns the working out of the tension between what I have termed the "poetic plot" and the "feminine plot" (the plot of love and desire), seems not so much to elude Moers as to fail to attract her attention. She treats the first plot -- the plot of female genius -- in a chapter mainly inspired by Madame de Staël's Corinne and entitled "Performing Heroism: The Myth of Corinne," and the second plot in a chapter entitled "Loving Heroism: Feminists in Love." However, both in her discussion of the various attempts at the portrayal of female genius, and in her exploration of the "literary consequences ... of [writing] female truths about female passion" (p. 299; italics mine), Moers remains silent on the literary consequences of attempts to reconcile the "performing heroine" -- "who is strong, willful, and grand" -- with the "loving heroine" -- who both articulates love and strives to elicit it in the beloved.

Invaluable for its introduction of a new critical focus, Moers' study nonetheless stops short of reflecting on the problematics which arises out of the dynamic interplay, in women's writing, between the "loving" and "performing" plots, an interplay I have characterized as a response to a paradoxical hegemonic injunction. Moers' oversight is evident not only in her formal separation of the two plots (into two chapters) but also in her neglect to explore the other pole of her "loving" and "performing" scheme: that of the lover and the audience. For a brief moment in "Performing Heroism" the shadow of this problematics is allowed to hover over Moers' otherwise 'happy' narrative; speaking of the "performing heroine" she writes: "Men adore her, but there is no other kind of heroine, not even the saint, who can so plausibly be made a chaste as well as a mature and desirable woman" (p. 288). Moers observes that George Sand keeps her Consuelo a virgin, that George Eliot's prima donna Armgart rejects a

marriage proposal, and that Madame de Staël plainly asserted that "many men prefer wives who are solely involved with household cares" (p. 288), but fails to draw the necessary conclusions. Exultant over the literary woman's success in creating a "loving" and "performing" heroine, Moers averts her glance away from the literary woman's far less satisfying attempts to claim for this heroine a responsive audience and a loving hero.

There is indeed a chapter missing from Literary Women, one which would have clarified and elaborated on Moers' own insight, with regard to that masterpiece which is The Letters of Elizabeth Barrett Barrett and Robert Browning (1845-6), that "Robert Browning came for Elizabeth Barrett just the way a lover should come for every literary woman, out of the blue, fascinated, enchanted, magnetized by her writing" (p. 10; italics mine). This hypothetical chapter would have further explored the consequences of a double bind of which Moers herself is aware, one characterizing the paradoxical position of the female subject in the literature of love. Moers notes: "women are the passionate sex, they are always told, and therefore love is their natural subject; but they must not write about it" (p. 218). Clearly, this paradoxical position is intensified for the "loving" and "performing" heroine who violates the injunction -- she not only flaunts her love ("loving") but also does so in the public sphere ("performing") -- and is thus forced to defend her femininity. Although Moers does not pursue this dilemma, she does indirectly suggest that a chief strategy in resolving the double bind (the term is not hers) has been 'made available' to women writers by Rousseau's La nouvelle Heloise which reverses the "axiomatic" love plot, portraying the heroine as "rich and noble," while her lover is "poor and common" (p. 239). Moers argues that the difference between Richardson and Rousseau, and the different traditions of women's literature they fathered, lies in a "single fact decisive to the love story in fiction. Pamela is the poor girl who wants a rich man, and Julie the rich girl who wants a poor man" (p. 240). Moers' argument elucidates both the deferral of the 'happy end' in Jane Eyre and Aurora Leigh, and the violence inflicted upon the male protagonists, Rochester and Romney (who are blinded); what Brontë and EBB are after in both cases, contends Moers, is "a chance to do the scene of choice: the heroine choosing and demanding her love" (p. 240). More is here implying a revisionary practice, a rewriting of stories with what Nancy Miller has

called an "emphasis added" (Miller, 1981). As I hope Chapter Five has demonstrated, Aurora Leigh represents a particular triumph of the literary woman, for Aurora not only gets to choose and demand her love, but is also allowed to win it through her writing.

In a book like Moers' which is as much a reading of literary women's works as it is about literary women reading each other's works, one would expect to find much in the way of our second line of inquiry, namely, on the poem's contextual space. Moers, however, only briefly sketches out a context for EBB's work, identifying her as a "post-Keatsian" and placing her, following Jerome Buckley's classification, "among the early-Victorian Spasmodics" (p. 83). She finds "the women poets of the 1810s, 1820s, and 1830s ... to have contributed very little to her [EBB's] manner as a poet," and although realizing that EBB shared many concerns with women novelists such as the Brontës, Mrs. Gaskell and George Sand, concludes that "where poetic tradition is concerned ... there EBB was more a founder than a follower" (pp. 83-4). Consequently, while Moers explores at some length EBB's "role in the formation of the greatest woman poet of the nineteenth century" (p. 84) -- by which she means Emily Dickinson -- she leaves us with some very suggestive but unexplored avenues to EBB's own text, Madame de Staël's Corinne and George Sand's life and art being the most important.

Although Moers does not recognize the problematics attendant upon EBB's employment of a "self-consciously female poetic voice" (p. 92), she prepares the way for such an understanding in suggesting a reading of the poem which emphasizes the connection between the poem's formal mode -- that of a first-person narrative -- and its thematic core -- the poet Aurora's absorption "with the significance of her own life as a woman, and with its effect on her language" (p. 93; italics mine). Similarly, Moers is suggestive when describing EBB as careening "from gritty fact to grand ideal," as in "her commitment to write of the 'pewter age' she lived in, plain truths about nineteenth-century realities are clamped with earnest, Carlylean fierceness to wild imaginings of spirituality" (p. 94). Moers does not venture to further investigate this heterogeneity of material, thus failing to recognize the strategic role I have demonstrated the transcendentalist discourse to occupy in Aurora Leigh (Chapter Four),

mistaking the procedure for a merely witty "jumble of metaphors" lacking in profundity (p. 95).

Moers' perception of the affinity between Aurora Leigh and the life and work of George Sand -- the suggestion indeed dates as far back as the early reviews of the poem -- is further elaborated by Patricia Thomson in her George Sand and the Victorians (1977). Thomson investigates this affinity in a chapter devoted to "the love affair of Elizabeth Barrett with George Sand" (Thomson, 1977: p. 43). Referring to EBB's two sonnets "To George Sand," Thomson points out that "in both sonnets she [EBB] makes great play with the man-woman aspect of George Sand" (p. 47), but offers no further elucidation, slipping rather into a biographical narrative concerning EBB's various plans to communicate with Sand. Here we witness a glossing over of important problematic aspects similar to that which occurs in Moers' study. On the whole, Thomson sees the sonnets to "invoke the possibility of a miraculous transformation" (p. 47), and Aurora to be "George Sand of the 1844 sonnet, A Desire, after the 'miraculous thunder' has sounded and the transformation has taken place. Aurora's soul is not at odds with her feelings" (p. 56). Failing to realize that Aurora is still preoccupied with the problematics of a poet who is a "large-brained woman and large-hearted man" (A Desire), Thomson overlooks the poem's central thrust, namely, Aurora's attempt to work out the terms of the desired transformation. Thomson instead capitalizes on some aspects of the poem's resolution -- "the blend of high-souled fervour, of mysticism and of sensuousness" (p. 59) -- to the detriment of an understanding of the conflictual dynamics necessitating such a resolution.

Thomson is, however, helpful in pointing out common preoccupations in the two writers -- "the wrongs of women, ... the treatment of women as commodities, conventional hypocrisy and social repression" (p. 58) -- and in suggesting that Aurora's doctrine of love owes much to the "creed of love which George Sand preached, without faltering, from start to finish" (p. 59). Particularly significant for our purposes is Thomson's linking of Aurora's final affirmation of female passion to Sand's view, expressed in the chapter of Histoire de ma vie which EBB read with great excitement before finishing Aurora Leigh, that "for true consummation, 'Il faut être trois; un homme, une femme et Dieu en eux '" (p. 59). In EBB's own writing

of the literary woman's apotheosis this Sandian text becomes the unspoken link between a tradition of female self-reflexion and self-creation and Aurora's own particular triumph of transcendence granted and passion gratified.

As Barbara Charlesworth Gelpi has pointed out, "in recent years Elizabeth Barrett Browning's Aurora Leigh has reemerged, after more than half a century of neglect, as a strikingly important Victorian poem, historically significant in its interaction with the works of other Victorian writers and immediately relevant in its depiction of a feminist consciousness" (Gelpi, 1981: p. 35). Cora Kaplan's essay on the poem, which serves as an introduction to the 1977 edition of Aurora Leigh, anticipates much of the work done on the poem in the past five years in that it addresses both the issue of the poem's context and its depiction "of the socialisation of women and the making of a poet" (Kaplan, 1977: p. 10). In retrospect, Kaplan's essay can indeed be seen as having succeeded in setting forth a master-program for research on which students of the poem still draw. Conceptually, Kaplan treats the poem as an "overlapping sequence of dialogues with other texts, other writers" (p. 16). Formally, she tries to account for the poem's "integrated" elements -- that is, elements constitutive of formal unity -- as well as for its "unintegrated" aspects, arguing that

the poem tries to make an over-arching ideological statement by enlarging the personal to encompass the political, but the individual history interior to the poem -- its 'novel' -- cannot answer the questions which the work as a whole puts to discourses outside it.
(pp. 16-17)

Starting off with a definition of the poem as "a collage of Romantic and Victorian texts reworked from a woman's perspective," Kaplan identifies three subjects which are "engaged as intersecting issues in the poem," namely, "gender difference, class warfare, the relation of art to politics" (p. 5). To this Kaplan adds what she regards as being the "condition of the poem's very existence," which is "the fact that its protagonist is a woman and a poet" (p. 10; italics mine). Kaplan can thus highlight the

implications of the poem's formal mode -- the "first person epic voice" (p. 10) -- and its thematic concerns -- "questions about politics and high culture" (p. 10) -- for the total effect achieved. An important part of this effect, argues Kaplan, is the poem's contribution to "a feminist theory of art which argues that women's language, precisely because it has been suppressed by patriarchal societies, re-enters discourse with a shattering revolutionary force" (p. 11).

