REFIGURING THE SAGE: ELIZABETH BARRETT BROWNING'S
PLURALISTIC VISION IN *AURORA LEIGH*

by

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Being here is so much

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ABSTRACT

Through her engagement with the philosophical, religious, and political debates of the nineteenth century, Elizabeth Barrett Browning (EBB) participates in the sage's work of writing to create a more thoughtful and ethical society. This thesis analyzes the ways in which EBB's *Aurora Leigh* (1856) portrays the poet and thus the sage not as the proponent of a single philosophy but as one who adopts many different forms of knowing. To conceptualize EBB's revision of Victorian sage discourse, I adapt and amplify Wayne C. Booth's theory of modal pluralism by drawing also from the work of Emmanuel Levinas, Balachandra Rajan, and John Ruskin. I argue that EBB presents the sage's "double vision" as a pluralistic synaesthesia that gathers together various perceptual, emotional, and intellectual faculties (5.184). Accordingly, I consider also the consequences of this pluralistic vision, particularly in terms of the generous disposition and the unrealizable fullness it enjoins.

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS USED

EBB   Elizabeth Barrett Browning

WEBB   *The Works of Elizabeth Barrett Browning*. General Ed. Sandra Donaldson;

                Volume Eds. Donaldson, Rita Patteson, Marjorie Stone, and

                Beverly Taylor. 5 vols. London: Pickering and Chatto, 2010. Print.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

CHAPTER 1: Introduction

In her dedication to John Kenyon, Elizabeth Barrett Browning (EBB) presents *Aurora Leigh* (1856) as "the most mature of my works, and the one into which my highest convictions upon Life and Art have entered" ("To John Kenyon" n.pag.).[1] Her emphasis on "Life and Art" positions her writing within the mid-Victorian aesthetic that Richard D. Altick calls "the Ruskinian conception of art as inseparable from society" (281) and, indeed, John Ruskin himself celebrated *Aurora Leigh* as "the greatest poem the century has produced in any language" (15.227). EBB attributed Ruskin's praise primarily to his agreement with her work's "philosophy" (*Letters to Arabella* 2.273), a word which suggests that *Aurora Leigh* participates in the tradition of Victorian sage writing John Holloway defines as a philosophical and moral discourse concerned about the nature of the world and humankind's situation in it (1). Yet though EBB's singular term "philosophy" evokes this discourse, it does not adequately convey the conceptual plurality of her work. My thesis aims to contribute to criticism on *Aurora Leigh* as well as to the understanding of the sage figure by analyzing the ways in which EBB portrays the sage not as the proponent of a single philosophy but as one who adopts many different forms of knowing.

To conceptualize EBB's engagement with sage discourse, I adapt and amplify the theory of modal pluralism advanced by Wayne C. Booth. In effect, I argue that *Aurora Leigh* figures the sage as a pluralist, so my project aims to align text, theory, and method.

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[1] My thesis follows the practice of the editors of *The Works of Elizabeth Barrett Browning* (*WEBB*) in using "EBB" to refer to Elizabeth Barrett Browning. Elizabeth Barrett Barrett used these initials as her signature both before and after her marriage to Robert Browning, so EBB offers a more historically accurate alternatively to the widely used but anachronistic "Barrett Browning."

Because modal pluralism combines different analytic models without reduction or subordination, it provides a productive lens through which to examine the sage and poet's "double vision" in *Aurora Leigh* (5.184). This phrase suggests, at a minimum, some form of dualism, but I argue that EBB presents the sage's vision as a more extensive plurality that gathers together various perceptual, emotional, and intellectual faculties. Accordingly, my thesis considers also the consequences of this pluralistic vision, particularly in terms of the generous disposition and the unrealizable fullness it enjoins.

Although several previous studies of *Aurora Leigh* have examined EBB's participation in sage discourse, these discussions concentrate primarily on her feminist and religious positions.[2] My approach to *Aurora Leigh* builds on these studies but draws attention to a largely unremarked aspect of EBB's representation of the sage's work. By adapting the framework of modal pluralism, I aim to show that the multiplicity other critics have observed in *Aurora Leigh* extends beyond the established categories of many genres and many voices.[3] For example, Marjorie Stone highlights EBB's "gynocentric adaptation" of sage writing's "characteristic strategies" and finds in this feminism a form of plurality that makes possible the "subversion of the authoritative stance so strenuously asserted by Victorian prophets like Carlyle" (*Elizabeth* 138). Stone's emphasis on EBB's gynocentric destabilizing of the patriarchal tradition hints at the more egalitarian position of *Aurora Leigh*, a position my thesis aims to bring into sharper relief by mobilizing Booth's concept of modal pluralism as "more a way of living with variety than of

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[2] Particularly noteworthy are Margaret Reynolds's "Critical Introduction" (16-19, 22), Marjorie Stone's *Elizabeth Barrett Browning* (134-88), Linda M. Lewis's *Elizabeth Barrett Browning's Spiritual Progress* (194-211), Rebecca Stott's "'Where Angels Fear to Tread': *Aurora Leigh*" (205-9) and Karen Dieleman's *Religious Imaginaries* (91-99).

[3] The gender-genre matrix is the paradigm most frequently pursued to analyze this multiplicity. See Stone ("Genre Subversion and Gender Inversion" 101-2) and Susan Stanford Friedman (205).

attempting to subdue it" and by considering the implications of this model (*Critical Understanding* 12).[4] In an analysis that bears many similarities to Stone's, Karen Dieleman focuses on the democratic impulse behind EBB's engagement with sage writing, proposing that *Aurora Leigh* replaces "the widely held contemporary paradigm of the (male) poet as seer, prophet, or sage . . . as one who has wisdom or insight that others lack" with the "dialogic" model of the Congregationalist or Independent preacher (50, 62). Dieleman's argument draws from Mikhail Bakhtin's theory of novelistic discourse, thereby privileging multiplicity in the forms of polyphony and heteroglossia but stopping short of the more extensive pluralism I want to place on view.[5] While the ideas of feminism and dialogism are helpful in understanding the richness of *Aurora Leigh*, they do not fully address the multiplicity of EBB's vision.

A similar emphasis on dialogism characterizes scholarship on the Victorian sage tradition more broadly, yet the thoroughgoing plurality of sage writing remains to be investigated. Holloway's definition of sage writing as "partly moral and partly philosophical" signals the compounded nature of this discourse, and George P. Landow's subsequent description of sage writing as a combination of "biblical, oratorical, and satirical traditions" underscores its plurality of genres (*Elegant Jeremiahs* 22). More pointedly, Thaïs E. Morgan argues that "Victorian sage writing, characterized by a mixture of genres, epitomizes the way in which 'heteroglossia'—or competing

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[4] The dispositional quality Booth attributes to modal pluralism underscores the continuity between this pluralistic turn in his thought and the ethical criticism he advances in *The Company We Keep: An Ethics of Fiction* (1988). In this book, his pluralism becomes evident in his emphasis on understanding the term "ethical" more broadly and in his concluding affirmation of "the rhetorical or pragmatic choice of a critical pluralism" (8, 489).

[5] It is worth noting that Dieleman is not alone in applying Bakhtin's theories to *Aurora Leigh.* Reynolds and Stone, in the studies cited in footnotes two and three respectively, also employ dialogism and polyphony. See, for example, Reynolds (31-32) and Stone (126-27).

affectional voices and ideological interests—enters written language, where differences are entertained but never completely resolved" (3). The respective studies of Dieleman and Morgan, then, both draw from Bakhtin's ideas, concepts which Booth explains as similar to, but not identifiable with, modal pluralism.

By Booth's definition, modal pluralism refers to a meta-critical practice grounded on the conviction that "in principle there must be at least two (and probably many more) legitimate ways of working with any intellectual domain, ways that cannot be reduced to any one purer or truer way" ("Pluralism" 918). Consequently, it affirms that "a mode justifies itself not by its capacity to refute the others but rather by its success in answering questions that in other modes are either distorted or ignored" ("Pluralism" 918). Booth's focus on the meta-critical is useful, yet the meta-critical is merely one aspect of the conceptual plurality my thesis finds in *Aurora Leigh*. For Booth, thinkers including Aristotle, Kant, Hegel, and Bakhtin "can be said to be pluralistic in various senses" but are, more precisely, "complex monists" because "each believes that his system is all that we need" ("Pluralism" 920). The pluralist, then, recognizes that Bakhtin's system—like all theories—is, as Booth says, "radically constrained" as a result of its "perspective or language" and that, as a result, "those who work within its terms can see only what that mode can reveal" ("Pluralism" 920). For example, whereas dialogism upholds a multiplicity of voices specifically and focuses on language and speech communities primarily, Booth's model prompts thinkers to work across critical paradigms or academic disciplines—that is, to combine several different methods of inquiry.

