The Norton Anthology of English Literature

EIGHTH EDITION

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VOLUME E
THE VICTORIAN AGE
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great effect on me, if he had merely placed before me beautiful pictures of
natural scenery. Scott’s does this still better than Wordsworth, and a very
second-rate landscape does it more effectually than any poet. What made
Wordsworth’s poems a medicine for my state of mind, was that they expressed,
not mere outward beauty, but states of feeling, and of thought colored by
feeling, under the excitement of beauty. They seemed to be the very culture
of the feelings, which I was in quest of. In them I seemed to draw from a
source of inward joy, of sympathetic and imaginative pleasure, which could
be shared in by all human beings; which had no connection with struggle or
imperfection, but would be made richer by every improvement in the physical
or social condition of mankind. From them I seemed to learn what would be
the perennial sources of happiness, when all the greater evils of life shall have
been removed. And I felt myself at once better and happier as I came under
their influence. There have certainly been, even in our own age, greater poets
than Wordsworth; but poetry of deeper and loftier feeling could not have done
for me at that time what his did. I needed to be made to feel that there was
real, permanent happiness in tranquil contemplation. Wordsworth taught me
this, not only without turning away from, but with a greatly increased interest
in the common feelings and common destiny of human beings. And the delight
which these poems gave me proved that with culture of this sort, there was
nothing to dread from the most confirmed habit of analysis. At the conclusion
of the Poems came the famous Ode, Falsely called Platonic, Intimations of
Immortality: in which, along with more than his usual sweetness of melody
and rhythm, and along with the two passages of grand imagery but bad philo-
osophy so often quoted, I found that he too had had similar experience to
mine; that he also had felt that the first freshness of youthful enjoyment of
life was not lasting; but that he had sought for compensation, and found it, in
the way in which he was now teaching me to find it. The result was that I
gradually, but completely, emerged from my habitual depression, and was
never again subject to it. I long continued to value Wordsworth less according
to his intrinsic merits than by the measure of what he had done for me. Com-
pared with the greatest poets, he may be said to be the poet of unpoetical
natures, possessed of quiet and contemplative tastes. But unpoetical natures
are precisely those which require poetic cultivation. This cultivation Words-
worth is much more fitted to give than poets who are intrinsically far more
poets than he.

* * *

7. Sir Walter Scott (1771–1832), Scottish poet and novelist.

ELIZABETH BARRET BROWNING
1806–1861

During her lifetime Elizabeth Barrett Browning was one of England’s most famous
poets. Passionately admired by contemporaries as diverse as John Ruskin, Algernon
Charles Swinburne, and Emily Dickinson for her moral and emotional ardor and her
energetic engagement with the issues of her day, she was better known than her husband, Robert Browning, at the time of her death. Her work fell into disrepute with the modernist reaction against what was seen as the inappropriate didacticism and rhetorical excess of Victorian poetry; but recently scholars interested in her exploration of what it means to be a woman poet and in her response to social and political events have restored her status as a major writer.

Browning received an unusual education for a woman of her time. Availing herself of her brother’s tutor, she studied Latin and Greek. She read voraciously in history, philosophy, and literature and began to write poetry from an early age—her first volume of poetry was published when she was thirteen. But as her intellectual and literary powers matured, her personal life became increasingly circumscribed both by ill health and by a tyrannically protective father, who had forbidden any of his eleven children to marry. By the age of thirty-nine, Elizabeths Barrett was a prominent woman of letters who lived in semi-isolation as an invalid in her father’s house, where she occasionally received visitors in her room. One of these visitors was Robert Browning, who, moved by his admiration of her poetry, wrote to tell her “I do as I say, love these books with all my heart—and I love you too.” He thereby initiated a courtship that culminated in 1846 in their secret marriage and elopement to Italy, for which her father never forgave her. In Italy Barrett Browning regained much health and strength, bearing and raising a son, Pen, to whom she was ardently devoted, and becoming deeply involved in Italian nationalist politics. She and her husband made their home in Florence, at the house called Casa Guidi, where she died in 1861.

Browning’s poetry is characterized by a fervent moral sensibility. In her early work she tended to use the visionary modes of Romantic narrative poetry, but she turned increasingly to contemporary topics, particularly to liberal causes of her day. For example, in 1843, when government investigations exposed the exploitation of children employed in coal mines and factories, she wrote “The Cry of the Children,” a powerful indictment of the appalling use of child labor. Like Harriet Beecher Stowe in Uncle Tom’s Cabin (1851–52), Barrett Browning uses literature as a tool of social protest and reform, lending her voice, for example, to the cause of American abolitionism in “The Runaway Slave at Pilgrim’s Point.” In later poems she took up the cause of the risorgimento, the movement to unify Italy as a nation-state, in which Italy’s struggle for freedom and identity found resonance with her own.