Sketching out a few of the "debates" in which she sees EBB to engage in the poem, Kaplan brings forth Mme de Staël's Corinne, or Italy (1807), George Sand's life and work, Charlotte Brontë's Jane Eyre and Mrs. Gaskell's Ruth, Tennyson's The Princess, Clough's Bothie (1848), as well as Kingsley's Alton Lock, Tailor and Poet (1850). Most relevant to our project, moreover, is Kaplan's perception of the poem as "the first and most powerfully sustained literary effort" to engage in a discussion of "the relationship between women's experience, politics and creativity" (pp. 35-6). In redefining the poem as centered around "the woman as speaker-poet" (p. 35; italics mine) and in drawing attention to its employment of what Aurora calls the "woman's figure," Kaplan has thus carried yet further the project which was also Woolf's, Tompkins', and Moers'.

Since the re-appearance of Aurora Leigh in a new edition with Cora Kaplan's strong feminist introduction, there has been a continuing interest in the poem. Although no long studies of the poem or of EBB's canon have been published since Hayter's 1962 Mrs. Browning -- with the exception of Radley's 1972 study in the Twayne series -- articles and essays on EBB have appeared in journals, in collections of essays devoted to women's writing, and in studies of different aspects of Victorian poetry. Similarly, two doctoral dissertations have been recently completed which deal with EBB's poetry exclusively. Since most of these recent studies of Aurora Leigh are of immediate relevance to the issues discussed in the present work and have thus already been addressed, I will here recapitulate only their general import.

Sandra Donaldson's dissertation, completed in 1976, deals, as the title already indicates, with "Elizabeth Barrett Browning's Poetic and Feminist Philosophies in Aurora Leigh and other poems." The dissertation deals with these two aspects under separate headings, Chapter I and II being devoted to "The Poet" and "The Poet in Aurora Leigh," respectively, while Chapter III and Chapter IV deal with "Women's Themes" and "Women's Themes in Aurora Leigh," respectively. Testing Aurora Leigh against her formulation of EBB's poetic theory prior to 1856, Donaldson finds that

in Aurora Leigh Barrett Browning has done what she has said a poet must do: she has created a character (1) who learns that isolation is deadly and that she must both participate in worldly activities and experience the emotions that are contingent upon involvement with other people, (2) who resists the temptation to see her poetic inspiration as rendering her divine, and (3) who finally joins together with another person in a small but basic step toward harmonious living as well as in a shared vision of unifying the world.

(Donaldson, 1977: pp. 112-113)

I find this formulation of EBB's aesthetics in Aurora Leigh to be lacking, as it ignores the transcendentalist creed which informs EBB's poetics. This oversight is most disabling, and accounts for Donaldson's failure to perceive EBB's revisionist practice in creating a feminized version of the Carlylean hero-as-poet. Disregarding the transcendentalist element, moreover, Donaldson remains oblivious to the conflict which arises out of the mutually exclusive demands of the feminine plot and the aesthetic (transcendentalist) plot. Indeed, Donaldson's description of the poem's aesthetics as advocating "involvement with other people" and more specifically the joining "together with another person in a small but basic step towards harmonious living" mistakes some aspects of the poem's attempt to resolve the aforementioned conflict for the poem's overall aesthetics. As I have demonstrated, the desire for a union with another person constitutes an aspect of the feminine plot; EBB takes eight books to illustrate the conflict between this plot and the exigencies of a transcendentalist aesthetics in which the particular (individual) is

subsumed by and subservient to the universal.

Having thus formalized EBB's aesthetics, Donaldson argues the poem's conclusion to be a satisfactory resolution:

Life has joined her [Aurora's] art ... In her life she comes to experience what she has been writing about for ten years ... but has been denying or suppressing emotionally all that time -- the particular love of another person.

(pp. 109-110)

By positing that love as the "particular love of another person" is unequivocally valorized throughout the poem, Donaldson overlooks the poem's central concern with the conflicting demands of "love" -- the feminine plot -- and art -- the plot of the poet as prophet and seer. Failing to grasp the transcendentalist aspect of EBB's poetics, Donaldson remains oblivious to its centrality for the story of the poet as a woman.

While Donaldson's close reading of the text often singles out important moments, her decision to separate "the treatment of Aurora Leigh into two categories: Aurora as a genderless poet ... and Aurora as a woman with a career, which happens to be that of a poet" (p. 77), makes it virtually impossible for her to treat the problematics I have identified as central to the poem, that concerning the construction of a female poetic subject within a specifically transcendentalist context. Where there is an interrelationship, Donaldson perceives only a parallelism, comparing Aurora's "growth as a poet, as she moves from the dangers of isolation to the joys of harmonious union," to her growth as a woman through "three stages of development towards self-sufficiency and self-awareness: separatism, sisterhood, and androgyny" (p. 184-5; italics mine). Ultimately, Donaldson's study suffers from its isolationist tactic, for not only does she unjustifiably separate related issues in the poem (the "woman," the "poet") she also fails to venture outside the EBB canon to see the poem in its interaction with other texts.

J.M.W. Borg's dissertation, entitled "The Fashioning of Elizabeth Barrett Browning's Aurora Leigh" and completed in 1979, is perhaps the first extensive scholarly attempt to approach the poem from a contextual

perspective. Although well over half of the dissertation is given over to a comparison of the various manuscript versions of Aurora Leigh (with little commentary), the first part of the dissertation, appropriately entitled "Influences and Development," is suggestive. Interspersed with many valuable insights, Borg's reading of the poem basically follows from an understanding of Aurora Leigh as "an autobiographically centered epic which has prophetic intent" (Borg, 1979: p. 26). Borg's emphasis on this "prophetic intent" is clear throughout, making the chapters on EBB's early poetry ("The Fugitive Angel") and on her ambivalence towards male authority ("Byron in Bluestocking") an extended introduction to what are the dissertation's two central chapters: "The Evangelical Heritage" and "Swedenborgian Revelation."

Tracing a religious-spiritual growth which he finds documented in the poetry, Borg sees superimposed on the later poetry an hierarchical structure which leads from Calvinist thought through Neoclassic, Moderate, Enthusiastic, Romantic, to a Spiritualist faith (p. 94). In this last and highest plane Borg finds most evident the "grand theosophy of Swedenborg, which reifies these [aforementioned] elements from her [EBB's] life and reading, and undergirds Aurora Leigh" (p. 94). Overall, Borg considers Swedenborgian thought to have answered EBB's need for "a Christianity that was universal, yet not exclusive; spiritual, yet not scientific; and poetic, though not cryptic" (p. 120). Accordingly, he reads Aurora Leigh as an allegory depicting "the spiritual via dolorosa both woman and man had to traverse in order to be transfigured... Marian Erle carries the cross; Romney and Aurora see the New Jerusalem" (p. 94). Borg claims EBB's indebtedness to the thought of Edward Irving: "it was Irving's concern with God's oracles, the apocalyptic books of the Bible, where we see the clearest influence on Aurora Leigh" (p. 122), but the major thrust of his argument concerns EBB's move away from Calvinism, with its "idea of a domineering masculine God" (p. 123), to the 'softer' Swedenborgian "spiritual reading of the Bible in terms of wisdom and love" (p. 136).

In Borg's reading, then, Aurora Leigh, like Swedenborg's Apocalypse, is ultimately a gloss on Revelation, "as well as a prophetic utterance which exalted the New Revelation of Swedenborg" (p. 135). While the comparison with Swedenborg helps illuminate certain aspects of the poem's

resolution, Borg's overall interpretive scheme is faulty for in its attempt to superimpose these Swedenborgian elements on the poem as a whole, much in the poem is discarded or disregarded. Most importantly, Borg ignores EBB's exploration of the dilemma of the woman seeking to appropriate a male discourse and to assume a masculine role, that of the heroic poet-prophet. Borg cites a long list of such model poet-prophets -- "Dante, Shakespeare, Milton, Wordsworth, Sand, Carlyle, Keats and Byron" -- and regards Swedenborg as "representing the most complete heroic fulfillment of the poet-prophet succession" (p. 122). Overlooking the implications of this all-male list (the exception is Sand) for the female subject, Borg collapses the poem's sustained concern with Aurora's problematic relation to a male tradition into an harmonizing vision of the Swedenborgian Christ as "soothingly feminine" (p. 106). In reading the poem backwards from its resolution, seeking to make it conform to the Swedenborgian master-narrative in which "marriage represents the proper and highest consummation of love" (p. 143), Borg not only fails to account for aspects of the poem which do not fit into this narrative, but is also unable to realize the relative, functional position of this apocalyptic narrative within the poem.

