

## “WILL WRITE MY STORY FOR MY BETTER SELF [...]”: AURORA LEIGH’S REFLEXIVE WAYS

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The paper explores self-reflection in Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s *Aurora Leigh* (1856). It aims at a hermeneutical-phenomenological analysis of select episodes of this epic tale, nuancing autobiography as self-confrontation. The interdependence between gender and genre, child and parent, and past and present are some of the matters that pertain to this research which prompts the possibility of recognizing self-writing as an overall context for understanding Barrett Browning’s devotion to the theme of responsibility.

**Key words:** Elizabeth Barrett Browning, reflexive, autobiography, identity, narrative, Other

*Autobiography in each case is a constitutive act, one designed to construct a reality about a life in a place and time, one that can be negotiated with somebody. It can no more be placeless and timeless than it can be “self-less.” Nor can its composition be disembodied from the interlocutors who constitute the dialogic imagination of the teller. (Bruner 1993: 44)*

The initial stanza of *Aurora Leigh* (1856) contains an ill-masked controversy which stands for the author’s dialectically self-corrective ways:

Of writing many books there is no end;  
And I who have written much in prose and verse  
For others’ uses, will write now for mine,—  
Will write my story for my better self,  
As when you paint your portrait for a friend,

Who keeps it in a drawer and looks at it  
Long after he has ceased to love you, just  
To hold together what he was and is.

(*AL*, I: 1 – 8)<sup>1</sup>

In other words, it may be dangerous and futile to succumb to a common human temptation – to write books for others’ sake. A far better employment of talent may be to write one’s own story. A self-portrait has its implied Other, its addressee who would be capable of empathizing with the author’s image across time, space and beyond forgetting. The image, however, is a temporal product: it is not impervious to change. Or perhaps Aurora means that she will now write instead of her better self, playing the role of a mediator between the two: Inexperienced (in need of amelioration) and experienced (fulfilled). The result: a counter-common-sense split between referent, signified and signifier. Logic wavers: who emulates who and in view of what/whom? On such a comparatist beginning, precisely, rests our further debate.

We need to define the conceptual range of our research. “Reflexive” and “reflexivity” denote (self)possessing, or a relation to oneself (vs. no relation to oneself), and a “reflective equilibrium” denotes “balancing our native intuitions in a given area with a set of principles which we take to govern that area” (Lacey 1996: 293 – 94). This leads to exchange between Self and Other(s): adjustment, systematization, and (dis)agreement in co-existing, founded on the relational nature of the human being seen in acts of (non)transitivity, (non)inclusion, “connexity”, (a)symmetry, cause and effect, uniqueness and universality, reasoning and (self)contradiction (Iannone 2001: 483 – 85). A *reflexive relation* presupposes the spatiotemporal validation of one object or phenomenon against another, assuming the necessity of confirming or refuting sameness by way of comparison of one thing to another (Audi, ed. 1999: 788). In the aftermath of Locke and Hegel, an individual’s reflexive turn could be understood in terms of stages of ideation in the processual interdependence between sensation and knowledge (Bunnin and Yu 2004: 596 – 97), with an accent on “the operations perceived and reflected on by ourselves” (ibid.) against a vast array of external objects (stimuli outside the reflecting subject) and sensations (effects in the subject’s mind), between temporariness and lastingness in the communication between two persons. In her growing

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<sup>1</sup> *AL* stands for *Aurora Leigh*, with the book and line numbers ensuing (Cf. Donaldson’s edition referenced). B. Browning’s original spelling and punctuation have been followed.

fondness for life, other people, and art (a duty to a higher, exterior aim, and a tribute to one’s own genius) Aurora Leigh nuances, in various ways, reflexivity as the inevitability of being human.

### Some Voices Inside

A perspicacious editorial eye has discerned in the initial lines of *Aurora Leigh* responses to Ecclesiastes and to Virgil’s *Aeneid* – these lines warn of the hazards of excessive and derivative intellectual labour under inspiration from an Other. Must the solidity of truth be inspired by “one Shepherd”? (Donaldson 2010, 3: 267, n. 1; Bible 1990: *Ecclesiastes* 12: 11-12). Yet knowledge is migratory – its verity asks for extensions beyond an individual’s capacity. It may be worth mapping undulations in Barrett Browning’s views on the causality of self-expression and the autobiographical impulse as self-correction, as she wavers between monologue and dialogue.