For many years Elizabeth Barrett Browning was best-known for her Sonnets from the Portuguese (1850), a sequence of forty-four sonnets presented under the guise of a translation from the Portuguese language, in which she recorded the stages of her love for Robert Browning. But increasingly, her verse novel Aurora Leigh (1857) has attracted critical attention. The poem describes the growth of a woman poet and is thus, as Cora Kaplan observes, the first work in English by a woman writer in which the heroine herself is an author. When Barrett Browning first envisioned the poem, she wrote, “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 out plainly.” The poem is a portrait of the artist as a young woman committed to a socially inclusive realist art. It is a daring work both in its presentation of social issues concerning women and in its claims for Aurora’s poetic vocation; on her twentieth birthday, to pursue her career as a poet, Aurora refuses a proposal of marriage from her cousin Romney, who wants her to be his helpmate in the liberal causes he has embraced. Later in the poem, she rescues a fallen woman and takes her to Italy, where they settle together and confront a chastened womanhood.

Immensely popular in its own day, Aurora Leigh had extravagant admirers (like Ruskin, who asserted that it was the greatest poem written in English) and critics who faulted with both its poetry and its morality. With its crowded canvas and melodramatic plot, it seems closer to the novel than to poetry, but it is important to view the poem in the context of the debate about appropriate poetic subject matter that engaged other Victorian poets. Unlike Matthew Arnold, who believed that the present age had not produced actions heroic enough to be the subject of great poetry, and unlike Alfred, Lord Tennyson, who used Arthurian legend to represent contemporary concerns, Barrett Browning felt that the present age contained the materials for an epic poetry. Virginia Woolf writes that “Elizabeth Barrett was inspired by a flush of true genius when she rushed into the drawing-room and said that here, where we live and work, is the true place for the poet.” Aurora Leigh succeeds in giving us what Woolf describes as “a sense of life in general, of people who are unerringly Victorian, wrestling with the problems of their own time, all brightened, intensified, and compacted by the fire of poetry... Aurora Leigh, with her passionate interest in social questions, her conflict as artist and woman, her longing for knowledge and freedom, is the true daughter of her age.”

The Cry of the Children

“Φημ. Φημ, τ’ εις αυτήν ερείπηθε μ’ ἡδίστιον, τέκνα;”

—Medea

Do ye hear the children weeping, O my brothers,
Ere the sorrow comes with years?
They are leaning their young heads against their mothers,
And that cannot stop their tears.

The young lambs are bleating in the meadows,
The young birds are chirping in the nest,
The young fawns are playing with the shadows,
The young flowers are blowing toward the west—
But the young, young children, O my brothers,
They are weeping bitterly!

They are weeping in the playtime of the others,
In the country of the free.

Do you question the young children in the sorrow
Why their tears are falling so?

The old man may weep for his to-morrow
Which is lost in Long Ago;
The old tree is leafless in the forest,
The old year is ending in the frost,
The old wound, if stricken, is the sorest.

The old hope is hardest to be lost:
But the young, young children, O my brothers,
Do you ask them why they stand
Weeping sore before the bosoms of their mothers,
In our happy Fatherland? 

bitterly

2. Alas, my children, why do you look at me? (Greek), from Euripides’ tragedy Medea. Medea speaks these lines before killing her children in vengeance against her husband, who has taken a new wife. (The poem’s title is spoken by the chorus.)
They look up with their pale and sunken faces,
And their looks are sad to see,
For the man’s hoary anguish draws and presses
Down the cheeks of infancy;
“Your old earth,” they say, “is very dreary,”
“Your old feet,” they say, “are very weak; Few paces have we taken, yet are weary—
Our grave-rest is very far to seek:
Ask the aged why they weep, and not the children,
For the outside earth is cold,
And we young ones stand without, in our bewildering.
And the graves are for the old.”

“True,” say the children, “it may happen
That we die before our time:
Little Alice died last year, her grave is shapen
Like a snowball, in the rime.⁶
We looked into the pit prepared to take her:
Was no room for any work in the close clay!
From the sleep wherein she lieth none will wake her,
Crying, ‘Get up, little Alice! it is day.’
If you listen by that grave, in sun and shower,
With your ear down, little Alice never cries;
Could we see her face, be sure we should not know her,
For the smile has time for growing in her eyes:
And merry go her moments, lulled and still in
The shroud by the kirk’s chime.
It is good when it happens,” say the children,
“That we die before our time.”