In a number of essays on the poem appearing over the last few years there emerges a ^e heightened awareness of the poem's internal dynamics, its intense exploration of social issues, and its articulation of the dilemma of the woman poet. The profound change which the critical discourse on Aurora Leigh has undergone could perhaps be best exemplified by juxtaposing two brief summaries of the poem. Writing in 1969 on The Victorian Debate: English Literature and Society, Raymond Chapman tells the story of Aurora Leigh thus:

The hero passes from one disaster to another, including the loss of his house in a fire and of his own sight like Charlotte Brontë's Rochester, until he finds happiness with his cousin who had originally refused him.

(Chapman, 1968: p. 179)

Writing in 1981 for Victorian Poetry (a by no means feminist publication) Barbara Charlesworth Gelpi contends:

The poem is a bildungsroman as well as a novel/poem of social concern ... Although no personal line comes through the plot, the images of the poem tell a separate story: not the public story of a woman poet living in Victorian society but the inner story of such a woman's feeling about herself, particularly about her femininity.

(Gelpi, 1981: p. 36; italics hers)

The virtual absence of the heroine from Chapman's absurd plot-summary is indeed symptomatic of the absence (until very recently) of any serious critical appreciation of EBB's canon within mainstream Victorian criticism. Gelpi's account, on the other hand, demonstrates a refined and sophisticated reading of the poem made possible, in part, by an already established tradition of women readers of the poem, from Emily Dickinson and Virginia Woolf to G.M. Tompkins and Adrienne Rich.

In a direct challenge to the nineteenth century reviewers who sought to "trace the woman beneath the attainment" (Tuckerman, 1854: p. xvi), collapsing the poetry into a stereotyped image of womanhood, critics have recently begun the immense project of critically recording EBB's own daring investigations of both poetic and feminine identities. In "Working into Light: Elizabeth Barrett Browning," Helen Cooper's brief review of EBB's poetry, although leaving out Aurora Leigh, brings out EBB's preoccupation with "art, politics and motherhood" (Cooper, 1979: p. 81). Cooper points out EBB's ambivalence towards the male poetic tradition as well as her inclination towards female role-models such as Sand, Harriet Beecher Stowe, and Harriet Martineau (p. 68). This perception of EBB as creating "a voice and a vision for herself as a woman poet" (p. 81; italics mine) is also central to Gelpi's illuminating "Aurora Leigh: The Vocation of the Woman Poet." Both Gelpi's essay and Kathleen Hickok's "'New yet orthodox': The Female Characters in Aurora Leigh" are concerned with the poem's representation of female characters. Hickok's essay focuses on EBB's departure from a stereotypical portrayal of such "female figures as the lovelorn pining maiden, the fallen woman, the self-sacrificing wife, and the bereaved mother" (Hickok, 1980: p. 479). Her overall argument is that EBB's exploration, in Aurora Leigh, of "virtually all the women's roles with which the public was familiar in mid-nineteenth-century

England," constituted a challenge to the validity of these very conventions (pp. 480-81).

While Hickok places Aurora Leigh within a feminine poetic tradition which she sees EBB to transcend through revision, Gelpi is more concerned with Aurora's own internal conflicts as she strives to reconcile her creativity (her vocation) with her womanhood. Overall, Gelpi charts a developmental process which is initiated by Aurora's "ambivalence towards femininity itself" (Gelpi, 1981: p. 40), an ambivalence dramatized through the characters of Romney and Aurora whom Gelpi sees as "the dual expression of a single though ambivalent mind" (p. 41). Gelpi illustrates Aurora's agonized sense of a split or divided self (masculine/feminine) and points to Aurora's identification with Marian and her experience watching the women praying at the Florentine church as high moments leading towards Aurora's final "reconciliation with her womanhood" (p. 46). Although, as I have noted in Chapter Five, my reading differs from Gelpi's on a number of points, both our readings finally lead to a perception of the poem's conclusion as a celebration of what I have termed the literary woman's apotheosis and what Gelpi describes as "the united spirit of a creative woman at last trustful of her powers" (p. 48).

On the whole, recent readings of the poem acknowledge the presence of the conflicting plots of "woman" and "poet," a presence I have identified as constitutive of the double bind. Often, however, the critical focus lies not in the dynamic interplay of the two but rather in the one or the other plots, resulting in partial and reductive readings. Two recent articles illustrate this tendency. Meredith B. Raymond's "Elizabeth Barrett Browning's Poetics 1845-1856: 'The Ascending Gyre'" attempts a comprehensive description of EBB's poetics. Raymond finds EBB's poetic theory from 1820 to the period of her correspondence with Robert Browning (1845-6) to uphold the poet as a "mediator between heaven and earth, between the ideal and the real" (Raymond, 1980: p. 1). This perception, argues Raymond, is sustained and further developed in EBB's later poetry, including Aurora Leigh. He points out the Platonic origin of EBB's metaphysics and suggests that for her inspiration lies not in the primal "light" itself but rather "in the process of the vision and the effective presentation of the vision" (p. 2; italics his). Raymond sees this

conception of poetic inspiration to involve a "perennial paradox which arises from the merging of visions of the ideal and real" (p. 3; italics mine). Extrapolating a metaphysical scenario from a cursory reading of two EBB sonnets -- "Mountaineer and Poet" and "Love" -- Raymond introduces the paradoxical master-narrative which he then observes as central to Aurora Leigh:

The poet, with his dual vision, seeking experience in the objective and subjective worlds, seeks to reconstruct his revelation of the ideal and to transmit his version of this revelation, will succeed when the forces of intellect, sense, and soul, merge in an harmonious union and will triumph when the soul has achieved its perfection through the perfecting powers of Love.

(Raymond, 1980: p. 4)

This pre-conceived master-narrative, although capturing important aspects of EBB's poetics in Aurora Leigh, seriously hampers Raymond's perception of the larger problematics explored in the poem. Most importantly, by uncritically accepting the transcendentalist formula of resolution through "love" as the poem's proper resolution -- that is, by a priori positing "Love" as the resolution of all the conflicts explored in the poem -- Raymond in effect fails to grasp the poem's revisionary thrust and its sustained questioning of transcendentalist tenets. Raymond capitalizes "Love," and by adopting a metaphysical rhetoric as his own critical idiom fails to see both the problems which this rhetoric poses, in the context of the poem, for the female subject, and the ways in which the poem employs, challenges, and revises metaphysical rhetoric to resolve these problems. Raymond's oversight, like Hayter's, consists in his inability to view EBB's evolving poetics as a poetics of a specifically female subject. He concludes: "The novel-poem, Aurora Leigh, then, may be read as a record of the poet's, and more particularly, but less importantly, of the feminine poet's, evolving awareness of how to achieve this perfection of soul" (p. 10; italics mine).

Raymond sees this "evolving awareness," for which he finds EBB own metaphor of an "ascending gyre" most apt, to culminate, in the poem's resolution, with the "full awareness of the power of love as a converting and reconciling force" (p. 10). Clearly, Raymond's formulation totally overlooks not only the poem's central and profound questioning of the meaning of love, particularly for the female subject, but also the vital interrelationships between woman and poet in the overall construction of Aurora's poetics. Raymond notes in passing Aurora's self-doubt as she regards the need for a mediation to be a feminine flaw, and her reflections "on the irony and pathos of her loneliness and solitary life," but sees them to lead directly to and thus be subsumed by what he regards to be "an important revelation of her position as woman and artist" (p. 7; italics his), namely, that "the truth itself,/That's neither man's nor woman's, but just God's" (AL, VI, 752-3). Overtaken by this transcendentalist strain himself, Raymond further blurs the very distinctions with which the poem is so vitally concerned, ultimately reading the poem as an allegory which dramatizes the conflict between the "subjective" (Aurora) and "objective" (Romney) poles of the poet's dual vision, and between "out going love" (Romney) and "poetic vision" (Aurora). What is lost in the process is the opportunity to understand the poem not as yet another reiteration of an abstract millennial faith in the resolution of contradictory forces, but as the dynamic and profound investigation of the complex problematics of a poetics of the female subject.

While Raymond chooses to see in EBB's use of the metaphor of "light" no more than an evocation of a Platonic notion of "original light" (p. 2), Virginia Steinmetz believes the poem's solar imagery to "reveal EBB's struggle with her internalized father image and her attempt to derive her vision of androgyny from images of patriarchy" (Steinmetz, 1981: p. 18). Steinmetz's essay indeed goes a far way towards problematizing, albeit indirectly, a central issue in Raymond's study by demonstrating EBB's ambivalence, in Aurora Leigh, towards the transcendentalist discourse. While Raymond uncritically accepts the "light" of "Love" as the inevitable transcendentalist resolution, Steinmetz convincingly argues that the intensity of the solar imagery in the poem owes largely to the drama of conflicts which it reveals. She thus views the imagery to "reveal her [EBB's] struggle to find an image of androgyny disassociated from the sun

in its negative association with a hierarchical system which assumes the priority and superiority of the male" (p. 41). While Raymond, however, is hampered by his unquestioning employment of transcendentalist rhetoric as his own critical idiom, Steinmetz is bound both by a limited pattern of imagery and by a perspective which brings to bear on this pattern only a very partial context. Thus, Steinmetz considers EBB's early poetry to support her argument that EBB's solar imagery in Aurora Leigh "is not liberated from its Western cultural associations with male dominance and hierarchy," but mistakes the import of this imagery for the poem as a whole when she equates the limitations of the imagery with the limitations of the poem. Her attempt to read Aurora Leigh in terms of one specific pattern of imagery, her search for a coherent story to be revealed by this imagery, and her reduction of the context of the solar imagery to an "association with male dominance and hierarchy," all result in a particularly one-sided and partial reading of the poem.