The second chapter of my thesis argues that *Aurora Leigh* evinces compelling manifestations of this pluralism through the synaesthetic multiplicity that animates EBB's

title character's concept of "double vision" (5.184). Focusing on the Fifth and First Books, I argue that Aurora's language of crossing the senses demonstrates that the modes of modal pluralism must not be confined to the domain of critical frameworks but should be understood also in relation to the embodied and material aspects of human existence. EBB presents synaesthesia both as the compounding of the senses and as the intermingling of physical, emotional, and intellectual processes. Aurora's description of reading as plunging "[s]oul-forward, headlong" effectively gathers together this wide range of human faculties and indicates that they must work together in the search for knowledge and wisdom (1.707).

Aurora frames her reading practice as an alternative to "being ungenerous," so my third chapter considers the dispositional and relational significance of this pluralism (1.703). To analyze Aurora's imperative that readers must "gloriously forget" themselves, I draw from Emmanuel Levinas's grounding of ethics in an encounter with the face of the other (1.706). Levinas's philosophy supplies a useful framework for examining EBB's stated aim of "meeting face to face and without mask the Humanity of the Age" (Browning and Browning 10.102-3) as well as her representation of Marian Erle's "ineffable face" (*Aurora Leigh* 3.798). I argue that EBB, through Aurora, uses the language of forgetting the self to signify an orientation towards others that affirms both their presence and their irreducible alterity. Furthermore, I contend that Aurora's conflicting processes of self-forgetting and self-formation reflect a paradox indicative of the difficulties of realizing modal pluralism's intellectual and ethical objectives.

My fourth chapter extends this examination of the ways in which EBB positions her ethic of self-forgetting within a recognition of pluralism's limits. I argue that EBB

acknowledges these limitations by representing Aurora's aesthetic ideals and artistic quest as remaining, to a significant degree, unrealized. Concentrating primarily on the Fifth and Ninth Books, my analysis coordinates Balachandra Rajan's form of the unfinished and Ruskin's theory of the imperfect in order to argue that Aurora's aesthetic of the unrealized evinces pluralism in its resistance to containment and in its commitment to reaching for the unachievable.

By gathering these dimensions of *Aurora Leigh* together in terms of EBB's "pluralistic vision," my title uses the word "vision" to signify not sight alone but the broader conceptual metaphor of seeing as knowing—or, more precisely, as seeking knowledge. Furthermore, "vision" evokes the prophetic tradition from which sage discourse draws, and its proleptic connotations accord with EBB's presentation of pluralism as not a project that can be mastered but, rather, an ideal for which the sage and poet must continue to aspire. These manifold senses of the word "vision," then, resonate effectively with the plurality inherent in Aurora's concept of "double vision" (5.184)

CHAPTER 2: The Synaesthetic Plurality of "Double Vision"

Aurora introduces the idea of "double vision" when she exhorts poets to focus not on the glories of past eras but on the concerns of their own times, an exhortation which couples the work of the poet with that of the sage. In a statement that positions her against the mid-Victorian medievalist trend, Aurora insists that poets should "represent the age, / Their age, not Charlemagne's" (5.203-4). Even as she thus charges poets, however, she acknowledges the difficulties of perceiving accurately the issues of the present day: "Every age, / Through being beheld too close, is ill-discerned / By those who have not lived past it" (5.167-69). "Double vision," then, allows the poet to overcome this liability:

> But poets should
> Exert a double vision; should have eyes
> To see near things as comprehensively
> As if afar they took their point of sight,
> And distant things as intimately deep
> As if they touched them. (5.183-87)

As Aurora's language indicates, "double vision" requires not only the pairing of proximity and distance in vantage points—a metaphor which itself comingles space and time—but also the synaesthetic meeting of the visual and tactile registers.[6] By likening sight to touch, she effectively multiplies the twofold model of near and far to include eyes and hands as well. She thereby reveals that "double vision" involves complexity and compounding, not mere duality.

By representing Aurora's "double vision" as synaesthesia, EBB amplifies and exceeds Holloway's model of the sage's vision as a form of defamiliarization. Analyzing

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[6] EBB's use of synaesthesia in *Aurora Leigh*, largely neglected in critical analyses, may reflect the extent to which her work owes to the English Romantic poets, for whom synaesthesia is a relatively common trope. For a detailed examination of synaesthesia in the poetry of John Keats and Percy Bysshe Shelley, see Richard Harter Fogel (101-38).

writers as diverse as Thomas Carlyle, Benjamin Disraeli, George Eliot, Matthew Arnold,

and Thomas Hardy, Holloway contends that "all of these authors insist on how acquiring

wisdom is somehow an opening of the eyes" (9). His statement that the sage's objective

"is to make his readers see life and the world over again, see it with a more searching, or

perhaps a more subtle and sensitive gaze" (296) frames sage writing in terms that recall

the aesthetic of defamiliarization theorized by the Russian formalists, an aesthetic Victor

Shklovsky explains as poetic language's ability to "remove objects from the automatism

of perception" (12-13).[7] The similarities between Holloway and Shklovsky's arguments

suggest that both prose and poetry can function as effective forms of sage discourse: even

though Holloway confines his study to prose texts, his evocation of Shklovsky's poetic

defamiliarization and his assertion that the sage works "in the mode of the artist in

words" make poetry a particularly potent vehicle for the sage (10). Moreover, the "double

vision" of *Aurora Leigh* intensifies the sage's act of seeing again by showing that it

requires the operation of several different faculties simultaneously, a process analogous

to modal pluralism. This analogue becomes apparent in the language M.H. Abrams uses

when he defines synaesthesia as "the experience of two or more modes of sensation when

only one sense is being stimulated" (323). His definition suggests that Booth's concept of

a "mode" as a form of inquiry should not be restricted to the intellectual sphere: it

necessarily extends also into the material, embodied dimensions of human experience

("Pluralism" 918).

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[7] The process that twentieth-century formalists like Shklovsky have theorized figures also in earlier,
Romantic descriptions of the artist's role. For example, Shelley's statement in "A Defence of Poetry" that
poetry "lifts the veil from the hidden beauty of the world, and makes familiar objects be as if they were not
familiar" effectively expresses the same idea (7.117).

The physicality of EBB's deployment of modal pluralism emerges in a particularly striking manner through Aurora's portrait of the present age. Aurora uses similar terms and images to describe both the age and the sage: just as the poet possesses a "double vision" so also "every age, / Heroic in proportions, double-faced, / Looks backward and before, expects a morn / And claims an epos" (5.152-55). This Janus pose recalls Aurora's previous description of herself as one who "stood upon the brink of twenty years, / And looked before and after" (2.2-3). Insofar as Roman mythology presents Janus as the god of doors, gates, and pathways, this "double-faced" aspect is not dichotomous but indicative of a liminal, transitional perspective encompassing a minimum of three viewpoints: before, between, and after. Aurora intensifies the plurality of "double-faced" in her more provocative metaphor of the "double-breasted Age" (5.216). She charges the poet to

> Never flinch,
> But still, unscrupulously epic, catch
> Upon the burning lava of a song
> The full-veined, heaving, double-breasted Age:
> That, when the next shall come, the men of that
> May touch the impress with reverent hand, and say
> 'Behold, - behold the paps we all have sucked!' (5.213-22)

This graphic representation of the age as female has engendered substantial critical commentary on its sexuality, its maternity, and its metaphoric complexity, yet its synaesthesia has gone unremarked.[8] While Aurora's description of "the burning lava of a

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[8] Susan Walsh calls attention to the "eroticism" of EBB's metaphor, likening its "volcanic energy" to creative "orgasmic tremors" (178). For a discussion of the age's maternity, see, for example, Sandra Donaldson's argument about the vitality of the maternal breast (59). Gail Turley Houston considers the ways this erect breast "replaces the phallic gesture of the male authored *Künstlerroman*'s assumption of manhood" with "a new metaphor for woman as writer" (233). In a more detailed analysis of EBB's diction, Stone highlights the passage's dynamism and its "incongruous mix of metaphors" ("Taste" 751-52). Her examination of the intricate relationship between the breast and the lava metaphors comes the closest to a discussion of the image's synaesthetic qualities ("Taste" 751).

song" is erotically suggestive, it indicates also that, for the poet, the aural, "a song," is also haptic and tactile: it is caught—an action of the hands—on the "burning lava," a phrase which appeals to the sense of touch (5.214-15). The "double-breasted Age," then, must be apprehended by means of hearing as well as touch (5.216).

