

## HUMANIZED AND HUMANIZING: NATURE AS A TASK IN ELIZABETH BARRETT BROWNING'S *AURORA LEIGH*

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The aim of the present paper is to explore the role of nature in the emergence of the (artist's) self as a contract between the internalization of the surrounding reality and the externalization of one's own private world. Elizabeth Barrett Browning's *Aurora Leigh* (1856) displays nature as an eventful text to be read and comprehended – already available (immanent, inherited, preceding) and yet still forthcoming (imminent, producible, succeeding). Nature provides man with an opportunity for self-completion and self-extension, as one relates to reality by right and by moral obligation. In revealing the experiential basis of poetic identity, I have been especially interested in Aurora Leigh's devotedness to her native environment as a memorial of her deceased mother. (Artistic) being emerges as a responsibility to a call from the outside, where the humanizing element of one's natural existence is to be found. Philosophical hermeneutics and anthropology applied hereby, this literary work may be able to step beyond its conveniently Victorian cultural order of signification.

**Key words:** *Elizabeth Barrett Browning, nature, artist, self, event, hermeneutics, anthropology*

If you know nothing but railroads, and can communicate nothing but aqueous vapour and gunpowder, – what then? But if you have any other thing than those to give, then the railroad is of use only because it communicates that other thing; and the question is – what that other thing may be. Is it religion? I believe if we had really wanted to communicate that, we could have done it in less than 1800 years, without steam. Most of the good religious communication that I remember has been done on foot; and it cannot be easily done faster than at foot pace. Is it science? But what science – of motion, meat, and medicine? [...] Gradually, thinking on from point to point, we shall come to perceive that all true happiness and nobleness are near us, and yet neglected by us; and that till we have learned how to be happy and noble we have not much to tell, even to Red Indians. [...] To watch the corn grow, and the blossoms set; to draw hard breath over ploughshare or spade; to read, to think, to love, to hope, to pray, – these are the things that make men happy, they have always had the power of doing these, they never will have the power to do more. (Ruskin 2000: 31)

A work invariably intriguing, though not always unequivocally praised – chiefly due to its unorthodox “genetic and stylistic hybridity”<sup>1</sup> – and one which reveals the experiential premise of poetic identity, *Aurora Leigh* (1856) has been considered by many an intellectual divide in EBB’s entire legacy.<sup>2</sup> Drawn to the idealistic experientialism of thinkers such as Ruskin, Carlyle and Emerson (Stone 2010: xv), the poetess shares in this work of hers a belief in the emergence and shaping of the (poetic) self through a symbiotic co-ordination of instructed intellectual assiduity and ingrained natural lore. Both rest on a sense of fulfillment where recognition of the past and of one’s family background is a key element. Knowing nature – as an external reality and as a product of poetic composition – turns, in EBB’s poetry, into a prerequisite for survival, for artistic success and a guarantee for individuation. The materialization of EBB’s dream of writing “a poem comprehending the aspect & manners of modern life” (apparently prompted by Byron’s *Don Juan* – a strong influence on the young poetess), was preceded and indeed prepared by two other works which attempted to analyse the relationship between feeling, need, responsibility and national belonging, as related to in depth comprehension of the phenomenal and artistic value of nature (Cf. Stone 2010: x-xi). These were *Sonnets from the Portuguese* and *Casa Guidi Windows*. The thematic presence of nature in *Aurora Leigh* does not strike the scholar as the most obvious choice for an investigative project yet it reveals, to my mind, significant features of the development of EBB’s poetics as one of negotiation between two tendencies typical for the Victorian female mind: self-questioning, on the one hand, and affirming an artist’s biological rootedness in experiential reality, on the other. Roy Wagner argues that “our collective Culture creates and sustains an image and a perception of “nature” and natural force, whereas our compensating search for

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<sup>1</sup> The issue of the diversity of critical response to the form and target audience of this poetical work has been explored by Marjorie Stone, based also on Dorothy Mermin’s groundbreaking study, *Elizabeth Barrett Browning: The Origins of a New Poetry*, 1989 (Cf. Stone 2010: xx, xxii, xxiv). The first edition of *Aurora Leigh* is known to have sold out in a fortnight and to have subsequently been reprinted five times prior to its author’s death (Cf. Stone 2010: viii). Whether nominated the first female *Künstlerroman*, an epic, or a lengthy monodrama of self-interrogation, it reveals the poetess’ ideological oscillation between acceptable modes of (feminine) self-representation and more generic efforts to unearth the roots of writing as an experiential duty.