Such a beginning (“I will”, l. 4), ostensibly uniquely intentional, can be backed up by a long tradition of research of Self as related to the past as physical availability and interpretation – short of an unequivocal definition. *Aurora Leigh* is a diary, a memoir, an exegetical narrative about the irresolutely revisionary and relational nature of female genius. The dedication to her friend (John Kenyon), which precedes the text, betrays the writer’s faith in self-progress (“the most mature of my works”) as well as her belief in the organics of “Life and Art”; she stresses external inspiration (“you have believed in me”), rather than originary potency (Donaldson 2010: 1). While Aurora insists on independence of mind as a promising investment of time in writing, she refutes her own will and power over life as well as over writing as self-declaration. Her story of herself includes reminiscences which bifurcate the first-person-singular self-focus into a discursive spatiotemporal plurality: echoes of Romney’s admonitory voice that women make poor writers (“lady’s Greek / without the accents,” *AL*, III: 76 – 77); an account of Lucy Gresham’s sad demise (Book IV); Vincent Carrington’s news about his marriage; Marian Erle’s compulsive confession about her own moral degradation (Book VI); Lady Waldemar’s letter delivered by the now blind Romney (Books VIII and IX); Aurora and Romney’s final convergence. Birthing self and life together in what Gatti Taylor refers to as a “nine-book epic [...] gestation” project is part of a political-religious context in which poetic composition is required of woman, as Aurora lavishly explores throughout Books VIII and IX (but suggests as early as book II), at the cost of some self-sacrifice (Gatti Taylor 2006: 154, 160 – 61). Prominence but also withdrawnness, cultural pride but

also forgiveness, and putting oneself behind for the sake of an Other (in her eventual rescue of Marian and her unconditional embrace of Romney) – these lie at the heart of Aurora’s creationist narrative of truth-telling. Speaking and writing despite loss (contextual examples could be found in *Mother and Poet* (1861) and *Stabat Mater* [1846]) includes unreserved dedication to a child, the preservation of whose life paves the route to an adult’s salvation. Thus, the survival of Marian Erle’s son (yet another male child) becomes synonymous with the integrity of text as self-offering (ibid. 155). Hence the impregnating rhetorical “What art’s for a woman?” (*Mother and Poet*, ll. 1 – 20, 86 – 100).

The scope of a woman poet’s comfort of mind and soul seems paved by a long train of Corinnes and Eulalias, peregrinating between England and the Continent. Suffice it to mention Felicia Hemans (*The Last Song of Sappho, Corinne at the Capitol, Woman and Fame, The Grave of a Poetess, The Image of Lava, A Parting Song*) and Letitia Elizabeth Landon (*The Improvisatrice, Stanzas on the Death of Mrs. Hemans, A History of the Lyre, The Dying Child*). Put together, Hemans, Landon, and Barrett Browning provide a fruitful source for conversations about the loss of a woman’s talent. Such conversations could not circumvent the issue of self-reflection. These could be some of the nuances: The withering “laurel-wreaths” of fame crowning the hollowed song of the lonely woman-bard; lava-like self-exposure via contemplating mortality; visions of the conjoined existence of things “dissimilar”, brought together by circumstance; the falsity of friends and “the dross of worldliness”; a woman’s sensitivity to an individual’s (infant’s) suffering. Another common terrain among Hemans, Landon, and Browning is a Dantean sense of internal exile, away from one’s native place.

