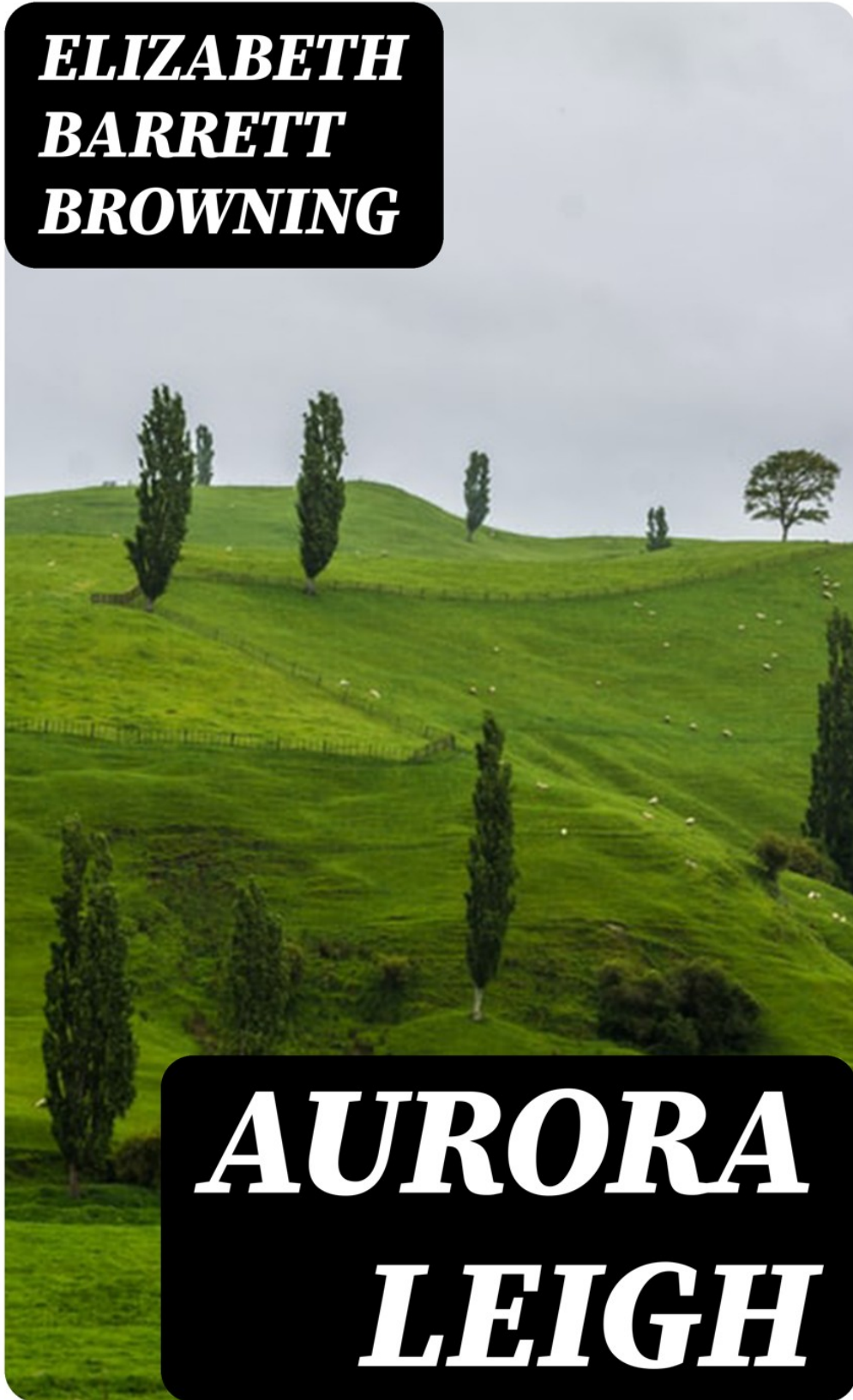


***ELIZABETH
BARRETT
BROWNING***



***AURORA
LEIGH***

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FIRST BOOK.

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OF writing many books there is no end; And I who have written much in prose and verse For others' uses, will write now for mine,— Will write my story for my better self, As when you paint your portrait for a friend, Who keeps it 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, writing thus, am still what men call young; I have not so far left the coasts of life To travel inland, that I cannot hear That murmur of the outer Infinite Which unweaned babies smile at in their sleep When wondered at for smiling; not so far, But still I catch my mother at her post Beside the nursery-door, with finger up, 'Hush, hush—here's too much noise!' while her sweet eyes Leap forward, taking part against her word In the child's riot. Still I sit and feel My father's slow hand, when she had left us both, Stroke out my childish curls across his knee; And hear Assunta's daily jest (she knew He liked it better than a better jest) Inquire how many golden scudi went To make such ringlets. O my father's hand, Stroke the poor hair down, stroke it heavily,— Draw, press the child's head closer to thy knee! I'm still too young, too young, to sit alone.