<sup>2</sup> I have hereby employed the widely accepted abbreviation of the poetess’ full name – **EBB**.

experience and knowledge in non-Cultural realism amounts to an invention of Culture” (Wagner 1981: 59). Wagner’s research shows that man’s cultural experience, significantly based on developing a perception of the surrounding world as related to a sense of collective belonging to the regulated body of nature, inevitably leads to the consideration of “man’s origins and his phenomenal existence” (Wagner 1981: 135). I would like to step onto this anthropological platform to consider the formation of selfhood as a constant directing one’s glance towards the past and outside of the self. There is always a past innate in a given geo-cultural environment. The past secures Aurora’s eventual maturation as re-appropriation of a homeland, Italy. Her contributive influence on an initially foreign culture (England) and her knowledge of the past pave her natural and spiritual survival.

The co-dramatization of the mind and of external reality in EBB’s poetry is marked by a sense of obligation to a set of relationships which form a living environment. As the principal voice<sup>3</sup> in *Aurora Leigh* is that of a young poetess in progress, selfhood becomes a doubly prominent category, a metaphoric extension based on the experiential interchange between one and other. A good example is to be discovered in the first lines of book one:

**[I] 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**

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<sup>3</sup> To arrive at an adequate definition of the role of Aurora in terms of content and structure of this project of EBB’s is not an easy task. If we call her merely “a lyrical speaker”, or “a narrator”, we may be accused of partisanship as we would be voting for a specific genre definition – itself a limitation on our comprehension of her role in the architecture of this poetic masterpiece where she is not merely a puppeteer or an external observer. Should we choose to define her as “a lyrical self” – perhaps the least appropriate of all titles in this case – we would reveal merely the intimate and self-reflective overtones. Just “heroine” would not be a much better choice simply because we would be insisting on the dialogic capacity of this experimental poem without really paying due respect to the poetess’ self-constructive thinking. It would be more appropriate to use various terms which gradually disclose a palette of functions Aurora manages. We thus hope to be able to validate the hybrid nature of both the individual as a centre of poetic composition, and the literary work as a cultural necessity based on interaction and external appreciation. Though significant, such terminological specification is nonetheless not an aim in itself in this research paper and it cannot therefore be expected to direct the overall critical investigation of the subject matter in hand.

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** [...]”<sup>4</sup>  
(I, ll. 4-16, emphasis added).

A reflection and a memory of childhood and of the passing of time, this excerpt indicates that the speaker aims her writing to be a purposeful recording of life and a conscientious exploration of the bounds of her own potential for someone else’s sake. Childhood plays a crucial role, the mother being a pillar of a growing individual’s wholeness – physical wellbeing and a healthy imagination. The lines bold-typed (ll. 10-12) anticipate Tennyson’s famous terminal sea-journey in “Crossing the Bar” (1889), as they also establish a natural platform for self-perception and for poetic self-expression. In addition, they suggest division of the self, a desire to see oneself from the position of someone else and explain oneself in historical terms. Time matters: the retention of early “nursery” memories implies the domestication of the past in the formation of a sense of identity. On the other hand, Richard Cronin’s research on Victorian voice as identity explores how the poet at that time “had to forge rather than find,” or remember, his/her own voice (Cronin 2010: 583). Dramatization became the most apt way of revealing this inner search for a centre of values which always took the poet back in time and, in this case, to one’s family background and to a certain encapsulated protective environment (see ll. 15-16). In *Aurora Leigh* this search is part of an epistemological journey whereby the female artist is on the lookout for an appropriate form of poetic expression of her desire to explain creatively the relationship between inheritance and free will in man’s natural phenomenal existence. However, like most poets of her time, EBB, too, took a swerve away from Romantic metaphysics (Cf. Bristow 2004: 88-89, 92), as she lacked in the certainty the Romantic poets cherished in their impression of nature as a source of inspiration and a regulative mechanism for

