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*Casa Guidi Windows* and *Aurora Leigh*  
The Genesis of Elizabeth Barrett Browning's  
Visionary Aesthetic

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Recent feminist criticism has gone a long way toward rescuing Elizabeth Barrett Browning's masterpiece, *Aurora Leigh*, from more than a half-century of neglect.<sup>1</sup> Through this narrative of the growth of a female poet and the development of a female poetics, Barrett Browning, who urged the female poet to look for her poetic "grandmothers,"<sup>2</sup> has come to serve as a poetic grandmother herself, a model of the female poet whose imagination is epic in scope, and whose inner—and domestic—life fosters the poetic energy to tackle social and political mystifications. *Aurora Leigh* shows Barrett Browning working out an aesthetic which, first of all, identifies women as originators of meaning rather than as reflecting mirrors for the male poet's search for self-transcendence, and secondly, makes a claim for poetry as deeply revolutionary as that of the Romantic poets. But the politics of Barrett Browning's poetics has an earlier source in another long-neglected poem,<sup>3</sup> written some years before *Aurora Leigh*, but not before *Aurora Leigh* was in her mind:<sup>4</sup> *Casa Guidi Windows* (written 1848-49, published 1851). Less a narrative than a meditative essay on the vicissitudes of the Italian Risorgimento, *Casa Guidi Windows* deals with a specific moment in history, framed—literally—by Barrett Browning's window on the world. What links the two poems is the poet's conviction that ways of seeing can transform the world of action, and that the weight of patriarchal tradition, aesthetic or political, can paralyze the actors in human history. As a representation of the deadliness of patriarchal rhetoric as well as patriarchal politics, *Casa Guidi Windows* paves the way for *Aurora Leigh*'s attempt to create a new mythos and a living language out of a deadening literary inheritance. In other words, what is mandated by the political vision of *Casa Guidi Windows* is a wholly new literary aesthetic.

In regard to *Aurora Leigh*, Barrett Browning once wrote that her aim was to come face to face with a living present, with the "Humanity" of the age.<sup>5</sup> In *Casa Guidi Windows* she in effect prepares herself for such a bold confrontation by first evaluating the view from the window: the proces-

sional of history in the making, “Humanity” betrayed by weak and faithless rulers and oppressed by a dead literary-political mythology. Barrett Browning does not reject, however, the poet’s need for a tradition or culture’s links with its heroic past. In both poems she is concerned with how the dead—fallen women, “shot corpses,” useless myths, dead poets—can be made to serve the living.

It is useful to keep in mind that this connection has not been made in the history of Barrett Browning scholarship, which has tended to compartmentalize and seal off her “best” works—the *Sonnets from the Portugese*, *Aurora Leigh*—from large tracts of presumed poetic wasteland. *Casa Guidi Windows* has been dismissed as politically naive, and misread as a record of Barrett Browning’s disappointment in the Grand Duke Leopold’s failure to become a charismatic hero.<sup>6</sup> Julia Markus’s recent scholarly edition of the poem<sup>7</sup> goes a long way toward dispelling these misapprehensions, and her introductory essay is mandatory reading for the Barrett Browning scholar. In an attempt to offset the critical tendency to consider *Casa Guidi Windows* “a political poem written by an unknowledgeable and hysterical female” (xix), Markus carefully reconstructs the poem’s historical context. Markus’s main point is that the Brownings’ new life of freedom in Italy coincided with the Florentines’ hope for a new era of political freedom and the eventual unification of Italy, as signaled by certain freedoms granted by Grand Duke Leopold II of Tuscany and the newly elected Pope, Pius IX. Markus brings textual and contextual evidence to bear against the charge that Barrett Browning naively trusted the promises of the Duke and the Pope, and that her reaction against both leaders and people is a reaction against the Risorgimento itself. Markus points out, rather, that Barrett Browning’s support of the Duke in 1847 and her disillusionment with him in 1849 “accurately reflect the attitude of all liberal Europe before and after the revolutions of 1848” (xvii). In fact, Markus makes a good case for the poem’s being “one of the most detailed accounts of the political happenings in Florence in 1847 and 1849 that has come down to us” (xxx). As well as this “objective” accuracy, what is important to a rehabilitative reading of the poem is the double-nature of the speaker: the persona is both “I, a woman” and “I, the poet,” a fusion that produces unique clarity and depth of vision. As this essay attempts to show, this vision is suited both to historical narrative and mythic epic. In *Casa Guidi Windows* a double-vision simultaneously “domesticates” the processional of history, focusing on lived experience in the present as opposed to a dead past, and places the lived moment within a cosmic perspective in which the present unfolds a dynamic future.

