Elizabeth Barrett Browning

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[In the excerpt below, Stedman offers a mixed appraisal of Browning's poetry.]

[Elizabeth Barrett Browning's] first venture of significance was in the field of translation. *Prometheus Bound, and Miscellaneous Poems*, was published in her twenty-fourth year. The poems were equally noticeable for faults and excellences, of which we have yet to speak. The translation was at that time a unique effort for a young lady, and good practice; but abounded in grotesque peculiarities, and in fidelity did not approach the modern standard. In riper years she freed it from her early mannerism, and recast it in the shape now left to us, "in expiation," she said, "of a sin of my youth, with the sincerest application of my mature mind." This later version of a most sublime tragedy is more poetical than any other of equal correctness, and has the fire and vigor of a master-hand. No one has succeeded better than its author in capturing with rhymed measures the wilful rushing melody of the tragic chorus. Her other translations were executed for her own pleasure, and it rarely was her pleasure to be exactly faithful to her text. She was honest enough to call them what they are; and we must own that her "Paraphrases on" Theocritus, Homer, Apuleius, etc., are enjoyable poems in themselves, preserving the spirit of their originals, yet graceful with that freedom of which Shelley's "Hymn to Mercury" is the most winsome English exemplar since Chapman's time....

The disadvantages, no less than the advantages, of [Miss Barrett's] education, were apparent at the outset. She could not fail to be affected by various master-minds, and when she had outgrown one influence was drawn within another, and so tossed about from world to world. "The Seraphim," a diffuse, mystical passion-play, was an echo of the Aeschylean drama. Its meaning was scarcely clear even to the author; the rhythm is wild and discordant; neither music nor meaning is thoroughly beaten out.... Miss Barrett's early verse was strangely combined of ... semi-musical delirium and obscurity, with an attempt at the Greek dramatic form. Her ballads, on the other hand, were a reflection of her English studies; and, as being more English and human, were a vast poetic advance upon "The Seraphim." Evidently, in these varied experiments, she was conscious of power, and strove to exercise it, yet with no direct purpose, and half doubtful of her themes, when, therefore, as in certain of these lyrics, she got hold of a rare story or suggestion, she made an artistic poem; all are stamped with her sign-manual, and one or two are as lovely as anything on which her fame will rest....

The effect of Miss Barrett's secluded life was visible in her diction, which was acquired from books rather than by intercourse with the living world; and from books of all periods, so that she seemed unconscious that certain words were obsolete, or repellent even to cultured and tasteful people.... The difficulty with her obsolete words was that they were introduced unnaturally, and produced a grotesque effect instead of an attractive quaintness. Moreover, her slovenly elisions, indiscriminate mixture of old and new verbal inflections, eccentric rhymes, forced accents, wearisome repetition of favored words to a degree that almost implied poverty of thought,—such matters justly were held to be an outrage upon the beauty and dignity of metrical art. An occasional discord has its use and charm, but harshness in her verse was the rule rather than the exception. When she had a felicitous refrain—a peculiar grace of her lyrics—she frequently would mar the effect and give a shock to her readers by the introduction of some whimsical or repulsive image. Her passion was spasmodic; her sensuousness lacked substance; as for simplicity, it was at one time questionable whether she was not to be classed among those who, with a turbulent desire for utterance, really have nothing definite to say....

In "A Drama of Exile," where she had a more definite object, these faults are less apparent, and her genius shines through the clouds; so that we catch glimpses of the brightness which eventually lighted her to a station in the Valhalla of renown.... [In "A Drama of Exile"] she aimed at the highest, and failed; but such failures are
impossible to smaller poets. It contains wonderfully fine passages; is a chaotic mass, from which dazzling lustres break out....

None of her later or earlier compositions were equal to [Casa Guidi Windows, Sonnets from the Portuguese, and Aurora Leigh] in scope, method, and true poetical value.

[A] surprising advance was evident in the rhythm, language, and all other constituents of her metrical work. The Saxon English, which she hitherto had quarried for the basis of her verse, now became conspicuous throughout the whole structure. Her technical gain was partly due to the stronger themes which now bore up her wing.—and partly, I have no doubt, to the companionship of Robert Browning. Even if he did not directly revise her works, neither could fail to profit by the other's genius and experience....