As this synaesthesia indicates, EBB presents embodiment as inherently plural. Both at the perceptual and the symbolic levels, Aurora's portrait of the age works by combining and multiplying. This vibrant and sensual female body resists conventional nineteenth-century representations of woman as chaste, childlike, and asexual; however, EBB appeals at the same time to the traditionally sanctioned idea of the nurturing maternal figure. Holly A. Laird draws attention to this complexity when she observes that *Aurora Leigh* presents "physical femaleness as twofold, sometimes grotesque, sometimes ennobled, and capable of the most diverse symbolism" (539). Laird's syntax progresses in much the same way as *Aurora Leigh*: from the duality of "twofold" to the multiplicity of "the most diverse symbolism" (539). Furthermore, by joining together the physical and the symbolic, her statements evoke the coherence of material and ideal that underpins *Aurora Leigh*. Such a coherence underpins Joyce Zonana's argument that Aurora possesses a "manifold embodiment" that brings together "both spirit and flesh" (251). The pluralism of embodiment as EBB represents it, then, both crosses different sensory registers and exceeds Cartesian mind/body dualism. Through such means, EBB amplifies synaesthesia to convey the combination of physical, emotional, and intellectual modes of inquiry integral to the sage's work.

EBB makes it clear that Aurora's process of seeking knowledge and wisdom draws from all of these capabilities simultaneously. Her deployment of synaesthesia thus

not only comingles modes of perception but also translates these physical sensations into the affective and intellectual realms.[9] This amalgam is obliquely acknowledged by the anonymous reviewer of *Aurora Leigh* for the 1856 issue of the *Literary Gazette*, who claims that EBB's work requires the "exercise" of the reader's "eye, and ear, and soul" together (918). Notably, this list of faculties resonates with the language EBB herself uses to describe reading in the First Book of *Aurora Leigh*. Aurora states that reading best occurs when individuals plunge "[s]oul-forward, headlong, into a book's profound / Impassioned for its beauty and salt of truth" (1.707-8). By speaking of reading in proprioceptive terms, Aurora invokes a version of synaesthesia: that is, she renders mental activity kinaesthetic. The direction of this motion is "[s]oul-forward," "headlong," and "[i]mpassioned," adjectives which together evoke a triad of spirit, mind, and heart.[10] In yet another triptych, she augments John Keats's chiastic equation of beauty and truth by adding a third term, "salt," which takes the reader into the gustatory realm. Beauty and truth, as Aurora presents them, are simultaneously studied, desired, and tasted. By compounding these actions, she implies that beauty and truth—and, by extension, knowledge and wisdom—must be approached through a variety of ways concurrently, that is, through modal pluralism.

The synaesthetic plurality of Aurora's reading practice invites further investigation into the account of her education as poet and sage in the First Book, an

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[9] Emily V. Epstein-Kobayashi evokes this process in her application of the Wordsworthian concept of "feeling intellect" to *Aurora Leigh* and, more pointedly, in her conclusion that *Aurora Leigh* makes use of language's function of "translating" sense perceptions (842).

[10] The multiplicity of Aurora's reading practice bears interesting similarities to the phenomenological approach to reading Rita Felski advances in *Uses of Literature*. Arguing for an extended definition of "use," Felski maintains that "there is no reason why our readings cannot blend analysis and attachment, criticism and love" (22). This amalgam is suggestive of the fullness EBB, too, evokes in making the "soul-forward," the "headlong," and the "[i]mpassioned" meet (1.707-8).

account often overlooked in other studies of *Aurora Leigh* as sage writing. Stone's description of Aurora as "a sage-in-formation" accords with the text's *Künstlerroman* elements, yet it invites a developmental reading of *Aurora Leigh* that frames the poem in linear terms that risk becoming too reductive (*Elizabeth* 162). Likewise, Dieleman emphasizes Aurora's process of maturation and thus foregrounds the developmental events that occur after the First Book. She contends, "*Aurora Leigh* depicts Aurora's shift from a naïve perspective of the poet as privileged seer to a humbler view of the poet as necessarily engaged in a communal effort to discover the right and the good" (93). *Aurora Leigh* undeniably presents the process of maturation Stone and Dieleman highlight, yet their emphasis on chronology obscures the ways Aurora's recollections of her girlhood portray her education in pluralistic terms. Contesting the dominant narrative of "psychological development" as it has been applied to *Aurora Leigh*, other major works by EBB, and EBB herself, Linda Shires argues instead for the model of "cross-dwelling," a model which recognizes a similar pluralism (337). She borrows the term "cross-dwelling" from Charles Spinoza and Hubert Dreyfus, explaining it as "[t]he ability to live in incommensurate identities" (331). Shires applies "cross-dwelling" primarily in a gendered fashion so as to discuss EBB's concurrent participation in masculine and feminine poetic traditions; however, the pluralistic simultaneity suggested by "cross-dwelling" surfaces also in Aurora's methods of acquiring knowledge throughout the First Book (332).

Although Aurora speaks, at times, of truth as a unitary entity, her words become complicated by and qualified through her emphasis on the necessity of taking into account many different approaches to this truth. Dieleman draws attention to the seeming

singularity of Aurora's statements, citing her claim that poets are "the only truth-tellers now left to God" (1.858) as an indication that "the young Aurora thinks and speaks about poetry in exclusivist terms" (93). Aurora's words about "the central truth" (1.800) appear similarly incompatible with modal pluralism, yet even in this passage she indicates that truth is not as singular as her phrase might suggest. Truth's latent plurality surfaces first in Aurora's reflection that the processes of seeking it, again expressed in kinaesthetic terms, involve "being dashed / From error on to error" as "every turn / Still brought [her] nearer" (1.798-800). For Aurora, truth and errors are always already intertwined, an enmeshment which requires "some hard swimming through / The deeps" (1.795-96). Her subsequent presentation of this turbulence as an immersion in "the thick / Of men's opinions . . press and counterpress, / Now up, now down, now underfoot, and now / Emergent" indicates that the practice of attending to other critical perspectives is a necessary, if difficult, part of the pursuit of knowledge (1.801-4).

Far from advancing a monistic intellectual paradigm, then, this passage represents pluralism in terms that recall those William James uses to depict his pluralistic empiricism. Aurora's use of the metaphor of swimming through rough waters to express her search for truth resembles James's description of his "pluralistic empiricism" as "a turbid, muddled, gothic sort of an affair, without a sweeping outline and with little pictorial nobility" (26). For James, truth is far from centralized: he draws a sharp distinction between the "absolutist" commitment to the "*all*-form"—that is, a manifestation of truth that is perfect and entire—and his pluralistic affirmation of the "*each*-form"—that is, a "distributive form of reality" which gathers some, but not all, of the truth (20). He indicates that the "*all*-form" presumes, in monistic fashion, that there is

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a singular and complete truth while the "*each*-form" recognizes that there are many partial truths (20). Because Aurora requires "the thick / Of men's opinions," she too presents reality as distributive: various opinions taken together allow her to know the truth more fully.[11]

Moreover, insofar as she depicts the apparently conflicting viewpoints of the "press and counterpress" as crucial to the search for knowledge, Aurora adopts the pluralist principle Booth describes as "treat[ing] critical modes not as positions to be defended but as locations or openings to be explored" (*Critical Understanding* 339). As Booth argues, some basic version of modal pluralism is the precondition for any effective critical debate. He states, "all criticism, in print or simply spoken, presupposes that some sort of communication among critics is both possible and valuable" because "no second speaker can sincerely say 'Yes but' without acknowledging the validity of the first voice" (*Critical Understanding* 197). In a similar manner, even though Aurora speaks about some entity called "the central truth" which the poet should pursue, she nevertheless recognizes that this pursuit requires many different methods and may result in widely divergent findings.