*Casa Guidi Windows*’ cosmic-domestic perspective provides a foundation for Aurora Leigh’s discovery of a whole new way of seeing. Aurora Leigh sees herself developing an aesthetic that will be more adequate to the needs of a

living people than are short-sighted social projects, precisely because the aesthetic irradiates the individual life *as* individual life. It would be simplistic to read *Aurora Leigh* as a response to the failures of active heroism as illustrated in *Casa Guidi Windows*, failures exemplary of patriarchal politics. Rather, we can see how in *Casa Guidi Windows* Barrett Browning is working out a conception of the struggle to recover the human from the abstract, the present from the past, radical vision from empty images. This conception is fully realized in *Aurora Leigh*, where the struggle is carried on by a woman poet who becomes a hero for humanity by virtue of her life-affirming visionary power. The rest of my essay elaborates a more detailed consideration of how the shifting perspective in *Casa Guidi Windows* leads to the crucial aesthetic reorientation of *Aurora Leigh*.

Part I of *Casa Guidi Windows* begins with a motion of the poet-speaker's mind, from her recollection of a child's song in praise of liberty, to her musings on the singers of the past who have commemorated Italy's sufferings. It is at this point, when she feels herself drawn to the beauty and melancholy of the past, that the poet announces her intention to break with their seductive rhetoric. The poem's images—here, in particular, female images—are fictions that mask the actuality of suffering: Juliet's empty tomb at Verona stands for "all images/Men set between themselves and actual wrong" (43-44). No matter how great the heritage—"Virgil, Cicero, Catullus, Caesar . . . Boccaccio, Dante, Petrarca . . . Angelo, Raffael, Pergolese" (176-81)—when these figures dry up into rhetoric they only enervate the living. As she is well aware, however, in Italy the past breaks into the present at every turn. Barrett Browning in fact shows great imaginative sympathy for the past, fully representing that seductive pull at the same time that she renounces it. When she visits a Florentine church, for instance, she can "see" exactly what Machiavelli saw: the beautiful terrified women at Plague time, "Rustling her silks in pauses of the mass,/To keep the thought off how her husband fell,/When she left home, stark dead across her feet," (325-27). It is just this ability to recreate that living moment that makes plain to her how easy it is to "reverence or lament" the past, and to turn away from the difficult present. To the extent that she is an apocalyptic thinker, Barrett Browning envisions a cleansing destruction of the old order to make way for the new. The living must go on with their present concerns, the making of a future, and remain strengthened by their links to the dead past, but not enthralled by it.

These meditations are followed by a description of the Grand Duke Leopold's triumphant procession through the streets of Florence. From her perspective at the window, as woman and poet, Barrett Browning sees the progress of a type of Carlylean hero, a hero for the people who demonstrate *their* heroism, in the Carlylean sense, by having chosen *him*. When she looks

at the second actor in this pageant, Pius Ninth, she has more serious reservations. Here the past is put to a different use: her knowledge of the historic papacy, the "hierocratic empire," makes her doubt the new pope can transcend that history. He too is captive to death, the deadliness of his symbolic function. He hardens into the stone of his office, and the people who need a living man must be served by "half travertine" (1041). Still hopeful, however, the poet ends with a blessing from one on whom the images of Italy have had a deep and early influence and a valediction for Naples' "shot corpses," who are dead fruitfully, in a righteous cause. With all the rest of Italy, then, the poet awaits the fulfillment of the Risorgimento.

Part II registers the poet's reaction to Duke Leopold's betrayal of Italy to the Austrians, the feeble attempts of the Florentine people at nationalism, and the Duke's return to Florence with the Austrian military machine. Death, the stone-hardness Barrett Browning has represented in Part I as reaching out from the past, enters the present fully realized as the inexorable engines of war:

cannons rolling on, / . . . each bestrode / By a single man, dust-white from head to heel,  
Indifferent as the dreadful thing he rode, / Like a sculptured Fate serene and terrible  
(302-07).

As neither leaders nor people have acted courageously or wisely, she can exempt from complicity only the dead themselves, who now become the "seeds of life" (663) in a new birth that prefigures the revival of the corpse Earth in Book V of *Aurora Leigh*.<sup>8</sup> The end of the poem circles back to the beginning, with the poet still preoccupied with "graves" and "patriot[s] tombs" (724-25). But she also recalls that she had hope once because a child sang. This association focuses her attention on her own child as a prophetic symbol of rebirth. The Christlike child offers hope of escape from the cycle of history, and the domestic sphere becomes the place where cosmic destiny is at work, allowing the poet to believe that there is a design to human history, that "the blank interstices/Men take for ruins, He will build into/ With pillared marbles rare" (756-58).