Around the 1850s noteworthy male minds (with Tennyson, Browning, and Arnold ahead) dwelled on the place of woman, the essence of poetic influence, and the hardships of self-expression. Patmore’s *The Angel in the House* (1854) stylizes his beloved (“the most excellent of all”) as a source of inspiration, which does nothing to mitigate his perplexity: “a woman is a foreign land, / Of which, though there he settle young, / A man will ne’er understand / The customs, politics, and tongue.” His grand story of praise of domesticity appears to be moving toward a questioning, but hermeneutically cohesive model: “each thing shows by something else;” “they speak best who best express / Their inability to speak, / And none are strong, but who confess / With happy skill that they are weak” (*The Angel in the House, Books I & II, The Paragon, The Wife’s Tragedy, The Foreign Land, Felicity*). Temporality is the ontological terrain for poetical

self-expression: Hugh Clough’s grief, experienced at the realization of life’s constrictive patterns, shows in his epistolary masterpiece *Amours de Voyages* (1849), in a sobering journey away from the security of one’s home, with no promise of satisfaction, for “the world that we live in, / Whithersoever we turn, still is the same narrow crib”, with the burden of the past behind, and the incongruity between times sensed by a young man defying inherited civilizational decrees (even in Rome, *Amours...* Canto I, i – iv).

### **What A-Priorism?**

As a nine-book epic, *Aurora Leigh* is an impressive example of self-acclaim yet self-antagonism. It reveals the woman’s imagination as a territory of oscillation between duty and desire – a territory not at all immune to high-brow striding cultural masculinity (which makes a toddler of literary femininity). Vincent Carrington exclaims: “We think you have written a good book / And you, a woman” (*AL*, VI: 564 – 65)! A woman who succumbs to writing wholly, steadfastly, and self-critically, throws her own inner world into relief: “I sign. / And now I lose my heart upon a page” (*AL*, VII: 277 – 78). *Aurora Leigh* sits on a fence – between Neoplatonism and essentialist empiricism (garnished by tunes of social reformism) – cherishing a kind of dual Eucharist, namely: just as “the bread of daily life is transformed into poetry,” verses can make bread (Stone 2010: xix). The woman writer gets born in between and becomes conscious of such an irredeemably bidirectional chronology of her own self. This chronology is the truth, also, of the permeability between present and past in narrative as human necessity. Aurora herself proves that a woman’s research of writing ends up with a hesitation between self-discovery and self-creation – an endless process which contradicts a-priorism of thought over action in the sense that it is always the case that Being equals Becoming. As if in advance, Aurora confirms Nicolai Hartman’s view that taxonomies of animate life fail to acknowledge “the ontic nature of things” where “our categories of understanding coincide at best only in part with the principles of being,” so that we grasp only that part of the world which is framed in accordance with our “rational principles” (Hartman 1953: 12 – 14; 28 – 29). The presence of the stories of Marian and Romney in her life is a fact: They are “perishable and therefore unrepeatable” while her own poetical genius and “spirit [do] not stand outside the world of reality. [They] belong completely to it, have the same temporality, the same coming into being and passing away as material things and living beings” (ibid. 24, 26). That would also indicate

the difficulty of dividing actual and imagined in the heroine's own life, and the ludicrousness of drawing a solid line between a fictional autobiography (*Aurora Leigh*), Browning's other attempts at self-writing (early autobiographical essays and her diary), and her correspondence – all abounding in self-fictionalization.

Autobiography, as Julian North affirms, for all its fear of the infirmity of individual life and for its search for immortality through self-authoring, emerges as a preferred venue for self-promotion especially in the 1820s – 1830s, when memoirism and confessional prose fiction gain head over poetry (North 2009: 37, 39, 44). This tendency finds especial favor with women writers to whose ability to accommodate contraries (e.g. conformity with, and radicalism against, a fixed place in the family, society and the literary market) the genre begins to gravitate, parading its own (in)congruousness, demonstrating the depth of women's capacity for a more generally philosophical, rather than just unrestrained emotionally effusive narration, giving a new lease of life to the female literary subject (ibid. 220 – 21). (Self)representation is a notable feature of Aurora's reflexive leanings in terms of truth-seeking. A cursory glance at Franz Rosenzweig's thoughts on the redemptive relationship between original and copy in the life of art as an integral part of man might be of assistance: "For the world, truth is not law, but content. Truth does not prove reality, but reality upholds truth. [...] This cool impassiveness of the painting in relation to the wall, without which it would not have found a place, is certainly [...] the price to be paid for the peaceful coexistence of picture and relief. [...] art represents only a limb [...] without which, of course, man would be only a mutilated man, while remaining man nevertheless. It is one limb among others. Man is more. The visible witness of his soul, [...], is the spoken word, [...]. Art, too, rests within the heart of the spoken word. [...] it is the language of the primordial world" (Rosenzweig 2005: 21 – 23, 159). Aurora binds self, eternity, and language in writing as self-exposure. As she remembers her mother, she simultaneously arrives at, and departs from, reality:

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; [...]  
But still I catch my mother at her post  
Beside the nursery-door [...]