Porter and Clarke's "Critical Introduction" to Aurora Leigh (in their 1900 edition of EBB's Works) is perhaps still one of the most satisfying accounts of the poem. Porter and Clarke realize that "Aurora herself is, of course, the centre around which the story revolves" (IV, p. ix), and understand her story to involve the particular problematics of a woman artist:

Aurora is the artist consumed with the flames of creative impulse burning toward some wholly worthy accomplishment, yet she is the woman, distrustful of her powers, and longing for the appreciation and sympathy of the man whom she loves.

(IV, p. xxi)

While crediting the poem with many modern preoccupations, Porter and Clarke view the poem's resolution as "reactionary," arguing that Aurora's willingness to "sink [her individuality] in her love at the end" proves her to be "the pioneer 'new woman,' who has not quite freed herself from the inheritance of the past" (p. xxvi). This judgment arises directly from Porter and Clarke's forward-looking, feminist convictions. Indeed, their essay anticipates the most recent readings of the poem in that it tries to appropriate the poem for a larger program, a program for which Aurora Leigh

becomes instrumental.

Unlike EBB's contemporary reviewers who sought to place her among the "female poets" who preceded her, Porter and Clarke see Aurora Leigh as "prophetic of the struggle which is everywhere going on today between the deep-seated unconscious egotism of men and the awakening, enlightened egotism of women" (IV, pp. xi-xii). For Porter and Clarke Aurora Leigh is a test-case from which one is to learn lessons about future survival, a significant episode in an ongoing "struggle" which is also theirs. Similar acts of appropriation, although for different purposes, are also evident in Elaine Showalter's "Towards a Feminist Poetics" (1979) and in an essay by the Marxist-Feminist Literature Collective entitled "Women Writing: Jane Eyre, Shirley, Villette, Aurora Leigh" (1978).

Showalter's essay attempts to "outline a brief taxonomy ... of feminist criticism," and distinguishes between "feminist critique" -- "concerned with woman as reader" -- and "gynocritics" -- "concerned with woman as writer" (Showalter, 1979: p. 25; italics hers). Showalter's choice of EBB as a case-study in her section on gynocritics attests to the centrality of EBB's canon to a reconstructed feminist literary history. Inspired by Kaplan's essay, Showalter finds Aurora Leigh a particularly apt illustration of "the need for completeness" which defines gynocritics: the need to "take into account the different velocities and curves of political, social and personal histories in determining women's literary choices and careers" (p. 29). Showalter's more obvious contribution to an understanding of Aurora Leigh consists, in this essay, in her addition to the intertext evoked by Kaplan of "the male poet whose influence on her [EBB's] work in the 1850's would have been most pervasive: Robert Browning" (p. 30). Even more important, however, are the unstated implications of Showalter's choice of Aurora Leigh as a case-study for a criticism concerned with the woman as writer.

These implications are perceptively spelled out in an essay by the Marxist-Feminist Literature Collective which explores the relationships between gender and discourse via four exemplary texts: Jane Eyre, Shirley, Villette, and Aurora Leigh. Like Showalter, the Collective writers see Aurora Leigh as focusing "on the woman as poet" (MFLC, 1978: p. 201).

While Showalter never acknowledges, however, Aurora Leigh as the paradigm for a valorized criticism of the woman as writer (gynocritics), the Collective writers openly declare EBB's attempt "to resolve [in Aurora Leigh] the contradiction implicit in her own speech by seeing poetry as action" to be the "Moebius strip" on which "we too as Marxist-feminist critics and writers inscribe ourselves" (p. 201). The Collective writers thus articulate what is at stake not only in their interpretation but also in Porter and Clarke's and in Showalter's; for all these critics Aurora Leigh represents a major achievement in a project which is as much the critic's as it is the poet's. For Porter and Clarke Aurora Leigh represents a major step forward in a discursive "struggle" for "an enlightened egotism of women" (IV, pp. xi-xii); for Showalter the poem embodies the institution of a female self-reflexive discourse, the discourse which serves as a paradigm for gynocritics. For the Collective writers Aurora Leigh partakes of their own struggle, a struggle for "women's access to full subjectivity in culture" (MFLC, 1978: p. 201). Finally, it is this route which has lead to the conception of the present work. It is this definition of Aurora's problematics as the dual problematics of woman as "the speaker/writer of her own discourse, and a desiring, choosing subject in her own right" (MFLC, 1978: p. 202), which has served as my point of departure in the present work.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

NOTE: Whenever possible, I have given the original date of publication in parenthesis (following the author's name), followed by the publication details of the edition used in the present work.

A. ELIZABETH BARRETT BROWNING

(arranged chronologically)

(a) Works

Barrett, Elizabeth Barrett (1818): My Own Character. In Browning Institute Studies, 2 (1974), pp. 119-121.

Barrett, Elizabeth Barrett (1820): Glimpses into My Own Life and Literary Character. In Browning Institute Studies, 2 (1974), pp. 121-133.

Browning, Elizabeth Barrett (1856): Aurora Leigh. London: The Women's Press, 1978.

Porter, Charlotte, and Helen Clarke, eds. (1900): The Complete Works of Elizabeth Barrett Browning. 6 vols. New York: T.Y. Crowell Company.

Browning, Elizabeth Barrett (1914): Hitherto Unpublished Poems and Stories with an inedited Autobiography. Boston: The Bibliophile Society.

(b) Diaries

Kelley, Philip, Ronald Hudson, eds. (1969): Diary by E.B.B.: The Unpublished Diary of Elizabeth Barrett Barrett 1831-1832. Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press.

Berridge, Elizabeth, ed. (1974): The Barretts at Hope End: The Early Diary of Elizabeth Barrett Barrett. London: John Murray.

(c) Letters

Mayer, Townshend, ed. (1877): Letters of Elizabeth Barrett Browning to Richard Hengist Horne. 2 vols. London: Richard Bentley and Son.

Kenyon, F.G. ed. (1898): The Letters of Elizabeth Barrett Browning. 2 vols. N.Y.: Macmillan Company.

Miller, Betty, ed. (1954): EBB to Miss Mitford: The Unpublished Letters of Elizabeth Barrett Barrett to Mary Russel Mitford. London: Murray John.

Kintner, Elvan, ed. (1969): The Letters of Robert Browning and Elizabeth Barrett 1845-1846. 2 vols. Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press.

Pope, W.B. ed. (1972): Invisible Friends: The Correspondence of Elizabeth Barrett Barrett and Benjamin Haydon 1842-1845. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.

Heydon, P.N. & P. Kelley, eds. (1973): Elizabeth Barrett Browning's Letters to Mrs. David Ogilvy 1849-1861. N.Y.: Quadrangle.

(d) Bibliographies

Barnes, Warner (1967): A Bibliography of Elizabeth Barrett Browning. The University of Texas and Baylor University.

Timko, Michael (1968): "Elizabeth Barrett Browning." In The Victorian Poets: A Guide to Research. Ed. Frederic Faverty. Second edition. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, pp. 122-136.

Peterson, William (1974): Robert and Elizabeth Browning: An Annotated Bibliography 1951-1970. New York: The Browning Institute.

Taplin, Gardner (1979): "Elizabeth Barrett Browning Scholarship: The Last Twelve Years." Studies in Browning and his Circle, 7, No. 2, pp. 34-54.

B. OTHER

Abrams, Meyer Howard (1971): Natural Supernaturalism: Tradition and Revolution in Romantic Literature. New York: Norton.

Agress, Lynn (1978): The Feminine Irony: Women on Women in Early Nineteenth Century English Literature. London: Associated University Presses.

- Angenot, Marc (1973): "Esquisse d'une théorie des actants romanesques."
Stratégie: pratiques signifiantes, (Winter 1973), pp. 83-109.
- Angenot, Marc (1977): "Présumé, topos, idéologème." Etudes Françaises,
13, 1-2, pp. 11-34
- Angenot, Marc (1978): "Fonctions narratives et maximes idéologiques."
Orbis Litterarum, 33, pp. 1-16.
- Ardener, Shirley, ed. (1975): Perceiving Women. N.Y.: John Wiley and
Sons.
- Ardener, Shirley, ed. (1978): Defining Females. London: Croom Helm.
- Armstrong, Isobel (1969): The Major Victorian Poets: Reconsiderations.
London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.
- Armstrong, Isobel (1972): Victorian Scrutinies: reviews of poetry
1830-1870. London: Athlone Press.
- Ashton, Rosemary (1980): The German Idea: Four English Writers and the
Reception of German Thought 1800-1860. Cambridge University Press.
- Astell, Mary (1694): A Serious Proposal to the Ladies. N.Y.: Source
Books Press, 1970.
- Astell, Mary (1696): An Essay in Defense of the Female Sex: In a Letter to
a Lady Written by a Lady. London: A. Roper.
- Atlantic Monthly (1861): "Elizabeth Barrett Browning." (September 1861),
pp. 368-376.
- Baillie, Joanna (1853): The Dramatic and Poetical Works of Joanna Baillie.
London: Longman, Brown, Green & Longmans.
- Bald, Marjorie (1923): Women Writers of the Nineteenth Century.
Cambridge: at the University Press.
- Barthes, Roland (1977): Image, Music Text. Trans. Stephen Heath.
Glasgow: Fontana/Collins.
- Basch, Françoise (1974): Relative Creatures: Victorian Women in Society
and in the Novel 1837-1867. Trans. A. Rudolf. London: Allen Lane.