Alas, alas, the children! they are seeking
Death in life, as best to have:
They are binding up their hearts away from breaking,
With a ceremon from the grave.
Go out, children, from the mine and from the city,
Sing out, children, as the little thrushes do;
Pluck your handfuls of the meadow-cowslips pretty,
Laugh aloud, to feel your fingers let them through.
But they answer, “Are your cowslips of the meadows
Like our weeds anear the mine?³
Leave us quiet in the dark of the coal-shadows,
From your pleasures fair and fine!

“For oh,” say the children, “we are weary,
And we cannot run or leap;
If we care for any meadows, it were merely
To drop down in them and sleep.
Our knees tremble sorely in the stooping.
We fall upon our faces, trying to go;
And, underneath our heavy eyelids drooping,

The reddest flower would look as pale as snow.
For, all day, we drag our burden tiring
Through the coal-dark, underground;
Or, all day, we drive the wheels of iron
In the factories, round and round.

“For, all day, the wheels are droning, turning;
Their wind comes in our faces,
Till our hearts turn, our heads with pulses burning,
And the walls turn in their places:
Turns the sky in the high window blank and reeling,
Turns the long light that drops adown the wall,
Turn the black flies that crawl along the ceiling,
All are turning, all the day, and we with all.
And all day, the iron wheels are droning,
And sometimes we could pray,
‘O ye wheels,’ (breaking out in a mad moaning)
‘Stop! be silent for to-day!’ ”

Ay, be silent! Let them hear each other breathing
For a moment, mouth to mouth!
Let them touch each other’s hands, in a fresh wreathing
Of their tender human youth!
Let them feel that this cold metallic motion
Is not all the life God fashions or reveals:
Let them prove their living souls against the notion
That they live in you, or under you, O wheels!
Still, all day, the iron wheels go onward,
Grinding life down from its mark;
And the children’s souls, which God is calling sunward,
Spin on blindly in the dark.

Now tell the poor young children; O my brothers,
To look up to Him and pray;
So the blessed One who blesseth all the others,
Will bless them another day.
They answer, “Who is God that He should hear us,
While the rushing of the iron wheels is stirred?
When we sob aloud, the human creatures near us
Pass by, hearing not, or answer not a word.
And we hear not (for the wheels in their resounding)
Strangers speaking at the door:
Is it likely God, with angels singing round Him,
Hears our weeping any more?

Two words, indeed, of praying we remember,
Hears our weeping any more?

Our Father,” looking upward in the chamber,
We say softly for a charm.
We know no other words except ‘Our Father’
And we think that, in some pause of angels’ song,
God may pluck them with the silence sweet to gather,
And hold both within His right hand which is strong.
'Our Father!' If He heard us, He would surely
(For they call Him good and mild)
Answer, smiling down the steep world very purely,
'Come and rest with me, my child.'

"But, no!" say the children, weeping faster,
"He is speechless as a stone:
And they tell us, of His image is the master
Who commands us to work on.
Go to!" say the children,—"up in Heaven,
Dark, wheel-like, turning clouds are all we find.
Do not mock us; grief has made us unbelieving:
We look up for God, but tears have made us blind."
Do you hear the children weeping and disapproving,
O my brothers, what ye preach?

For God's possible is taught by His world's loving,
And the children doubt of each.

And well may the children weep before you!
They are weary ere they run;
They have never seen the sunshine, nor the glory
Which is brighter than the sun.
They know the grief of man, without its wisdom;
They sink in man's despair, without its calm;
Are slaves, without the liberty in Christ's dominion,
Are martyrs, by the pang without the palm:

Are worn as if with age, yet unretrievably
The harvest of its memories cannot reap,—
Are orphans of the earthly love and heavenly,
Let them weep! let them weep!

They look up with their pale and sunken faces,
And their look is dread to see,
For they mind you of their angels in high places,
With eyes turned on Deity.
"How long," they say, "how long, O cruel nation,
Will you stand, to move the world, on a child's heart,—
Stifle down with a milled heel its palpitation,
And tread onward to your throne amid the mart?
Our blood splashes upward, O gold-heaper,
And your purple shows your path!
But the child's sob in the silence curses deeper
Than the strong man in his wrath."

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4. I.e., we gain our sense of the possibilities of God's love from our experience of love in the world.
5. Palm branch, symbol of victory.
6. Color associated with royalty and (in poetry) with blood.