She displays her readiness to take into account other perspectives in her presentation of the education she received from her father, whose library later allows her to nurture her love of reading and poetry. Remembering her father, Aurora recalls, "out of books / He taught me all the ignorance of men" (1.189-90). She thereby insinuates that

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[11] EBB underscores this point in her correspondence with William Merry on religious matters: her letters denounce "he or she who shall refuse to tolerate the brother or sister in Christ, on account of his or her holding a truth or a form in a different manner from the holding of his truth or form" (Browning and Browning 8:149). Her language of forms emphasizes the similarities between her ideas and those of James.

established schools of thought may well be too reductive or, more precisely, that their

very existence testifies to the multiplicity and incompleteness of truth. Aurora elaborates

on the inadequacy of such tidy understandings when she offers further commentary on

her father's pedagogy:

> 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. (1.194-98)

This aversion to systems resembles the ideas of Richard McKeon, the neo-Aristotelian

thinker of the Chicago School whom Booth credits with initiating "the fullest

development of pluralism in literary studies" ("Pluralism" 920). McKeon insists that

there is no virtue in "[p]urity in adherence to a single mode" because each mode is, in

fact, limited by its own terms ("The Philosophic Bases" 171). He further claims that

"there is no reason *a priori* why any starting-point should provide better principles than

any other or why any method adapted to the scope and intricacies of a universal subject

should be preferable to any other" ("Philosophy and Method" 672). McKeon's awareness

of the limitations of any one approach resonates with the wariness of Aurora's father—

and, as becomes clear later, Aurora herself—about any given school or "system" of

thought (1.198). In pluralistic fashion, Aurora compensates for these limitations through

multiplicity, studying a variety of books in a plurality of ways. She recounts that she

"read much" (1.710) and that "after [she] had read for memory / [she] read for hope"

(1.729-30). By compounding both subject matter and interpretive methods, Aurora enacts

what Booth theorizes as the modal pluralist objective of replacing the "subtraction or

cancellation of modes" with "some kind of *addition*" (*Critical Understanding* 197). This

addition allows seeming contradictions to stand without hierarchy or resolution.

The paradoxes resulting from this additive process become evident in Aurora's

catalogue of her reading material:

> 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 anyone should weep
> In this disjointed life for one wrong more. (1.779-91)

By bringing together good and bad, faith and doubt, morality and depravity, politeness

and indignity, and laughter and weeping, Aurora indicates that purity with respect to any

of these categories is impossible because they always present themselves as mixed.

Moreover, she reveals their simultaneity insofar as she cannot name one without evoking

another also. Because she describes this life as "disjointed" (1.791), she indicates that her

pluralistic manner of bringing these states together is not seamless or complete—that is, it

avoids the totalizing "*all*-form" that James identifies with monistic systems (20). While

Aurora's process of finding in one category its opposite may appear to suggest a satirical

cast of mind, this irony becomes tempered by the ethic of generosity that informs both

her reading practice as well as her treatment of others. This ethic effectively makes the

"headlong" and the "[s]oul-forward" meet by bringing conceptual and dispositional

realms together (1.708).

CHAPTER 3: The Pluralistic Ethics of Forgetting the Self

EBB makes it clear that the intellectual methods Aurora describes in the First

Book carry significant social and moral implications. As Aurora's exclamation "[b]ehold!

- the world of books is still the world" indicates, her manner of reading plays a crucial

role in shaping her actions (1.749).[12] The phrase "poetics of engagement," which Beverly

Taylor attaches to EBB's own "political-aesthetic philosophy," effectively signals

Aurora's insistent integration of poetry and morality (96). The ethical consequences of

reading become particularly evident in the unselfish attitude Aurora represents as

necessary in order to achieve "the right good" from reading:

> 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. (1.702-9)

Her presentation of her reading methods as an alternative to "being ungenerous" recalls

the dispositional qualities of modal pluralism that Booth traces to its genesis in "what

might better be called an attitude than a critical position" (*Critical Understanding* 12).

For Booth, the ethical consequences of modal pluralism issue chiefly from its function of

"reducing our tendency to misread and so to skewer straw men" (*Critical Understanding*

28). Modal pluralism, then, demands that other critical positions—and, by extension, the

thinkers who advocate for them—be treated with thoughtfulness and dignity rather than

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[12] EBB's amalgamation of intellectual and ethical concerns emerges also in a letter to Kenyon wherein she describes *Aurora Leigh* as a philosophical poem in which "the practical & the ideal" hinge upon engagement with "the social question" (Browning and Browning 21:111).

be reduced to a mere foil for some alternative position. In Booth's words, pluralism requires the movement "out of our initial infantile idiocentrism into the recognition of a world built of many centres, irreducible to any one" (*Critical Understanding* 348). EBB offers a similar affirmation of such "many centres" through Aurora's insistence that individuals must "gloriously forget" themselves if they are to appreciate a book's "right good" (1.706, 709).

Because this forgetting of the self requires, to use Booth's terms, the abandonment of "idiocentrism," it necessitates an orientation towards others which calls to mind the ethical position Levinas advances. For Levinas, the "direction toward the Other" is an essential feature of all discourse: he states, "before it is celebration of being, expression is a relation with the one to whom I express the expression and whose presence is already required so that my cultural gesture of expression can be produced" (*Humanism* 30). Levinas's Other is thus "both a term of orientation and first signification" (*Humanism* 30). As Bernard Waldenfels explains, Levinas grounds his theory of being for the Other not only in linguistics but also in the "phenomenology of the body" underlying his discussion of the face to face encounter (66). Furthermore, Levinas affirms that "[t]he face to face is a final and irreducible relation" that "makes possible the pluralism of society" (*Totality and Infinity* 291). This pluralism is, for Levinas, all-encompassing, and as such it pertains to the many ways of knowing and doing integral to Booth's modal pluralism. Both the plurality and the visceral force that define Levinas's ethical philosophy emerge also in EBB's representations of self-forgetting as well as her own use of the expression "face to face."

She uses this language in a letter to Robert Browning expressing her hopes for the

work that would become *Aurora Leigh*:

> my chief *intention* just now is the writing of a sort of novel-poem . . .
> running into the midst of our conventions, and rushing into drawing-rooms
> and the like, 'where angels fear to tread'; and so, meeting face to face and
> without mask the Humanity of the age, and speaking the truth as I
> conceive of it plainly. (Browning and Browning 10.102-3)

Here, "meeting face to face" suggests non-conformism, intimacy, and clarity: EBB

desires to strip away convention and confront reality unencumbered.[13] She thus desires

transparency immediately—in this present "age"—yet her words echo the apostle Paul's

statement that "now we see but through a glass, darkly; but then face to face" (1 Cor.

13.12). Because Paul speaks of knowledge gleaned by faith as only an imperfect

anticipation of future knowledge this passage pertains as much to epistemology as it does

to eschatology. In a similar form of multiple emphasis, EBB uses this expression to evoke

also the limitations of an individual's capacity to understand any aspect of the external

world, including other human beings. This limitation accords with Levinas's argument

that the other's face "cannot be comprehended, that is, encompassed" (*Totality and

Infinity* 194).[14] Indeed, Levinas affirms that the face of the other is "neither seen nor

touched" because "in visual or tactile sensation the identity of the I envelops the alterity

of the object" (*Totality and Infinity* 194). The irreducible alterity of another's face

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[13] This expression is a recurring one in EBB's writings, and it has not gone unnoticed in *Aurora Leigh*. Dolores Rosenblum considers the ways in which *Aurora Leigh* uses this trope as a means of "confronting falsifying masks and by breaking down the silent accounting of the female face" (325).

[14] Good warrant exists for considering together Paul and Levinas on the idea of the face to face: Paul was trained as a rabbi (Phil. 3.5) and, as Hilary Putnam explains, Levinas's Jewish background significantly informs his ethical philosophy (33-37). Both Paul and Levinas use "face" in a manner resonant with the Jewish sense of "face" as referring to holiness of Yahweh. For Paul, God has displayed "the glory of God in the face of Christ Jesus" (2 Cor. 4.6). Levinas, in effect, broadens this reading of the incarnation in his assertion that "[t]he dimension of the divine opens forth from the human face" (*Totality and Infinity* 178).

emerges in *Aurora Leigh* through Aurora's encounters with and descriptions of Marian Erle. [15]

When Aurora meets Marian in the Third Book, she implicitly recognizes her autonomy and individuality by saying that she has an "ineffable face" (3.798). Aurora further underscores the difficulty of describing and thus understanding Marian by reflecting that she "was not white nor brown, / But could look either," just as her hair remains "[i]n doubt 'twixt dark and bright" (3.810-11, 3.814). Marian's physiognomy thus makes concrete Levinas's idea that the other's face "is present in its refusal to be contained" (*Totality and Infinity* 194).[16] Consequently, even though Aurora's subsequent act of translating Marian's life narrative in words other than Marian's own risks appropriating her story, her encounter with this woman's physical being serves as a reminder of the inadequacy of such appropriative gestures (3.847-50). Zonana's argument that Marian, as a muse figure for Aurora, helps her to understand "that all individuals must be perceived as subjects, never as objects, in other people's social schemes or literary representations" underscores the extent to which Marian affirms the irreducible alterity that other individuals possess (243).