- Bateson, Gregory (1972): Steps to an Ecology of Mind. New York: Ballantine Books.
- Bayne Peter (1857): "Mrs. Barrett Browning." In his Essays in Biography and Criticism. N.Y.: John W. Lovell, pp. 146-210.
- Bayne, Peter (1881): "Elizabeth Barrett Browning." In his Two Great Englishwomen: Mrs. Browning and Charlotte Brontë. London: James Clarke and Co., pp. 3-154.
- Beattie, James (1777): The Minstrel; or The Progress of Genius. London: Printed for John Sharpe, 1816.
- Beebe, Maurice (1964): Ivory Towers and Sacred founts: The Artist as Hero in Fiction from Goethe to Joyce. N.Y.: N.Y. University Press.
- Behn, Aphra (1915): Works. 6 vols. Ed. Montagu Summers. London: W. Heineman, rpt. 1967.
- Behnken, Eloise M. (1978): Thomas Carlyle: "calvinist without the theology". Columbia & London: University of Missouri Press.
- Bentley, Eric (1957): A Century of Hero Worship. Beacon Press.
- Benveniste, Emile (1966): Problèmes de linguistique générale. Paris: Gallimard.
- Bergonzi, Bernard (1969): "Feminism and Femininity in The Princess." In The Major Victorian Poets: Reconsiderations. Ed. Isobel Armstrong. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, pp. 35-49
- Berridge, Elizabeth (1977): "A Talk on Aurora Leigh." Browning Society Notes, 7 (July 1977), pp. 53-58.
- Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine (1857): "Mrs. Barrett Browning: Aurora Leigh." (January 1857), pp. 23-41.
- Blackwood's (1862): "A Box of Books." (April 1862), pp. 434-451.
- Bloom, Harold (1973): The Anxiety of Influence. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Bloom, Harold (1975): A Map of Misreading. N.Y.: Oxford University Press.

- Blount, Paul (1979): George Sand and the Victorian World. Athens: University of Georgia Press.
- Boas, Louise Schutz (1930): Elizabeth Barrett Browning. London: Longmans Green.
- Booth, Wayne (1974): A Rhetoric of Irony. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Booth, Wayne (1979): Critical Understanding: The Powers and Limits of Pluralism. University of Chicago Press.
- Borg, J.M.W (1979): "The Fashioning of Elizabeth Barrett Browning's Aurora Leigh." Unpublished doctoral dissertation. Northwestern University.
- Bradstreet, Anne (1967): The Works of Anne Bradstreet. Ed. Jeanine Hensley. Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press.
- Brashear, William (1969): The Living Will: A Study of Tennyson and Nineteenth Century Subjectivism. The Hague, Paris: Mouton.
- Brink, J.R., ed. (1980): Female Scholars: A Tradition of Learned Women before 1800. Montreal: Eden Press.
- Brontë, Charlotte (1847): Jane Eyre. Ed. R.J. Dunn. N.Y.: Norton, 1971.
- Browning, Robert (1852:) An Essay on Shelley. London: Reeves & Turner, 1888.
- Buckler, William (1980): The Victorian Imagination: Essays in Aesthetic Exploration. N.Y. and London: N.Y. University Press.
- Buckley, J.H. (1951): The Victorian Temper: A Study in Literary Culture. N.Y.: Vintage.
- Buckley, J.H. (1961): Tennyson: The Growth of a Poet. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.
- Burdett, Osbert (1921): The Idea of Coventry Patmore. Oxford University Press.
- Burke, Edmund (1756): "A Philosophical Inquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful." In The Works of Edmund Burke.

London: George Bell & Sons, 1889.

Carlyle, Thomas (1899): Critical and Miscellaneous Essays. 5 vols.
London: Chapman and Hall. (rpt. New York: AMS Press, 1969).

Carlyle, Thomas (1827): "The State of German Literature." In Critical and Miscellaneous Essays, I, pp. 26-86.

Carlyle, Thomas (1828): "Goethe." In Critical and Miscellaneous Essays, I, pp. 198-257.

Carlyle, Thomas (1830): "On History." In Critical and Miscellaneous Essays, II, pp. 83-95.

Carlyle, Thomas (1832): "Biography." In Critical and Miscellaneous Essays, III, pp. 44-61.

Carlyle, Thomas (1838): Sartor Resartus. In Sartor Resartus and On Heroes and Hero Worship. London: J.M. Dent and Sons, 1948.

Carlyle, Thomas (1841): On Heroes and Hero Worship. In Sartor Resartus and On Heroes and Hero Worship. London: J.M. Dent and Sons, 1948.

Castan, C. (1977): "Structural Problems and the Poetry of Aurora Leigh." Browning Society Notes, 7 (December 1977), pp. 73-81.

Cavendish, Margaret, Duchess of Newcastle (1655): "Address to the Two Universities." In her Philosophical and Physical Opinions. London.

Cavendish, Margaret, Duchess of Newcastle (1656): "A True Relation of the Birth, Breeding, and Life of Margaret Cavendish, Duchess of Newcastle." In her Life of William Cavendish, Duke of Newcastle, to which is added, The True Relation of my Birth, Breeding, and Life. London: C.H. Firth, 1886.

Centlivre, Susanna (1872): The Dramatic Works of the Celebrated Mrs. Centlivre. 3 vols. London: John Pearson.

Chapman, Raymond (1968): The Victorian Debate: English Literature and Society 1832-1901. New York: Basic Books.

Cohn, Norman (1970): The Pursuit of the Millennium. London: Paladin.

- Colby, Vineta (1970): The Singular Anomaly: Women Novelists of the Nineteenth Century. N.Y.: New York University Press.
- Colley, A.C. (1978): "The Conflict between Tradition and Modern Values in Tennyson's The Princess." Bucknell Review, 24, No. 1, pp. 37-48.
- Collins, T. (1967): Robert Browning's Moral-Aesthetic Theory 1833-1855. University of Nebraska Press.
- Collins, Winston (1973): "The Princess: The Education of the Prince." Victorian Poetry, 11, No. 4 (Winter 1973), pp. 285-294.
- Cooper, Helen (1979): "Working into Light: Elizabeth Barrett Browning." In Shakespeare's Sisters: Feminist Essays on Women Poets. Eds. Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Crawford, Virginia (1901): "Coventry Patmore." The Fortnightly Review, LXXV, No. CCCCX (1 February 1901), pp. 304-311.
- Crow, Duncan (1971): The Victorian Woman. London: George Allen.
- Culler, Jonathan (1976): "Presupposition and Intertextuality." Modern Language Notes, 91, pp. 1381-1396.
- Currie, Robert (1974): Genius: An Ideology in Literature. London: Chatto & Windus.
- Dale, Peter Allan (1977): The Victorian Critic and the Idea of History: Carlyle, Arnold, Pater. Cambridge, Mass. & London: Harvard University Press.
- Daly, Mary (1978): Gyn/Ecology: The Metaethics of Radical Feminism. Boston: Beacon Press.
- Danzing, A. (1966): "Tennyson's The Princess: A Definition of Love." Victorian Poetry, 4, No. 1, pp. 83-89.
- Davies, Emily (1866): The Higher Education of Women. N.Y.: AMS Press, 1973.
- Dawson, Carl (1979): Victorian Noon: English Literature in 1850. Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press.

- Dawson, S.E. (1882): Study; with critical and explanatory notes, of Alfred Tennyson's The Princess. Montreal: Dawson Brothers.
- DeLaura, David (1976): "The Future of Poetry: A Context for Carlyle and Arnold." In Carlyle and his Contemporaries. Ed. John Clubbe. Durham: Duke University Press, pp. 148-180.
- Diamond, A. & L. Edwards, eds. (1977): The Authority of Experience: Essays in Feminist Criticism. Amherst: University of Mass. Press.
- Didier Beatrice (1981): L'écriture-femme. Paris: PUF.
- Diehl, J.F. (1978): "'Come Slowly Eden' -- An Exploration of Women Poets and their Muse." Signs, 3, No. 3, pp. 572-587.
- Donaldson, Sandra (1977): "Elizabeth Barrett Browning's Poetic and Feminist Philosophies in Aurora Leigh and Other Poems." Unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Connecticut.
- Donaldson, Sandra (1977b): "Elizabeth Barrett's Two Sonnets to George Sand." Studies in Browning and his Circle, 5, No. 1 (Spring 1977), pp. 19-22.
- Donovan, J., ed. (1975): Feminist Literary Criticism: Explorations in Theory. University of Kentucky Press.
- Ducrot, Oswald (1972): Dire et ne pas dire: principes de semantique linguistique. Paris: Herman.
- Duerksen, Roland (1966): Shelleyan Ideas in Victorian Literature. The Hague: Mouton.
- Dyce, Alexander (1827): Specimens of English Poetesses. London: T. Rodd.
- Eagleton, Terry (1976): Criticism and Ideology. London: NLB.
- Eagleton, Terry (1978): "Tennyson: Politics and Sexuality in 'The Princess' and 'In Memoriam'." In 1848: The Sociology of Literature. Eds. F. Barker, J. Coombes, P. Hulme, C. Mercer, A. Musselwhite. University of Essex.