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<sup>4</sup> Quotations from, and references to, *Aurora Leigh* specify the respective book (in Roman numbers), followed by the respective lines (in Arabic numbers).

maintaining order. Thematic diversity was one of the results of this search for a centre, which would also account for the common critical trend to perceive nature as part of EBB's vaster political take on issues concerning femininity.<sup>5</sup> Above all, the initial lines bold-typed in this excerpt suggest, albeit ambiguously, a wish for the individual to be seen and recognized from an external point of view, by, and for the sake of, someone else.

Paths for furthering this research into a more expected, gender-studies, direction (i.e. a woman's natural sense of care; reforming the territory of women's professional and private belonging; biographical evidence of the poetess' involvement, in her correspondence, with female social activists) have been ploughed by Marjorie Stone and Sandra Donaldson (Cf. Stone 2010: vii-viii, xvii-xviii, xx). Little has been done so far to unearth the anthropological potential of *Aurora Leigh*. This potential encourages the scholar to isolate memory as the crux of the central lyrical heroine's evolving self-awareness as obligation to her native land. An obligation which, later, grows into a sense of duty also towards other individuals whose spiritual wholeness and physical wellbeing may be in peril: Marian Erle and Romney Leigh (two different referential contexts for Aurora). It is the native land that sets a standard for the perception of nature as environment, inner necessity, and aim in the young artist's mind.

Upon her mother's death, Aurora is left – for nine years – in the hands of her father to eventually find him “stone-dead,” his legacy to her being a wish: “Love, my child” (I, ll. 210-213). This most significant gap – Aurora's mother's death – threatens the child's developing apparatus of perception. Now that both parents are no more, travelling and learning away from the native environment seem not merely necessary and

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<sup>5</sup> The discussion of the role of nature in the poetess' epistemological journey refers one, historically, thematically, and inevitably, to theoretical research on the subject in terms of literary periodization. Professor Joseph Bristow's contributive article quoted hereby may be seen as a gateway towards exploring the present theme as tied to distinctive genre specificities in the poetry of the Victorian age. Paying attention to Robert and Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Bristow outlines some general features of Victorian poetics as an extension of the Romantic age. Yet while drawing on examples from M. Arnold, R Browning, J. S. Mill, Th. Carlyle, A. Tennyson and others, and taking into consideration early as well as modern critics' attempts to forge definitions regarding predominant Victorian forms and topics, he does little more than reveal the failure of both scholar and poet to arrive at an unambiguous grasp of a canonical genre or theme with which the period in hand may identify. Bristow acknowledges both select chief writers and contemporary academics that have dug into, and around, the “Victorian” age as an age of thematic diversity.

predictable accessories in the process of one growing up: they are also part of a compensatory urge to search for that which has been irrevocably lost and cannot be retrieved – the parent figure as a primary and natural guardian of an infant’s initiation into the world. The child has been denied the crucial guarantor for the acquisition of meaning in life – the mother – to remember Bakhtin (Cf. Bakhtin 2003: 128-129). Originating from an Italian mother and an English father, and having spent her initial thirteen years in Italy, Aurora is the poetess’ cultural manipulation of the motif of the orphaned infant uprooted from the familiarity of the home. Aurora’s proper place is the Italian, continental, mountainous domain (one that became indigenous to the Brownings). Her emergence as an adult, woman and poet, is facilitated by her migration between Italy and England, in particular between the cultural meanings of nature in these two lands. The mountains are Aurora’s native and natural environment, also a shelter from the far-off roar of the English Industrial Revolution: “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” (I, ll. 121-123). Stillness, lack, some unuttered truth and comforting silence envelop this withdrawn home, deprived of maternal presence and care. The mountains bear the primary referential meaning of birth-place and maternal land, but upon the mother’s untimely demise, they become an aporetic signifier of an unmanageable lacuna and a material divide in Aurora’s imagination which works anti-clockwise and takes her back in time and to her Italian home. It is there that we finally find her to accept Romney and to settle down. Secrecy, isolation, temporal stagnation and deprivation (muteness, helplessness, and absence of an addressee) become the symptoms of a young girl’s defenseless, motherless, and from a certain point on also fatherless, existence:

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 life’s needs and agonies  
With an intense, strong, struggling heart beside  
A stone-dead father. [...]  
(I, ll. 204-201, emphasis added)

In this case, nature functions as an all-encompassing contextual reality which both nurtures and delimits. Silence – encoded in a pact between man and God – becomes a distinctive feature of a spiritually

endowed, deep and enriching lore laid in nature. So that Aurora's anthropological journey towards artistic independence is very much a roundabout one: starting from, and terminating into, the Italian mountains and her homeland. The lines bold-typed direct one's attention to an idealistic perception of the origin of life as ascribed to a demiurge with a design – a predictable epitome of the poetess' epistemological search for a *primaeval* centre of values both inside and outside of the self.

A proxy between man and God, a receptacle of man and God, an extension of God's will of creation, and a product of the young woman's acute sense of departure from her birth place, nature holds sway over Aurora's evolving sense of selfhood. Nature moderates Aurora Leigh's problematic early attempts to comprehend the world around and form a feasible idea of time and space as related to human existence. In her description of the foreignness of the English landscape, in which she is planted after her departure from Italy following her father's death, Aurora appears to be stricken with abandonment and fear. A contrastive negation suggests instinctive mutual domestication between man and nature at one place (Italy) and the impossibility of achieving the same symbiosis at another (England). Both tendencies historicize Aurora's identity as they confirm the dependence between inner and outer on both somatic and abstract levels. The young (female) mind conceptualizes and masters life in a predictably empirical fashion – through reference to outer, or physical reality:

**Not a grand nature. Not** my chestnut-woods  
[...] **Not** my headlong leaps  
Of waters, that cry out for joy of 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.**  
(I, ll. 615-627, emphasis added)

While an echo of the Romantics' search for sublimity and beauty in grand forms and elements of nature can be discerned, further we stumble upon the idea of a task, a plan, a common, shared purpose, and a kind of interdependence. Bound in "a magic circle," the mutuality of the mountains reflects some higher intention ("influent heavens") which

summons man to “communion and commission,” i.e. to sharing and to acting upon duty. So, behind the passionate spirituality of this captivating mountainous continental landscape, there lurks an instructive inspiration which provokes this lengthy autobiographic poetic confession as a demonstration of an understanding of life as developmental obligation. Akin to a Roman Catholic perception of communal exchange and a dutiful need to confess, this description-reminiscence of Aurora’s native place defines and deifies the role of the mountains as a temporal and spatial divide between own and foreign in what may be termed a hermeneutic journey towards self-cognizing.

It may be impossible or undesirable to categorically rule in favour of the dominance of either external nature or man’s intentionality and intellectual prowess, since – as may be seen in the passage just quoted – naturalness and artificiality co-habit the domain of “the subliminal invention of self and of the natural proclivity that accompanies our everyday life. We create nature, and tell ourselves stories about how nature creates us” (Wagner 1981: 140; see also p. 143). Applied in this case, Wagner’s reflections on the relationship between man and nature elucidate the degree of Aurora’s adaptation to the external world as a birth place, and her adaptation of familiar Italian nature as a cultural context at a level of referentiality and somatic self-reflexivity apparently missing in her Englishness. Upon Aurora’s arrival in England, in the garden, her aunt reminds her of her English father and lets her ruminate this new environment of being – the garden symbolizes order, peace, regularity, yet imprisonment and foreignness (Cf. II, ll. 727-733). “Italian manners” must be abandoned for the “deaf blue sky that brings the roses out / On such June mornings” (II, ll. 748-749). Her paternal English aunt eventually leaves her be “in the garden walk” (II, l. 733) – a crossroads of two cultures, a sign of continuity, of opportunities to grow awareness and cherish this at first unnatural Englishness. A bit further we read that the speaker relates of “crisis and transition in this life” (II, l. 751) – symptomatic of the culture shock Aurora experiences by moving to England, where she is destined to grow up. A promising abode of peace, protection and regularity, the garden threatens Aurora with exclusion through hierarchical distribution of order and power in a clearly set class system – that of Victorian society. So in book VI, in Marian Erle’s confession to Aurora, we read the sentence: “a garden is no place for kids” (VI, l. 937). These words reach far, as we remember the exclusion from good society of a person with an out-of-wedlock child, such as the one Marian bears. The poetess’ employment of the image of the garden