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[15] The role of Marian in *Aurora Leigh* has received a substantial amount of critical commentary. In addition to the studies by Leighton and Zonana cited in the paragraphs to follow, see also, for example, Leslee Thorne-Murphy (246-53), Patricia Murphy (23-26), Linda Shenk (41-44), and Lewis ("Rape and Resurrection" 60-65).

[16] Additionally, EBB's detailed description of Marian's face evokes what Jeane Fahnestock identifies as the trend of using physiognomy as a method of characterization, a pattern evident in novelistic works in the 1850s through the 1870s (325-27). Fahnestock observes that by the mid-Victorian period, novelists were offering far more detailed descriptions of heroine's faces than did earlier writers such as Walter Scott and that these descriptions worked to provide clues to readers about the characters in question (327).

Moreover, Aurora regards Marian not only as "ineffable" but also as one who embodies the ideal of forgetting the self (3.798). This embodiment emerges most pointedly in Aurora's representation of Marian while holding her infant son:

> Self-forgot, cast out of self,
> And drowning in the transport of the sight,
> Her whole pale passionate face, mouth, forehead, eyes,
> One gaze, she stood: then, slowly as he smiled
> She smiled too. (6.604-7)

Aurora perceives Marian's smile as an expression not of calculation but of selfless delight in her child, whom she has conceived as a result of a brutal rape. Her esteem for Marian thus performs the ideological work Angela Leighton describes as dismantling "the intriguing enigma that surrounds the figure of the fallen woman" (147). In effect, EBB replaces an enigma tinged with judgement with a more respectful appreciation for Marian's physical presence. She thereby participates in the mid-Victorian alteration in representations of the fallen woman that Kathleen Hickock traces to the middle decades of the nineteenth-century wherein "literature underwent a gradual shift in emphasis from depicting the fallen woman as miserable and irretrievably lost . . . toward depicting the fallen woman as less inexorably doomed and degraded" (97). EBB's engagement with this effort to reclaim the so-called fallen woman effectively enacts her stated aim of "running into the midst of our conventions" (Browning and Browning 10.102). *Aurora Leigh* treats the fallen woman as a subject possessing dignity and thus assigns Marian an uncontainable alterity, not because she is a woman who has been raped but because she is a human being.

Aurora's respect for Marian becomes even more apparent through the blatant contrasts between her account of Marian's "[s]elf-forgot" countenance and her

descriptions of Aunt Leigh and Lady Waldemar (6.604). She portrays her aunt as one who performs "[h]er duty, in large measure, well-pressed out, / But measured always," a statement which suggests the attitude of "calculating profits" that inhibits the process of reading (1.363-64, 1.706-7). Indeed, Aurora sees her English guardian as the antithesis to self-forgetting, stating that her aunt's eyes "once . . . might have smiled, / But never, never have forgot themselves / In smiling" (1.282-84). She finds in Lady Waldemar's smile a similarly calculating attitude, calling it "such a smile, so cold and bright, / As if she tried it in a 'tiring glass / And liked it" (5.988-90). This simile echoes her previous portrayal of Lady Waldemar as a "centre to herself, / Who has wheeled on her own pivot half a life / In isolated self-love and self-will" (4.514-16). The mercenary and insular behaviour Aurora attributes to and denounces in these women reflects the manner in which her language of self-forgetting functions as a sincere, though paradoxical, expression of the respect for others necessitated by modal pluralism.

Aurora's insistence that readers "gloriously forget" themselves, then, differs from the rhetoric of self-deprecation sometimes associated with sage writers (1.706). In Landow's analysis, sages often attempt to solicit an audience's favour through "a kind of implicit self-deprecation" ("Aggressive" 41). More pointedly, Morgan notes that female sage writers, in particular, "manipulate the rhetorical conventions of self-deprecation" to position themselves within the predominantly masculine discourse of the sage (8). Aurora distances herself from the strategies Landow and Morgan identify through her marked disdain for all manner of self-absorption, whether parsed in terms of self-aggrandizement or self-flagellation:

> We are always wrong when we think too much
> Of what we think or are: albeit our thoughts

> Be verily as bitter as self-sacrifice,
> We're no less selfish. (4.440-444)

Her first-person plural pronoun makes no distinction along gendered lines, thereby

reinforcing the ubiquity of her exhortation to forget the self. Indeed, throughout *Aurora*

Leigh EBB rejects the stereotype of the self-effacing woman and the rigid gender

categories it implies. Although Aurora evokes this model when she calls the empathic

desire "[t]o undo [a wrong or suffering] though we undo ourselves" a quality that is

"womanly, past doubt," she later troubles this essentialist ideology (7.2.15-18). Her

assertion that women are "knights-errant to the last" indicates that a similar selflessness

animates the conventionally masculine ideal of chivalry, and thus she underscores the

instability of gender roles (7.224-25). Hickock effectively draws attention to this

performative presentation of gender when she asserts that *Aurora Leigh* reveals "that

male/female personality differences are artificial" (186). As Hickock's analysis suggests,

EBB advances a kind of androgyny that functions as yet another manifestation of her

pluralism.[17] This androgyny places the concept of self-forgetting outside the specifically

feminine strategies Morgan highlights.

The language of self-forgetting in *Aurora Leigh*, then, differs significantly from

these self-deprecatory postures, yet it nevertheless evokes the rhetoric of sage writing

through its reliance on paradox: the self would appear to be no more if successfully

forgotten. As Holloway argues, paradox allows the sage "to say what is true in a form

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[17] Studies approaching *Aurora Leigh* through a nexus of genre and gender, including Stone's "Genre Subversion and Gender Inversion" (126-27) and Freidman's "Gender and Genre Anxiety" (203-205) have also appreciated the androgynous qualities of EBB's writing. Such androgyny allows EBB to cut across the gendered pattern observed not only by Morgan in her work on feminine sage discourse but also by Dorothy Mermin ("The Damsel" 75), Glenis Byron (59), and Kate Flint (158, 165) in their respective studies of dramatic monologues by Victorian female poets.

which at first sight appears untrue" and thereby express "the important truth which the common eye has missed" (17). Despite the sage's seeming untruthfulness, Holloway maintains that these paradoxical statements "always can and often do lead on to something realer and richer" (296). This appeal to rhetoric rather than logic, however, prompts Camille R. La Bossière to argue that the sage's role is fraught with untenable contradictions. La Bossière argues that paradox's departure from logic "hints at a contradiction of means and ends" that makes the sage's vocation "a calling to suicide" (16). Identifying a "fundamental contradiction between wisdom and art," he concludes that "[t]he artist's enterprise, the composing of a *discordia concors* in tune with the syntax of unreason ruling the world, denies him the office of ethical guide" (19). La Bossière's model presumes an incompatibility of wisdom and art that differs significantly from the Victorian concept of art as fundamentally engaged with society—he adopts instead Joseph Conrad's ideas about art and imagination and thus draws attention to the ideological shift towards decadence at the fin de siècle—yet his argument effectively draws attention to the liabilities and the instabilities of a rhetoric based on paradox (100).

Such instabilities become evident in *Aurora Leigh* insofar as EBB's paradoxical language underscores the difficulty—and, moreover, the impossibility—of perfectly achieving the pluralistic ethics of self-forgetting. This paradox reflects the implicit tension between forgetting the self and the *Künstlerroman* genre in which *Aurora Leigh* participates, for if *Aurora Leigh* is a story of self-forgetting, it is also a story of self-formation.[18] The conflicting processes of self-forgetting and self-fashioning demonstrate

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[18] The dynamic of self-fashioning integral to the *Künstlerroman* genre emerges first in the metaphor of self-portraiture that opens *Aurora Leigh*, and Aurora's claims about writing for her "better self" underscore the ongoing and complex nature of her formation (1.2-9). In an analysis of how this passage sets up *Aurora*

the differing concepts of selfhood in circulation during the time of EBB's writing. Examining changing ideas of selfhood from a historical perspective, Roy Porter notes that in the tradition of Christian mystics such as St. John of the Cross "selfishness was the archetype of all sin" and "self-denial was the supreme good" (2). He observes that though this idea has been an enduring one, it has since the Renaissance been tempered by a humanism which "rejected the theological dogma of man as a loathsome sinner required to abase himself before God, and began to take delight in man himself, the apex of creation, the master of nature, the wonder of the world" (2). Porter associates these changing patterns of thought with new "cultural genres," including the portrait, the self-portrait, the diary, the biography, and the autobiography—genres in which *Aurora Leigh* participates (2).