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.

[...] I, Aurora Leigh, was born  
To make my father sadder, and myself  
Not overjoyous, truly. Women know  
The way to rear up children, [...]  
The painter drew it after she was dead;  
[...] very strange  
The effect was. I, a little child, would crouch  
For hours upon the floor, with knees drawn up,  
And gaze across them, half in terror, half  
In adoration, at the picture there,—  
[...]

(*AL*, I: 9 – 16, 45 – 48, 128 – 38)

Thirty years of age at the end of the story, found in her Italian home, and comfortably relying on her own writing for subsistence, Aurora is hesitant whether to sever the umbilical cord between infinite and finite, home and foreign land, man and woman, and infant and adult. Aurora's mother's portrait prevails and urges Aurora to be self-conscious.

Aurora becomes obsessed with looking steadily at images, to which her art of writing becomes hostage. Insight and blindness, satiety and austerity form a seminal entity of alternating states of comprehension and miscomprehension between Aurora and Romney. This duality gets reconciled finally when both partners admit to their rashness of mind and their improvident seclusion in life-threatening idealism: “I have loved you! O my soul, / I have lost you” (Romney's words; *AL*, IX: 497 – 98); “He had loved me, watched me, watched his soul in mine, / Which in me grew and heightened into love” (Aurora's words; *AL*, IX: 763 – 64). Sightedness becomes a figuration of the temporality of man's knowledge and of relating to others who hold the golden key to one's own sanity of mind, as Marian pleads: “Catch my hands, / Miss Leigh, and burn into my eyes with yours, – I swear I do not love him [Romney]” (ibid. 356 – 58).

### **Double Vision**

Aurora hybridizes thought and action, time and space, cause and effect, content and form, body and spirit, child and adult, deduction and induction:

[...] 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. [...]  
I do distrust the poet who discerns  
No character or glory in his times,  
[...]  
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!*  
This bosom seems to beat still, or at least  
It sets ours beating: *this is living art,*  
*Which thus presents, and thus records true life.'*  
*What form is best for poems? Let me think*  
*Of forms less, and the external. Trust the spirit,*  
*As sovran nature does, to make the form;*  
For otherwise we only *imprison* spirit,  
And not *embody*. *Inward evermore*  
*To outward,—so in life, and so in art,*  
*Which still is life.*

(*AL*, V: 183 – 198, 214 – 222, emphasis added)

Such self-defense, albeit methodical, adamant and provocative, barely holds against an equally formidable internal undercurrent: self-particularization, or self-fragmentation, prompted by the fortitude of a man's mistrust for a woman poet's ingeniousness. Aurora's own better judgment is one of pardon, generosity of intellect and heart, care for the internal but also for an external voluminous social body, as she, now orphaned, prepares to emblemize her own time, age and generation in a revivalist-reactionary manner. And there is some aggressive dread against straightforwardness in self-articulation: Aurora's refusal to espouse categorically just one epoch, gender, genre, parent, or component of human presence. What we have is an instance of conceptual bifocalism illustrating the multi-faceted nature of poetic identity.