discloses, in almost Biblical terms, a hapless young maid's compromised position in a myopic society which rests on inherited formulae of social decorum. While Marian narrates of Lady Waldemar and Romney, we come across the following summary: "she too in that Eden of delight / Was out of place, and, like the silly kid, / She did most mischief where she meant most love" (VI, ll. 943-945). This episode contains Marian's analysis of Lady Waldemar's relationship with Romney (also indigenous subject of Aurora's own affective narrative), but it is truly Marian herself who may be said to be afraid to "break the tulips" in this neat garden of social conventions which has disallowed her in the first place by urging her to think of herself as a villainess. Marian perceives herself as a stranger, an external observer, and an alien. Nature in this case emblemizes the lyrical speaker's impossibility of merging with a human milieu based on stratification. Such garden represents a turn-aside from the natural wisdom, peace and harmony of some earlier gardens found in the poetics of the English Romantics.

That EBB should utilize nature as a referential thematic compendium is no surprise given this work's form. A *Bildungsroman* (or a *Künstlerroman*) may be an adequate choice of a genre definition befitting the idea of the reciprocity between creativity and existence as progress, as permanent, non-finalizable development, as constant search, as inconclusiveness, and as exchange between two – all features also of natural survival through eternal modification and variability. Indirectly, the genre specificities of this work of EBB's are related to the author's hardship in "detaching [herself] sufficiently from [her] protagonist to pass a disinterested final judgement on the success or failure of [her] orientation" (Buckley 1966: 100). In confessional poetry, there is commonly no visible demarcation line between author and hero. In this case, however, this fragility demonstrates the developmental specificity of the interdependence of form and content with regard to the human being's search – to establish the natural roots of both her moral and aesthetic standards, to not forget her mother's land yet master her new, English, environment as a compelling geo-cultural offer for professional independence (through writing one's own autobiography). Stringent adherence to inherited rules and principles proves as non-habitual with Aurora as rash acceptance of new standards, yet both convention and innovative research naturally and significantly broaden her human understanding. A balance between fixity and mobility is crucial for Aurora's sober perception of external reality as source and aim of her evolving humanness. Reciprocally, nature rests on alteration of form yet

preservation of content. Aurora Leigh and Marian Erle can be seen as social orphans whose prime concern is their individual survival – needless to say also a common social concern, especially if society be seen as a natural habitat affected by, and affecting, the survival of separate individuals. Aurora is bent on objectifying her poetic talent through observing, and employing imagery from, nature. Nature's two-fold application (ethic and aesthetic) is in that it is a source of Aurora's cognitive growth (which involves physical development, survival in a foreign environment, sexual female maturation, and cultivation of compassion) and a poetic address to the sensitive reader of earlier, Romantic poetry.