This transposition of a pattern of death and renewal from a historical sphere to a cosmic-domestic one prepares for a similar shift in *Aurora Leigh*. The central parallels are two. First, Barrett Browning's assertions in *Casa Guidi Windows* that Italy must throw off a crippling past, especially the mediations of a bankrupt rhetoric, prepare for her assertions about the poet's role in *Aurora Leigh* and her rejection of the empty rhetoric of a patriarchal poetic tradition. In Book V, for instance, she denounces the kind of poet who "trundles back his soul five hundred years" to commemorate an idealized past (in other words the Carlyles and the Tennysons) and announces

her aim to write for the present, to “catch/Upon the burning lava of a song/  
The full-veined, heaving, double-breasted Age” (V, 215-17). This impulse is the same one that stirs the poet to mistrust the uses of the past in *Casa Guidi Windows*: not a mistrust of Dante and Boccaccio in themselves, but in the way they come to signify, blurring our vision of the present. This oppressive past is obviously patriarchal and Barrett Browning comes to supplant it with a female aesthetic and a female history.

Second, in “planting” the dead as seeds for new life in *Casa Guidi Windows*, Barrett Browning prepares for a similarly fruitful “planting” in *Aurora Leigh*. In this case, however, rather than the death of the life-denying fathers, Barrett Browning takes as her base the death of the life-giving mothers. If the dead poets transmit useless myths, there are ways in which female death—female exclusion from the canon—can be made to signify. Like the corpse Earth, whom Christ revives by freeing her curled-back tongue, the poet in *Aurora*—and in her creator—is revived and set free in the course of the poem. The symbolic instrument of that resuscitation is Marian Erle, the woman who suffers social death as a consequence of her rape, pregnancy, and delivery. On a narrative level, the birth of Marian’s child delivers her from her numbing exclusion from society; on the symbolic level, the woman who has been set beyond the boundaries of signification altogether—“fallen” to her death—becomes a powerful figure for the female as originator of meaning. Both through her ongoing relation with Marian and through Marian’s narration of her personal history *Aurora* makes contact with a mythic past adequate to her present; encountering this mother, *Aurora* can at last experience herself as the mother of poems. On the one hand, Marian Erle has created her own domestic society that excludes as much as it is itself excluded from patriarchal culture; on the other, *Aurora Leigh*, while rejecting the deadening aspects of patriarchal poetics, has created her own aesthetic sphere which is uniquely inclusive.

While both *Casa Guidi Windows* and *Aurora Leigh* designate the proper sphere of poetic vision as the domestic-cosmic rather than the social-historic, *Aurora Leigh* holds out the possibility of keeping both spheres simultaneously in view. According to *Aurora*, the proper poet ought to “exert a double vision,” to

see near things as comprehensively / As if afar they took their point of sight, / And  
distant things as intimately deep / As if they touched them. (V, 183-88)

On the surface, this looks like the standard Romantic tendency toward the visionary, a call to “see into the life of things.” My argument, however, is that Barrett Browning’s “double vision” requires constant shifts in focus that not only open up vistas, but also keep the gazer firmly rooted in the moment and

the near-at-hand. In Book VI, just before her encounter with Marian Erle, Aurora articulates her resolve to “look into the swarthiest face of things,” and asserts that she will have nothing to do with an art that shrinks from the particularity of a beggar boy who hungers for oranges. The poet who looks and really sees this reality sees yet another: the beggar boy contains

both flowers and firmaments / And surging seas and aspectable stars / And all that we  
would push him out of sight / In order to see nearer. (VI, 186-94)

It is this realization of double focus that seems to facilitate Aurora’s crucial recovery of Marian the beggar maid and her child. The “age” Aurora aims to reflect in her poetry seems problematically female, for Aurora’s resolve to “look” will have to encounter Marian’s sexual fall and death, a female *cultural* death. What such determination yields is a miraculous, or mythic, reality: the dead mother restored to life, accompanied by her sacred child—a little world that opens out into infinity. The kind of double focus I have described above is prefigured in *Casa Guidi Windows* as a shift in focus from the distant to the near, which may yet yield another distance: from the pageant outside the windows, to the child within the house, to the invisible heavenly city. It is fully realized in *Aurora Leigh* by the poet’s ability to keep Marian in view simultaneously as a narrative character with a social destiny and as a mythic character with a cosmic destiny. Significantly, while the poet in *Casa Guidi Windows* remains framed in the window, looking out on the panorama of patriarchal history, or turns from that to her inner domain, the poet in *Aurora Leigh* moves freely in the crowded street and takes her vision where she finds it.

