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THE EDUCATIONAL LEADER



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Artemus Ward as a Comic Lecturer

By JOHN Q. REED

Next to Mark Twain the most famous mid-nineteenth century American humorist was Charles Farrar Browne, better known as "Artemus Ward."¹ Born in Waterford, Maine, in 1834, he learned the printing trade and then worked on several small newspapers in Maine and New Hampshire. In 1851 he went to Boston, where he was employed for two years as a compositor on the *Carpet Bag*, which was an important journal in developing the "cracker box" type of American humor. His first crude attempts at humorous writing were published in the *Carpet Bag* under the pseudonym "Chub." Leaving Boston, he spent a number of years in Ohio as a journeyman printer and as local editor of both the Toledo *Commercial* and the Cleveland *Plain Dealer*. It was during his years on the *Plain Dealer* that he invented the character of Artemus Ward, whom he characterized as an illiterate but shrewd old side-showman. Adopting the viewpoint and style of his creation, he wrote a series of letters in which he commented, usually in a genial manner, upon almost every aspect of the life of his times. His social criticism was particularly directed against the overzealousness of reformers, the excesses of nationalism and patriotism, and the bizarre aspects of unorthodox religious sects. These articles, which were widely reprinted all over the United States, gained him an extensive audience. Going to New York from Cleveland, he assumed for a time the editorship of *Vanity Fair*, a humorous weekly, and embarked on a career as a humorous lecturer.

Ward's maiden lecture, first entitled "Children" and later "Babes in the Wood," was initially presented in New London, Connecticut,

1. The only biography of Browne is Don C. Seitz, *Artemus Ward: A Biography and Bibliography* (New York: Harpers, 1919). E. P. Hingston, Browne's manager, tells the story of the humorist's career as lecturer in *The Genial Showman* (London: John Camden Hotten, 1870).

on November 26, 1861. During the following months he delivered it in many cities in the Northeast, and everywhere he went he was enthusiastically received by his audiences and praised by the press. His popularity as a comic lecturer was undoubtedly furthered by the immediate success of *Artemus Ward; His Book*, which appeared in the spring of 1862. So elated was Ward by his reception on the lecture platform that he gave up his position on *Vanity Fair* so that he could devote all of his time to lecturing. By the fall of 1862 he had prepared a new lecture entitled "Sixty Minutes in Africa," which he presented not only in the East but also in Cleveland, Milwaukee, and Memphis. Then in the fall of 1863 he hired E. P. Hingston as his manager and together they travelled to the West Coast, where Ward gave his "Babes in the Wood" lecture in numerous cities and towns in California and the Territory of Nevada. It was while lecturing in Virginia City that he became acquainted with Mark Twain, who was then a reporter on the *Territorial Enterprise*. On his return trip from the West, Ward stopped in Salt Lake City to speak and to gather material for a humorous lecture on the Mormons.

Ward's discourse on the Mormons, which was accompanied by a panorama,² was his last and most applauded lecture. After presenting it for two seasons in this country, he decided to fulfill his dream of lecturing in England. When he arrived in England in the summer of 1866 he was far from a stranger to the British reading public. *Artemus Ward; His Book* had been widely read in England, and a British edition of his new book, *Artemus Ward; His Travels*, was selling well. His reputation in England was further enhanced by a series of articles which he contributed to *Punch* before he began lecturing. His lecture and panorama, which opened in Egyptian Hall, London, in November, was a phenomenal success, and he was lauded in the pages of the *Spectator*, the *Times*, and other London newspapers. However, after six weeks of lecturing, Ward, who was suffering from tuberculosis, was unable to go on, and he died in Southampton on March 6, 1867, at the age of thirty-three.

Since the lecturer's, like the actor's, is a fugitive art, the role which Artemus Ward played on the platform can be reconstructed today only from accounts of his lectures written by contemporaries and from the text of his lecture on the Mormons, which was edited

2. A panorama was constructed by painting scenes on a long strip of canvas, wound on rollers and then wound across the stage from one roller to the other, thus imparting the illusion of space or movement.

by T. W. Robertson and E. P. Hingston after his death. One point on which all contemporary critics agree is that Ward was genuinely funny on the lecture platform; many of his contemporaries, in fact, have expressed the opinion that his lectures were much more humorous than his Artemus Ward letters. Probably, as Walter Blair points out, Ward's humor properly belongs to oral rather than written speech.³ The letters from the old showman, if less humorous, did, nevertheless, heighten the humor of the lectures by serving as an incongruous background or framework for them. In contrast with the showman, who is pictured in the illustrations which accompany Ward's humorous writings as a short, stout, bald, carelessly dressed man of middle age, Artemus Ward the lecturer is described as a slender, immaculately dressed young man with delicate white hands and carefully curled hair. The two Artemus Wards were also temperamentally quite different. Whereas the showman often expresses his feelings in a boisterous or wrathful manner, the lecturer was reticent, grave, dignified, and ostensibly devoid of a sense of humor. It is not surprising to learn that the simultaneous existence of two Artemus Wards was confusing to some members of his audiences. Hingston says that many people came to Ward's lectures fully expecting to see an uncouth old showman on the platform.

Great was the disappointment of many who, having read his humorous papers descriptive of his exhibition of snakes and wax work, and who having also formed their ideas of him from the absurd pictures which had been attached to some editions of his works, found on meeting him that there was no trace of the showman in his deportment, and little to call up to their mind the smart Yankee who had married "Betsy Jane." There was nothing to indicate that he had not lived a long time in Europe and acquired the polish which men gain by coming in contact with the society of European capitals.⁴

As far as is known, no copies of Ward's lectures prior to the one on the Mormons exists today. According to Hingston, the chief difference between the Mormon lecture and the ones which preceded it was that the earlier ones were altogether lacking in continuity. Hingston says, "Anyone of his lectures, previous to the delivery of the Mormon one, was simply a heterogeneous collection of jests, interspersed with dry, witty telling observations on the fashions and follies of mankind, and pleasantly wrapped-up sar-

3. Walter Blair, *Native American Humor, 1800-1900* (New York: American Book Co., 1937), p. 124.

4. E. P. Hingston, in *Introduction to Artemus Ward's Panorama* (New York: G. W. Carleton, 1869), pp. 46-47.

casms on the social and political topics of the day."⁵ Although the lectures gave the impression of being improvisations, they were actually very carefully planned and sometimes even rehearsed before they were presented to an audience. Apparently he gathered the best jokes from his writings, his reading, and his memory, invented some new ones, and painstakingly strung them together to give the effect of utter chaos. All of the early lectures were probably made up of the same materials, although he no doubt made additions and deletions from time to time. Hingston assures us that the actual contents of the early lectures had no relation to their titles; and Ward himself said, "One of the features of my entertainment is that it contains so many things that don't have anything to do with it."⁶ Hingston, in discussing "Babes in the Wood," his first lecture, says that the "Babes" were mentioned once at the beginning of the lecture, when he announced to the audience that they were the subject of his discourse, and again at the end, when he concluded:

"I now come to my subject—"The Babes in the Wood." Here he would take out his watch, look at it with affected surprise, put on an appearance of being greatly perplexed, and amidst roars of laughter from the people, very gravely continue, "But I find I have exceeded my time, and will therefore merely remark that so far as I know they were as good as ordinary babes. I really have not time to go into their history. You will find it all in the story books. They died in the woods, listening to the woodpecker tapping the hollow birch tree. It was a sad fate for them, and I pity them. So I hope, do you. Good night."⁷

Little is known about the remainder of "Babes in the Wood." A review in the *Plain Dealer* of Ward's presentation of the lecture in Cleveland indicates that it contained some satire of reformers:

He ridiculed modern reformers by saying that some were opposed to razors, some to law, and all to work. Some of these reformers say tobacco will kill a dog. Well—let us not give it to our dogs and by that means we can save them. He knew of reformatory societies in the West whose tenets would make a gorilla shudder or a negro minstrel to blush palpably through a double coating of cork.⁸

He began his lecture entitled "Sixty Minutes in Africa," Hingston says, with a few banal comments on the products of the country and then wandered completely away from the subject until the very end of the lecture, when he concluded as follows:

5. Hingston, *The Genial Showman*, p. 151.

6. *Artemus Ward's Panorama*, p. 68.

7. Hingston, *Ibid.*, Introduction, p. 30.

8. "Artemus Ward at the Academy," *Cleveland Plain Dealer*, Feb. 1, 1862.

Africa is my subject. You wish me tell you something about Africa. Africa is on the map. It is on all of the maps of Africa I have ever seen. You may buy a good map of Africa for a dollar. If you study it well, you will know more about Africa than I do. It is a comprehensive subject—too vast, I assure you for me to enter upon tonight. You would not wish me to—I feel that—I feel it deeply, and I am very sensitive. If you go home and go to bed—it will be better for you than to go with me to Africa.⁹

The lecture on the Mormons, unlike the earlier ones, was constructed around a central theme. Ward seems to have taken the trip to the West Coast, partially at least, because he wanted to use the experience as a topic around which he could construct a new lecture. He used the trip, of course, only as a thread upon which he strung a variety of humorous materials not even remotely concerned with his journey. The humor of the lecture was reinforced with a panorama, which purported to picture various places which he had visited, and by a pianist who accompanied the lecture with appropriate—or inappropriate—background music. The lecture itself, as edited by Robertson and Hingston, begins with a long rambling introduction, which finally leads to a description of his trip. The account of the trip is interrupted, however, by humorous comments on the panorama and by numerous jests which are connected to it only by far-fetched chains of association. A number of these jests were undoubtedly ones which he had used successfully in prior lectures and which he carefully fitted into this one. Ward's technique of leading to a joke by following a ludicrous chain of association is seen in the following passage. In describing one of the pictures of Salt Lake City in the panorama, he says,

The West Side of Main Street—Salt Lake City—including a view of the Salt Lake Hotel—it is a temperance hotel. I prefer temperance hotels—altho' they sell worse liquor than any other kind of hotels. But the Salt Lake Hotel sells none—nor is there a bar in all Salt Lake City—but I found when I was thirsty—and I generally am—that I could get some very good brandy of one of the Elders—on the sly—and I never on any account allow my business to interfere with my drinking.¹⁰

Ward also adapted to his lectures many of the same devices which he employed in his writings. In the Mormon lecture one finds puns, nonsense, surprise, logical absurdities, asides, anticlimax, understatement, exaggeration, comic lists, and burlesques of various kinds. Although the language, unlike that of his Artemus Ward letters, is on a literate level, he does employ language as a constant source of

9. Hingston, *The Genial Showman*, p. 153.

10. *Artemus Ward's Panorama*, pp. 105-106.

humor. Not only does he coin words, but he often makes deliberate errors in grammar and then attempts to correct them with something even more ludicrous.

To arouse expectancy among his audience Ward carefully designed humorous bills, programs, and tickets. His bills usually read "Artemus Ward Will Speak a Piece," and the tickets to the Mormon lecture bore the inscription, "Admit Bearer and One Wife." The program for his lecture in London, which was an elaborate burlesque of conventional lecture programs, contained such whimsical statements as, "During the Vacation the Hall has been carefully swept out, and a new Door-Knob has been added to the Door"; "Mr. Artemus Ward will call on the citizens of London, at their residences, and explain any jokes in his narrative which they do not understand"; and "Mr. Ward will not be responsible for any debts of his own contracting."¹¹

The real humor of Ward's lectures lay, however, not in the subject matter, but in his manner of delivery. If we accept Twain's differentiation among what he designates as "humorous," "comic," and "witty" story tellers, we must classify Ward's art as "humorous." "The humorous story," Twain says, "depends for its effect upon the manner of the telling; the comic and the witty story upon the matter."¹² The text of the Mormon lecture, in spite of the efforts of Robertson and Hingston to indicate Ward's manner of delivering it through typographical devices, remains a disappointingly commonplace piece of humor.

Perhaps the most penetrating analysis of the basic role which Ward played on the platform is contained in an article which appeared in the *London Spectator* during the humorist's stay in England.

The character he best likes to fill is that of a sort of intellectual Hans—the world simpleton of the old German stories—in the act of confiding himself to the public. In the German stories Hans only makes a practical fool of himself in all sorts of impossible ways. But Artemus Ward intellectualizes him, shows the inner absurdity of his own thoughts with a pathetic earnestness and candor.¹³

However idiotic his thoughts might be, he always seemed utterly unconscious of their absurdity. Every jest he uttered seemed to be thought aloud as if it had just then occurred to him. Grave and apologetic, he would appear to be drifting helplessly from one idea

11. *Ibid.*, pp. 203-204.

12. Samuel Clemens, "How to Tell a Story," *The Writings of Mark Twain* (New York: Harpers, 1929), XXIV, p. 263.

13. *London Spectator*, Nov. 24, 1866.

to another as if his mind were floating along a natural current of thought which he was unable to check.¹⁴ Often an entreating expression would appear upon his face which seemed to indicate that he desperately wanted to get his thoughts untangled but was unable to do so. As he drifted about ineptly in search of words and phrases, he would become ensnared in verbal traps of his own making. Sometimes he would fall into a reverie, and apparently forgetting his audience entirely, would stand gazing at his panorama for a few seconds. Then he would start up apologetically, remark that he enjoyed his pictures a great deal, and gravely proceed with the lecture. There were, of course, those people who failed to comprehend his "deadpan" delivery. Hingston reports that after his first lecture the audience, thinking that the chaotic nature of the lecture had been caused by his extreme nervousness, thronged up to the platform to sympathize with him.¹⁵ He states, too, that he once heard an elderly lady in Peoria remark as she left the lecture hall, "It is too bad of people to laugh at a poor young man who doesn't know what he is saying and ought to be sent to a lunatic asylum."¹⁶

Each step of Ward's lecture was very carefully planned and according to many who heard him, his sense of timing was excellent. Mark Twain, in "How to Tell a Story," points out a basic principle of his technique when he states that Ward "dealt in numbers three and four a great deal."¹⁷ Often he pursued the following procedure: First, feigning a sort of idiotic enthusiasm, he would begin to tell something which he apparently thought was highly interesting. Secondly, he would appear to lose confidence and pause. Thirdly, he would add, as a sort of afterthought, a remark which was the real "nub" of the joke. Fourthly, he might add a second humorous remark in an apparent effort to correct the first one. For example, in the Mormon lecture, he would say enthusiastically, "I met a man in Oregon who hadn't any teeth—not a tooth in his head." Then he would pause and add, "Yet that man could play on the bass drum better than any man I ever met." To further the joke, he would then add, "He kept a hotel."¹⁸ A variation on the above formula consisted of his making an error and then, in attempting to correct it, making an even more ludicrous blunder. He would begin, for example, by saying, "I like music. I can't sing.

14. *Ibid.*

15. Hingston, *The Genial Showman*, p. 141.

16. Hingston, in Introduction to *Artemus Ward's Panorama*, p. 33.

17. Samuel Clemens, *op. cit.*, p. 267.

18. *Artemus Ward's Panorama*, p. 70.

As a singer I was not successful." After an embarrassed pause he would attempt to correct himself with the statement, "As a singer I was a failure."¹⁹

Ward's bag of tricks contained some other devices which he seems to have used effectively. He had, for example, several unusual ways of beginning his lectures. Charles Woodbury, who saw him deliver "Sixty Minutes in Africa" in Springfield, Massachusetts, says that he came on the platform and strode silently to a chair, where he sat, looking very unhappy. In spite of the applause of the audience, he continued to sit glumly for some minutes, during which he repeatedly looked at his watch. When the town clock struck eight, however, an expression of relief came over his face, and he went to the rostrum. In a halting manner he told the audience that inadvertently his lecture had been advertised as lasting from eight until nine o'clock, but since it was actually only three quarters of an hour long, he found himself upon arrival in a predicament. "I did not know," he said, "whether I ought to begin at eight and close at a quarter till nine, or wait until eight and a quarter, so that I could close promptly at nine." He then proceeded to give a number of reasons for each course of action and to describe the embarrassment which this purely imaginary dilemma had caused him.²⁰

Another way he had of beginning his lecture was to come onto the platform, stare at the audience, and calmly twiddle his thumbs. After the impatient audience had become sufficiently restless, he would say in a hurt tone, "Ladies and gentlemen, when you have finished this unseemly interruption, I guess I'll begin my discourse."²¹ His Mormon lecture he sometimes began with the phrase, "Those of you who have been in Newgate—" Then, after pausing, as if realizing that he had blundered, he would add, "and have stayed there for any considerable time."²²

The lecturer's endless difficulties with the operation of his panorama were also carefully calculated to provoke laughter. H. R. Haweis, who saw him present the lecture in London, describes his manipulation of the mechanical moon, which was a feature of his panorama, as follows:

19. *London Spectator*, Nov. 24, 1866.

20. Charles J. Woodbury, "Artemus Ward at Springfield, Massachusetts," *The Century Magazine*, LXIII (Feb., 1902), pp. 636-637.

21. Don C. Seitz, *op. cit.*, p. 208.

22. Stephen Leacock, "American Humour," *Nineteenth Century*, LXXVI (Aug., 1914), p. 452.

The difficulties with the moon were endless. It would rise abruptly, a great noise of cranks and wheels being heard behind the scenes. Ward would watch its progress with anxiety and ill-disguised alarm; he would then go out and attend to it himself. Renew difficulties with the machinery; the moon would presently fall askew, then tumble out of the heavens altogether; when suddenly with a vigorous spurt she would go up like a cannon shot and stick at the top, when Ward would reappear, exhausted with his exertions, and complain that he was in need of a good "moonist," his young man having left him.²³

Another feature of the panorama which Ward employed as a source of merriment was a transparency of a prairie fire. Concerning his antics with this contraption, Enoch Knight says, "The prairie fire would go down at the wrong time, and then break out again when the scene it was to illustrate had wholly passed, the lecturer meantime apparently overcome with vexation and despair, that made the whole effect irresistibly ludicrous."²⁴

When Ward's second panorama was under construction, he had instructed the artist who painted the scenes to distort them deliberately so that he could make humorous comments upon them in his lectures. One of his comments, according to Knight, concerned a figure of an animal in one of the pictures. Knight says that in the midst of an ecstatic description of mountain scenery Ward would point to an animal in the foreground of the scene and remark apologetically, "I have always spoken of this animal as a buffalo, but this morning my artist came to me and said, 'Mr. Ward, I can conceal it from you no longer—that is a horse!'"²⁵

Still another of Ward's pranks, according to Melville D. Landon, was to stop in the middle of his lecture and announce, "Owing to a slight indisposition, we will now have an intermission of fifteen minutes." He would then pause, and a look of discontent would sweep the audience as they contemplated staring at an empty platform for a quarter of an hour. But, after just the right interval of time had passed, Ward, rubbing his hands, would add, "But, ah—during the intermission I will go on with my lecture."²⁶ Still another stratagem was to announce his intention of telling an interesting story and to begin, "On a beautiful June morning, some sixteen years ago—." At that point his pianist would begin to play

23. H. R. Haweis, *American Humorists* (New York: John W. Lovell Co., N. D.), p. 129.

24. Enoch Knight, "The Real Artemus Ward," *Overland Monthly*, XVIII (July, 1891), p. 57.

25. Enoch Knight, "Charles F. Browne ('Artemus Ward'); The Tribute of a Friend and Fellow-Townsmen," *Putnam's Monthly*, 1 (Feb., 1907), p. 604.

26. Melville D. Landon, *Eli Perkins' Thirty Years of Wit* (New York: Cassell, 1891), p. 176.

quite loudly, and moving his lips, Ward would pretend to tell the story. At last the music would cease, and he would conclude "—and she fainted on Reginald's breast."²⁷

An equally effective device which Ward regularly employed in his lectures was that of ardently pronouncing a truism as if he thought he were imparting a very valuable piece of information. He would, for example, point to the summit of one of the mountains in his panorama and announce solemnly, "The highest part of this mountain is the top."²⁸ Often, too, he would present and dwell at some length upon an obvious truth as if it were a novel idea which had just then occurred to him. In his lecture on the Mormons he would say, in a serious tone of voice, "Time passed on. It always does by the way. You may possibly have noticed that time passes on—It is a kind of a way that time has."²⁹

In conclusion, it should be pointed out that Artemus Ward holds the distinction of being the first important American humorist to give comic lectures. The phenomenal success of his lectures in both England and America encouraged other humorists to take to the platform, and before long comic lectures were a staple form of entertainment in America. The roll of comic lecturers who succeeded Ward would include the names of Mark Twain, Josh Billings, Petroleum V. Nasby, Bill Arp, Eugene Field, Bill Nye, Eli Perkins, and many others. Not only did Ward's success inspire other humorists to become lecturers, but his style of lecturing greatly influenced the art of his successors. Both his "deadpan" delivery and his rambling technique were borrowed by many later humorists. Mark Twain, who had a high regard for his abilities as a story teller, probably learned something from him about the importance of timing, inflection and pause. Finally, the enthusiastic reception and favorable critical comments which Ward received in England helped to bring about a reappraisal by Americans of their native humorists. Earlier humorists had not been highly respected either by the "better people" or by critics, but after Ward was hailed as a genius by the British, native American humorists were held in higher esteem by the American people. Although sober critics still, for the most part, ignored them, magazines began to publish their pictures and brief articles about them,³⁰ and native humor began to be recognized as a genuine and original part of American culture.

27. *Artemus Ward's Panorama*, pp. 180-185.

28. *London Spectator*, Nov. 24, 1866.

29. *Artemus Ward's Panorama*, p. 63.

30. Blair, *op. cit.*, pp. 108-109.

Francis Jeffrey, *Critic of the Romantics*

By ELLIS GALE SHIELDS

Probably Francis Jeffrey, who for twenty-six years, from 1803 to 1829, was the editor of *The Edinburgh Review*, is remembered chiefly for his condemnation of Wordsworth, if, indeed, he is not thought of as the chief of those wrong-headed critics who so perversely treated the romantic poets. Many of the writers on English literature allow him little critical judgment. Walker, in his *History of the Victorian Age*, in which he makes a dozen references to Jeffrey, uses such terms as "from the vantage ground of a comprehensive ignorance" and "a want of critical balance." Bagehot, in his essay on "The First Edinburgh Reviewers," sums him up with the sentence: "He had his day, and was entitled to his day; but a gentle oblivion must now cover his already subsiding reputation."

Perhaps the latter observation is the correct one and Jeffrey, like so many of his contemporaries, should be consigned to the forgotten. But he has not been, at least not completely, as Walker's dozen references testify. Any critic who is successful in his condemnation consigns himself to the same oblivion that he orders for the criticised. But the literary critic who mistakenly derides the author whom posterity will cherish seems to sign, not a death warrant, but his own visa to unenviable fame. His good points are forgotten, his correct judgments are overlooked, and his prejudices, so often condoned in the poet, are remembered with amusement, or anger, or both. It would seem that here the ancient maxim *nil nisi bonum* does not apply. Jeffrey is not the exception that proves the rule. He is almost our best exemplar, for he derided the 'Lakers' and has got damned for it. Byron did too, and more offensively, but that can be—and has been—forgiven. Jeffrey may merit oblivion, and his reputation is almost covered, but not gently.

This paper is not an attempt to reanimate this reputation, nor is it a brief to prove that he was a great critic. It is an attempt to show that Jeffrey, who made a number of mistakes, could also say some things that are true. It is an attempt to show a more nearly complete picture of his work, or, more accurately, to bring out cer-

tain details in the picture that time and a hurried world have blotted out. A reading of his critical reviews could accomplish this better than any number of papers (Jeffrey made this possible by republishing about a third of his articles in convenient four-volume form in 1844), but few of us have the time or the desire to go to the trouble. Jeffrey's ghost, wherever it is—Saintsbury's thought that he played the *Advocatus Diaboli* may be suggestive—must be satisfied with our reading a few excerpts and a few summaries by later writers. This paper is an attempt to supply a few excerpts and summaries in a kind of corrective propitiation.

Although the *Edinburgh Review* is well known to students of English literature, perhaps a brief summary of its history will not be amiss. The first number appeared on the tenth of October, 1802, a magazine of 252 pages containing twenty-nine articles, of which six were written by Jeffrey, although he was not yet the editor; it was published by Constable. The impact of this first number has been called 'electrical.' Succeeding numbers added to its fame and popularity. "In a half-dozen years, its circulation rose from 800 to 9,000; in ten years, it had grown to nearly 10,000, and, by 1818, it had attained a circulation of nearly 14,000, which was never exceeded." Since Jeffrey speedily became its powerful editor and remained in that office until 1829, he commanded the attention of a considerable number of the reading public.

The motto of the *Edinburgh Review* was *Judex damnatur cum nocens absolvitur*, and its editor, as his own contributions show, took the motto seriously. Politically, the quarterly was a Whig organ, seeking not so much to reflect, but to mold the sentiments of the party. In literature it sought to bring to the bar of established forms and conventions the productions of the day and judge them. These established forms and conventions, however, were not those of the neo-classicists; Jeffrey says, in his review of Alison's *Essays on the Nature and Principles of Taste*:

"All tastes, then, are equally just and true, in so far as concerns the individual whose taste is in question; and what a man feels distinctly to be beautiful, is *beautiful*." This does not seem far from the position of the romantic critic—certainly it does not agree with that of Pope—but Jeffrey goes on to say:

but it does not follow . . . that all tastes are equally good or desirable, or that there is any difficulty in describing that one is really the best, and the most to be envied. The only use of the faculty of taste, is to afford an innocent delight, and to assist in the cultivation of a finer morality; and that man certainly will have the most delight from this faculty, who has the most numerous and the most powerful perceptions of beauty.

It does follow that such a man will be the best critic. In his essay on Scott's *Lady of the Lake* he declares the standard of literary excellence to reside in "the taste of a few . . . persons, eminently qualified, by natural sensibility and long experience and reflection, to perceive all beauties that really exist, as well as settle the relative value and importance of all the different sorts of beauty." Obviously Jeffrey considered himself a man with just such equipment and hence the right man to pass judgment on all books which he cared to hale into the court of the *Review*. This was his rule, which, if more capricious than that of the neo-classicists, at least had the merit of being as flexible as a Scotch advocate would be. In a word, it was a rule of the coterie, a small select group whose representative was the critic, whose authority is derived from the group and not from changeless, abstract formulas of excellence. In such a tradition he judged and he kept himself from damnation quite successfully, for he never freed those guilty of offending his personal, educated, man-of-the-world taste.

As his judgment of Wordsworth is probably the best known of his criticisms, let us begin our excerpting with Jeffrey's famous admonition: "This will never do!" with which he began his review of *The Excursion*. After this pithy remark, Jeffrey concludes his first paragraph with this stricture on the poem:

It is longer, weaker, and tamer, than any of Mr. Wordsworth's other productions; with less boldness of originality, and less even of that extreme simplicity and lowliness of tone that wavered so prettily in the Lyrical Ballads, between silliness and pathos. We have imitations of Cowper, and even of Milton here; engrafted on the natural drawl of the Lakers—and all diluted into harmony by that profuse and irrepressible wordiness that deluges all the blank verse of this school of poetry, and lubricates and weakens the whole structure of their style.

Jeffrey objects to the length of the poem—"420 good quarto pages" and this only a "portion" of a larger work; to the "long words, long sentences, and unwieldy phrases" in which Wordsworth rings innumerable changes upon "a few very simple and familiar ideas"; to the obscurity; and to the choice of characters exclusively from the lowest ranks of society. After these animadversions are presented, Jeffrey proceeds to summarize—in no favorable way—the events of the poem, book by book. This done, he says:

Our abstract of the story has been so extremely concise, that it is more than usually necessary for us to lay some specimens of the work itself before our readers. Its grand staple, as we have already said, consists of a kind of mystical morality: and the chief characteristics of the style are, that it is prolix, and very frequently unintelligible: and though

we are sensible that no great gratification is to be expected from these qualities, yet it is necessary to give our readers a taste of them, both to justify the sentence we have passed and to satisfy them that it was really beyond our power to present them with any abstract or intelligible account of those long conversations which we have had so much occasion to notice in our brief sketch of its contents.

Then follow some six and a half pages of quotation—with appropriate comment—to demonstrate the truth of his earlier assertions.

The obvious weaknesses of the work out of the way, Jeffrey continues:

If it had not contained something a good deal better, we do not know how we should have been justified in troubling [the reader] with any account of it. But the truth is, that Mr. Wordsworth, with all his perversities, is a person of great powers; and has frequently a force in his moral declamations, and a tenderness in his pathetic narratives, which neither his prolixity nor his affectation can altogether deprive of their effect.

This adverse critic then gives twelve pages of quotation and favorable comment on the description; on the sweetness—"a sweetness like that of Massinger, in his softer and more mellifluous passages" (Jeffrey was warm in his praise of the Elizabethan dramatists); on the imagery, "something peculiarly grand and terrible to our ears"; and on the vigor and truth of some of the lines. Moreover, he notes favorably Wordsworth's interest in social problems: "There is a lively and impressive appeal to the injury done to the health, happiness, and morality of the lower orders, by the unceasing and premature labours of our crowded factories." "There is also a very animated exhortation to the more general diffusion of education among the lower orders, and a glowing and eloquent assertion of their capacity for all virtues and all enjoyments."

Besides the more extended passages of interest or beauty, Jeffrey notes that there are a very great number of single lines and images, "that sparkle like gems in the desert and startle us with an intimation of the great poetic powers that lie buried in the rubbish that has been heaped around them." Jeffrey has almost convinced himself: "we feel," he says, "half inclined to rescind the severe sentence which we passed on this work at the beginning—But when we look into the work itself, we perceive that it cannot be rescinded." He concludes the review by reasserting his previous objections.

Although the beginning was too severe, as Jeffrey recognized in his later years when he republished the essay, on the whole the things he finds fault with are the same things that most of us

find objectionable in Wordsworth, and he appreciated properly those aspects of the *Excursion* which most please the modern reader. In a word, he does not seem the harsh and unfair critic that he is popularly supposed to be. And even if his judgment may not have been altogether liberal, he at least allowed Wordsworth to speak for himself by quoting abundantly from the *Excursion*.

But he was not always so kind to Wordsworth. Eleven months after he reviewed *The Excursion*, Jeffrey wrote a ten-page review (he had devoted thirty-five to *The Excursion*) of *The White Doe of Rylstone* in which he says not one single kind thing about the poem, which, he says, "has the merit of being the very worst poem we ever saw imprinted in a quarto volume." The story itself "is a pretty subject for a ballad; and in the author's better day, might have made a lyrical one of considerable interest." But for Wordsworth's handling of it he has only ridicule and contempt; he does, however, quote extensively, so that, in this case, he is almost as fair to Wordsworth as Wordsworth was.

These are the only reviews of Wordsworth included in the 1844 volumes, but Jeffrey finds other occasion to note him. In his review of Crabbe's *Poems* (1807), which he admired, he devotes some time to Wordsworth. The comparison is an obvious one; both poets described the persons and life of the lowest classes of society. But Crabbe described with an eye for realistic detail, with understanding, with sympathy, with kindness, but with a considerable detachment, as though—as was the case—a gentleman looked on the miseries of poverty with compassion, but not with much personal identification with the sufferers. He looked upon his characters as persons; he did not idealize them. Wordsworth did. And Jeffrey didn't like it. He says:

Mr. Crabbe . . . shows us something which we have all seen, or may see, in real life; and draws from it such feelings and such reflections as every human being must acknowledge that it is calculated to incite. He delights us by the truth, and vivid and picturesque beauty of his representations, and by the force and pathos of the sensations with which we feel that they are connected. Mr. Wordsworth and his associates, on the other hand, introduce us to beings whose existence was not previously suspected by the acutest observers of nature; and excite an interest for them—when they do excite an interest—more by an eloquent and refined analysis of their own capricious feelings than by any obvious or intelligible ground of sympathy in their situation.

Jeffrey then illustrates his point: the village schoolmaster: Wordsworth "represents his grey-haired rustic pedagogue as a sort of half crazy, sentimental person, overrun with fine feelings, constitu-

tional merriment, and a most humorous melancholy"; the frail damsel: Wordsworth "has contrived to tell us nothing whatever of the unfortunate fair one, but that her name is Martha Ray; and that she goes up to the top of the hill, in a red cloak, and cries 'O misery!'" Jeffrey gives other examples including one of the Lucy poems in which, he says, Wordsworth illustrates the copious subject of love by one single thought: "a lover trots away to see his mistress one fine evening, gazing all the way on the moon; when he come to her door,

O mercy! to myself I cried,
If Lucy should be dead!

And there the poem ends." Jeffrey, who elsewhere recommends brevity, seems not to have appreciated it much when he found it.

As has been implied by the comparison with Wordsworth, Jeffrey approved of Crabbe. He considered that Crabbe, after Campbell and Rogers, was most likely to survive. By reprinting nearly a hundred pages of criticism and quotation of Crabbe, he felt that he was contributing to the reputation of a poet in whose powers and moral excellence he had faith.

He had no such faith in Southey. Apparently he said some very harsh things about him, for he apologizes, in a footnote, when he reprints the review of the last of Southey's considerable poems: *Roderick: The Last of the Goths* (1815). But the review itself seems most fair; he generalizes:

The author is a poet undoubtedly; but not of the highest order. There is rather more of rhetoric than of inspiration about him—and we have oftener to admire his taste and industry in borrowing and adorning, than in the boldness or felicity of his inventions. He has indisputably a great gift of amplifying and exalting, but uses it, we must say, rather unmercifully. He is never plain, concise, or unaffectedly simple, and is so much bent upon making the most of everything, that he is perpetually overdoing.

But the worst fault by far, and the most injurious to the effect of the author's greatest beauties, is the extreme diffuseness and verbosity of his style, and his unrelenting anxiety to leave nothing to the fancy, the feeling, or even the plain understanding of his readers—but to have every thing set down, and impressed and hammered into them, which it may any how conduce to his glory that they should comprehend.

Of Coleridge, Jeffrey does not say much in his collected works. He has no independent essay on him and, indeed, generally does not seem to link him closely with Wordsworth and Southey. Of the romantics he has most to say about Scott—chiefly as the author of *Waverley*. Of *The Lay of the Last Minstrel*, after commenting on the irregularity and incoherence of the narrative, he says:

A poem is intended to please by the images it suggests, and the feelings it inspires, and if it contain delightful images and affecting sentiments, our pleasure will not be materially impaired by some slight want of probability or coherence in the narrative by which they are connected. . . . [Scott] writes throughout with the spirit and force of a poet, and though he occasionally discovers a little too much, perhaps, of the "brave neglect," and is frequently inattentive to the delicate propriety and scrupulous correctness of his diction, he compensates for those defects by the fire and animation of his whole composition, and by the brilliant colouring and prominent features of the figures with which he has enlivened it.

Such criticism as this, considering Scott's reputation today, may seem too warm and hearty. But it must be remembered that Scott was a good friend of Jeffrey, and a compatriot—even so, Jeffrey found fault.

Byron is compared with the other romantics, especially Wordsworth and Southey, and found to have much in common with them; Jeffrey pays a rather handsome tribute to all three men, but he still objects to the prolixity of the older men while he admires the brevity and succinctness of Byron. But, although he was impressed by Byron, he was not fooled by him:

As to Lord Byron's pretending to set up the *Unities* at this time of day, as 'the law of literature throughout the world,' it is mere caprice and contradiction. He, if ever man was, is a *law to himself*—a chartered libertine,"—and now, when he is tired of this unbridled licence, he wants to do penance within the *Unities*! This certainly looks like affectation.

These collected reviews contain only scattered references to Shelley, but Jeffrey includes his somewhat belated review of *Endymion* (1818) which he conveniently included with *Lamia, Isabella, The Eve of St. Agnes, and Other Poems* (1820). He treats Keats generously, if not enthusiastically. Another review was undoubtedly in his mind when he said: "There is no work . . . from which a malicious critic could cull more matter for ridicule, or select more obscure, unnatural, or absurd passages. But we do not take *That* to be our office; — and must beg leave, on the contrary, to say, that anyone who, on this account, would represent the whole poem as despicable, must have no notion of poetry, or no regard for truth." Nor, Jeffrey adds a little after, can such a man "find any great pleasure in some of the finest creations of Milton or Shakespeare." Of the Ode to Autumn, Jeffrey said, "We know nothing at once so truly fresh, genuine, and English, — and, at the same time, so full of poetical feeling, and Greek elegance and simplicity. . . ."

Jeffrey was not always so kind as I have presented him, admit-

tedly. We must remember that the essays here used were those he thought fitting to reprint in 1843, and, as he admits, he chose some of the more polite reviews. But he asserts that he did republish the essays as they were printed in the *Edinburgh Review*. This in itself is evidence of his judgment, for some of the reviews had been written many years earlier—his review of the *Excursion*, for example, was written in 1814, almost thirty years before. Probably the worst thing we can say about Jeffrey as a critic, if we will but allow him the right of living in his day, is that he was a brilliant writer, and sometimes just a bit too clever. As he says, "A certain tone of exaggeration is incident, we fear, to the sort of writing in which we are engaged." Perhaps this somewhat prim confession is not sufficient to merit forgiveness for his mistakes, but it does not bespeak an unkind, or an ungenerous, mind.

Elizabeth Browning and Emily Dickinson

By REBECCA PATTERSON

American readers became acquainted with the work of Elizabeth Browning as early as the publication of the 1844 *Poems*. Even before the book was reprinted in the United States, two of the poems, "The Lay of the Brown Rosary" and "Lady Geraldine's Courtship," crossed the Atlantic in manuscript and found admiring readers at Brook Farm and in Cambridge. Subsequent books were published, or rather pirated, in this country almost as soon as they appeared in England. During the winter of 1853-54 Thomas Wentworth Higginson could write to Robert Browning that his wife's poems were "household words" in Massachusetts (and that his own poetry would "become so more slowly").¹

Mrs. Browning attracted a more famous enthusiast than Higginson. Edgar Allan Poe dedicated one of his books to her and borrowed the rhythm of "Lady Geraldine's Courtship" and one scarcely altered line for his "Raven," a plagiarism which Elizabeth willingly overlooked in the hope of winning his critical influence for Robert Browning. As it happened, she might have spared her pains. Poe remained coolly silent to her blandishments, and in fact never mentioned her husband, although he was extravagant in his praise of Mrs. Browning, naming her, with but one exception, the greatest of living poets of both sexes. He used to read her poems aloud, so Mrs. Osgood reported, with tears in his "wild eyes."

In the Lowell home the Browning elopement was table talk, and Ralph Waldo Emerson repeated with gossipy enjoyment the legends circulating about the invalid woman poet, the cruel father, the romantic rescue. American travelers made pilgrimages to Casa Guidi, bringing back accounts of how Mrs. Browning looked and what she said and did and how devotedly her husband took care of her. To G. S. Hillard, she was "a soul of fire enclosed in a shell of pearl." When at last, in 1860, a New York magazine offered "a hundred dollars for every single poem, though as short as a sonnet," Mrs. Browning herself was taken aback by the fervor of her American audience.

"Conceive, Robert!" she liked to say teasingly. "If I were to set my heart on going to live in New York! What then?" And this devoted husband would reply: "Why then, you should go directly! Only *don't* set your heart on it, Ba."

1. For a more extended account of Elizabeth Browning's relations with America, as well as all quotations used in these introductory paragraphs, see Louise Greer, *Browning and America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1952), *passim*.

As a woman, an invalid recluse, a heroine of romance (her more talented husband figuring in popular opinion as little else than a necessary adjunct to the romance),² Elizabeth Browning commanded an audience that was more fervent than critical. The truth is that Mrs. Browning had a faltering taste and a poor ear and wrote too hastily to write well. Still she would have had an audience even if there had been no romantic history; her poetry appealed strongly to Victorian taste. To women her appeal was especially great, for they could identify themselves with her, as did the American poet Emily Dickinson.

On April 26, 1862, Emily Dickinson wrote to T. W. Higginson, her new friend and elected audience: "For poets I have Keats, and Mr. and Mrs. Browning. For prose, Mr. Ruskin, Sir Thomas Browne, and the Revelations."³

Although she must have known that Higginson admired the Brownings, her own admiration of Elizabeth Browning was already feverish, and the short reading list was not chosen at random. Her interest in the Book of Revelation derived in good part from Mrs. Browning's poetic use of it in *Aurora Leigh*, a melodramatic verse novel which had proved a revelation to Emily; she would have agreed with Ruskin that *Aurora Leigh* was "the finest poem written in any language in this century." For Keats, the only poet named with the Brownings, she had Mrs. Browning's warrant:

By Keats's soul, the man who never stepped
In gradual progress like another man,
But turning grandly on his central self,
Enspersed himself in twenty perfect years . . .
Aurora Leigh, I, 1003-06.⁴

Apparently Higginson scolded Emily for her off-rhymes and suggested that she write in free verse. He mentioned Walt Whitman. Emily had heard that Whitman's book was "disgraceful"; besides, she "could not drop the bells whose jingling cooled my tramp."⁵ The words echo Elizabeth Browning:

At such times, ended seemed my trade of verse;
I feared to jingle bells upon my robe
Before the four-faced silent cherubim.
Aurora Leigh, VII, 1302-04.

2. In the 1850's, according to "Grace Greenwood" (Mrs. Lippincott), Browning was scarcely known in America except as the husband of Mrs. Browning.

3. Emily Dickinson, *Letters*, edited by Mabel Loomis Todd, with an introduction by Mark Van Doren (Cleveland: The World Publishing Co., 1951), p. 253.

4. Elizabeth Barrett Browning, *Complete Poetical Works* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1900). All quotations are from this edition, but for convenience *Aurora Leigh* is cited by its own book and line numbers.

5. *Letters*, pp. 254-55.

Emily Dickinson was nowhere a simple copyist. Her appropriation of Mrs. Browning's work was subtle and complicated, much as if she had taken another's raw material into the laboratory of her own mind. To Higginson she wrote: "I marked a line in one verse, because I met it after I made it, and never consciously touch a paint mixed by another person."⁶ Unlike Poe, she would not plagiarize so much as a single line, nor was there any question of imitating Mrs. Browning's grandiloquent style: the instrument on which Emily played was diminutive and delicate. But words and ideas fascinated her, and she took them, consciously or no, and converted them to her own use.

For example, Mrs. Browning wrote:

I breathe now, I spring upward like a branch
The ten-years school-boy with a crooked stick
May pull down to his level in search of nuts,
But cannot hold a moment. How we twang
Back on the blue sky, and assert our height,
While he stares after!

Aurora Leigh, V, 1173-78.

For "The nearest Dream recedes unrealized," one of the first four poems sent to Higginson, Emily Dickinson borrowed the staring school boy, disappointed in his hopes; but she changed the branch to a June bee which teasingly evades pursuit and then flies upward,

Heedless of the Boy—
Staring—bewildered—at the mocking sky—⁷

Mrs. Browning wrote:

And hope, now for me, now against me, dragged
My spirits onward, as some fallen balloon,
Which, whether caught by blossoming tree or bare,
Is torn alike.

Aurora Leigh, V, 423-26.

More bitterly, Emily wrote:

You've seen Balloons set—Hav'nt You?
.....
The Gilded Creature strains—and spins—
Trips frantic in a Tree—
Tears open her imperial Veins—

Here too the balloon stands for hope, but Emily has added a crowd

6. *Ibid.*, p. 259.

7. Emily Dickinson, *Poems*, edited by Thomas H. Johnson (3 volumes; Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1955), I, 244; probably written about 1861. All quotations are from this edition, and the approximate dates are those assigned by the editor.

of onlookers who watch the destruction of another person's hope and dismiss it with cruel indifference as "only a Balloon."⁸

Sometimes it was a single word, like "logarithm." No one except Mrs. Browning had thought of "logarithm" as a word for poetic use.⁹ Then Emily Dickinson caught it from her and used it twice—both times as a figure for her desolate "school" days before some beloved person entered her life. In "Knows how to forget!" she says her schoolday logarithm had not taught her how to forget a faithless lover.¹⁰ In "Let Us play Yesterday" she says she had "Logarithm . . . for Drink" and adds that it was a "dry Wine." Two lines earlier she speaks of reading her dictionary to satisfy the hunger for love. The "dry Wine" must accordingly be read as a poor quencher of thirst.¹¹

In another version of "Knows how to forget!" Emily describes herself as rising like a dunce from the "Greek" over which she has long "pored—patient."¹² The real Emily knew not a word of Greek, but Elizabeth Browning was schooled in it, as was her heroine Aurora. In a girlhood as dreary as Emily imagined her own girlhood to be, Aurora solaces herself by studying Greek.

These are instances. They can be multiplied and will be multiplied, but only the reader who comes saturated with Emily Dickinson to the reading of Mrs. Browning will understand that Emily herself was saturated with *Aurora Leigh*. It was not a matter of a few words or a few ideas; rather, it was as if Emily Dickinson set out to illustrate by her own work the gospel of poetry and of love that she had discovered in Elizabeth Browning.

For example, Mrs. Browning wrote:

Fame, indeed, 'twas said,
Means simply love. It was a man said that:
And then, there's love and love: the love of all
(To risk in turn a woman's paradox)
Is but a small thing to the love of one.
You bid a hungry child be satisfied
With a heritage of many corn-fields: nay,
He says he's hungry,—he would rather have
That little barley-cake you keep from him

8. About 1863; *Poems*, II, 539-40. There are other "balloon" poems: "I would not paint a picture" (early 1862; *Poems*, II, 387); "It was a quiet way" (1862; II, 743); "I bet with every Wind that blew" (about 1862; III, 847); "As from the earth the light Balloon" (about 1884; III, 1118). These appear to draw upon common symbolism and to have no identifiable connection with Mrs. Browning's poem. The first of these, apparently, and the second, certainly, describe the sensation of love as like floating above the earth in a balloon.

9. Romney Leigh exclaims to his cousin Aurora: "Why, now indeed you throw your bonnet off/ As if you had time left for a logarithm" (*AL*, III, 1020-21).

10. About 1865; *Poems*, I, 336.

11. Dated approximately 1863; *Poems*, II, 728.

12. About 1862; *Poems*, I, 335.

While reckoning up his harvests. So with us
(Here, Romney, too, we fail to generalize):
We're hungry.

Hungry! but it's pitiful
To wail like unweaned babes and suck our thumbs
Because we're hungry.

Aurora Leigh, V, 477-90.

In poem after poem Emily Dickinson describes love as hunger and the act of love as the act of eating. About 1874 she writes to her Norcross cousins:

Affection is like bread, unnoticed till we
starve, and then we dream of it, and sing of
it, and paint it, when every urchin in the
street has more than he can eat.¹³

The woman who renounces love, as Aurora does in refusing her cousin, lives henceforth in the desert, but with courage she can stand erect like the palm tree. While her married sisters are vines bending under their fruit,

The palm stands upright in a realm of sand.

Aurora Leigh, II, 519.

"In this desert newly made," she can still be herself, perform the work of her choice, build towns, "when the breath,/ Now choked with sand, returns for building towns" (AL, II, 960-62).

In the poetry of Emily Dickinson the desert is most commonly a state of bleak hopelessness or an obstacle to be crossed. On one occasion, however, she speaks with the stoicism of Aurora:

Soil of Flint, if steady tilled—
Will refund the Hand—
Seed of Palm, by Lybian Sun
Fructified in Sand—¹⁴

Much of this symbolism is so commonplace, so obvious, that Emily Dickinson might be supposed capable of arriving at it by herself. But she did not arrive at it by herself; she had first read Mrs. Browning, as some particular word or turn betrays in poem after poem. For example, St. John was the favorite evangelist of many Victorian writers. Emily Dickinson did not need Elizabeth Browning to single him out or to make the contrast with "Inhuman

13. *Letters*, p. 232. Among the poems in which this theme figures are "Talk with prudence to a Beggar" (I, 86; about 1859), "Undue Significance a starving man attaches" (I, 339; about 1862), "I had been hungry, all the Years" (II, 443; about 1862), "Victory comes late" (II, 533; about 1861), "The Beggar Lad—dies early" (II, 550; about 1863), "God gave a Loaf to every Bird" (II, 597; about 1863), "I play at Riches—to appease" (II, 606; about 1863), "Let Us play Yesterday" (II, 728; about 1863), "The beggar at the door for fame" (III, 862; about 1872), "Who never wanted—maddest Joy" (III, 991; about 1877). It is worth noting that in perhaps half these poems, as if she had after all a poor stomach for the love she craves, Emily writes that she prefers to contemplate the food rather than eat it.

14. About 1863; *Poems*, II, 528.

doctrines never taught by John" (AL, I, 397). But if she had not read "And if you weep still, weep where John was laid/ While Jesus loved him,"¹⁵ it is unlikely that she would have apostrophized so wildly:

Jesus—it's your little "John"!
Don't you know—me?

Or

Why—Slay—Me?¹⁶

Again, Mrs. Browning wrote:

The Saviour looked on Peter. Ay, no word,
No gesture of reproach; the Heavens serene
Though heavy with armed justice, did not lean
Their thunders that way: the forsaken Lord
Looked only, on the traitor.¹⁷

Of a faithless friend, Emily Dickinson wrote bitterly:

Jesus merely "looked" at Peter—
Could I do aught else—to Thee?¹⁸

Emily did not need to turn to the pages of *Aurora Leigh* for "Ararat" or "chariots" or "wells," but she found them there, used repeatedly as symbols, and they entered into her own symbolism.

Nor did Emily need to be taught that women's occupations offer a rich source of figurative language, but she might have used them less readily and with less assurance if Aurora had not tartly commanded Romney to take her meaning directly,

And not allow for puckerings in the silk
By clever stitches. I'm a woman, sir—
I use the woman's figures naturally . . .
Aurora Leigh, VIII, 1129-31.

Admittedly Aurora was not fond of woman's work and dropped it for poetry. Her friend Marian Erle was more patient. Marian earned her living as a seamstress, sewing for Lady Waldemar and other exacting ladies, and moreover had a tragic love story:

[T]hen she drew
The stitch, and mused how Romney's face would look,
And if 'twere likely he'd remember hers
When they two had their meeting after death.
Aurora Leigh, III, 1240-43.

15. *Aurora Leigh*, III, 1207-08. "Now there was leaning on Jesus' bosom one of his disciples, whom Jesus loved. . . . He then lying on Jesus' breast . . ." John 13:23, 25.

16. "He strained my faith," *Poems*, II, 380; about 1862.

17. "The Look," *Poetical Works*, p. 101. "And the Lord turned and looked upon Peter. And Peter remembered the word of the Lord, how he had said unto him, Before the cock crow, thou shalt deny me thrice." Luke 22:61. The look, which is not mentioned in the other Gospels, appears to be one of Luke's poetic touches.

18. "He forgot—and I—remembered," *Poems*, I, 144; about 1860.

Emily would have remembered Marian herself in the following lines:

Don't put up my Thread & Needle—
I'll begin to Sow . . .
Hems—too fine for Lady's tracing . . .¹⁹

Aurora had bonnets and hats, with strings to be tied:

[I] would not wait so long
As even to snatch my bonnet by the strings . . .
Aurora Leigh, II, 19-20.

Leaving home after her aunt's funeral, she met her cousin Romney, who touched

My hatstrings tied for going (at the door
The carriage stood to take me) . . .
Aurora Leigh, II, 970-71.

Emily wrote:

Tie the Strings to my Life, My Lord
Then, I am ready to go!
Just a look at the Horses—²⁰

Again:

I sing to use the Waiting
My Bonnet but to tie
And shut the Door unto my House . . .²¹

And again:

I tie my Hat—I crease my Shawl—²²

Aurora knows more than one gossip neighbor who "cuts your morning up/ To mincemeat of the very smallest talk,/ Then helps to sugar her bohea at night/ With your reputation" (AL, IV, 489-92). Emily Dickinson thinks of death as an escape from gossip neighbors:

No Chatter—here—no tea—
So Babbler, and Bohea—stay there—²³

Romney warns his cousin against the hazards of the life she is choosing, and Aurora answers that she would rather die than "gather up my feet from even a step/ For fear to soil my gown in so much dust./ I choose to walk at all risks" (AL, II, 104-06). More humorously, and with a different goal in view, Emily considers the threat to her boot:

19. About 1862; *Poems*, II, 475.

20. About 1861; *Poems*, I, 279.

21. About 1864; *Poems*, II, 639.

22. About 1862; *Poems*, I, 341.

23. About 1862; *Poems*, I, 317-18.

Is Bliss then, such Abyss,
 I must not put my foot amiss
 For fear I spoil my shoe?
 I'd rather suit my foot
 Than save my Boot—²⁴

In their personal symbolism, Mrs. Browning is the lion; Emily Dickinson, the leopard. Mrs. Browning's poetic ego, Aurora Leigh, reacts to her aunt's harshness like a captive lion: "The lion in me felt the keeper's voice" (AL, II, 560). Her cousin Romney asks her, "Need you tremble and pant/ Like a netted lioness?" (AL, II, 1096-97). "And now, my lioness," says Lady Waldemar, holding Aurora at bay (AL, III, 528).

The leopard is of course a smaller beast, and less royal. In "Civilization spurns the leopard!" Emily is the leopard that has strayed from the warm south into a cold and disdainful "Civilization." She admits that her "customs" are "tawny" and her "dun gown" is "spotted," but insists that this is the "Leopard's nature" and her "keeper" should not frown. In identifying herself with the leopard, Emily is recalling not only Mrs. Browning's lion but also that animal singled out in the Bible as reprehensibly spotted and incapable of change.²⁵ Elsewhere she cries, "With thee, in the Desert/ . . . in the thirst/ . . . in the Tamarind wood—/ Leopard breathes—at last!"²⁶ The poem is like a gasping sigh.

That Aurora so often thought of herself as a hunted deer or hare or wounded bird may help explain Emily's use of these symbols. Nor does this exhaust the metamorphoses of Emily Dickinson; somewhat absurdly, she became Mrs. Browning's spaniel. In a letter to Mary Bowles she describes her heart as "half broken sometimes, yet close as the spaniel to its friends."²⁷ More explicitly, she begs "some god" to tell her vanished lover that she is dying:

Say—that a little life—for His—
 Is leaking—red—
 His little Spaniel—tell him!
 Will he heed?²⁸

Aurora Leigh describes the pathetic Marian Erle as "dropping her impassioned spaniel head" (AL, IX, 278).

It is probable that Aurora's "large-mouthed frogs/ (Those noisy

24. Early 1862; *Poems*, I, 271.

25. About 1862; *Poems*, I, 375. "Can the Ethiopian change his skin, or the leopard his spots? Then may ye also do good, that are accustomed to do evil." Jeremiah 13:23.

26. About 1860; *Poems*, I, 147. Since Emily Dickinson did not find the tamarind in Mrs. Browning's poem, it is at least possible that she took it from Poe's sonnet "To Science." It would have a rich connotation, for Poe complains that he has been robbed of his "summer dream beneath the tamarind tree."

27. *Letters*, p. 178.

28. "If He dissolve, then there is nothing more," *Poems*, I, 170-71; about 1861.

vaunters of their shallow streams)" were sounding in Emily's ears when she wrote of the pompous frog that tells his name "the live-long June—/ To an admiring Bog!"²⁹ And there are still other possible borrowings of zoological material. Of course Emily owed not a penny to Mrs. Browning for her bees and butterflies. She found them in her own garden and used them with a persistence and a rich symbolism not to be discovered in her model. But it may be questioned whether she would have had so many gnats if *Aurora Leigh* had not suffered a plague of them.

Aurora is troubled by the thought of gnats that draw "too near the fire of love," of girls who are of no more importance than gnats. Emily is most painfully teased by gnats—a "Gnat's horizon," "a Gnat's minutest fan," "a Gnat's embrace," "the Gnat's supremacy," food for a gnat, repudiation of a gnat, the arrogance of a "Summer Gnat"—all in poems assigned to the years 1862 and 1863. Again and again she opposes to the gnat the giant that she wishes to be. She struggles to escape her sense of helplessness and insignificance and to reduce some important other person to the pettiness of a gnat.³⁰

To Emily Dickinson, the geography of *Aurora Leigh* is no less important than the zoology. First, there are casual borrowings. Aurora is obliged to learn "by how many feet/ Mount Chimborazo outsoars Teneriffe" (AL, I, 409-10). And Emily Dickinson writes, "Love—thou art high—" Yet she might reach the summit if only there were two of them "Taking turns—at the Chimborazo."³¹ Elsewhere it is "Ah, Teneriffe," at whose feet she can only kneel.³² In another poem we are told that "'Morning'—means 'Milking'—to the Farmer—/ Dawn—to the Teneriffe—."³³ Finally, in an unfinished worksheet of a late poem, the phrase "Teneriffe's Adventure" appears as an interlineation.³⁴

29. *Aurora Leigh*, VII, 1078-79. "I'm Nobody! Who are you?" *Poems*, I, 206-07; about 1861.

30. The following lines from *Aurora Leigh* are illustrative: "They have drawn too near the fire of love, like gnats" (II, 695); "Who's sorry for a gnat . . . or a girl?" (II, 697); "Your steps, for ever buzzing in the room,/ Tease me like gnats" (III, 28-29); "You've gnats instead" (IV, 237); "Wind, rain, the creaking gnat, or stuttering fly" (VII, 961); "And watching gnats a-prick upon a pond" (VI, 237). Some of these gnats are clearly figurative, as they are in Emily Dickinson's poems: "I know lives, I could miss" (I, 296); "More Life went out when He went" (I, 327); "We see Comparatively" (II, 411-12); "A Toad can die of Light" (II, 446); "It would have starved a Gnat" (II, 471); "Size circumscribes—it has no room" (II, 494); "Who Giants know, with lesser Men" (II, 602); "The Fingers of the Light" (II, 722-23); "Wonder is not precisely Knowing" (III, 919). The first six poems were written about 1862; the seventh, about 1863; the eighth (of a different, less painful tenor), about 1865. Only the last poem is comparatively late, about 1874.

31. About 1862; *Poems*, I, 350.

32. About 1863; *Poems*, II, 512-13.

33. About 1862; *Poems*, I, 221-22.

34. "The Jay his Castanet has struck," *Poems*, III, 1121; about 1884.

Aurora speaks of "the mountain-peaks of Thessaly" (AL, VI, 168) and "the softest hum of Hyblan bee" (AL, V, 298). In "The World feels Dusty" Emily proposes to bring to a dying friend "Dews of Thessaly . . . / And Hybla Balms."³⁵

More complicated is Emily's use of the following lines:

Of fair fantastic Paris who wears trees
Like plumes, . . .
The city swims in verdure, beautiful
As Venice on the waters, the sea-swan.
Aurora Leigh, VI, 81-82, 89-90.

Describing flowers, Emily takes the greenness of Paris and the soft sheen of Venice and achieves these lines:

Paris could not lay the fold
Belted down with Emerald—
Venice could not show a cheek
Of a tint so lustrous meek—³⁶

Of such borrowings as "Chimborazo," "Teneriffe," "Hybla," and the like, the most probable explanation is that *Aurora Leigh* sent Emily to her dictionary and her geography book, that she liked what she found and kept it for her own use. None of these words is significant in comparison with what Italy, Mrs. Browning's Italy, was to mean to her.

It was a rare poet in the nineteenth century who did not claim Italy as his spiritual home, and Emily Dickinson was never more than uncomfortably at home in New England. The south, and Italy in particular, symbolized escape and sensuous freedom. Just as one stripped off heavy layers of clothing on a tropic island (Emily dreamed of the "spicy isles"),³⁷ so one stripped off the stifling Puritan taboos against pleasure and lived in the sun of enjoyment. As early as her schoolgirl friendship with Susan Gilbert (afterwards her sister-in-law), Emily was reading about Italy in Longfellow's *Golden Legend* and "Ik Marvel's" *Reveries of a Bachelor*, and was writing to Sue with passionate longing of "the South, the love South."³⁸ Mrs. Browning's life in Florence, coupled with her romantic verse novel, merely reawakened and intensified Emily's love of Italy.

The young Aurora, taken from her mother's home in Florence and brought up in England, cries out for "the white walls, the blue hills, my Italy" (AL, I, 232). She contrasts the cold manners of England

35. About 1863; *Poems*, II, 548.

36. "Pigmy seraphs gone astray," *Poems*, I, 98; about 1859.

37. "How sick to wait in any place but thine," *Poems*, I, 293; about 1862.

38. Rebecca Patterson, *The Riddle of Emily Dickinson* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1951), p. 98.

with Italian warmth and describes the slow snuffing out of her life under the guardianship of her English aunt. At last she is able to plan her return:

And now, my Italy. . . .
For still I have heard thee crying through my life,
Thou piercing silence of ecstatic graves . . .
Aurora Leigh, V, 1190, 1194-95.

She describes her arrival in Florence:

I'm happy. It's sublime,
This perfect solitude of foreign lands!
'To be, as if you had not been till then,
And were then, simply that you chose to be:
To spring up, not be brought forth from the ground.
.
—possess yourself,
A new world all alive with creatures new,
New sun, new moon, new flowers, new people—ah,
And be possessed by none of them!
—Such most surprising riddance of one's life
Comes next one's death: 'tis disembodiment
Without the pang.
Aurora Leigh, VII, 1193-97, 1200-03, 1209-11.

To Emily Dickinson, who had once hidden in a wood to avoid being questioned by her neighbors, and who described death as "Escape from Circumstances, and a Name,"³⁹ Mrs. Browning's Italy would have seemed very desirable.

In February, 1860, Emily's friend Kate Scott received a copy of Hillard's *Six Months in Italy*. At about this time she made one of her frequent visits to Amherst, and she may have lent the book or recommended it to Emily. Both women were reading *Aurora Leigh*, both were fervent admirers of Mrs. Browning, and Hillard's book not only described Mrs. Browning's Italy but recorded also a devout pilgrimage to Casa Guidi.

In the summer of 1860 Emily wrote to Kate Scott, reminding the latter of her recent visit:

It's but a little past, dear, and yet how far
from here it seems, fled with the snow! So
through the snow go many loving feet parted by
"Alps." How brief, from vineyards and the sun!⁴⁰

The lines are reminiscent of a poem, "Our lives are Swiss," which was written at about this time. On "some odd afternoon," says

39. "For Death—or rather," *Poems*, I, 302; about 1862.

40. *Letters*, p. 123.

the poet, the Alps draw back their cloudy curtains, and from our cool Swiss heights we glimpse the warm, alluring sensuousness of Italy. But we are debarred from entering paradise; the guardian Alps "forever intervene."⁴¹ Obviously it is not the Italy of geography for which the poet longs, but rather a symbolic Italy of love and sensuous freedom.

In a poem written some three years later, the symbolic Italy reappears as the "Blue Peninsula" of the poet's longing imagination. (Perhaps the blue color is borrowed from Mrs. Browning's emphatic line "the white walls, the blue hills, my Italy.") According to this poem, the self-denial foreboded in the "Alps" poem is now a settled condition; Emily is so "accustomed" to her fate that she prefers the certain enjoyment of suffering to the dangerous happiness of fulfillment. It might be better, she thinks, to fail even in sight of land "than gain—My Blue Peninsula—/ To perish—of Delight—"⁴²

Another poem of this same year employs the "peninsula" symbol:

They put Us far apart—
As separate as Sea
And Her unsown Peninsula—⁴³

It is clear that the mysterious "they" have separated two lovers (in subsequent stanzas, "thwarted" them with "guns," with "Dungeons," and with a sentence of death), but the symbolism is otherwise riddling. In what sense can a peninsula be thought of as separate from the sea that embraces it? And is the peninsula to sow itself or to be sown? Perhaps the poet wants the sea to inundate the peninsula. Geographically it would be a disaster, but erotically it might make sense.

In a late poem, "The inundation of the Spring," Emily writes that the soul at first gropes for the shore, but growing accustomed to the waters, no longer pines "For that Peninsula."⁴⁴ Apparently the "unsown Peninsula" of the earlier poem is now submerged by the sea.

Mrs. Browning nowhere used the word "peninsula"; she used the allied word "promontory." In a description of Leigh Hall, Romney's home, his cousin Aurora writes:

41. About 1859; *Poems*, I, 65.

42. "It might be lonelier," *Poems*, I, 316; about 1862.

43. About 1862; *Poems*, I, 364.

44. About 1877; *Poems*, III, 988. The word "peninsula" recurs in five other poems: "Could I but ride indefinite" (II, 509; about 1862); "By my Window have I for Scenery" (II, 603; about 1863); "Bereaved of all, I went abroad" (II, 592; about 1863); "The earth has many keys" (III, 1186; undated); "Two Butterflies went out at Noon" (*Poems*, II, 409-10; about 1878).

. . . far above, a jut of table-land,
 A promontory without water, stretched,—

 The vigorous sun would catch it up at eve
 And use it for an anvil till he had filled
 The shelves of heaven with burning thunderbolts.
Aurora Leigh, I, 601-02, 605-07.

Like Emily's "unsown peninsula," this promontory is waterless, but at this stage of the novel young Aurora is hostile to her cousin and treats his courtship with harsh contempt. When she is able to love him, the promontory reappears, now moon-drenched, no longer arid:

[Romney] bade me mark how we two met at last
 Upon this moon-bathed promontory of earth,
 To give up much on each side, then take all.
Aurora Leigh, IX, 848-50

In both instances the "promontory" is associated with the hero of Mrs. Browning's poem. Emily Dickinson's "peninsula" is more ambiguous. At one time she herself appears to be the arid peninsula longing for the inundating waters; at other times she gropes toward an unattainable peninsula. The ambiguity of this symbol, as of her symbols in general, apparently springs from the circumstance that they are too nearly dream-symbols, that she took them from the depths of her mind and never subjected them to logical analysis. As Emily herself observed, in an early letter to Higginson:

I had no monarch in my life, and cannot rule
 myself; and when I try to organize, my little
 force explodes and leaves me bare and charred.⁴⁵

Emily Dickinson was much impressed by Mrs. Browning's romantic conception of the poet and his role. Said Mrs. Browning, through her heroine Aurora:

The name [of poet]
 Is royal, and to sign it like a queen
 Is what I dare not,—though some royal blood
 Would seem to tingle in me now and then.
Aurora Leigh, I, 934-37.

The poet is a Ganymede, a cupbearer to the gods, ravished by the eagle poetry (AL, I, 918-23). Yet Aurora reminds herself that "all the birds/ Will sing at dawn," and fears that she may be a swallow mistaking itself for the "holy lark" (AL, I, 951-53):

'Tis too easy to go mad
 And ape a Bourbon in a crown of straws.
Aurora Leigh, I, 940-41.

45. *Letters*, p. 258.

Half-playfully Emily takes up the word "Bourbon" and the poet's claim to royal status:

I'm saying every day
 "If I should be a Queen, tomorrow"—

If it be, I wake a Bourbon.

and she proposes to ornament herself against that day, loop up her apron with "bright Pins of Buttercup," and "perch" her tongue "on Twigs of Singing," so that her new rank will not take her by surprise.⁴⁶

It has been noted as curious that Emily Dickinson invited the criticism of a well-known writer like Higginson and yet changed no line or word to suit him. Higginson protested that she would confess a spelling error but ignore all his well-meant attempts to direct her in more important matters. He need not have been surprised; she wanted acceptance, not correction. Mrs. Browning had schooled her well:

And whosoever writes good poetry,
Looks just to art. . . .
He will not suffer the best critic known
To step into his sunshine of free thought
And self-absorbed conception and exact
An inch-long swerving of the holy lines.

Aurora Leigh, V, 251-52, 254-57.

Furthermore:

If virtue done for popularity
Defiles like vice, can art. for praise or hire,
Still keep its splendor and remain pure art?
Eschew such serfdom. What the poet writes,
He writes: mankind accepts it if it suits,
And that's success: if not, the poem's passed
From hand to hand, and yet from hand to hand
Until the unborn snatch it, crying out
In pity of their fathers' being so dull,
And that's success too.

Aurora Leigh, V, 258-67.

Ignoring Mrs. Browning's practice in favor of her precept, Emily took this nonsense for gospel and made no serious effort to publish her poetry. She did literally "eschew such serfdom." In a poem beginning "Publication is the Auction/ Of the Mind of Man," she declares that poverty might justify "so foul a thing," but she would rather starve in her garret than "invest" her "Snow."⁴⁷ In a letter

46. About 1862: *Poems*, I, 296.

47. About 1863: *Poems*, II, 544.

of June, 1862, to T. W. Higginson, she writes: "I smile when you suggest that I delay 'to publish,' that being foreign to my thought as firmament to fin."⁴⁸ This arrogance, of course, may have masked a very real chagrin, but she did consistently refuse to publish her work. Shortly afterwards, in a poem, she is writing that her own self-approval is enough.⁴⁹ Another poem, "The Poets light but Lamps," reads like a commentary on Mrs. Browning.⁵⁰ As late as 1877 she is still insisting that fame can be earned only by disdaining it.⁵¹

Mrs. Browning wrote and Emily Dickinson believed:

The worthiest poets have remained uncrowned
Till death has bleached their foreheads to the bone.

Aurora Leigh, II, 28-29.

But the young Aurora is humanly reluctant to go all uncrowned to her grave, and in a private ceremony on the June morning of her twentieth birthday she makes a chaplet of leaves and crowns herself. Surprised and teased by her cousin, she tears off her leafy crown but preserves it in a drawer (AL, II, 812-14) and sometimes recalls the day when she "tried a crown on" (AL, VIII, 501). In moments of discouragement she cares little for "the crowns and goals" (AL, VII, 742-43). At other times she believes she has borne more worthily "the poet's veritable charge," and the weight on her forehead feels "somewhat liker to a crown" (AL, VIII, 567-69).

The woman poet is a queen and she is crowned. Somewhat mystically, she is also a queen by the simple fact of being a woman. Emily Dickinson is born royal:

Crowned—Crowing—on my Father's breast—
A half unconscious Queen—⁵²

Aurora's aunt demands caustically: "Are they queens, these girls?" (AL, II, 577). And the word sounds again and again in *Aurora Leigh*: "as queens may mock" (AL, II, 392); "a queen might stop at" (AL, IV, 214); "a great queen's bosom" (AL, IV, 218); "she wore her bonnet as the queen might hers" (AL, IV, 1036); "Some beauteous dame, half chattel and half queen" (AL, V, 196). Abasing himself to Aurora, Romney affirms that he is a wretch "in the presence of a queen" (AL, IX, 473). He wonders how he has dared, "with male ferocious impudence," to thrust her aside,

48. *Letters*, p. 255.

49. "Fame of Myself, to justify," *Poems*, II, 547; about 1863.

50. About 1864; *Poems*, II, 654.

51. "To earn it by disdaining it," *Poems*, III, 990; about 1877.

52. "I'm ceded—I've stopped being Their's," *Poems*, II, 389-90; early 1862.

Because she was a woman and a queen,
 And had no beard to bristle through her song . . .
Aurora Leigh, VIII, 331-32.⁵³

A woman beloved is also a woman crowned and a queen. When Romney Leigh offers himself to Marian Erle, she is too much in love to question his love for her:

The cataracts of her soul had poured themselves,
 And risen self-crowned in rainbow: would she ask
 Who crowned her?—it sufficed that she was crowned.
Aurora Leigh, IV, 184-86.

Later on, with her illegitimate child, she is described as unlawfully wearing "that crown of prosperous wives" (AL, VI, 348). This motif never entered the virgin mind of Emily Dickinson. She was concerned with the crown of poetic fame, the crown of love, and the crown of death, but not with the child as a woman's crown. Mrs. Browning was a mother.

The young heroine of *Aurora Leigh* is a career woman born before her time and nagged by the problem of reconciling a career with love. She is less anxious to win Romney's love than to dislodge his masculine crown. The humble Marian may kneel to be crowned by her lover; Aurora will force him to his knees before she consents to be crowned. They both understand, of course, that he is in love with her; the leafy crown with which they play is also a lover's crown:

And thus I came here to abase myself,
 And fasten, kneeling, on her regent brows
 A garland which I startled thence one day
 Of her beautiful June-youth.
Aurora Leigh, VIII, 1219-22.

Love as a crown, the loved woman as a queen, is a principal theme in Emily Dickinson's poetry. In a poem beginning "You said that I 'was Great'—one Day—" she combines the themes of love and poetic fame. Her lover has praised her poetry, and she is gratified, but far more grateful for the love. She will be great or small, rhinoceros, mouse, "Queen," or whatever pleases the other. Ardently as she desires fame, she is still more desirous of love. Her

53. In a curious poem, probably belonging to the early 1860's, Emily Dickinson reacts as sensitively to the beard as does Mrs. Browning:

Rearrange a "Wife's" affection!
 When they dislocate my Brain!
 Amputate my freckled Bosom!
 Make me bearded like a man!

She has kept the secret of her love, she adds; it is only at night that she puts on her "Diadem." *Poems*, III, 1168-69; no manuscript survives.

arrogance she reserves for her readers; to the longed-for lover, she is not an Aurora but a Marian Erle.⁵⁴

An early variant of the coronation theme (absent from *Aurora Leigh*) is that of winning a heavenly crown. In "Going to Heaven," a poem written about 1859, Emily asks for "just a bit of 'Crown.'" ⁵⁵ A poem written about 1862, "Smiling back from Coronation," implies a crowning in heaven.⁵⁶ But Emily's favorite symbol for death was the wearing of white, and this she did find in Mrs. Browning's *Aurora Leigh*. Angered by her cousin's interference, Aurora exclaims:

I would rather take my part
With God's Dead, who afford to walk in white . . .
Aurora Leigh, II, 101-02.

In July, 1862, Emily sent to Higginson a poem beginning "Of Tribulation—these are They,/ Denoted by the white." They are the conquerors, she says, those who have overcome great tribulation; their ornaments are martyrs' palms and their garments are snow-white.⁵⁷ In a slightly later poem, "Take Your Heaven further on," she upbraids a rescuer who has come too late; the sufferer (Emily herself) is now dressed in the white of the shroud or of martyrdom.⁵⁸ A poem of the same period begins "Mine—by the Right of the White Election."⁵⁹ In a late poem, "Unworthy of her Breast," she contrasts herself with some visitor:

By her exacting light
How counterfeit the white
We chiefly have!⁶⁰

At some period in her life, perhaps as early as the poem sent to Higginson, Emily began to wear white garments as a symbol of martyrdom and death. Those rare visitors who caught a glimpse of her after her early thirties recall that she was wearing white. Higginson noted that she was dressed in white during both his winter and his summer visit to Amherst. That she customarily wore white was a fixed part of her legend years before her death. She had caught the notion from Mrs. Browning, who had sent her with

54. It must suffice to name some of the poems in which this theme figures most prominently: "God permits industrious Angels," *Poems*, I, 168, about 1861; "The Sun just touched the Morning," I, 168, about 1861; "The Day that I was crowned," I, 283, about 1862; "Like Eyes that looked on Wastes," I, 353, about 1862; "The World stands solemn to me," I, 375, about 1862; "I'm coded—I've stopped being Their's," II, 389, about 1862; "You said that I 'was Great'—one Day—," II, 562, about 1863; "Title Divine is mine!," II, 758, about 1862; "Rearrange a 'Wife's' affection!," III, 1168, undated.

55. *Poems*, I, 64.

56. *Poems*, I, 304.

57. *Poems*, I, 256; late 1861.

58. About 1862; *Poems*, I, 306.

59. About 1862; *Poems*, II, 405.

60. About 1877; *Poems*, III, 981.

renewed interest to Revelation 7. Apparently she considered herself one of "God's Dead."

Emily had two ways of regarding herself as dead. The first was by identification with Aurora as a young girl. Aurora's early years under the cold guardianship of her English aunt are described as a kind of death:

But slowly, as one in swoon,
To whom life creeps back in the form of death,
With a sense of separation, a blind pain
Of blank obstruction, and a roar i' the ears
Of visionary chariots which retreat
As earth grows clearer . . . slowly, by degrees,
I woke, rose up. . . .

Aurora Leigh, I, 559-65.

She has "a little chamber in the house,/ As green as any privet-hedge a bird/ Might choose to build in" (AL, I, 567-69), and here she lives in the company of her books and the lime tree outside her window (Emily's tree is a pine). When her cousin twits her cruelly, she observes:

He might have known that, being what I was,
'Twas natural to like to get away
As far as dead folk can: and then indeed
Some people make no trouble when they die.

Aurora Leigh, I, 505-08.

Emily took this for a literal description of Mrs. Browning's own childhood. In a letter of 1861 to her young Norcross cousins, she writes: "That Mrs. Browning fainted, we need not read *Aurora Leigh* to know, when she lived with her English aunt."⁶¹ In a similar vein she describes herself as "the slightest in the House," one who took the "smallest Room" and had for company only her "little Lamp, and Book—/ And one Geranium." She was ashamed to "live—aloud" and spoke only when she was addressed. Sometimes she thought "how noteless" an insignificant person like her "could die."⁶² Other childhood recollections are colored with a similar self-pity, less candidly avowed than Mrs. Browning's:

My own self-pity, like the red-breast bird
Flies back to cover all that past with leaves.

Aurora Leigh, I, 737-38.

But Emily's preferred identification was with Aurora's friend, Marian Erle. In the most melodramatic episode of *Aurora Leigh* poor Marian is betrayed by a treacherous friend and suffers a brutal assault. She regards herself henceforth as one of the living dead:

61. *Letters*, p. 200.

62. "I was the slightest in the House," *Poems*, I, 371; about 1862.

And she, I said, was murdered; Marian's dead.

They say there's help in heaven
For all such cries. But if one cries from hell . . .
What then?—the heavens are deaf upon that side.

To go down with one's soul into the grave,
To go down half-dead, half-alive, I say,
And wake up with corruption, . . . cheek to cheek
With him who stinks since Friday!

When waking up at last . . .
I told you that I waked up in the grave.

Aurora Leigh, VI, 813, 1179-81, 1198-1202, 1217-18.

Apparently Marian's cruel experience made a deep impression on Emily Dickinson and helped shape her reaction to a painful experience of her own. In 1872 and again as late as 1881 she recalls Marian Erle in letters to her Norcross cousins.⁶³ But there is not space enough to analyze Emily's numerous "death-in-life" poems or the many poems in which she describes herself as murdered or betrayed; and the subject has been treated elsewhere.⁶⁴ Here it is only possible to suggest that in Marian Erle she found her model.

As a result of some bitter experience, then, Emily Dickinson considered herself dead and adopted a symbolic white. The notion of wearing white came from Revelation 7, to which Mrs. Browning's poem had emphatically directed her. But this was not the only use that Mrs. Browning made of Revelation. It served as the framework of her novel; in some sense Aurora herself experienced Revelation and attained the New Jerusalem. In her early girlhood she declares she would rather walk in white with God's dead than lead a quiet, conventional life. Years later, philosophizing over her mail and noting its red seals, she exclaims:

A ninth seal;
The apocalypse is drawing to a close.

Aurora Leigh, III, 98-99.

Marian Erle says to Aurora:

You're great and pure; but were you purer still,—
As if you had walked, we'll say, no otherwise
Than up and down the New Jerusalem,
And held your trailing lute-string up yourself
From brushing the twelve stones, for fear of some
Small speck . . .

Aurora Leigh, VI, 711-16.

63. *Letters*, pp. 61, 246.

64. Patterson, *Emily Dickinson*, pp. 203-04, 382-84.

Toward the end of the poem Romney recalls a sermon:

The vicar preached from "Revelations" (till
The doctor woke), and found me with "the frogs"
On three successive Sundays.

Aurora Leigh, VIII, 903-05.

And the poem closes with a vision of the New Jerusalem:

He turned instinctively, where, faint and far,
Along the tingling desert of the sky,
Beyond the circle of the conscious hills,
Were laid in jasper-stone as clear as glass
The first foundations of that new, near Day
Which should be builded out of heaven to God.

I saw his soul saw,—'Jasper first,' I said;
'And second, sapphire; third, chalcedony;
The rest in order:—last, an amethyst.'

Aurora Leigh, IX, 951-56, 962-64.

In a letter to a friend Emily Dickinson writes:

Don't tell, dear Mrs. Holland, but wicked as I am, I read my Bible sometimes, and in it as I read to-day, I found a verse like this, where friends should "go no more out"; and there were "no tears," and I wished as I sat down to-night that we were *there*—not *here*—and that wonderful world had commenced, which makes such promises, and rather than to write you, I were by your side, and the "hundred and forty and four thousand" were chatting pleasantly, yet not disturbing us. . . .

If roses had not faded, and frosts had never come, and one had not fallen here and there whom I could not waken, there were no need of other Heaven than the one below—and if God had been here this summer, and seen the things that I have seen—I guess that He would think His Paradise superfluous. Don't tell Him, for the world, though, for after all He's said about it, I should like to see what He *was* building for us, with no hammer, and no stone, and no journeyman either.⁶⁵

All the allusions are to Revelation, and it is a reasonable guess that Emily had turned to it after reading *Aurora Leigh*.

A letter of 1863 to Mr. and Mrs. Bowles alludes to Revelation: "To-night looks like 'Jerusalem'! . . . I hope we may all behave so as to reach Jerusalem."⁶⁶ While Samuel Bowles was abroad in 1862, Emily begged him: "Should anybody, where you go, talk of Mrs. Browning, you must hear for us, and if you touch her grave, put one hand on the head, for me—her unmentioned mourner."⁶⁷

65. *Letters*, pp. 140-41. The manuscript of this letter has perished. It cannot be dated by an examination of the handwriting, as was done quite recently and successfully with the poems. When the first edition of the *Letters* was preparing, Mrs. Holland guessed that this letter belonged to the late summer of 1856. She made other guesses which have been proved wrong. Unfortunately there is no internal evidence for redating this poem except that it is signed "Emilie," a vagary that the poet abandoned in 1861, and the excited references to Revelation suggest that it was written after she read *Aurora Leigh*. Mrs. Browning's poem was published in England during the Christmas season of 1856.

66. *Letters*, p. 178.

67. *Ibid.*, p. 173.

As she knew, Bowles himself was a fervent admirer of Mrs. Browning; the latter's complete works headed the list of books Bowles suggested as a traveling library for his friend Maria Whitney. After his death Emily recalled that he had loved the "Gem chapter" (Revelation 21),⁶⁸ which describes the building of the New Jerusalem and the city wall with its twelve courses of jewels; jasper, sapphire, chalcedony, emerald, sardonyx, sardius, chrysolite, beryl, topaz, chrysoprasus, jacinth, and amethyst. Emily used most of these gem names in her poetry, jasper, sapphire, emerald, chrysolite, beryl, jacinth. Two gem names she used repeatedly, topaz and amethyst, and they were Mrs. Browning's favorite's also.⁶⁹

The date when Emily Dickinson began to read Elizabeth Browning is unknown. Mrs. Browning's poetry was available in this country from the time Emily was fifteen or sixteen, and Emily herself wrote that she was "a little girl" when she first made the acquaintance of the English poet. But she first wrote "a sombre girl," which is reminiscent of her bleak "school" days. The years before 1859 or 1860 she habitually described as her school days, although her thirtieth birthday occurred in December 1860; and her definition of childhood was peculiar. She once referred to an event of her twenty-fourth year as belonging to "little girlhood." It becomes clearer when we understand that she did not come of age, by her own reckoning, until she fell in love, until she read Mrs. Browning. Except for a letter of doubtful date to Mrs. Holland, there is no suggestion in letters or poems that Emily read anything by Elizabeth Browning before 1859. It was, finally, the *Aurora Leigh* which overwhelmed her, and this she could not have read before 1857 at the earliest.

What was *Aurora Leigh*, that it could move Emily Dickinson so profoundly?

The writings of women have a peculiar attraction for women writers. In these they find themselves, and they read another woman's poems and novels, even when the latter are technically inferior to men's work (as most commonly they are), with a passionate interest and a secret understanding. No male writer, even the greatest, has been able to create a wholly convincing woman.

68. *Ibid.*, p. 189.

69. Emily's "Amethyst remembrance" probably owes something as well to the following lines of Sonnet XXXVIII, *Sonnets from the Portuguese*:

A ring of amethyst
I could not wear here, plainer to my sight,
Than that first kiss.

See "I held a Jewel in my fingers," *Poems*, I, 176; written about 1861.

It is impossible that he should. His position in the family constellation is altogether different, and he can only guess, and guess imperfectly, at the woman's feelings. A woman may concede that the innocent Ophelia, freed from her inhibitions by madness, might give vent to an astonishing amount of bawdry. A woman may feel the justice of the depiction of Gertrude's possessive love for her son. But she is never caught and bruised by these feelings, as she would be if Ophelia and Gertrude had been the creation of a woman. There is something false in the character she contemplates, just as there was something false in the Elizabethan boy actors who played women's roles; as a result, there is never the intensity of complete identification.

Similarly, no woman can ever react to the character of Hamlet as men have reacted. She cannot enter into the intense subterranean struggle that makes the true horror of his position. At most she has an uneasy sense that this is the way men feel about women. When a male critic (Kohler) asks, "Who has ever seen *Hamlet* and not felt the fearful conflict that moves the soul of the hero?," the answer must be, "Any woman." She may dislike (that is, envy) the lusty Gertrude, but she does not feel the mysterious horror that Hamlet feels. It is impossible that she should. And if it seems the merest fooling to insist that women are not men, still it must be pointed out that male critics have always assumed they were. They have spoken, with complete assurance, for women.

Some men reacted angrily to Mrs. Browning's *Aurora Leigh*. They stigmatized the book as "nasty" and "immoral" and did violence to the feelings of the author, who was aware of nothing but the most idealistic and blameless intentions. Edward Fitzgerald was especially hostile. On the other hand, some men relished the book, Robert Browning, for one, and John Ruskin.

Mrs. Browning borrowed her plot from Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*, obviously because it was congenial to her. The essence of this plot, which delighted Emily Dickinson and generations of other women as well as some men, is that a frail woman should confront a strong, arrogant male and trim him down to her own size or even a little smaller. The modern reader must particularly deplore the blinding of Rochester as tasteless and unpleasant, however necessary it may have been to a *Jane Eyre*; but at least his creator endowed him with some dignity. Here Mrs. Browning failed completely.

Romney Leigh is an incredible amalgam of the moneyed, aris-

tocratic, but warmhearted Rochester and the cold zealot St. John Rivers. Like Rivers he lives to do good and sometimes proposes to subdue others to the yoke of his good. He is also under the necessity of being the acceptable Rochester, and this schizoid character proves his undoing. He is too weak to offer even a sporting resistance to the assertive heroine.

Aurora Leigh is the daughter of "an austere Englishman,/ Who, after a dry lifetime spent at home/ In college-learning, law, and parish talk," journeys to Italy and falls in love with a Florentine woman. Abandoning his home and all his connections, he settles down in Florence with his wife and baby daughter. But the mothers of heroines have a poor life expectancy, and the Florentine soon dies. Aurora lives with her father, who introduces her to books and teaches her Greek. She is thirteen when he dies, murmuring as his last words, "Love, my child, love, love!" In England she finds a new mother in the person of her father's sister, a cold, quiet, upright woman who introduces Aurora to all the virtues of womanhood and makes dull work of them. She finds a new father too in her older cousin Romney, and she resents him:

Once, he stood so near,
He dropped a sudden hand upon my head
Bent down on woman's work, as soft as rain—
But then I rose and shook it off as fire,
The stranger's touch that took my father's place.

She discovers poetry and dreams of being a poet. On her twentieth birthday, as she is putting a hopeful crown on her head, Romney surprises her, teases her about her poetry, and follows this unhappy beginning by a proposal of marriage. He has a respect for serious poetry but doubts that she will ever write any. He wants her to join hands with him and work to cure the world's ills. She answers, in sum (for her full reply is long):

Sir, you were married long ago.
You have a wife already whom you love,
Your social theory. Bless you both, I say.
For my part, I am scarcely meek enough
To be the handmaid of a lawful spouse.
Do I look a Hagar, think you?

Her aunt, who has encouraged this marriage, is shocked to learn that Aurora has refused Romney. By a curious provision cutting off the family estate from heirs with foreign mothers, the fortune that should have come to Aurora is entailed on Romney, who is already rich in his own right. On the aunt's death Aurora will

inherit only a few hundred pounds. Aurora is even less pleased to see Romney in the role of King Cophetua. She will take nothing from him. The subterfuge by which he tries to insure her inheritance of thirty thousand pounds through the aunt is only fresh occasion for anger. And this in spite of the fact that he is clearly in love with her and she is more than a little inclined toward him. She leaves the house with her three hundred pounds and goes to London.

For seven years Aurora earns a precarious living as journalist and part-time poet, always hoping to write the great poem that will prove Romney wrong. She hears occasionally that he is devoting his time and great wealth to social betterment, but her first real news of him comes through Lady Waldemar. This astonishing aristocrat climbs to Aurora's garret apartment and tries to enlist her help in dissuading Romney from a bad marriage. He has engaged himself to a daughter of the people, Marian Erle. Aurora refuses but is sufficiently interested to visit Marian. The latter is as curious a representative of her class as Lady Waldemar of hers. Daughter of a drunken brute and a callous mother, Marian has learned poetry from stray leaves thrown to her by a peddler. As a patient in a charity hospital she meets Romney Leigh, who finds her a job as seamstress. Now he has asked her to marry him, and help with his work, and she has accepted him. In her eyes he is not a man but a saint, and her description makes him indeed a saintly figure. It is the only part of the book in which Romney is not made to appear a complete fool.

But the marriage never comes off. Marian sends a letter saying she is unworthy of Romney and is going away with a friend. Aurora suspects Lady Waldemar's wiles but is thrown off the track. Two years later, at a reception given by her friend Lord Howe, Aurora learns that Lady Waldemar is to marry Romney. In a fit of dejection she resolves to leave England and go to Florence for a rest. During a brief stay in Paris she comes upon Marian Erle and her illegitimate child and learns her story. As Aurora has suspected, it is Lady Waldemar who persuaded Marian to go away, supposedly to Australia, actually into a French brothel. The undoing of Marian Erle is described in some detail, a curious performance for a mind as innocent as Mrs. Browning's. Turned loose raving mad, Marian finds her way to Paris and bears her child.

Aurora takes Marian and the little boy with her and establishes the party in a villa at Bellosguardo overlooking Florence. There

they spend quiet days, with Marian happy in her child but otherwise regarding herself as among the dead. The new book that Aurora left with her publisher has come out and is a huge success. It is the vindication she has been looking for, but she is not happy. At last she is ready to admit that she wants love.

As she sits on her terrace one evening with a book, Romney silently appears before her. There ensues a long scene in which she argues her side of their long-ago difference with a zeal that takes no account of what he is saying. He is humble, agrees to everything; her new book has overwhelmed him. She reminds him bitterly that he had once a different opinion. "But you talked the right," says Romney eagerly, "While I, . . . I built up follies like a wall/ To intercept the sunshine and your face." She answers only, "Speak wisely, cousin Leigh." He speaks at considerable length, heaping ashes on his head. And she takes him up "austerely";

You have read
My book, but not my heart; for recollect,
'Tis writ in Sanscrit, which you bungle at.

Night draws on, and they are still at it, Romney pitifully humble, Aurora vengeful as a Fury. No humility on his part, no admission of past mistakes, can stop the torrent of her spite. She is only slowed down a little when he tells her that his neighbors have burned Leigh Hall, burned it because they resented the derelicts he was establishing there. He has saved nothing except the portrait of an ancestress who reminds him of Aurora. But it ends with his cousin coldly wishing him well and hoping he will be happy with Lady Waldemar.

At this point Romney shows a feeble spark of anger. He is indignant that she couples him with that woman. And he gives her a letter from Lady Waldemar, which is abject enough in a spiteful way. She tries to clear herself of a charge of guilty behavior toward Marian Erle, which has been brought home by a letter from Aurora to Lord Howe. And she has other reasons for hating Aurora. One of her penances during Romney's convalescence after the burning of Leigh Hall has been to read aloud from the famous new book. She has had enough of Aurora and her cousin too.

Marian Erle closes her part of the story by quietly refusing Romney, who has come to keep his word with her. She does not love him. Nothing remains but for Romney to take his leave, and he turns to whistle for the man who has brought him to Aurora's

villa. He is blind. In the burning of his house he has suffered a far greater loss than the destruction of his property. (By a curious species of poetic justice it is Marian's worthless father who blinded him.)

Aurora is stunned. For a while she can only exclaim, "Heavenly Christ! . . . Blind, Romney? . . . No hope?" She weeps, as well she might for what she has done to him. No apology of his has moved her. She has remained obdurate in the face of some thousand lines of humble contrition. Only now is she moved. Only now can she admit that she is "vilely proud," "not a generous woman, never was," in everything more wrong than he.

It is a moment of triumph, and she can afford to be generous. The man who stands before her is *maimed*. She has what she has always secretly desired. Henceforth she can lead him by the hand—by the nose, for that matter. And with a curiously virile image, she flings herself on his breast,

As sword that, after battle, flings to sheath.

Mrs. Browning died on June 30, 1861, a severe blow to Emily Dickinson. Later that summer, in a broken letter to her Norcross cousins, she remembers that Mrs. Browning had once fainted and that George Sand "'must make no noise in her grandmother's bedroom.' Poor children! Women, now, queens, now! And one in the Eden of God."⁷⁰ Shortly afterwards she is begging Mary Bowles to name her newborn son "Robert" in honor of "the bravest man alive," adding, "but *his* boy has no mamma. That makes us all weep, don't it?"⁷¹ Emily was not, however, a particular admirer of Robert Browning. Like most American readers of that period, she saw him as the consort of a queen. In April 1862 she noticed, almost with disapproval, that he "had made another poem, and was astonished—till I remembered that I, myself, in my smaller way, sang off charnel steps."⁷² She read little of his work and late in life could note coolly that it had much declined in quality. But she could never judge Mrs. Browning's poetry dispassionately any more than a lover his beloved. It was part of herself. The bulk of her own poetry was written in the years 1859-1865, and it was written under the influence of Mrs. Browning. After that period Emily

70. *Letters*, p. 200. George Sand was apparently another admiration contracted from Mrs. Browning, who had addressed to Sand two emotional sonnets.

71. *Ibid.*, p. 163.

72. *Ibid.*, p. 205.

Dickinson was like an expiring Roman candle that still jets out a few last brilliant stars.

There are three poems commemorating Mrs. Browning, all written in 1862, about the date of the letter confessing that Emily too "sang off charnel steps." The first begins, "Her 'last Poems'—/ Poets ended." It affirms that there is not on record any other bubbling of "Flute or Woman/ So divine." If a mourner who is no kinsman can almost suffocate with woe,

What, and if, Ourselves a Bridegroom—
Put Her down in Italy? ⁷³

The second begins, "I went to thank Her—/ But She Slept." ⁷⁴ The third is most important, for it gives Emily's conception of her own poetic origin:

I think I was enchanted
When first a sombre Girl—
I read that Foreign Lady—
The Dark—felt beautiful—

Under this spell all experience enlarged for her and became transformed. It was as if, in terms of her playful metaphor, bees became butterflies, butterflies swans, and the little chirpings and soughings of nature a "Titanic Opera." It was a "Divine Insanity," a "Conversion of the Mind/ Like Sanctifying in the soul"—to be witnessed but not explained. ⁷⁵

One last poem of this important year (a year which saw the production of almost one-fourth of Emily Dickinson's poems) remains to be noticed. It begins:

Ourselves were wed one summer—dear—
Your Vision—was in June—
And when Your little Lifetime failed,
I wearied—too—of mine—

And overtaken in the Dark—
Where You had put me down—
By Some one carrying a Light—
I—too—received the Sign.

It is true, the poet continues, that their futures were different. Emily's garden was sown in frosts, and her cottage enclosed by oceans and the cold north. The other's cottage faced the sun, her garden "led the Bloom":

And yet, one Summer, we were Queens—
But You—were crowned in June—

73. *Poems*, I, 234.

74. *Poems*, I, 288.

75. *Poems*, II, 454.

In the manuscript a suggested variant of these two lines reads:

And yet, one Summer, we were wed—
But Your's was first—in June—⁷⁶

Mrs. Browning died in June, after years in the Italian sun and in the sun of poetic fame, and her fictional ego, Aurora, crowned herself poet with a chaplet of leaves on a June day. So much appears to be reflected in the poem. Furthermore, the "Sign" might be interpreted as the gift of poetry, although the identity of the some one "carrying a Light" is as obscure as the darkness in which Emily is set down. Could it be Higginson, who came to Emily's rescue about the time this poem was written? And what is the sense of this mysterious "wedding"? Are the two women "wed" to each other? or is each "wed" to the poetic muse? or are they Brides of the Lamb? Does it refer, however confusedly, to Mrs. Browning's real death and Emily's symbolic death?

The poem is hysterical. There is feeling here too chaotic and anguished for communication. The poem is intimate in tone, without a trace of the idolatry found in the three clearly addressed to Mrs. Browning. It sounds as if it were written to a woman whom Emily knew well, knew intimately. Yet if the poem was inspired by a real friend, it nevertheless appears to borrow from *Aurora Leigh* and the life of Elizabeth Browning. If it was written to Mrs. Browning, then it suggests a feeling so intense as to amount to identification.

76. *Poems*, II, 485.