Aurora evolves (with) the narrative biologically and historically – through growing awareness of time (the pivot of which is the tragic loss of both her parents). In this process natural time is a prerequisite for historical/cultural time. Aurora's awareness of nature as external reality and as inner necessity is triggered by the loss of her mother, then her father, and then her departure from Italy. These three events humanize the lyrical persona as they form part of her knowledge of fragility and terminality as ingredients of existing and of comprehending nature. They train Aurora's memory which helps her objectify both her own native place and her own feelings, as she develops – to refer to Plessner – “an eschatological consciousness” (Plessner 1958: 233-234) – a kind of thinking which acknowledges beginnings, longevity and endings as orienting increments of human existence through experiential loss. As Plessner rightly observes of societal and personal development, the emergence of the historical feeling of time (as “before,” “now,” “then,” etc.) through death (loss) is “nascent” in that it is inevitable as observable experience which enhances the individualization of both groups and their separate members (Plessner 1958: 236). Nature shapes the existence of man as it triggers and calibrates one's capacity to remember, expect, account for, dramatize, conceptualize, speed up, experiment with, and shape the exterior and the interior, based on repeated biological occurrences: “the rational chronology of natural time forms the basis of historical time” (Plessner 1958: 236). Death (the loss of the parent) hovers above humanity as “immanence” (as general and personal biological inevitability to be obeyed internally) and “transgression” (as expectation, memory, knowledge of being that gets developed as death befalls man from outside, calling for the attention of the living who bond on this basis) (Plessner 1958: 250). It humbles one and stimulates reflexivity and self-consciousness. The success of Aurora Leigh's self-expression through writing her own life is backed by this anthropological certainty. Materialized in a literary product, loss is an

indispensable component of aesthetic memory which is itself directly dependent on the variability of the distance between the observer (author) and the object observed (literary hero, or subject). This distance, which may also be termed “transgredience,” is controlled – eventually – biologically. In *Aurora Leigh* distanciation becomes a cultural variable: it makes prominent the most challenging moments of the central heroine’s existential transfer from Italian continental communitarian confessionalism to British insular protestant survivalism. Thus, when Aurora returns to Italy and eventually claims a diligent place of her own as a writer, she actualizes and objectifies herself through her relatedness to nature as part of a domain of filial devotion. She “takes up the old days” of “Tuscan pleasures” in which nature is an open book returned to in different seasons; but Aurora is friendless, so that reading now feels a solitary activity (see book VII, ll. 1040-1050). Knowledge is a return to the past through nature: “I knew the birds” (VII, l. 1053), “I recognized / the moths” (VII, l. 1055-1056), “And I knew / The harmless opal snakes, the large-mouthed frogs” (VII, ll. 1077-1078), “How I sate among them equally, / In fellowship and mateship, as a child” (VII, ll. 1087-1088). Aurora’s perceptive mind and keen capacity for recollection induce the memory of her father (objectified through familiar components of the natural surrounding reality), expressed as loss: “And I, I had come back to an empty nest, / Which every bird’s too wise for. How I heard / My father’s step on that deserted ground, / His voice along that silence, as he told / The names of bird and insect, tree and flower, / And all the presentations of the stars” (VII, ll. 1109-1113). Apparently a lover of nature, Aurora’s father – as memory encrusted in items of external reality – aggravates Aurora’s aporetic desolateness. She simultaneously finds nature to be the same and altered – it reminds her of her parent and of the improbability of his return from the world beyond. Nature can therefore be seen as a palimpsest whose innermost interpretable component is indeed loss as an opportunity for (self-)perception. Marked by absoluteness, the native land becomes conceptually comparable to an ultimate source of human culture: “My old Assunta, too, was dead, was dead – / **O land of all men’s past! for me alone, / It would not mix its tenses. I was past, / It seemed, like others, – only not in heaven**” (VII, ll. 1156-1159, emphasis added). The “mixture of tenses” (l. 1158) referred to is a most opportune illustration of the applicability of Plessner’s view on the collaboration between natural and historical time (embedded also in the grammatical structure of tenses, on a linguistic level). Aurora sees herself as living “past” because she belongs – ethnically, ethically, and artistically – with something other, and older, than the present. Nonetheless, the professional independence she eventually claims is very much a

phenomenological proof of her intention to relate equally to both past (Italian Roman Catholic purgatorial confessionalism) and present (English evolutionary optimism and self-help). The validation of the concept of time through personally experienced communal bonding (as alternation of poverty and satiety, loss and gain – materially and spiritually) is a seminal idea in EBB's work and a good proof of the hermeneutic potency of the text.