- Eagleton, Terry (1981): Walter Benjamin: or Towards a Revolutionary Criticism. London: Verso.
- Edgeworth, Maria (1799): Letters for Literary Women. London: J. Johnson.
- Edinburgh Review (1861): "The Works of Elizabeth Barrett Browning." (October 1861), pp. 513-534.
- Egerton, Sara Fyge (1706): Collection of Poems on Several Occasions. London: Nutt.
- Ehrenpreis, Irvin & R. Hasband (1966): The Lady of Letters in the Eighteenth Century. Los Angeles: W.A. Clark Memorial Library, University of California.
- Eliot, George (1856): "Silly novels by Lady Novelists." Westminster Review, (October 1856), pp. 442-461.
- Ellis, Mrs. Sarah (1843): The Women of England. N.Y.: D. Appleton Co.
- Ellis, Mrs. Sarah (1845): The Daughters of England. London: Charles Griffin.
- Elwood, Mrs. (1843): Memoirs of the Literary Ladies from the commencement of the last century. London: Henry Colburn.
- Ewbank, Inga-Stina (1966): Their Proper Sphere: A Study of the Brontë Sisters as Early Victorian Novelists. London: Edward Arnold.
- Farwell, Marilyn (1977): "Adrienne Rich and an Organic Feminist Criticism." College English, 39, No. 2 (October 1977), pp. 191-199.
- Farwell, Marilyn (1978): "Feminist Criticism and the concept of the Poetic Persona." Bucknell Review, 24, No. 1 (Spring 1978), pp. 139-156.
- Faulkner, William (1936): Absalom! Absalom!. N.Y.: The Modern Library.
- Fielding, K.J. & Rodger L. Tarr, eds. (1976): Carlyle Past and Present. Plymouth, England: Vision Press.
- Finch, Ann (Countess of Winchilsea) (1928): Poems. Selected by J.M. Murry. London: Jonathan Cape.

- Foucault, Michel (1972): The Archeology of Knowledge and the Discourse on Language. Trans. A. Sheridan. N.Y.: Harper Colophon.
- Foucault, Michel (1976): La Volonte de Savoir. Editions Gallimard.
- Foucault, Michel (1982): "The Subject and Power." Critical Inquiry, 8, No. 1 (Summer 1982), pp. 777-795.
- Freud, Sigmund (1933): "Femininity." In his New Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis. Trans. James Strachey. N.Y.: Norton, 1965.
- Fuller, Margaret Ossoli (1855): Woman in the Nineteenth Century. N.Y.: Source Books Press.
- Gadamer, H.G. (1975): Truth and Method. N.Y.: The Seabury Press.
- Garcia, Irma (1981): Promenade femmilière: Recherches sur l'écriture féminine. 2 vols. Paris: Editions des femmes.
- Gelpi, Barbara Charlesworth (1981): "Aurora Leigh: The Vocation of the Woman Poet." Victorian Poetry, 19, No. 1 (Spring 1981), pp. 35-48.
- Genette, Gerard (1980): Narrative Discourse: an essay in method. Trans. Jane E. Lewin. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- Gerhard, J. (1969): Tennysonian Love: The Strange Diagonal. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Gilbert, Sandra & Susan Gubar (1979a): The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth Century Literary Imagination. New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press.
- Gilbert, Sandra and Susan Gubar (1979b): "Introduction: Gender, Creativity, and the Woman Poet." In Shakespeare's Sisters: Feminist Essays on Women Poets. Eds. Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, pp. xv-xxvi.
- Gildon, Charles (1702); A Comparison between the Two Stages. Ed. Staring B. Wells. Princeton University Press, 1942.
- Gisborne, Thomas (1797): An Inquiry into the Duties of the Female Sex. Second edition. London: T. Cadell and W. Davie.

- Glennon, L. (1979): Women and Dualism: A Sociology of Knowledge Analysis. N.Y. & London: Longmans.
- Goldman, Emma (1910): Anarchism and Other Essays. New York: Dover Publications, rpt. 1969.
- Goldmann, Lucien (1964): Pour une sociologie du roman. Paris: Gallimard.
- Goldsmith, Oliver (1878): The Works of Oliver Goldsmith. 4 vols. Ed. Peter Cunningham. London: Murray John.
- Gosse, Sir Edmund William (1905): Coventry Patmore. London.
- Gregory, Allene (1966): The French Revolution and the English Novel. New York: Haskell House.
- Gross, John (1969): The Rise and Fall of the Man of Letters. N.Y.: Macmillan
- Gutwirth, M. (1966): Mme de Staël, Novelist: The Emergence of the Artist as Woman. University of Illinois Press.
- Hair, Donald (1981): Domestic and Heroic in Tennyson's Poetry. Toronto, Buffalo, London: Toronto University Press.
- Haller, John S. (1974): The Physician and Sexuality in Victorian America. Urbana: University of Illinois Press.
- Harrington, E.R. (1978): "A Study of the Poetry of Elizabeth Barrett Browning." Unpublished doctoral dissertation, New York University.
- Harris, Wendell (1981): The Omnipresent Debate: Empiricism and Transcendentalism in Nineteenth Century English Prose. Dekalb: Northern Illinois Press.
- Harrold, Charles Frederick (1963): Carlyle and German Thought 1819-1834. London: Archon Books.
- Hartman, Geoffry (1970): Beyond Formalism. New Haven and London: Yale University Press.
- Hayter, Alethea (1962): Mrs. Browning, A Poet's Work and its Setting. London: Faber and Faber.

- Hayter, Alethea (1965): Elizabeth Barrett Browning. London: British Council and National Book League.
- Hazlitt, William (1818): "On Poetry in General." In The Complete Works of William Hazlitt. Ed. P.P. Howe. London and Toronto: J.M. Dent and Sons, 1930-34, Vol. V, pp. 1-18.
- Hazlitt, William (1822): Table Talk. In The Complete Works of William Hazlitt. Vol. VIII.
- Hemans, Felicia (1859): Records of Women and Other Poems. Edinburgh: Blackwood & Sons.
- Hemans, Felicia (1860): Poetical Works. Philadelphia.
- Henderson, P. (1978): Tennyson: Poet and Prophet. London & Henley: Routledge and Kegan Paul.
- Hickok, Kathleen (1980): "'New Yet Orthodox': The Female Characters in Aurora Leigh." International Journal of Women's Studies, 3, No. 5 (Sept/Oct 1980), pp. 479-490.
- Holloway, John (1953): Victorian Sage. London: Macmillan.
- Holloway, John (1977a): The Proud Knowledge: Poetry, Insight and the Self 1620-1920. Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul.
- Holloway, John (1977b): "Aurora Leigh and Jane Eyre." Brontë Society Transactions, 17, pp. 126-32.
- Homans, Margaret (1980): Women Writers and Poetic Identity: Dorothy Wordsworth, Emily Brontë, and Emily Dickinson. Princeton University Press.
- Horne, Richard Hengist (1844): A New Spirit of the Age. Oxford University Press, 1907.
- Howe, S. (1930): Wilhelm Meister and his English Kinsmen. N.Y.: Columbia University Press.
- Hoy, D.C. (1978)): The Critical Circle. University of California Press.
- Hoy, D.C. (1979): "Taking History Seriously: Foucault, Gadamer, Habermas." Union Seminary Review Quarterly, 34, No. 2 (Winter 1979),

pp. 85-95.

Hudson, Gladys W., compiled: An Elizabeth Barrett Browning Concordance. 4 vols. Detroit, Michigan: Gale Research Company.

Ikeler, Abbott (1972): Puritan Temper and Transcendental Faith: Carlyle's Literary Vision. Ohio State University Press.

Ingram, J.H. (1888) Elizabeth Barrett Browning. London: W.H. Allen.

Jacobus, Mary, ed. (1979): Women Writing and Writing about Women. London: Croom Helm.

Jacobus, Mary (1981): "Book Reviews: Gilbert and Gubar's The Madwoman in the Attic, and Gilbert and Gubar, eds., Shakespeare's Sisters." Signs, 6, No. 3 (Spring 1981), pp. 517-523.

Jameson, Anna (1846): Memoirs and Essays. London.

Janes, Regina (1976): "Mary, Mary, Quite Contrary, Or, Mary Astell and Mary Wollstonecraft Compared." In Studies in 18th Century Culture. Ed. Ronald Rosbottom. Ohio State University, pp. 121-139.

Juliana, Anchoret (Julian of Norwich) (1978): Showings. Trans. Edmund Colledge and James Walsh. N.Y.: Paulist Press.

Jauss, Hans Robert (1970): "Literary History as a Challenge to Literary Theory." New Literary History, 2, No. 1 (Autumn 1970), pp. 7-37.

Jauss, Hans Robert (1979): "The Alterity and Modernity of Medieval Literature." New Literary History, 10, No. 2 (Winter 1979), pp. 181-227.

Jehlen, Myra (1981): "Archimedes and the Paradox of Feminist Criticism." Signs, 6, No. 4 (Summer 1981), pp. 575-601.

Jerrold, Walter (1926): Five Queer Women. London: Brentano's Ltd.

Jewsbury, Maria Jane (1932): Occasional Papers. London: Oxford University Press.

Juhasz, Suzanne (1976): Naked and Fiery Forms: Modern American Poetry by Women: A New Tradition. N.Y.: Harper Colophon Books.