EBB effectively encapsulates this tension between self-forgetting and self-formation through Aurora's palimpsestic imagery:

> 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. (1.824-26)

Her metaphor evokes the textual history of many religious manuscripts and effectively nuances the Lockean notion of the tabula rasa. Moreover, because the erasure and inscription of a palimpsest remains only partial, this metaphor renders the self plural: the palimpsest's display of many layers of text evokes the presence of other hands, other significances. Aurora's metaphor thereby suggests that the effacement—or the

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Leigh as a "literary self-portrait," Christine Chaney emphasizes the "hybridity of self-portraiture" signaled by this metaphor, particularly insofar as it intertwines "self, other, and text" (792, 795, 796).

forgetting—of the self is never complete, for it is intricately connected with the inscription not merely of oneself but of one's selves.[19]

The impossibility of self-forgetting reflects EBB's recognition of pluralism's limits. Such an awareness emerges also in Levinas's ethical philosophy. As Diane Perpich observes, for Levinas, "[e]thics is a matter not of having a secure principle, but of realizing that the principle is never secure enough. It is a matter of being overwhelmed by the infinity of the demand" (77). Perpich's emphasis on the infinite and overwhelming nature of Levinas's ethical imperative suggests that a complete and perfect orientation toward the other remains an impossible task. In a similar manner, *Aurora Leigh* indicates that the dispositional and intellectual aims of modal pluralism may, ultimately, be unachievable. EBB signals this prospect through representing Aurora's artistic ideals as largely unrealized.

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[19] EBB's portrayal on the self-in-process thus aligns with the Romantic tradition of selfhood Gerald Izenberg describes as "a concept of ideal self-formation and transformation" that remains nonetheless "unrealizable in the world except as an abstraction or allegory" (309).

CHAPTER 4: The Limits of Pluralism and the Aesthetic of the Unrealized

Aurora advances her aesthetic of the unrealized in a compelling fashion throughout the Fifth Book, the portion of the text that Alison Case calls Aurora's "most forceful and coherent statement of what Art in her age can and should be" (17). Despite this forcefulness, the book begins with an admonition: "Aurora Leigh, be humble. Shall I hope / To speak my poems in mysterious tune / With man and nature?" (5.1-3). These lines initiate a series of rhetorical questions that progressively intensify the magnitude of Aurora's aspirations, questions she implicitly answers negatively in her realization "I must fail" (5.30).[20] She further highlights this sense of failure when she assesses her writing, remarking, "I still see something to be done, / And what I do, falls short of what I see, / Though I waste myself on doing" (5.344-46). Her words underscore the difficulty— indeed, the near impossibility—of making vision and results commensurate.

EBB's presentation of Aurora's art as failing to live up to her ideals resonates with Booth's skepticism about whether a full and reasoned modal pluralism can, after all, be achieved. Booth observes that the paradoxes engendered by modal pluralism's commitment to affirming apparently conflicting or contradictory approaches often leads to charges of its incoherence ("The Possibilities" 61). Furthermore, he concludes that "[t]here is little evidence that a full modal pluralism will ever be embraced" because it necessitates "a kind of total embrace of at least two modes for long enough to recognize their radically distinct and irreducible powers" ("Pluralism" 920). Booth thus speculates that both the critical and the philosophical world "will always find more enthusiasts for

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[20] Lewis discusses this emphasis on humility as a manifestation of one of the wisdom traditions from which EBB's sage discourse draws, emphasizing the "well-established" connection between humility and wisdom in the literature of the Old Testament (*Elizabeth Barrett Browning's Spiritual Progress* 209).

monist, eclectic, and skeptical claims" ("Pluralism" 920). Likewise, James observes that

pluralism has enjoyed "little countenance" from philosophers, in large part because of the

messy appearance it offers when compared with the "rationalizing pictures" provided by

more unitary systems (26). That is, Booth and James both recognize that pluralism's

unruly heterogeneity is often regarded as an untenable incongruity.

A similar sense of incongruity predominates in the critical tradition regarding the

ending of *Aurora Leigh*. Specifically, the implications of Aurora's artistic quest

culminating in her marriage to Romney Leigh have been the subject of substantial debate.

In the second-wave feminism of the 1970s and 1980s, readers frequently interpreted

Aurora's marriage as a compromise, if not an utter capitulation, in her quest for poetic

fulfillment. For instance, in their examination of *Aurora Leigh* in *The Madwoman in the*

Attic: The Woman Writer and The Nineteenth-Century Imagination (1979), Sandra M.

Gilbert and Susan Gubar conclude that *Aurora Leigh* displays "what may well have been

the most reasonable compromise between assertion and submission that a sane and

worldly woman poet could achieve in the nineteenth century" (575). Deirdre David is less

optimistic when she critiques EBB for advancing "a sexual politics which dedicate

woman's art to the realisation of a conservative ideal" (113). These two interpretations,

then, deal with the plurality of Aurora's artistic and romantic desires by relating them to

the single, dominant tradition of the marriage plot.

More recent analyses of the text's conclusion, however, have acknowledged the

distortions that occur when *Aurora Leigh* is read primarily as a love story and, in effect,

these readings affirm the validity of pluralism despite its difficulties. Christine Sutphin,

for example, recognizes that EBB "refuses to endorse the socially prescribed either/or

choice between marriage and artistic career and argues that Aurora is strong enough to be herself, even within marriage" (50). Sutphin's observation that EBB rejects a dichotomous paradigm in favour of a more inclusive model frames the ending of *Aurora Leigh* in terms suggestive of pluralism. A similar plurality emerges also in Margaret Reynolds's argument that "[t]he ending of *Aurora Leigh* imagines a radical break from the traditions of the nineteenth-century feminine by proposing that a woman's life might contain both love and work and that each might reinforce, rather than contradict, the other" ("Critical Introduction" 46). Reynolds's language of reinforcement rather than contradiction bears a distinct resemblance to Booth's description of modal pluralism as a model which requires not the "subtraction or cancellation of modes" but "some kind of *addition*" (*Critical Understanding* 197).

Reynolds's analysis provides further insight into the pluralism of *Aurora Leigh* by implying that incompletion is a necessary condition of such addition. Reynolds states, "as the poem concludes, Aurora resists that ending to insist that she will go on with her poetic career" ("Critical Introduction" 38). She thus hints at, though does not explore, a structurally significant possibility—specifically, that *Aurora Leigh* as a text works to counter the idea of conclusive endings. Rajan's theory of the unfinished offers a productive means of pursuing this line of inquiry and analyzing the nine-book form of *Aurora Leigh*. While Olivia Gatti Taylor reads these nine books as indicative of the poem's "gestational nature," the recurring emphasis on androgyny in *Aurora Leigh* invites an understanding that does not depend on the author or protagonist's gender (154). Held up against twelve-book epics such as Virgil's *Aeneid* (19BCE) and John Milton's

Paradise Lost (1667), the nine-book pattern of *Aurora Leigh* suggests an unfinished epic and thus suits Rajan's model.

Rajan argues that the long poem possesses an energy that he calls the unfinished, a structure which "does not invite completion" (5). By locating the unfinished in texts ranging from Edmund Spenser's *The Faerie Queen* (1590) to Ezra Pound's *The Cantos* (1948), he demonstrates that the unfinished pertains not only to the manner of a poem's ending but, more broadly, to whether it can be contained within a neat and single structure. For Rajan, closure "is merely a means of circumscribing a poem that is inconclusive on the page and unfinished in the mind of the reader, since every reading interrogates previous readings" (19). His emphasis on the interrogative energy of multiple readings accords with modal pluralism's affirmation of many different conceptual approaches. *Aurora Leigh*, then, evinces the unfinished both in its presentation of the sage's work throughout the text as well as in the particular features of the final book.