A cultural hero, Aurora is drawn towards attaining private and public recognition through knowledge, deed and feeling. All these solidify the place of memory as a motivational basis dominated by the image of the girl's dead mother – source of both divinity and abjectness in Aurora's spiritual search. In her foundational analysis of EBB's masterpiece, Prof. Linda Hughes addresses the presence of Aurora's dead mother as "the psychic ground on which Aurora's self, womanhood, and art are formed," and which is haunted by another, earlier, noteworthy, literary perusal of paternal loss (in relation to a poet's becoming) found in William Wordsworth's *The Prelude* (Hughes 2010: 263, 265). Accentuated reminiscences from, and representations of, childhood allow for a liberal yet circular narrative pattern. In her imagined and actual returns to Italy, Aurora emerges as part of a medieval *medias-res* structure of rendering experience (Cf. Hughes 2010: 263). Removal from, and arrival at, the same locus mark both the lyrical persona's peregrinations and the poetess' own (self-)educative lifetime search within a literary extension-precursor (Italy and continental culture) of the recognizable for that era Victorian environment. Like her husband, the great Victorian poet Robert Browning, EBB saw possibilities for thematic diversification of, and experimentation with, form by crossing the boundaries of British utilitarian realistic essentialism. This desire manifested itself as medievalist meditateness, preference for millennial images of purging and/or expulsion (in some of her political poems), and visibly in her preference for nature as a universal and vocational ground of existing.<sup>6</sup> As a metaphorical and physical premise, nature props the lyrical speaker's temporal leaps, themselves expressive of a wish to achieve self-comprehension by comprehending the absence of her own mother – a bio-cultural gap, accountable for the speaker's genetic aporeticity:

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<sup>6</sup> For further reflections on "the nurturing presence of nature" consult Hughes 2010: 261.

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 **fraternized** 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. [...]  
(I, ll. 29-47, emphasis added)

Apart from signaling desertion and lack of self-confidence, the passage quoted above displays a tendency to problematize orphanhood technically, empirically, scientifically (see the words in bold), sociologically, which would perhaps account for some untypical application of conventional vocabulary (e.g. “nest-deserted bird”), in a manner akin to, and anticipatory of, for instance, Thomas Hardy’s linguistic experimentalism (evidence of his clairvoyant conviction in nature’s ludic attitude to man). Novelty is seen as fraternal, whereas tradition belongs to the maternal ground – always remembered, imagined, and finally returned to. And in the midst of all this, nature’s prolific imagery orchestrates a fascinating, idiosyncratic, yet apt autobiographical poetic vault between adulthood and childhood, between loss (see the passage underlined) and eventual self-acquisition. Contingency and inventiveness are intertwined as undeniable features of natural existence. In lines 45-47 it is easy to detect the notion of responsibility and guilt as part of the idea of predestination – evidence of the female individual’s self-critical attitude whereby she approaches being as a task, with a purpose and a sense of duty. It is Aurora’s intuitive willingness to grasp the world around (in order to grasp her own self) that deals nature this central place of a field of instruction – it must be read, sensed, remembered, returned to, quoted and compared. Writing about nature is no mere proclivity for pathetic fallacy: nature is the habitat for the formation of a poetic talent

whose prowess stems from, and always looks in the direction of, outsidership as a source of ideation and identification. To write is to remember. This position of dependence and posterity of the poetic talent with regard to nature is an indicator of spatio-temporal awareness. An awareness of the fragility of being through acknowledging individual life as bounded by a sense of responsibility – a fact which provokes narrating as memorializing. Aurora's cousin, Romney Leigh, tries to ascertain the balance between good and bad in nature, hinting at eternal regeneration: "And in all nature is no death at all, / As men account of death" (II, ll. 289-290). Further on, there is no final, or finalizable, death: each account of it is penultimate in that it is always followed by another actual occurrence which needs explaining and remembering. Righteous and divine through God, as Aurora and Romney believe, nature – in, and out of, man is a most scriptable text yet to be explored as part of the investigation of EBB's place amid her predecessors, contemporaries, and followers.

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