Bifocalism and hybridization highlight 19<sup>th</sup>-century female talent as dependent on hierarchies inside and outside the family: marital coverture and an ambiguous devotion to a patronizing father (ironically, but understandably enough, pioneering promoter of the young “Poet-Laureate of Hope End” in this case) amidst others. Aurora’s confrontational yet consensual policies (efficiently researched by Deidre David; David 1999: 164 – 65) lead to a project to transcend materialism as she wishes to follow an inner urge, a vocation of her own. But aiming at professional recognition, she actually aims to get admittance to what in essence classifies as a male domain (with Romney looming above), though she strives to produce an epic palpitating with current life – in a woman’s mind and soul. An emblematic prefiguration of this is Elizabeth’s authorial self-betrayal in her early Lockean autobiographical essays (‘My Own Character’ (1818), and ‘Glimpses into My Own Life and Literary Character’ [1820]) and her early Popean treatise on poetical scholarship, *An Essay on Mind* (1826). Aurora sees the soul as “a clean white paper,” rather say, / A palimpsest, a prophet’s holograph, / [...] Expressing the old scripture” (*AL*, I, ll. 825 – 26, 832), which may also “signalize [Barrett Browning’s] [...] preoccupation with the traditional Christian myth of lost unity” (David 1999: 167). On the other hand, we are faced with “a theological poetics firmly rooted in human existence” (Wörn 2002: 137–38): Aurora’s reformist ways as woman and poet befit the Christological model of unique activeness and evolving understanding as care for others – against Romney’s harsh remark that no Christ, redeemer-artist, could be got from women (“doating mothers, and perfect wives, / Sublime Madonnas, and enduring saints;” *AL*, II, 220 – 25).

Critical scholarship on narratorial self-legitimation in the long 19<sup>th</sup> century has noted the writer’s desire to demonstrate a middle-class woman at once “observing and transcending conventionality” in her survivalist “pursuit of artistic excellence” at the cost of “the sacrifice of human love” (Hicock 1999: 130 – 31, 136). The heroine strives to produce “a striking book, yet not a startling book” (ibid. 130) – at once conscientiously daring yet not too shockingly innovative in terms of literary-theoretical taxonomies (novel-poem) and authorial position (producer, rather than just consumer of high art). Reflexivity includes considering, also, the balance between similarity and dissimilarity in Self as a temporal unity and a cultural whole. More and more interested in matters such as origin and end, in Book VI, feeling “strong to love this noble France” (l. 53), Aurora observes that Englishmen are “unused to abstract questions, and untrained / To trace the involutions, valve by valve, / In each orbéd bulb-root of a

general truth, / And mark what subtly fine integument / Divides opposed compartments. [...] / [...] though I'm of Italy / By mother's birth and grave, by father's grave / And memory; let it be; – a poet's heart / Can swell to a pair of nationalities, / However ill-lodged in a woman's breast" (*AL*, VI, ll. 38 – 52). This is a peculiar position of self-aggregation via collectivity: she is to walk all the way to a New Jerusalem only alongside a spiritual partner: blind Romney (IX, 941 – 64).

With her account of Marian Erle – the wronged maiden – at the heart of her own story, Aurora's dramatization of her own poetical emergence seems to have grafted onto her professional autobiographical canvas a maiden's introspective, confessional, fragmentary self-exploratory will, a kind of "chronique scandaleuse" (Peterson 1993: *ibid.* 90 – 91, 93 – 95) – proof of the permeable boundaries of a writing woman's own story of propriety. By Book IV we learn that Aurora's ability to speak of her own heart is a possibility bestowed upon her as a manifestation of divine grace: it would perish if severed from Marian Erle who she now finds, now loses, until she takes her up at her own place in Florence: "That face persists. / It floats up, it turns over in my mind, / As like to Marian, as one dead is like / The same alive. In very deed a face / And not a fancy, though it vanished so; / The small fair face between the darks of hair" (*AL*, IV, ll. 308 – 313). Or: "Shall I leave Marian? Have I dreamed a dream? // – I thank God I have found her! I must say / 'Thank God,' for finding her, [...] // I'll write about her, [...]. My hand's a-tremble, as I had just caught up / My heart to write with, in the place of it" (*ibid.* ll. 411 – 413, 415 – 17). Later on, in Book VII, listening to Marian's story, Aurora feels the overtone of intermingled voices (including that of God) which gets consumed by that of Nature. Romney's voice also flows into Aurora's memory and wish for self-completion (*AL*, VII, ll. 174 –96).