I write. My mother was a Florentine, Whose rare blue eyes were shut from seeing me When scarcely I was four years

old; my life, A poor spark snatched up from a failing lamp
Which went out therefore. She was weak and frail; She could
not bear the joy of giving life— The mother's rapture slew
her. If her kiss Had left a longer weight upon my lips, It
might have steadied the uneasy breath, And reconciled and
fraternised my soul With the new order. As it was, indeed, I
felt a mother-want about the world, And still went seeking,
like a bleating lamb Left out at night, in shutting up the fold,
— As restless as a nest-deserted bird Grown chill through
something being away, though what It knows not. I, Aurora
Leigh, was born To make my father sadder, and myself Not
overjoyous, truly. Women know The way to rear up children,
(to be just,) They know a simple, merry, tender knack Of
tying sashes, fitting baby-shoes, And stringing pretty words
that make no sense, And kissing full sense into empty
words; Which things are corals to cut life upon, Although
such trifles: children learn by such, Love's holy earnest in a
pretty play, And get not over-early solemnised,— But
seeing, as in a rose-bush, Love's Divine, Which burns and
hurts not,—not a single bloom,— Become aware and
unafraid of Love. Such good do mothers. Fathers love as
well —Mine did, I know,—but still with heavier brains, And
wills more consciously responsible, And not as wisely, since
less foolishly; So mothers have God's licence to be missed.

My father was an austere Englishman, Who, after a dry life-
time spent at home In college-learning, law, and parish talk,
Was flooded with a passion unaware, His whole provisioned
and complacent past Drowned out from him that moment.
As he stood In Florence, where he had come to spend a
month And note the secret of Da Vinci's drains, He musing

somewhat absently perhaps Some English question ...
whether men should pay The unpopular but necessary tax
With left or right hand—in the alien sun In that great square
of the Santissima, There drifted past him (scarcely marked
enough To move his comfortable island-scorn,) A train of
priestly banners, cross and psalm,— The white-veiled rose-
crowned maidens holding up Tall tapers, weighty for such
wrists, aslant To the blue luminous tremor of the air, And
letting drop the white wax as they went To eat the bishop's
wafer at the church; From which long trail of chanting
priests and girls, A face flashed like a cymbal on his face,
And shook with silent clangour brain and heart,
Transfiguring him to music. Thus, even thus, He too received
his sacramental gift With eucharistic meanings; for he loved.

And thus beloved, she died. I've heard it said That but to
see him in the first surprise Of widower and father, nursing
me, Unmothered little child of four years old, His large
man's hands afraid to touch my curls, As if the gold would
tarnish,—his grave lips Contriving such a miserable smile,
As if he knew needs must, or I should die, And yet 'twas
hard,—would almost make the stones Cry out for pity.
There's a verse he set In Santa Croce to her memory, 'Weep
for an infant too young to weep much When death removed
this mother'—stops the mirth To-day, on women's faces
when they walk With rosy children hanging on their gowns,
Under the cloister, to escape the sun That scorches in the
piazza. After which, He left our Florence, and made haste to
hide Himself, his prattling child, and silent grief, Among the
mountains above Pelago; Because unmothered babes, he
thought, had need Of mother nature more than others use,

And Pan's white goats, with udders warm and full Of mystic contemplations, come to feed Poor milkless lips of orphans like his own— Such scholar-scrap he talked, I've heard from friends, For even prosaic men, who wear grief long, Will get to wear it as a hat aside With a flower stuck in't. Father, then, and child, We lived among the mountains many years, God's silence on the outside of the house, And we, who did not speak too loud, within; And old Assunta to make up the fire, Crossing herself whene'er a sudden flame Which lightened from the firewood, made alive That picture of my mother on the wall. The painter drew it after she was dead; And when the face was finished, throat and hands, Her cameriera carried him, in hate Of the English-fashioned shroud, the last brocade She dressed in at the Pitti. 'He should paint No sadder thing than that,' she swore, 'to wrong Her poor signora.' Therefore very strange The effect was. I, a little child, would crouch For hours upon the floor, with knees drawn up, And gaze across them, half in terror, half In adoration, at the picture there,— That swan-like supernatural white life, just sailing upward from the red stiff silk Which seemed to have no part in it, nor power To keep it from quite breaking out of bounds: For hours I sate and stared. Assunta's awe And my poor father's melancholy eyes Still pointed that way. That way, went my thoughts When wandering beyond sight. And as I grew In years, I mixed, confused, unconsciously, Whatever I last read or heard or dreamed, Abhorrent, admirable, beautiful, Pathetical, or ghastly, or grotesque, With still that face ... which did not therefore change, But kept the mystic level of all forms And fears and admirations; was 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 Moonlighted
pallor, ere she shrunk and blinked, And, shuddering,
wriggled down to the unclean; Or, my own mother, leaving
her last smile In her last kiss, upon the baby-mouth My
father pushed down on the bed for that,— Or my dead
mother, without smile or kiss, Buried at Florence. All which
images, Centred on the picture, glassed themselves
Before my meditative childhood, ... as The incoherencies of
change and death Are represented fully, mixed and merged,
In the smooth fair mystery of perpetual Life.

And while I stared away my childish wits Upon my mother's
picture, (ah, poor child!) My father, who through love had
suddenly Thrown off the old conventions, broken loose
From chin-bands of the soul, like Lazarus, Yet had no time to learn
to talk and walk Or grow anew familiar with the sun,— Who
had reached to freedom, not to action, lived, But lived as
one entranced, with thoughts, not aims,— Whom love had
unmade from a common man But not completed to an
uncommon man,— My father taught me what he had learnt
the best Before he died and left me,—grief and love. And,
seeing we had books among the hills, Strong words of
counselling souls, confederate With vocal pines and waters,
—out of books He taught me all the ignorance of men, And
how God laughs in heaven when any man Says 'Here I'm
learned; this, I understand; In that, I am never caught at

fault or doubt.' 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 am like,
They tell me, my dear father. Broader brows Howbeit, upon
a slenderer undergrowth Of delicate features,—paler, near
as grave; But then my mother's smile breaks up the whole,
And makes it better sometimes than itself.

So, nine full years, our days were hid with God Among his
mountains. I was just thirteen, Still growing like the plants
from unseen roots In tongue-tied Springs,—and suddenly
awoke To full life and its needs and agonies, With an
intense, strong, struggling heart beside A stone-dead father.
Life, struck sharp on death, Makes awful lightning. His last
word was, 'Love—' 'Love, my child, love, love!'—(then he
had done with grief) 'Love, my child.' Ere I answered he was
gone, And none was left to love in all the world.

There, ended childhood: what succeeded next I recollect as,
after fevers, men Thread back the passage of delirium,
Missing the turn still, baffled by the door; Smooth endless
days, notched here and there with knives; A weary, wormy
darkness, spurred i' the flank With flame, that it should eat
and end itself Like some tormented scorpion. Then, at last, I
do remember clearly, how there came A stranger with
authority, not right, (I thought not) who commanded, caught
me up From old Assunta's neck; how, with a shriek, She let
me go,—while I, with ears too full Of my father's silence, to
shriek back a word, In all a child's astonishment at grief
Stared at the wharfage where she stood and moaned, My

poor Assunta, where she stood and moaned! The white walls, the blue hills, my Italy, Drawn backward from the shuddering steamer-deck, Like one in anger drawing back her skirts Which suppliants catch at. Then the bitter sea Inexorably pushed between us both, And sweeping up the ship with my despair Threw us out as a pasture to the stars.

Ten nights and days we voyaged on the deep; Ten nights and days, without the common face Of any day or night; the moon and sun Cut off from the green reconciling earth, To starve into a blind ferocity And glare unnatural; the very sky (Dropping its bell-net down upon the sea As if no human heart should scape alive,) Bedraggled with the desolating salt, Until it seemed no more that holy heaven To which my father went. All new, and strange— The universe turned stranger, for a child.

Then, land!—then, England! oh, the frosty cliffs Looked cold upon me. Could I find a home Among those mean red houses through the fog? And when I heard my father's language first From alien lips which had no kiss for mine, I wept aloud, then laughed, then wept, then wept,— And some one near me said the child was mad Through much sea-sickness. The train swept us on. Was this my father's England? the great isle? The ground seemed cut up from the fellowship Of verdure, field from field, as man from man; The skies themselves looked low and positive, As almost you could touch them with a hand, And dared to do it, they were so far off From God's celestial crystals; all things, blurred And dull and vague. Did Shakspeare and his mates Absorb the light here?—not a hill or stone With heart to

strike a radiant colour up Or active outline on the indifferent air!

I think I see my father's sister stand Upon the hall-step of her country-house To give me welcome. She stood straight and calm, Her somewhat narrow forehead braided tight As if for taming accidental thoughts From possible pulses; brown hair pricked with grey By frigid use of life, (she was not old, Although my father's elder by a year) A nose drawn sharply, yet in delicate lines; A close mild mouth, a little soured about The ends, through speaking unrequited loves, Or peradventure niggardly half-truths; Eyes of no colour,—once they might have smiled, But never, never have forgot themselves In smiling; cheeks, in which was yet a rose Of perished summers, like a rose in a book, Kept more for ruth than pleasure,—if past bloom, Past fading also. She had lived, we'll say, A harmless life, she called a virtuous life, A quiet life, which was not life at all, (But that, she had not lived enough to know) Between the vicar and the county squires, The lord-lieutenant looking down sometimes From the empyreal, to assure their souls Against chance-vulgarisms, and, in the abyss, The apothecary looked on once a year, To prove their soundness of humility. The poor-club exercised her Christian gifts Of knitting stockings, stitching petticoats, Because we are of one flesh after all And need one flannel, (with a proper sense Of difference in the quality)—and still The book-club, guarded from your modern trick Of shaking dangerous questions from the crease, Preserved her intellectual. She had lived A sort of cage-bird life, born in a cage, Accounting that to leap from perch to perch Was act and joy enough for any bird. Dear

heaven, how silly are the things that live
In thickets, and eat
berries! I, alas, A wild bird scarcely fledged, was brought to
her cage, And she was there to meet me. Very kind. Bring
the clean water; give out the fresh seed.

She stood upon the steps to welcome me, Calm, in black
garb. I clung about her neck,— Young babes, who catch at
every shred of wool To draw the new light closer, catch and
cling Less blindly. In my ears, my father's word Hummed
ignorantly, as the sea in shells, 'Love, love, my child.' She,
black there with my grief, Might feel my love—she was his
sister once— I clung to her. A moment, she seemed moved,
Kissed me with cold lips, suffered me to cling, And drew me
feebly through the hall, into The room she sate in. There,
with some strange spasm Of pain and passion, she wrung
loose my hands Imperiously, and held me at arm's length,
And with two grey-steel naked-bladed eyes Searched
through my face,—ay, stabbed it through and through,
Through brows and cheeks and chin, as if to find A wicked
murderer in my innocent face, If not here, there perhaps.
Then, drawing breath, She struggled for her ordinary calm,
And missed it rather,—told me not to shrink, As if she had
told me not to lie or swear,— 'She loved my father, and
would love me too As long as I deserved it.' Very kind.

I understood her meaning afterward; She thought to find my
mother in my face, And questioned it for that. For she, my
aunt, Had loved my father truly, as she could, And hated,
with the gall of gentle souls, My Tuscan mother, who had
fooled away A wise man from wise courses, a good man
From obvious duties, and, depriving her, His sister, of the

household precedence, Had wronged his tenants, robbed his native land, And made him mad, alike by life and death, In love and sorrow. She had pored for years What sort of woman could be suitable To her sort of hate, to entertain it with; And so, her very curiosity Became hate too, and all the idealism She ever used in life, was used for hate, Till hate, so nourished, did exceed at last The love from which it grew, in strength and heat, And wrinkled her smooth conscience with a sense Of disputable virtue (say not, sin) When Christian doctrine was enforced at church.

And thus my father's sister was to me My mother's hater. From that day, she did Her duty to me, (I appreciate it In her own word as spoken to herself) Her duty, in large measure, well-pressed out, But measured always. She was generous, bland, More courteous than was tender, gave me still The first place,—as if fearful that God's saints Would look down suddenly and say, 'Herein You missed a point, I think, through lack of love.' Alas, a mother never is afraid Of speaking angerly to any child, Since love, she knows, is justified of love.

And I, I was a good child on the whole, A meek and manageable child. Why not? I did not live, to have the faults of life: There seemed more true life in my father's grave Than in all England. Since *that* threw me off Who fain would cleave, (his latest will, they say, Consigned me to his land) I only thought Of lying quiet there where I was thrown Like sea-weed on the rocks, and suffer her To prick me to a pattern with her pin, Fibre from fibre, delicate leaf from leaf, And dry out from my drowned anatomy The last sea-salt left

in me. So it was. I broke the copious curls upon my head
In braids, because she liked smooth-ordered hair. I left off
saying my sweet Tuscan words Which still at any stirring of
the heart Came up to float across the English phrase, As
lilies, (*Bene ... or che ch'è*) because She liked my father's
child to speak his tongue. I learnt the collects and the
catechism, The creeds, from Athanasius back to Nice, The
Articles ... the Tracts *against* the times, (By no means
Buonaventure's 'Prick of Love,') And various popular
synopses of Inhuman doctrines never taught by John,
Because she liked instructed piety. I learnt my complement
of classic French (Kept pure of Balzac and neologism,) And
German also, since she liked a range Of liberal education,—
tongues, not books. I learnt a little algebra, a little Of the
mathematics,—brushed with extreme flounce The circle of
the sciences, because She disliked women who are
frivolous. I learnt the royal genealogies Of Oviedo, the
internal laws Of the Burmese empire, ... by how many feet
Mount Chimborazo outsoars Himmeleh, What navigable
river joins itself To Lara, and what census of the year five
Was taken at Klagenfurt,—because she liked A general
insight into useful facts. I learnt much music,—such as
would have been As quite impossible in Johnson's day As
still it might be wished—fine sleights of hand And
unimagined fingering, shuffling off The hearer's soul through
hurricanes of notes To a noisy Tophet; and I drew ...
costumes From French engravings, nereids neatly draped,
With smirks of simmering godship,—I washed in From
nature, landscapes, (rather say, washed out.) I danced the
polka and Cellarius, Spun glass, stuffed birds, and modelled

flowers in wax, Because she liked accomplishments in girls. I
read a score of books on womanhood To prove, if women do
not think at all, They may teach thinking, (to a maiden-aunt
Or else the author)—books demonstrating Their right of
comprehending husband's talk When not too deep, and
even of answering With pretty 'may it please you,' or 'so it
is,'— Their rapid insight and fine aptitude, Particular worth
and general missionariness, As long as they keep quiet by
the fire And never say 'no' when the world says 'ay,' For
that is fatal,—their angelic reach Of virtue, chiefly used to
sit and darn, And fatten household sinners,—their, in brief,
Potential faculty in everything Of abdicating power in it: she
owned She liked a woman to be womanly, And English
women, she thanked God and sighed, (Some people always
sigh in thanking God) Were models to the universe. And last
I learnt cross-stitch, because she did not like To see me wear
the night with empty hands, A-doing nothing. So, my
shepherdess Was something after all, (the pastoral saints Be
praised for't) leaning lovelorn with pink eyes To match her
shoes, when I mistook the silks; Her head uncrushed by that
round weight of hat So strangely similar to the tortoise-shell
Which slew the tragic poet. By the way, The works of
women are symbolical. We sew, sew, prick our fingers, dull
our sight, Producing what? A pair of slippers, sir, To put on
when you're weary—or a stool To stumble over and vex you
... 'curse that stool!' Or else at best, a cushion, where you
lean And sleep, and dream of something we are not, But
would be for your sake. Alas, alas! This hurts most, this ...
that, after all, we are paid The worth of our work, perhaps.
In looking down Those years of education, (to return) I

wonder if Brinvilliers suffered more In the water-torture, ...
flood succeeding flood To drench the incapable throat and
split the veins ... Than I did. Certain of your feebler souls Go
out in such a process; many pine To a sick, inodorous light;
my own endured: I had relations in the Unseen, and drew
The elemental nutriment and heat From nature, as earth
feels the sun at nights, Or as a babe sucks surely in the
dark. I kept the life, thrust on me, on the outside Of the
inner life, with all its ample room For heart and lungs, for
will and intellect, Inviolable by conventions. God, I thank
thee for that grace of thine! At first, I felt no life which was
not patience,—did The thing she bade me, without heed to a
thing Beyond it, sate in just the chair she placed, With back
against the window, to exclude The sight of the great lime-
tree on the lawn, Which seemed to have come on purpose
from the woods To bring the house a message,—ay, and
walked Demurely in her carpeted low rooms, As if I should
not, harkening my own steps, Misdoubt I was alive. I read
her books, Was civil to her cousin, Romney Leigh, Gave ear
to her vicar, tea to her visitors, And heard them whisper,
when I changed a cup, (I blushed for joy at that)—‘The
Italian child, For all her blue eyes and her quiet ways,
Thrives ill in England: she is paler yet Than when we came
the last time; she will die.’

‘Will die.’ My cousin, Romney Leigh, blushed too, With
sudden anger, and approaching me Said low between his
teeth—‘You’re wicked now? You wish to die and leave the
world a-dusk For others, with your naughty light blown out?’
I looked into his face defyingly. He might have known, that,
being what I was, ’Twas natural to like to get away As far as

dead folk can; and then indeed Some people make no trouble when they die. He turned and went abruptly, slammed the door And shut his dog out. Romney, Romney Leigh. I have not named my cousin hitherto, And yet I used him as a sort of friend; My elder by few years, but cold and shy And absent ... tender, when he thought of it, Which scarcely was imperative, grave betimes, As well as early master of Leigh Hall, Whereof the nightmare sate upon his youth Repressing all its seasonable delights, And agonising with a ghastly sense Of universal hideous want and wrong To incriminate possession. When he came From college to the country, very oft He crossed the hills on visits to my aunt, With gifts of blue grapes from the hothouses, A book in one hand,—mere statistics, (if I chanced to lift the cover) count of all The goats whose beards are sprouting down toward hell, Against God's separating judgment-hour. And she, she almost loved him,—even allowed That sometimes he should seem to sigh my way; It made him easier to be pitiful, And sighing was his gift. So, undisturbed At whiles she let him shut my music up And push my needles down, and lead me out To see in that south angle of the house The figs grow black as if by a Tuscan rock, On some light pretext. She would turn her head At other moments, go to fetch a thing, And leave me breath enough to speak with him, For his sake; it was simple. Sometimes too He would have saved me utterly, it seemed, He stood and looked so. Once, he stood so near He dropped a sudden hand upon my head Bent down on woman's work, as soft as rain— But then I rose and shook it off as fire, The stranger's touch that took my father's place, Yet dared seem soft. I used him for a

friend Before I ever knew him for a friend. 'Twas better,
'twas worse also, afterward: We came so close, we saw our
differences Too intimately. Always Romney Leigh Was
looking for the worms, I for the gods. A godlike nature his;
the gods look down, Incurious of themselves; and certainly
'Tis well I should remember, how, those days, I was a worm
too, and he looked on me.

A little by his act perhaps, yet more By something in me,
surely not my will, I did not die. But slowly, as one in swoon,
To whom life creeps back in the form of death, With a sense
of separation, a blind pain Of blank obstruction, and a roar i'
the ears Of visionary chariots which retreat As earth grows
clearer ... slowly, by degrees, I woke, rose up ... where was
I? in the world; For uses, therefore, I must count worth while.

I had a little chamber in the house, As green as any privet-
hedge a bird Might choose to build in, though the nest itself
Could show but dead-brown sticks and straws; the walls
Were green, the carpet was pure green, the straight Small
bed was curtained greenly, and the folds Hung green about
the window, which let in The out-door world with all its
greenery. You could not push your head out and escape A
dash of dawn-dew from the honeysuckle, But so you were
baptised into the grace And privilege of seeing.... First, the
lime, (I had enough, there, of the lime, be sure,— My
morning-dream was often hummed away By the bees in it;)
past the lime, the lawn, Which, after sweeping broadly
round the house, Went trickling through the shrubberies in a
stream Of tender turf, and wore and lost itself Among the
acacias, over which, you saw The irregular line of elms by

the deep lane Which stopped the grounds and dammed the
overflow Of arbutus and laurel. Out of sight The lane was;
sunk so deep, no foreign tramp Nor drover of wild ponies out
of Wales Could guess if lady's hall or tenant's lodge
Dispensed such odours,—though his stick well-crooked
Might reach the lowest trail of blossoming briar Which
dipped upon the wall. Behind the elms, And through their
tops, you saw the folded hills Striped up and down with
hedges, (burly oaks Projecting from the lines to show
themselves) Through which my cousin Romney's chimneys
smoked As still as when a silent mouth in frost Breathes—
showing where the woodlands hid Leigh Hall; While, far
above, a jut of table-land, A promontory without water,
stretched,— You could not catch it if the days were thick, Or
took it for a cloud; but, otherwise The vigorous sun would
catch it up at eve And use it for an anvil till he had filled The
shelves of heaven with burning thunderbolts, And proved he
need not rest so early:—then, When all his setting trouble
was resolved To a trance of passive glory, you might see In
apparition on the golden sky (Alas, my Giotto's
background!) the sheep run Along the fine clear outline,
small as mice That run along a witch's scarlet thread.

Not a grand nature. Not my chestnut-woods Of Vallombrosa,
cleaving by the spurs To the precipices. Not my headlong
leaps Of waters, that cry out for joy or fear In leaping
through the palpitating pines, Like a white soul tossed out to
eternity With thrills of time upon it. Not indeed My
multitudinous mountains, sitting in The magic circle, with
the mutual touch Electric, panting from their full deep
hearts Beneath the influent heavens, and waiting for

Communion and commission. Italy Is one thing, England one. On English ground You understand the letter ... ere the fall, How Adam lived in a garden. All the fields Are tied up fast with hedges, nosegay-like; The hills are crumpled plains,—the plains, parterres,— The trees, round, woolly, ready to be clipped; And if you seek for any wilderness You find, at best, a park. A nature tamed And grown domestic like a barn-door fowl, Which does not awe you with its claws and beak, Nor tempt you to an eyrie too high up, But which, in cackling, sets you thinking of Your eggs to-morrow at breakfast, in the pause Of finer meditation. Rather say, A sweet familiar nature, stealing in As a dog might, or child, to touch your hand Or pluck your gown, and humbly mind you so Of presence and affection, excellent For inner uses, from the things without.

I could not be unthankful, I who was Entreated thus and holpen. In the room I speak of, ere the house was well awake, And also after it was well asleep, I sate alone, and drew the blessing in Of all that nature. With a gradual step, A stir among the leaves, a breath, a ray, It came in softly, while the angels made A place for it beside me. The moon came, And swept my chamber clean of foolish thoughts. The sun came, saying, 'Shall I lift this light Against the lime-tree, and you will not look? I make the birds sing—listen!... but, for you, God never hears your voice, excepting when You lie upon the bed at nights and weep.'

Then, something moved me. Then, I wakened up More slowly than I verily write now, But wholly, at last, I wakened, opened wide The window and my soul, and let the airs And

out-door sights sweep gradual gospels in, Regenerating
what I was. O Life, How oft we throw it off and think,
—'Enough, Enough of life in so much!—here's a cause For
rupture;—herein we must break with Life, Or be ourselves
unworthy; here we are wronged, Maimed, spoiled for
aspiration: farewell Life!' —And so, as froward babes, we
hide our eyes And think all ended.—Then, Life calls to us In
some transformed, apocryphal, new voice, Above us, or
below us, or around.... Perhaps we name it Nature's voice,
or Love's, Tricking ourselves, because we are more ashamed
To own our compensations than our griefs: Still, Life's voice!
—still, we make our peace with Life.

And I, so young then, was not sullen. Soon I used to get up
early, just to sit And watch the morning quicken in the grey,
And hear the silence open like a flower, Leaf after leaf,—and
stroke with listless hand The woodbine through the window,
till at last I came to do it with a sort of love, At foolish
unaware: whereat I smiled,— A melancholy smile, to catch
myself Smiling for joy. Capacity for joy Admits temptation. It
seemed, next, worth while To dodge the sharp sword set
against my life; To slip down stairs through all the sleepy
house, As mute as any dream there, and escape As a soul
from the body, out of doors,— Glide through the
shrubberies, drop into the lane, And wander on the hills an
hour or two, Then back again before the house should stir.

Or else I sate on in my chamber green, And lived my life,
and thought my thoughts, and prayed My prayers without
the vicar; read my books, Without considering whether they
were fit To do me good. Mark, there. We get no good By

being ungenerous, even to a book, And calculating profits ...
so much help By so much reading. It is rather when We
gloriously forget ourselves, and plunge Soul-forward,
headlong, into a book's profound, Impassioned for its beauty
and salt of truth— 'Tis then we get the right good from a
book.

I read much. What my father taught before From many a
volume, Love re-emphasised Upon the self-same pages:
Theophrast Grew tender with the memory of his eyes, And
Ælian made mine wet. The trick of Greek And Latin, he had
taught me, as he would Have taught me wrestling or the
game of fives If such he had known,—most like a
shipwrecked man Who heaps his single platter with goats'
cheese And scarlet berries; or like any man Who loves but
one, and so gives all at once, Because he has it, rather than
because He counts it worthy. Thus, my father gave; And
thus, as did the women formerly By young Achilles, when
they pinned the veil Across the boy's audacious front, and
swept With tuneful laughs the silver-fretted rocks, He wrapt
his little daughter in his large Man's doublet, careless did it
fit or no.

But, after I had read for memory, I read for hope. The path
my father's foot Had trod me out, which suddenly broke off,
(What time he dropped the wallet of the flesh And passed)
alone I carried on, and set My child-heart 'gainst the thorny
underwood, To reach the grassy shelter of the trees. Ah,
babe i' the wood, without a brother-babe! My own self-pity,
like the red-breast bird, Flies back to cover all that past with
leaves.

Sublimest danger, over which none weeps, When any young wayfaring soul goes forth Alone, unconscious of the perilous road, The day-sun dazzling in his limpid eyes, To thrust his own way, he an alien, through The world of books! Ah, you!—you think it fine, You clap hands—‘A fair day!’—you cheer him on, As if the worst, could happen, were to rest Too long beside a fountain. Yet, behold, Behold!—the world of books is still the world; And worldlings in it are less merciful And more puissant. For the wicked there Are winged like angels. Every knife that strikes, Is edged from elemental fire to assail A spiritual life. The beautiful seems right By force of beauty, and the feeble wrong Because of weakness. Power is justified, Though armed against St. Michael. Many a crown Covers bald foreheads. In the book-world, true, There’s no lack, neither, of God’s saints and kings, That shake the ashes of the grave aside From their calm locks, and undiscomfited Look stedfast truths against Time’s changing mask. True, many a prophet teaches in the roads; True, many a seer pulls down the flaming heavens Upon his own head in strong martyrdom, In order to light men a moment’s space. But stay!—who judges?—who distinguishes ’Twixt Saul and Nahash justly, at first sight, And leaves king Saul precisely at the sin, To serve king David? who discerns at once The sound of the trumpets, when the trumpets blow For Alaric as well as Charlemagne? Who judges prophets, and can tell true seers From conjurors? The child, there? Would you leave That child to wander in a battle-field And push his innocent smile against the guns? Or even in the catacombs, ... his torch Grown ragged in the fluttering air, and all The dark a-mutter round him? not a child!

I read books bad and good—some bad and good At once:
good aims not always make good books: Well-tempered
spades turn up ill-smelling soils In digging vineyards, even:
books, that prove God's being so definitely, that man's
doubt Grows self-defined the other side the line, Made
atheist by suggestion; moral books, Exasperating to license;
genial books, Discounting from the human dignity; And
merry books, which set you weeping when The sun shines,—
ay, and melancholy books, Which make you laugh that any
one should weep In this disjointed life, for one wrong more.

The world of books is still the world, I write, And both worlds
have God's providence, thank God, To keep and hearten:
with some struggle, indeed, Among the breakers, some hard
swimming through The deeps—I lost breath in my soul
sometimes, And cried, 'God save me if there's any God,'
But, even so, God saved me; and, being dashed From error
on to error, every turn Still brought me nearer to the central
truth.

I thought so. All this anguish in the thick Of men's opinions
... press and counterpress, Now up, now down, now
underfoot, and now Emergent ... all the best of it, perhaps,
But throws you back upon a noble trust And use of your own
instinct,—merely proves Pure reason stronger than bare
inference At strongest. Try it,—fix against heaven's wall Your
scaling ladders of high logic—mount Step by step!—Sight
goes faster; that still ray Which strikes out from you, how,
you cannot tell, And why, you know not—(did you eliminate,
That such as you, indeed, should analyse?) Goes straight
and fast as light, and high as God.

The cygnet finds the water; but the man is born in ignorance
of his element, And feels out blind at first, disorganised
By sin in the blood,—his spirit-insight dulled And crossed by his
sensations. Presently We feel it quicken in the dark
sometimes; Then, mark, be reverent, be obedient,— For
those dumb motions of imperfect life Are oracles of vital
Deity Attesting the Hereafter. Let who says '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. Books, books, books! I had
found the secret of a garret-room Piled high with cases in
my father's name; Piled high, packed large,—where,
creeping in and out Among the giant fossils of my past, Like
some small nimble mouse between the ribs Of a mastodon, I
nibbled here and there At this or that box, pulling through
the gap, In heats of terror, haste, victorious joy, The first
book first. And how I felt it beat Under my pillow, in the
morning's dark, An hour before the sun would let me read!
My books! At last, because the time was ripe, I chanced
upon the poets. As the earth Plunges in fury, when the
internal fires Have reached and pricked her heart, and,
throwing flat The marts and temples, the triumphal gates
And towers of observation, clears herself To elemental
freedom—thus, my soul, At poetry's divine first finger-touch,
Let go conventions and sprang up surprised, Convicted of
the great eternities Before two worlds. What's this, Aurora
Leigh, You write so of the poets, and not laugh? Those

virtuous liars, dreamers after dark, Exaggerators of the sun and moon, And soothsayers in a tea-cup? I write so Of the only truth-tellers, now left to God,— The only speakers of essential truth, Opposed to relative, comparative, And temporal truths; the only holders by His sun-skirts, through conventional grey glooms; The only teachers who instruct mankind, From just a shadow on a charnel-wall, To find man's veritable stature out, Erect, sublime,—the measure of a man, And that's the measure of an angel, says The apostle. Ay, and while your common men Build pyramids, gauge railroads, reign, reap, dine, And dust the flaunty carpets of the world For kings to walk on, or our senators, The poet suddenly will catch them up With his voice like a thunder ... 'This is soul, This is life, this word is being said in heaven, Here's God down on us! what are you about?' How all those workers start amid their work, Look round, look up, and feel, a moment's space, That carpet-dusting, though a pretty trade, Is not the imperative labour after all.

My own best poets, am I one with you, That thus I love you, —or but one through love? Does all this smell of thyme about my feet Conclude my visit to your holy hill In personal presence, or but testify The rustling of your vesture through my dreams With influent odours? When my joy and pain, My thought and aspiration, like the stops Of pipe or flute, are absolutely dumb If not melodious, do you play on me, My pipers,—and if, sooth, you did not blow, Would no sound come? or is the music mine, As a man's voice or breath is called his own, Inbreathed by the Life-breather? There's a doubt For cloudy seasons! But the sun was high When first I felt my pulses set themselves For concords; when the

rhythmic turbulence Of blood and brain swept outward upon words, As wind upon the alders, blanching them By turning up their under-natures till They trembled in dilation. O delight And triumph of the poet,—who would say A man's mere 'yes,' a woman's common 'no,' A little human hope of that or this, And says the word so that it burns you through With a special revelation, shakes the heart Of all the men and women in the world, As if one came back from the dead and spoke, With eyes too happy, a familiar thing Become divine i' the utterance! while for him The poet, the speaker, he expands with joy; The palpitating angel in his flesh Thrills inly with consenting fellowship To those innumerable spirits who sun themselves Outside of time. O life, O poetry, — Which means life in life! cognisant of life Beyond this blood-beat,—passionate for truth Beyond these senses,—poetry, my life,— My eagle, with both grappling feet still hot From Zeus's thunder, who has ravished me Away from all the shepherds, sheep, and dogs, And set me in the Olympian roar and round Of luminous faces, for a cup-bearer, To keep the mouths of all the godheads moist For everlasting laughters,—I, myself, Half drunk across the beaker, with their eyes! How those gods look! Enough so, Ganymede. We shall not bear above a round or two— We drop the golden cup at Heré's foot And swoon back to the earth,—and find ourselves Face-down among the pine-cones, cold with dew, While the dogs bark, and many a shepherd scoffs, 'What's come now to the youth?' Such ups and downs Have poets. Am I such indeed? The name Is royal, and to sign it like a queen, Is what I dare not,—though some royal blood Would seem to tingle in me now and then, With sense of power and

ache,—with imposthumes And manias usual to the race.
Howbeit I dare not: 'tis too easy to go mad, And ape a
Bourbon in a crown of straws; The thing's too common.
Many fervent souls Strike rhyme on rhyme, who would strike
steel on steel If steel had offered, in a restless heat Of doing
something. Many tender souls Have strung their losses on a
rhyming thread, As children, cowslips:—the more pains they
take, The work more withers. Young men, ay, and maids, Too
often sow their wild oats in tame verse, Before they sit down
under their own vine And live for use. Alas, near all the birds
Will sing at dawn,—and yet we do not take The chaffering
swallow for the holy lark.

In those days, though, I never analysed Myself even. All
analysis comes late. You catch a sight of Nature, earliest, In
full front sun-face, and your eyelids wink And drop before
the wonder of't; you miss The form, through seeing the
light. I lived, those days, And wrote because I lived—
unlicensed else: My heart beat in my brain. Life's violent
flood Abolished bounds,—and, which my neighbour's field,
Which mine, what mattered? It is so in youth. We play at
leap-frog over the god Term; The love within us and the love
without Are mixed, confounded; if we are loved or love, We
scarce distinguish. So, with other power. Being acted on and
acting seem the same: In that first onrush of life's chariot-
wheels, We know not if the forests move or we.

And so, like most young poets, in a flush Of individual life, I
poured myself Along the veins of others, and achieved Mere
lifeless imitations of live verse, And made the living answer
for the dead, Profaning nature. 'Touch not, do not taste, Nor