- Jump, J.D. ed. (1967): Tennyson: The Critical Heritage. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.
- Kaplan, Cora (1977): "Introduction." In Aurora Leigh and Other Poems by Elizabeth Barrett Browning. London: The Women's Press.
- Kierkegaard, Soren (1841): The Concept of Irony. Trans. L.M. Capel. London: Collins, 1966.
- Killham, J. (1958): Tennyson and The Princess. University of London: The Athlone Press.
- Killigrew, Ann (1986): Poems. Gainseville: Scholars Facsimiles & Reprints, 1967.
- Kincaid, J.R. (1975): Tennyson's Major Poems: Comic and Ironic Patterns. New Haven & London: Yale University Press.
- Kingsley, Charles (1850): "On Tennyson's In Memoriam and Earlier Works." In Tennyson: The Critical Heritage. Ed. John Jump. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1967, pp. 172-185.
- Kissane, James (1970): Alfred Tennyson. N.Y.: Twayne Publishers.
- Klein, Viola (1948): The Feminine Character: History of an Ideology. N.Y.: International Universities Press.
- Kolodny, Annette (1975): "Some Notes on Defining a 'Feminist Literary Criticism'." Critical Inquiry, 2 (1975-6), pp. 75-92.
- Kolodny, Annette (1980): "A Map for Rereading: Or, Gender and the Interpretation of Literary Texts." New Literary History (1980), pp. 451-467.
- Kozicki, H. (1979): Tennyson and Clio: History in the Major Poems. Baltimore & London: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Kramarae, Cheris (1981): Women and Men Speaking: Frameworks for Analysis. Rowley, Mass.: Newbury House Publishers.
- Kristeva, Julia (1970): Le texte du roman. The Hague: Mouton.
- Kristeva, Julia (1974): La révolution du langage poétique. Paris: Seuil.

- Kristeva, Julia (1980): Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art. Ed. Leon S. Roudiez, trans. Thomas Gora, Alice Jardine, and Leon Roudiez. N.Y.: Columbia University Press.
- Landon, Laetitia Elizabeth (1857): The Complete Works of Laetitia Elizabeth Landon. 2 vols. Boston: Phillips, Sampson and Company.
- LaValley, Albert (1968): Carlyle and the Idea of the Modern. New Haven & London: Yale University Press.
- Lehman, B.H. (1928): Carlyle's Theory of the Hero. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Lentricchia, Frank (1980): After the New Criticism. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
- Lewes, G.H. (1852): "The Lady Novelists." Westminster Review (July 1852), pp. 129-141.
- Lucas, John (1971): "Politics and the Poet's Role." In Literature and Politics in the Nineteenth Century. Ed. J. Lucas. London.
- Ludlow, J.M. (1853): "Ruth." North British Review, XIX (1853), pp. 81-94.
- Lukacs, Georg (1973): Theory of the Novel. Trans. Anna Bostock. Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press.
- Lupton, M.J. (1970): "The Printing Woman who has lost her Place." Women: A Journal of Liberation, 2, pp. 2-5.
- Lupton, M.J. (1972): Elizabeth Barrett Browning. Old Westbury, N.Y.: Feminist Press.
- Macherey, Pierre (1966): Pour une théorie de la production littéraire. Paris: François Maspero.
- MacKinnon, Catharine (1982): "Feminism, Marxism, Method, and the State: An Agenda for Theory." Signs, 7, No. 3 (Spring 1982), pp. 515-544.
- Mander, Rosalie (1980): Mrs. Browning: The Story of Elizabeth Barrett. London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson.

- Mandeville de, Bernard (1725): The Fable of the Bees; or. Private Vices. Public Benefits. London: Printed for Bathurst, Nourse, Carman, etc., 1795.
- Martin, R.B. (1980): Tennyson: The Unquiet Heart. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Martineau, Harriet (1837): Society in America. 2 vols. New York: Saunders and Otley.
- Mason, Mary (1980): "The Other Voice: Autobiographies of Women Writers." In Autobiography: Essays Theoretical and Critical. Ed. James Olney. Princeton University Press, pp. 207-235.
- Massey, Gerald (1862): "Last Poems and Other Works of Mrs. Browning." North British Review, XXXVI (1862), pp. 271-281.
- McElderly, B. (1944): "Common Elements in Wordsworth's 'Preface' and Shelley's Defense of Poetry." Modern Language Quarterly, 5 (June 1944), pp. 175-181.
- McGhee, Richard (1980): Marriage, Duty, and Desire in Victorian Poetry and Drama. Lawrence: The Regents Press of Kansas.
- Mellor, Anne K. (1980): English Romantic Irony. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.
- Mercier, M. (1976): Le roman féminin. Presses universitaires de France.
- Merlette, Germaine Marie (1905): La vie et l'oeuvre d'Elizabeth Barrett Browning. Paris: Librairie Armand Colin.
- Mews, Hazel (1969): Frail Vessels: Woman's Role in Women's Novels, from Fanny Burney to George Eliot. London: University of London, the Athlone Press.
- MFLC (Marxist-Feminist Literature Collective) (1978): "Women Writing: Jane Eyre, Shirley, Villette, Aurora Leigh." In 1848: The Sociology of Literature. Eds. F. Barker, J. Coombes, P. Hulme, C. Mercer, A. Musselwhite. University of Essex, pp. 185-206.
- Miles, Alfred (1896): The Poets and the Poetry of the Century. London: Hutchinson Co.

- Mill, J.S. & Harriet Taylor (1970): Essays on Sex Equality. Ed. Alice Rossi. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Mill, J.S. (1969): Autobiography and Other Writings. Ed. J. Stillinger. Boston: Houghton and Mifflin.
- Miller, Nancy (1980): The Heroine's Text: Readings in the French and English Novels 1722-1782. Columbia University Press.
- Miller, Nancy (1981): "Emphasis Added: Plots and Plausibilities in Women's Fiction." PMLA, 96, No. 1 (January 1981), pp. 36-47.
- Mitford, Mary Russel (1852): Recollections of a Literary Life. N.Y.: Harper Brothers.
- Moers, Ellen (1977): Literary Women. New York: Doubleday.
- Moglen, Helen (1976): Charlotte Brontë: The Self Conceived. N.Y.: Norton.
- More, Hannah (1786): The Bas Bleu; or. Conversation, addressed to Mrs. Vesey. n.d., n.p.
- More, Hannah (1799): Strictures on the Modern System of Female Education. In The Works of Hannah More. London: D. Graisberry, 1803, Vol. IV.
- Morgan, Sydney Owenson (1840): Woman and her Master. 2 vols. London: Colburn.
- Morgan, Sydney Owenson (1862): Lady Morgan's Memoires: Autobiography Diaries and Correspondence. 2 vols. London: Wm. H. Allen.
- Mulock, Dina Craik (1858): A Woman's Thoughts About Women. N.Y.: Rudd and Carleton.
- Nicati, Mme A.B. (1912): Femme et Poète: Elizabeth Barrett Browning. Paris: Perrin et Cie.
- Nichols, E.M. (1961): "Mary Wollstonecraft." In Shelley and his Circle. Ed. K.N. Cameron. Harvard University Press.
- Nicolson, Harold (1949): Tennyson. London: Constable.

(OED) The Oxford English Dictionary: Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1933.

Ohmann, Carol (1971): "Emily Brontë in the Hands of the Male Critics." College English, 32 (May 1971), pp. 906-913.

Ostriker, Alicia (1982): "The Thieves of Language: Women Poets and Revisionist Mythmaking." Signs, 8, No. 1 (Autumn 1982), pp. 68-96.

Page, Frederick (1933): Patmore: A Study in Poetry. London: Oxford University Press.

Palmer, D.J., ed. (1973): Writers and their Background: Tennyson. Ohio University Press.

Paroissien, David (1971): "Mrs. Browning's Influence on and Contribution to A New Spirit of the Age (1844)." English Language Notes, 8, No. 4, pp. 274-281.

Patmore, Coventry (1851): "The Social Position of Women." North British Review, XIV.

Patmore, Coventry (1857): "Mrs. Browning's Poems." North British Review, 52 (February 1857), pp. 237-47.

Patmore, Coventry (1893): Religio Poetae. London: Bell.

Patmore, Coventry (1949): The Poems of Coventry Patmore. Ed. Frederick Page. Oxford University Press.

Pattison, Robert (1979): Tennyson and Tradition. Harvard University Press.

Peirce, Charles Sanders (1931-1935): Collected Papers of Charles Sanders Peirce. 6 vols. Ed. Charles Hartshorne and Paul Weiss. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.

Pichanick, V.K. (1977): "An Abominable Submission: Harriet Martineau's View on the Role and Place of Woman." Women's Studies, 5, pp. 13-32.

Plottel, J.P. & H. Charney, eds. (1978): Intertextuality: New Perspectives in Criticism. N.Y.: New York Literary Forum.

Priestly, F.E. (1973): Language and Structure in Tennyson's Poetry. London: Andre Deutsch.

- Radley, Virginia (1972): Elizabeth Barrett Browning. N.Y.: Twayne.
- Raymond, Meredith B. (1978): "EBB's Early Poems: the 1820's." Browning Society Notes, 8 (December 1978), pp. 3-7.
- Raymond, Meredith B. (1980): "Elizabeth Barrett Browning's Poetics 1845-1856: 'The Ascending Gyre'." Browning Society Notes, 11, No. 2 (August 1980), pp. 1-11.
- Reed, John (1975): Victorian Conventions. Ohio University Press.
- Reid, J.C. (1957): The Mind and Art of Coventry Patmore. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.
- Reynolds, Myra (1920): The Learned Lady in England 1659-1760. Boston and N.Y.: Houghton Mifflin Company.
- Rich, Adrienne (1976): "'Vesuvius at Home': The Power of Emily Dickinson." Parnassus, 5 (Fall-Winter 1976), pp. 49-74.
- Ricks, Christopher (1972): Tennyson. N.Y.: The Macmillan Company.
- Riffaterre, Michael (1978): Semiotics of Poetry. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Rivers, C.L. (1976): Robert Browning's Theory of the Poet 1833-41. Salzburg University.
- Roberts, William (1836): Memoirs of the Life and Correspondence of Mrs. Hannah More. N.Y.: Harper and Brothers.
- Robertson, E.S. (1883): English Poetesses. London: Cassel.
- Rogers, Katharine (1966): The Troublesome Helpmate: A History of Misogyny in Literature. Seattle: University of Washington Press.
- Rosenberg, Philip (1974) The Seventh Hero: Thomas Carlyle and the Theory of Radical Activism. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.
- Rousseau, Jean Jacques (1762): Emile, ou de l'education. Librairie Garnier Freres.
- Rowton, Frederick (1848): The Female Poets of Great Britain. Philadelphia, 1854.