### **Content Greater Than Form**

A Levinasian summons (the call that the Face of the Other is) can be discovered in Marian's abiding face in Aurora's developing perception of life. Face becomes interchangeable with conscience: it annuls the foreignness of the Other who calls for assistance, to the effect that "the Other faces me and puts me in question and *oblige*s me by his essence qua infinity", so that any self-representation through art appears but a puny fledgling in comparison to the unavailability of narrative as sensitivity for an Other's vulnerability (Levinas 1979: 207, 215). The inconvenient state of intermediacy – between ethic and ontology (also feeling/action and understanding/intellectual reaction) – the borderline between internality and

externality with regard to the object of one’s sympathy, which becomes a subject for writing, is the position Aurora struggles with, as woman and poet.

Taking into consideration the impermanence of autobiographical narrative, the pattern-resistant nature of experience it lives by, the experimentalist motivation of the speaker as one’s own subject, and the importance of combining different modes of narrating Self and Other, one could see “negotiation”, “improvisation” and “patchwork” make autobiography a kind of juggling between truth and fiction (Smyth 2016: 5 – 6). The need to maintain at once diplomacy and assume responsibility for what happens outside as well as inside one’s own story could be seen in Aurora’s protracted tracking down, musing on, rescuing, and inhaling Marian’s shocking experiences around the Paris dens, which leads her to a disquisition (similar to the one referred to in Book II, where she converses with Romney) on womanhood and cultural identity in a masculine world (B. VI, ll. 204 – 293, and B. VII, 1 – 202) – a world which sucks her into an insoluble game of hide-and-seek where passions, professions, positions, and ambitions mercilessly fuel a young seeker’s imagination, subsidizing her skill to fantasize, creating a conflict between perception as self-indulgence and perception as empathy. Aurora proclaims her spiritual independence: “[...] At least / My soul is not a pauper; I can live / [...] without alms from men; / And if it must be in heaven instead of earth, / Let heaven look to it, – I am not afraid’ (*AL*, II, 679 – 84). The subsequent opening of the aunt’s will and Aurora’s proud refusal to accept her share (“thirty thousand”) can be explained by her insistence that, like Romney, she is “rather made for giving” (*ibid.* l. 1006), than taking – through embracing her own time as she sees fit.

*Aurora Leigh* is a seeking of a room of one’s own which the woman writer would inhabit by way of depicting her own time and sex, based on her own “wealth of experience and wisdom” (Markus 1995: 64, 255). Though barred by her own “wayside hedge” (*AL*, II, 851) for the sake of preserving her own beliefs, Aurora is naturally on contact, comparison and communication bent – a reflexive attitude she later perfects in order to sift through her own literary produce and arrive at the necessity to write an epic all-encompassing. This would be an epic of present and past, one and many, good and ill, basic survival and divine truth. She fears anonymity but she fears excessive pride more. Oftentimes, her uncouthness of mind leads her to mistaken judgment:

And so, *a month passed*. Let me see it down  
At once, – *I have been wrong, I have been wrong.*  
*We are wrong always when we think too much*  
*Of what we think or are; albeit our thoughts*  
*Be verily bitter as self-sacrifice,*  
*We're no less selfish.* If we sleep on rocks  
Or roses, sleeping past the hour of noon  
We're lazy. *This I write against myself.*  
(*AL*, IV: 438 – 45, emphasis added)

In nine books Barrett Browning struggles against Self as impermanence, as a process. Exploring personal identity, she explores narrative identity, as does Paul Ricoeur in *Oneself as Another*, where he arrives at the conclusion that identity can be justified “only in the temporal dimension of human existence” (Ricoeur 1994: 114, 125). In the embryonic fragment quoted above the abiding question is “Who am I?”. Self-interrogation takes Aurora back to her childhood, the loss of her parents, her Italian home, and the inconvenient acceptance of “the “already-there-ness of [her] character” (i.e. “sameness”), yet to some difference broiling in her (ibid. 118, 120 – 21), which causes anxiety. She experiences reflexive splits: confronted by her dead mother’s portrait, or overwhelmed by her father’s spectral presence upon discovering his books (“the world of books is still the world, I write / And both worlds have God’s providence, thank God / To keep and hearken”; *AL*, I, 791 – 93) in his study (*AL*, I, ll. 125 – 140; 815 – 845). Identicalness and permanence in time (or, *oneself-ness* and *like-before-ness*, if I could thus put it) seem unfeasible. Inevitably, this leads to doubting the reliability of memory as a narrative tool: Aurora senses she has been wrong, stumbling over the aporia of her non-self-coincidence. She constantly disrupts chronology, returning to previous episodes, inserting other characters’ experiences and stories, in favour of a totalistic immersion in a hermeneutical-phenomenological journey into “the dialectic of selfhood and sameness”, which could be another way that this daring verse novel’s “[dis]unity of the temporal form” could be explained by (ibid. 140 – 41).<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Incomprehension stands for the phasic development of a writer. Total comprehension hides the danger of a life-threatening stasis. Commemorating Barrett Browning in *Flush*, Virginia Woolf emphasizes the indivisibility of Self and Other, entering at once the consciousnesses of dog and man reflexively: “Broken asunder, yet made in the same mould, could it be that each completed what was dormant in the other? [...] Between them lay the widest gulf. She spoke. He was dumb. She was woman; he was dog. [...] closely united, [...] immensely divided, they gazed at each other” (Woolf 1933: 31).

“But I who saw the human nature broad / [...] / And all the high necessities of Art, / Betrayed the thing I saw, and wronged my own life / For which I pleaded. Passioned to exalt / The artist’s instinct in me at the cost / Of putting down the woman’s, I forgot / No perfect artist is developed here / From any imperfect woman” (*AL*, IX, 640 – 49): Aurora’s inspiration cannot be torn apart from Romney, or from Marian’s divided personality. Marian might be seen as a martyred “Madonna”, but Marian herself feels halved internally (Thorne-Murphy 2005: 246, 253). Until genuine and wholesome acceptance of the other is reached, incomprehension threatens to dissolve narrative coherence. Yet the author eschews full fusion between Marian and Aurora – despite the sympathy, help and sagacity demonstrated by both women for each other. She prefers collection rather than homogenization, which leads her to “an aggregate” genre (“epic, Kunstlerroman, and sage discourse”), based on productivity (child-rearing and literary composition) in a hybridist way (Kahrman Huseby 2018: 2), and drawing on literariness (Aurora) and non-literariness (Marian) alike.

Woman and artist, in a letter to the novelist and family friend Isa Blagden (20 Oct 1856), Barrett Browning foresees Coventry Patmore’s reproach for “[her] poor ‘Aurora Leigh,’” who has had the unfeminine audacity to express an opinion on “abstract subjects” (BC 2016, 23: 103 – 05). In another letter, the following day, she considers the philosophy of clothing: “Robert’s taylor” [...] has made me a black jacket. [...] as no woman could. (One must admit that men *can* do some things.) [...] if you wish to look better than you are made, get a taylor to make you. Several of my friends do this .. being wise, & rich” (ibid. 111 – 12). The quoted fragment discloses the writer’s internal struggle to put the finishing touches to her own *I* (externally and internally), considering also her own gender and financial position.

### Conclusive Wanderings

The diversity of Aurora Leigh’s reflexive ways calls for a wider context of the conceptual tensions between blindness and insight, singularity and collectivity, the (in)articulacy of (artistic) self-comprehension, the reliability and unreality of memory – inclusive of an earlier (*A Vision of Poets*, *Hector in the Garden*, *Lady Geraldine’s Courtship* (all 1844), *The Runaway Slave at Pilgrim’s Point* (1848), etc.), as well as a later (*My Heart and I*, *A Musical Instrument*, and *Only a Curl*) Barrett (Browning). I also need to consider other aspects of Aurora’s reflexive stance: language in truth-seeking; transitions between rural and urban (and native and foreign);

faith. The appreciation of the element of self-writing in the emergence of an author requires exploring a vaster before (e.g. G. De Staël's *Corinne, or Italy* (1807), Coleridge's *Biographia Literaria* (1817), Shelley's *A Defence of Poetry* (1821), Wordsworth's *The Prelude* [1850]) and after (e.g. J. S. Mill's *Autobiography* (1873), Chr. Rossetti's *Time Flies: A Reading Diary* (1879) and *Monna Innominata* [1881]). Such a task seems daunting yet stimulating, especially in view of the diversely (counter)self-articulating – not just English – literary 19<sup>th</sup> century.

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