Although the Ninth Book closes with Aurora envisioning her and Romney's work together according to images borrowed from Revelation 21, Aurora represents the New Jerusalem not as an ending—or even a beginning—but a continuation. As Jude V. Nixon observes, the apocalyptic genre in which the Ninth Book participates is itself an "amorphous" and "protean" form, and as such it is in keeping with the generic and conceptual plurality of *Aurora Leigh* as a whole (77).[21] EBB underscores the overlap between the future and the present when Aurora insists that the task Romney calls

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[21] Nixon discusses in detail how EBB's particular forms of Christianity and feminism revise a conventionally male religious discourse. Other notable studies of EBB's engagement with varying religious traditions have focused on her use of Emmanuel Swedenborg's theories—see the respective studies of Nathan Camp (63-69) and Lewis (*Elizabeth Barrett Browning's Spiritual Progress* 165-70). For a discussion of the hermeneutical indeterminacy of *Aurora Leigh*'s ending, see Stone (*Elizabeth* 181-6).

"raising souls" must be done from the vantage point of standing "upon the earth" (9.853, 854). This location reflects the continuity between that which is already and that which is not yet. Furthermore, by describing what the blinded Romney's soul sees as a glimpse of "perfect noon," Aurora implies that the "new, near Day" she and Romney anticipate has begun but remains far from over (9.961, 9.955). Similarly, Romney's assertion that "by mounting ever, we attain, / And so climb on" foregrounds the ongoing nature of their endeavours (9.938-39).

By esteeming the act of aspiring, both Romney and Aurora value the principal function of Rajan's unfinished: namely, questioning not only the possibility but also the desirability of conclusive endings. Rajan argues that an unfinished text "should be less satisfactory if we were to pursue any of the conceivable ways of finishing it" (5). He concludes, "[i]nstead of speaking of its failure to achieve closure, we should regard any prospective closure of it as an imminent failure" (5). Aurora affirms the interrogative energy of the unfinished most emphatically in her images of hunger: "Who in all this world," she asks, "[h]as never hungered?" (5.490, 5.493). Answering her own question with the declaration "[w]oe to him who has found / The meal enough," Aurora implies that hunger—and the concepts of asking and yearning it evokes—is both more desirable and more necessary than satiety, even though it engenders pain (5.493-94).

Because EBB's unrealized and aspiring aesthetic embraces the possibility of failure, the unfinished energy that animates *Aurora Leigh* finds its closest conceptual analogue in the Victorian era in Ruskin's theory of the imperfect. While the unfinished, as Rajan positions it, is a timeless category, the ideas Ruskin expresses in *The Stones of Venice* (1851) offer a compelling manifestation of the unfinished within nineteenth-

century sage discourse. Moreover, Ruskin's admiration of *Aurora Leigh*, cited in the first

paragraph of this thesis, invites attention to the similarities between his and EBB's work.

Given that Landow finds in Ruskin's writings many of the characteristic features of sage

discourse, some comparison between EBB and Ruskin is all the more warranted (*Elegant*

Jeremiahs 17). Such a comparative approach has not been explored in other studies of

Aurora Leigh as sage writing, perhaps because of the obvious disparity between EBB and

Ruskin's respective positions on the woman question—indeed, as Stone points out,

Ruskin's celebration of *Aurora Leigh* occurs in the same sentence in which he praises

Coventry Patmore's "The Angel in the House" (1854) ("The 'Advent' of *Aurora Leigh*"

n.pag.). Nevertheless, the artistic, religious, social, and moral correspondences between

Ruskin's analysis of Gothic architecture and the pluralistic vision EBB expresses in

Aurora Leigh merit close analysis.

The vitality integral to EBB's pluralistic vision constitutes a central feature of

Ruskin's theory of the imperfect also. For Ruskin, imperfection "is in some sort essential

to all that we know of life" because it is indicative of growth: "[a]ll admit irregularity as

they imply change" (10.203). This emphasis on growth demonstrates the affinity between

the imperfect and the unfinished—both pertain to forms in process—and indicates that

the imperfect, like the unfinished, is pluralistic because it too prizes addition over

reduction or cancellation. Just as modal pluralism refuses to resolve seeming

contradictions, so also Ruskin's imperfect affirms "irregularity" (10.203). EBB advocates

for a similar irregularity insofar as Aurora privileges energy and vigour above adherence

to tidy genre categories:

> Five acts to make a play.
> And why not fifteen? Why not ten? Or seven?

> What matter for the number of the leaves,
> Supposing the tree lives and grows? (5.228-32)

Conventional principles of unity or perfection matter less in Aurora's estimation than do

life and growth. Barbara Charlesworth Gelpi effectively expresses this emphasis on

vitality in her argument that EBB's presentation of life, in its fullness, is one in which

vision itself "transcend[s] any possible expression of it (47). Both EBB and Ruskin, then,

affirm a resistance to containment that is congruent with modal pluralism.

Furthermore, Ruskin's understanding of the "savageness" of Gothic architecture

as an "index of . . . religious principle" accords with EBB's presentation of Aurora's

unfinished and imperfect work as artist and social reformer in terms of a Christology

from below (10.188). Savageness is, for Ruskin, a quality that "deserves our profoundest

reverence" because it gives rise to an expression of grace (10.188). He associates the

rudeness and wildness of the Gothic with the "admission of lost power and fallen nature"

that "the Christian makes daily and hourly, contemplating the fact of it without fear, as

tending, in the end, to God's greater glory" (10.190). He thus evokes the biblical idea that

weak and lowly things have been divinely appointed so as to manifest God's power (1

Cor. 1.27). EBB displays a similar esteem for roughness when Aurora asserts that scorn

for the "common, ugly, human dust" is a weakness, not a strength (6.164). This valuation

of that which is lowly and human reflects her understanding of the incarnation. She

quotes Jesus's teachings about humility—"[m]y humbleness, said One, has made me

great!"—and Romney affirms this statement by rejoining, "[t]he man most man, with

tenderest human hands, / Works best for men, - as God in Nazareth" (9.857, 9.862-63).

By emphasizing Christ's humanity rather than his divinity, Aurora and Romney revere

that which is lowly—in effect, savage—in a manner congruent with Ruskin's imperfect.

Closely related to the religious principle Ruskin derives from the imperfect is the antithesis he draws between Gothic and Grecian aesthetics, an opposition present, though in a more qualified form, in *Aurora Leigh* as well. The admission of weakness integral to the Christian faith is, as Ruskin says, anathema to the Grecian attitude (10.189). Claiming that "[t]he Greek gave to the lower workman no subject which he could not perfectly execute," Ruskin calls Grecian forms "servile" because they rob the individual worker of autonomy and dignity (10.189). He argues that these religious and social principles obtain also in his present context—"the modern English mind has this much in common with that of the Greek, that it intensely desires, in all things, the utmost completion or perfection compatible with their nature"—and takes issue with this desire for perfection (10.109). Like Ruskin, EBB, through Aurora, interrogates the classical emphasis on perfection:

> Shall I fail?
> The Greeks said grandly in their tragic phrase,
> 'Let no one be called happy till his death.'
> To which I add, - Let no one till his death
> Be called unhappy. (5.73-77)

By inverting the Greek saying, Aurora advocates for the suspension of judgement, that is, for not bestowing the term "unhappy" on a life until it is over. In subsequent lines, she intensifies her affirmation of the imperfect by saying that even that which is "scant" should be appreciated as noble if it is produced by one who has "nobly striven" (5.80). Her privileging of what is attempted rather than what is attained, then, differs markedly from the emphasis on completion and perfection conventionally associated with the classical art of ancient Greece.[22]

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[22] The similarities between Ruskin and EBB's perspectives on Grecian aesthetics merit some nuance. It is worth noting that, unlike Ruskin, EBB celebrates the literary tradition of Greece—and, especially, the

For both Ruskin and EBB, to contest classical aesthetics is, ultimately, to reject

the idea of artistic perfection. Ruskin argues that the Greek preoccupation with perfection

"is a noble character in the abstract, but becomes ignoble when it causes us to forget the

relative dignities of that nature itself, and to prefer the perfectness of the lower nature to

the imperfection of the higher" (10.190). Consequently, even though Ruskin allows that

the artist aims for perfection he insists that "we are nevertheless not to set the meaner

thing, in its narrow accomplishment, above the nobler thing, in its mighty progress; not to

esteem smooth minuteness above shattered majesty; not to prefer mean victory to humble

defeat; not to lower the level of our aim, that we may the more surely enjoy the

complacency of success" (10.191). The chief liability of insistence on perfection is that it

prompts one to settle for something lesser in order to achieve something perfect. It is

better, according to Ruskin, to offer an imperfect rendering of what is great than a perfect

version of what is mean.