- Royds, Kathleen (1912): Elizabeth Barrett Browning and her Poetry. London: George G. Harrap and Co.
- Sanders, Charles Richard (1960): "Carlyle, Browning, and the nature of a poet." Emory University Quarterly, 16 (Winter 1960), pp. 197-209.
- Sanders, Charles Richard (1963): "Carlyle--Browning Correspondence." Journal of English and Germanic Philology, 62 (April 1963), 323-35.
- Sanders, Charles Richard (1977): Carlyle's Friendships and other Studies. Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press.
- Seigel, Jules Paul (1971): Thomas Carlyle: The Critical Heritage. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.
- Sejourne, P. (1966): Aspects généraux du roman féminin en Angleterre 1740-1800. Editions Ophrys.
- Shackford, Martha Hale (1935): "Elizabeth Barrett Browning's Aurora Leigh" In her Elizabeth Barrett Browning; R. H. Horne: Two Studies. The Wellesley Press, pp. 5-27.
- Shannon, E.F. (1952): Tennyson and the Reviewers: a study of his literary reputation and of the influence of the critics upon his poetry 1827-1851. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.
- Sharma, T.R. (1975): Carlyle and Tennyson: A Study of Tennyson's Heroic Characters in the light of Carlyle's Theory of the Hero. Aligarh: Viveka Publications.
- Sharp, Amy (1891): "Elizabeth Barrett Browning." In her Victorian Poets. London: Methuen, pp. 103-120.
- Shaw, W.D. (1976): Tennyson's Style. Ithaca & London: Cornell University Press.
- Shelley, Percy Bysshe (1821): A Defence of Poetry. In English Literary Criticism. Ed. C.E. Vaughan. London: Blackie and Son.
- Sheridan, A. (1980): Michel Foucault: The Will to Truth. London & N.Y.: Tavistock Publications.

- Shine, Hill (1971): Carlyle and the Saint Simonians: The Concept of Historical Periodicity. N.Y.: Octagon Books.
- Showalter, Elaine (1977): A Literature of Their Own: British Women Novelists from Brontë to Lessing. N.Y.: Princeton University Press.
- Showalter, Elaine (1979): "Towards a Feminist Poetics." In Women Writing and Writing About Women. Ed. Mary Jacobus. London: Croom Helm, pp. 22-41.
- Showalter, Elaine (1981): "Feminist Criticism in the Wilderness." Critical Inquiry, 8, No. 2 (Winter 1981), pp. 179-205.
- Smith, Barbara Herrnstein (1968): Poetic Closure: a study of how poems end. University of Chicago Press.
- Smith, Elton Edward (1964): The Two Voices: A Tennyson Study. London: University of Nebraska Press.
- Smith, George Barnett (1876): Poets and Novelists. N.Y.: D. Appleton.
- Spacks, Patricia Meyer (1975): The Female Imagination. New York: Knopf.
- Spacks, Patricia Meyer (1976): Imagining a Self. London: Harvard University Press.
- Spacks, Patricia Meyer (1977): "Women's Stories, Women's Selves." Hudson Review, 30, No. 1 (Spring 1977), pp. 29-46.
- Springer, M., ed. (1977): What Manner of Woman: Essays on English and American Life and Literature. N.Y.: University Press.
- Stanton, Domna (1977): "Parole et ecriture: Women's Studies USA." Tel Quel, 71/73 (Autumn 1977), pp. 119-135.
- Starzyk, Lawrence (1977): The Imprisoned Splendor: A Study of Early Victorian Critical Theory. London: Kennikat Press.
- Stedman, Edmund Clarence (1875): "Elizabeth Barrett Browning." In his Victorian Poets. Boston and New York: Houghton, Mifflin, 1915, pp. 114-149.
- Steinmetz, Virginia (1981): "Beyond the Sun: Patriarchal Images in Aurora Leigh." Studies in Browning and his Circle, 9, No. 1 (Spring 1981),

pp. 18-41.

- Stevenson, Lionel (1936): The Wild Irish Girl: The Life of Sydney Owenson, Lady Morgan 1776-1859. London: Chapman & Hall.
- Stewart, Grace (1979): A New Mythos: The Novel of the Artist as Heroine 1877-1977. Montreal: Eden Press.
- Stone, Lawrence (1977): The Family Sex and Marriage in England 1500-1800. N.Y.: Harper and Row.
- Taplin, Gardner (1957): The Life of Elizabeth Barrett Browning. N.Y.: Yale University Press.
- Taylor, Irene, and Gina Luria (1977): "Gender and Genre: Women in British Romantic Literature." In What Manner of Woman: Essays in English and American Life and Literature. Ed. Marlene Springer. New York University Press, pp. 98-123.
- Tennyson, Alfred (1969): The Poems of Tennyson. Ed. and annotated by Christopher Ricks. London: Longman.
- Tennyson, G.B. (1965): Sartor called Resartus. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press.
- Thomas, Edward (1910): Feminine Influence on the Poets. London: Martin Secker.
- Thomson, Patricia (1956): The Victorian Heroine: A Changing Ideal. London: Oxford University Press.
- Thomson, Patricia (1977): George Sand and the Victorians: Her Influence and Reputation in Nineteenth Century England. N.Y.: Columbia University Press.
- Thorpe, James (1951): "Elizabeth Barrett's Commentary on Shelley: Some Marginalia." Modern Language Notes (November 1951), pp. 455-458.
- Todorov, Tzvetan (1981): Mikhail Bakhtine: le principe dialogique, suivi d'Ecrits du cercle de Bakhtine. Paris: Editions du seuil.
- Tompkins, J.M.S. (1961-2): "Aurora Leigh." The Fawcett Lecture, Bedford College, Univ. of London.

- Trilling, Lionel (1953): The Liberal Imagination, N.Y.: Doubleday.
- Tuckerman, H.T. (1854): "The Poetry of Elizabeth Barrett Browning." In The Poems of Elizabeth Barrett Browning. N.Y.: C.S. Francis and Co., pp. ix-xvii.
- Turner, Paul (1948): "Aurora Versus the Angel." R.E.S., 24, No. 95 (July 1948), pp. 227-235.
- Turner, Paul (1976): Tennyson. London & Henley: Routledge & Kegan Paul.
- Vicinus, Martha, ed. (1972): Suffer and be Still: Women in the Victorian Age. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Vicinus, Martha (1977): A Widening Sphere: Changing Roles of Victorian Women. Bloomington: Indiana university Press.
- Waring, Walter (1978): Thomas Carlyle. Boston: Twayne Publishers.
- Warren, Alba (1950): English Poetic Theory 1825-1865. Princeton University Press.
- Watzlawick, P., J. Helmick Beavin, D. Jackson (1967): Pragmatics of Human Communication. N.Y. & London: Norton & Company.
- Weber, Samuel (1980): "Closure and Exclusion." Diacritics, (June 1980), pp. 35-46.
- Weinig, Sister M.A. (1981): Coventry Patmore. Twayne Publishers.
- Welter, Barbara (1966): "The Cult of True Womanhood: 1820-60." American Quarterly, 18, No. 2, Pt. 1 (Summer 1966), pp. 151-174.
- West, Jane (1801): Letters Addressed to a Young Man. Charlesworth, Mass.: Etheridge for Parker.
- West, Jane (1806): Letters to a young lady, in which the duties and characters of women are considered--chiefly with a reference to prevailing opinion. London.
- Westminster Review (1857): "Belles Lettres." (January 1857), pp. 306-326.

- Whiting, L. (1899): A Study of Elizabeth Barrett Browning. London: Gay and Bird.
- Willet, C. (1935): Feminine Attitudes in the Nineteenth Century. London & Toronto: Heineman Ltd.
- Williams, Raymond (1958): Culture and Society: 1780-1950. N.Y.: Penguin Books, rpt. 1977.
- Wilsey, Mildred (1944): "Elizabeth Barrett Browning's Heroine." College English, 6, 1 (October 1944), pp. 75-81.
- Wollstonecraft, Mary (1792): A Vindication of the Rights of Woman. Ed. C. Hagelman. N.Y.: Norton, 1967.
- Woolf, Virginia (1929): A Room of One's Own. N.Y.: Granada, 1977.
- Woolf, Virginia (1932): "Aurora Leigh." In her The Second Common Reader. N.Y.: Harcourt, pp. 202-213.
- Woolfford, J. (1978): "EBB: The Natural and the Spiritual." Browning Society Notes, 8 (April 1978), pp. 15-19.
- Wordsworth, William (1802): "Preface to the Lyrical Ballads." In Wordsworth and Coleridge, The Lyrical Ballads. Ed. W.J.B. Owen. Oxford University Press, 1969.
- Wordsworth, William (1876): The Prose Works of William Wordsworth. Ed. Rev. A. Grosart. London: E. Moxon.
- Young, G.M. (1936): Portrait of an Age. Ed. G.K. Clark. London: Oxford University Press, 1977.
- Zeman, Anthea (1977): Presumptuous Girls: women and their world in the serious woman's novel. London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson.