

**ELIZABETH  
BARRETT  
BROWNING**

**AURORA  
LEIGH**

**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,  
Concentred 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 suplicants 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 misliked 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 conjurers? 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 i' 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.