In his Nobel Lecture (1982), Czeslaw Milosz suggests that this double vision characterizes the poet whose quest is for “reality.”<sup>9</sup> He tells how his model for the poet is a character in a children’s fantasy by Selma Lagerlöf, who “flies above the earth and looks at it from above but at the same time sees it in every detail.” Such double vision implies for Milosz two attributes of the poet: “avidity of the eye and the desire to describe that which he sees.” I would suggest that such double vision as Barrett Browning and Milosz describe—the comprehensive and the close-up view—is specially, if not uniquely, female. The contrast between Robert Browning’s and Barrett Browning’s positions is instructive: as Nina Auerbach points out, for Robert Browning there is no single moment of epiphanic vision, only the multiple changing faces of his *dramatis personae*.<sup>10</sup> Robert Browning, then, with his ironic distance and shifting realities, would seem to be the more “modern” poet, less in the grip of Romantic projections. But as much as she, too, is committed to the deconstruction of Romantic projections, Barrett Browning is equally committed to the epiphanic vision which would empower all

the oppressed—whether the Italian people or all women. It would seem that Barrett Browning turns Romantic vision to her own female purposes, emphasizing the necessary shift and re-shift from the near-at-hand to the distant overview. Because she, too, wants access to power, the female poet looks through appearances to the visionary distances; because she cannot forget female powerlessness, however, she keeps looking steadfastly at the close-up view, the swarthiest face of things.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Notable are Cora Kaplan's introduction to her edition, *Aurora Leigh and Other Poems*, (London: The Women's Press Ltd., 1978); Sandra Donaldson's "'Motherhood's Advent in Power': Elizabeth Barrett Browning's Poems about Motherhood," *Victorian Poetry*, 18 (Spring 1980), 51-60; Barbara Gelpi's "*Aurora Leigh*: The Vocation of the Woman Poet," *Victorian Poetry*, 19 (Spring 1981), 35-48; Virginia Steinmetz's "Beyond the Sun: Patriarchal Images in *Aurora Leigh*," *Studies in Browning and His Circle*, 9 (Winter 1981), 18-41, and "Images of Mother-Want' in Elizabeth Barrett Browning's *Aurora Leigh*," *Victorian Poetry*, 21 (Winter 1983), 351-67; Sandra Gilbert's analysis in *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1979), as well as her "From Patria to Matria: Elizabeth Barrett Browning's Risorgimento," *PMLA*, 99 (March 1984), 194-209; and Dolores Rosenblum's "Elizabeth Barrett Browning's *Aurora Leigh*: Face to Face with the Nineteenth-Century Poets," *Victorian Studies*, 26 (Spring 1983), 321-38.

<sup>2</sup>"England has had many learned women, not merely readers but writers of the learned languages, in Elizabeth's time and afterwards—women of deeper acquirement than are common now in the greater diffusion of letters; and yet where were the poetesses? The divine breath . . . why did it never pass, even in the lyrical form, over the lips of a woman? How strange! And can we deny that it was so? I look everywhere for grandmothers and see none. It is not in the filial spirit I am deficient, I do assure you—witness my reverent love of the grandfathers!" *The Letters of Elizabeth Barrett Browning*, ed. Frederic G. Kenyon (New York: Macmillan, 1897), I, 231-32.

<sup>3</sup>See Flavia Alaya's complex and insightful study of the Brownings and Italian politics in "The Ring, the Rescue, and the Risorgimento: Reunifying the Brownings' Italy," *Browning Institute Studies*, 6 (1978), 1-41.

<sup>4</sup> Writing to Robert Browning in 1845, she mentions her projected "novel-poem." *The Letters of Robert Browning and Elizabeth Barrett Browning, 1845-1846*, ed. Elvan Kinter (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1969), I, 31.

<sup>5</sup>*Letters of Robert Browning and Elizabeth Barrett Browning*, I, 31.

<sup>6</sup>See for instance Alethea Hayter's comments in *Mrs Browning: A Poet's Work and Its Setting* (London: Faber and Faber, 1962), 131-32, and William Irvine and Park Honan's evaluation in *The Book, the Ring, and the Poet* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1974), 253-54.

<sup>7</sup>Elizabeth Barrett Browning, *Casa Guidi Windows*, ed. Julia Markus (New York: The Browning Institute, 1977). Subsequent references to Markus's essay are cited parenthetically, and line numbers for *Casa Guidi Windows* refer to this edition.

<sup>8</sup>Elizabeth Barrett Browning, *The Complete Works of Elizabeth Barrett Browning*, eds. Charlotte Porter and Helen Clarke (New York; Crowell, 1900; rpt. New York: AMS Press,



1983), V, 117-18. Subsequent references to *Aurora Leigh* refer to this edition, and book and line numbers are cited parenthetically in the text.

<sup>9</sup>*The New York Review of Books*, 28: 3, 11-15.

<sup>10</sup>Nina Auerbach, "Robert Browning's Last Word," *Victorian Poetry*, 22 (Summer, 1984), 161-73.