I am disposed to consider the Sonnets from the Portuguese as, if not the finest, a portion of the finest subjective poetry in our literature. Their form reminds us of an English prototype, and it is no sacrilege to say that their music is showered from a higher and purer atmosphere than that of the Swan of Avon.... Here, indeed, the singer rose to her height. Here she is absorbed in rapturous utterance, radiant and triumphant with her own joy. The mists have risen and her sight is clear. Her mouthing and affectation are forgotten, her lips cease to stammer, the lyrical spirit has full control. The sonnet, artificial in weaker hands, becomes swift with feeling, red with a "veined humanity," the chosen vehicle of a royal woman's vows....

If Mrs. Browning's vitality had failed her before the production of Aurora Leigh, ... her generation certainly would have lost one of its representative and original creations; representative in a versatile, kaleidoscopic presentment of modern life and issues; original, because the most idiosyncratic of its author's poems. An audacious, speculative freedom pervades it, which smacks of the New World rather than the Old. Tennyson, while examining the social and intellectual phases of his era, maintains a judicial impassiveness; Mrs. Browning, with finer dramatic insight,—the result of intense human sympathy, enters into the spirit of each experiment, and for the moment puts herself in its advocate's position. Aurora Leigh is a mirror of contemporary life, while its learned and beautiful illustrations make it, almost, a handbook of literature and the arts. As a poem, merely, it is a failure, if it be fair to judge it by accepted standards. One may say of it, as of Byron's Don Juan (though loath to couple the two works in any comparison), that, although a most uneven production, full of ups and downs, of capricious or prosaic episodes, it nevertheless contains poetry as fine as its author has given us elsewhere, and enough spare inspiration to set up a dozen smaller poets. The flexible verse is noticeably her own, and often handled with as much spirit as freedom; it is terser than her husband's, and, although his influence now began to grow upon her, is not in the least obscure to any cultured reader. The plan of the work is a metrical concession to the fashion of a time which has substituted the novel for the dramatic poem. Considered as a "novel in verse," it is a failure by lack of either constructive talent or experience on the author's part.... Mrs. Browning essayed to invent her whole story, and the result was an incongruous framework, covered with her thronging, suggestive ideas, her flashing poetry and metaphor, and confronting you by whichever gateway you enter with the instant presence of her very self. But either as poem or novel, how superior the whole, in beauty and intellectual power, to contemporary structures upon a similar model, which found favor with the admirers of parlor romance or the lamb's-wool sentiment of orderly British life! As a social treatise it is also a failure, since nothing definite is arrived at. Yet the poet's sense of existing wrongs is clear and exalted, and if her exposition of them is chaotic, so was the transition period in which she found herself involved. Upon the whole, I think that the chief value and interest of Aurora Leigh appertain to its marvellous illustrations of the development, from childhood on, of an aesthetical, imaginative nature. Nowhere in literature is the process of culture by means of study and passionate experience so graphically depicted....

Her metres came by chance, and this often to her detriment; she rarely had the patience to discover those best
adapted to her needs, but gave voice to the first strain which occurred to her. Hence she had a spontaneity which is absent from the Laureate's work. This charming element has its drawbacks: she found herself hampered by difficulties which a little forethought would have avoided, and her song, though as fresh, was too often as purposeless, as that of a forestbird. There is great music in her voice, but one wishes that it were better trained.

Her spontaneous and exhaustless command of words gave her a large and free style, but likewise a dangerous facility, and it was only in rare instances, like the one just cited, that she attained to the strength and sweetness of repose. Her intense earnestness spared her no leisure for humor, a feature curiously absent from her writings: she almost lacked the sense of the ludicrous, as may be deduced from some of her two-word rhymes, and from various absurdities solemnly indulged in. But of wit and satire she has more than enough, and lashes all kinds of tyranny and hypocrisy with supernal scorn. It is perhaps due to her years of indoor life that the influence of landscape-scenery is not more visible in her poetry. [She] uses by preference the works of man rather than those of Nature: architecture, furniture, pictures, books above all, rather than water, sky, and forest. Men and women were the chief objects of her regard,—her genius was more dramatic than idyllic, and lyric first of all.

The instinct of worship and the religion of humanity were pervading constituents of Mrs. Browning's nature, and demand no less attention than the love which dictated her most fervent poems. A spiritual trinity, of zeal, love, and worship, presided over her work. If in her outcry against wrong she had nothing decisive to suggest, she at least sounded a clarion note for the incitement of her comrades and successors.