Such are the priorities EBB, too, affirms in her description of Aurora's poetic

labour. Likening her artistic endeavours to climbing a mountain, Aurora says that

"generous souls" encouraged her with the statements "now you're on our level, - now! /

The next step saves you!" (9.428-29). This encouragement becomes cause for dismay,

however, when she becomes aware of her work's meager scale:

> I was flushed with praise,
> But, pausing just a moment to draw breath,
> I could not choose but murmur to myself
> 'Is this all? all that's done? and all that's gained?
> If this then be success, 'tis dismaller

---

figure of Prometheus—in earlier works such as her translation of *Prometheus Unbound* (1833). Discussing
EBB's engagement with these Greek traditions, Stone argues that EBB "redefines classical poets like
Aeschylus as romantic" (*Elizabeth* 71). Stone effectively highlights the ways in which EBB perceived the
Grecian aesthetic as emphasising not perfection but passionate imagination (*Elizabeth* 71). EBB's
romanticized idea thus foregrounds similar features as those Ruskin finds in the Gothic.

Than any failure.' (5.429-34)

Her conclusion that such success would be worse than failure echoes Ruskin's dissatisfaction with the perfection "of the lower nature" (10.190). She thus advances a paradoxical commitment to reaching for the unachievable, a commitment required for the practice of modal pluralism.

Modal pluralism's unpopularity in philosophical and critical discourse does not, for Booth, constitute sufficient reason for abandoning it as an analytical and dispositional model. He says that even though the modal pluralist "must live with no hope whatever of getting everything clear at last" because he or she believes that "truth is forever richer than its formulations" modal pluralism need not become pessimism (*Critical Understanding* 340). Using the sea as a metaphor for the infinite possibilities that modal pluralism invites—a metaphor which recalls Aurora's description of seeking truth as "some hard swimming through / The deeps" (1.795-96)—Booth affirms, "there is a great difference between the exhausted swimmer who is convinced that the patternless waves he struggles through extend in all directions without limit, and the one who says to himself, 'There *are* islands. Swim a bit further, and you will certainly find another one, perhaps even more hospitable than the last one you rested on'" (*Critical Understanding* 340). The impossibility of definitively realizing pluralism, then, need not and should not deter individuals from pursuing it. EBB arrives at a similar conclusion in *Aurora Leigh*: imperfection makes possible continued effort. Indeed, Aurora speaks of the sage's "double vision" itself as an ideal for which to aspire rather than a capacity to be mastered,

exhorting "[l]et us strive for this" (5.188). She thereby presents her pluralistic vision

more as something to be reached for than as something to be grasped.[23]

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[23] Here, I am borrowing the terms Browning employs in "Andrea del Sarto": "a man's reach should exceed his grasp / Or what's a heaven for?" (lines 97-98).

CHAPTER 5: Conclusion

The consequences of EBB's pluralistic engagement with sage discourse can be effectively summarized in the principles of effort and mercy Ruskin derives from the imperfect. He writes, "[a]ll things are literally better, lovelier, and more beloved for the imperfections which have been divinely appointed, that the law of human life may be Effort, and the law of human judgment, Mercy" (10.204). The former law aligns with the yearning that issues from EBB's aesthetic of the unrealized and the latter with the orientation towards others enjoined by her ethic of self-forgetting. Moreover, Ruskin's twofold formulation resonates with the metaphor Aurora offers for her poetics in the Second Book. Crowning herself as poetess with a garland of ivy, she says, "I like such ivy, bold to leap a height / T'was strong to climb; as good to grow on graves / As twist about a thyrsus" (2.50-52). Insofar as the ivy is "bold to leap a height," it figures forth effort, yet at the same time its association with the grave evokes mortality and thus a weakness and sorrowfulness that demands mercy.

In much the same way that EBB's "double vision" employs a twofold structure not to represent duality but to initiate a greater multiplicity, so also the poles of grave and thyrsus signal not two alternatives but the whole range of prospects in between. The ivy imagery thus offers a merismus, a form of synecdoche which uses two terms of a series—either the first and last or two of the most prominent—to indicate the entire continuum between them.[24] The fertility staff and the grave, then, function not antithetically but

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[24] Merismus is a common trope in Hebrew poetry; see A.M. Honeyman (13-14) for an extended discussion of its uses in Old Testament literature. As Mermin notes, EBB taught herself Hebrew and read the Old Testament in its original language, so the prospect that she mobilizes this trope is an enticing one (*Elizabeth* 19). Although she does not comment on EBB's use of merismus, Cynthia Scheinberg draws attention to EBB's engagement with the Hebraic tradition in terms of its history and prophetic figures (55-56).

inclusively. Merismus uses duality to signify plurality—that is, a fullness which exceeds representation and can only be evoked by naming some of its constituent parts. As a figure of plenitude, this trope emblematizes the manifold—indeed, limitless—prospects that issue from modal pluralism. While this boundlessness prevents complete realization, it preserves the process of aspiring and, because its unattainability means that no one can achieve it perfectly, necessitates an attitude of compassion.

Aurora Leigh displays the difficulties as well as the possibilities attending the pursuit of "beauty and salt of truth," given the multiplicity of these categories (1.706). EBB thereby participates in both the sage discourse particular to her nineteenth-century era and a broader wisdom tradition. Her emphasis on such capacious and pluralistic objects as beauty and truth—or, in her dedication to Kenyon, "Life and Art" (n.pag.)— attests to Holloway's argument that though the work of the sage finds a particular expression in the Victorian period the sage performs "an activity which has an enduring place in human life" (2).[25] The concern for wisdom that underpins sage discourse has, as Morton Bloomfield contends, a similar ubiquity: Bloomfield suggests that wisdom is "perhaps the only subject which is universally admired" (2). He considers wisdom as universal not because of its singularity but because of its variety: wisdom's ubiquity arises from its particularity, from its many formulations in different traditions the world over. Bloomfield's language of universality invites some suspicion insofar as universalism has been conventionally associated with imperialism and the suppression of

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[25] Linda H. Peterson discusses in some detail the historical factors that shaped Victorian sage discourse specifically. She argues that though "virtually every historical epoch has had some version of sage writing," the distinctly Victorian "commitment to identifying and analyzing social, political, economic, religious, and philosophical problems" can be connected to industrialization, urbanization, the growth of democracy, the proliferation of periodicals and the rise of the professional writer (373).

difference; however, as Amanda Anderson reminds us, the existence of different cultural conventions "does not mean that we should not deploy the term *universal*; we should in fact continuously attempt to give it a fuller articulation, so as to include groups that have been hitherto excluded from its purview" (281).[26]

EBB signals her desire to provide such a fuller articulation of concepts like beauty, truth, knowledge, wisdom, and justice in her description of herself as "a citizeness of the world" (Browning and Browning 18.126). Because the concept of citizenship entails responsibilities and duties including the participation in political matters, her diction affirms her commitment to engaging with social issues that extend beyond Victorian England. *Aurora Leigh* locates the work of the poet and sage in a similar global sphere: once again using the trope of doubleness to represent a more extensive plurality, Aurora not only maintains that "a poet's heart / Can swell to a pair of nationalities" (6.51-52) but also reflects that "[w]e poets always have uneasy hearts, / Because our hearts, large-rounded as the globe, / Can turn but one side to the sun at once" (5.1180-83). The "pair of nationalities" is thus situated within a "large-rounded" sphere, an orbed shape which, strictly speaking, cannot be said to have only two sides because its contours resist a neat and dichotomous split. This image of the poet's heart effectively figures modal pluralism's uncontainable fullness, a fullness that, though disquieting—

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[26] Anderson's statement occurs in her discussion of the ways contemporary theories of cosmopolitanism must "combine the critique of partial or false universals with the pursuit of those emancipatory ideals associated with traditional universalism" (265). A consideration of EBB's pluralism as cosmopolitanism in *Aurora Leigh* is beyond the scope of this project, yet it is worth observing that Aurora is of mixed English-Italian heritage and that she travels between England, France, and Italy over the course of the text. Notably, recent scholarship on EBB has focused on her cosmopolitanism, particularly as it is manifest in *Casa Guidi Windows* (1855), *Poems before Congress* (1860) and *Last Poems* (1862). See, for example, Armstrong (52-57), Chapman (72-75), Cronin (35-39), and Keirstead (65-89).

because of the impossibility of bringing all to light—remains, nevertheless, promising—

because of the sheer inexhaustibility of the efforts to do so.

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