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Narrative Means, Lyric Ends

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JUXTAPOSED FRAGMENTS OF GENRES IN *AURORA LEIGH*

... the ballad's race
Is rapid for a poet who bears weights
Of thought and golden image. He can stand
Like Atlas, in the sonnet—and support
His own heavens pregnant with dynastic stars;
But then he must stand still, nor take a step.

—Elizabeth Barrett Browning, *Aurora Leigh* 5.84–89

Elizabeth Barrett Browning's *Aurora Leigh*, first published in 1856, is impossible to fit into only one category or describe with only one adjective. Virginia Woolf called it "stimulating and boring, ungainly and eloquent, monstrous and exquisite all by turns, it overwhelms and bewilders."¹ One of its most bewildering features is its generic hybridity: it is, by turns, novel and poem, retrospective and diaristic, epic and lyric. The poem contains fragments of many different genres, but I argue this is an indication of Barrett Browning's artistic control, rather than a symptom of artistic sloppiness. The poem, for the most part, keeps the various generic fragments distinct; as discrete units juxtaposed with each other, they expose the conventions and liabilities of each genre

1. Virginia Woolf, "Aurora Leigh," in *The Second Common Reader* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., 1960), 188.

when considered separately. By incorporating conflicting generic conventions, the poem offsets the limits of one genre by the strengths of another; narrative is exposed to show the strengths of lyric, and lyric to show the strengths of narrative. *Aurora Leigh* thus implies the necessity of the generic hybridity it embodies.

Aurora Leigh's relationship to genre categories has been a vexed one, from its very inception. In a letter to Robert Browning discussing her early ideas for the poem, Elizabeth Barrett Browning declared, "My chief intention just now is the writing of a sort of novel-poem."² It was originally conceived as a generic hybrid, the exact nature of which was left ambiguous by the phrase "a sort of." Critics have generally agreed with the author's own label for her poem, but have sometimes called the form anomalous.³ Those who describe Barrett Browning's poem through more narrow generic categories, most frequently apply the category of epic. Herbert Tucker views the poem as "at once a veiled autobiography, a reluctant novel, and an aspiring epic," arguing that its use of certain epic elements allowed Barrett Browning "a variety of means for loosening the realist novel's grip on Victorian narrative as a shaper of women's lives."⁴ Though Tucker suggests the poem uses elements of epic to escape the patriarchal restrictions of the novel, other critics think the more troublesome patriarchal restrictions are affiliated with the epic. Deirdre David sees Barrett Browning as complicit in a conservative gender ideology, and claims, "*Aurora Leigh* is a formal hybrid that attempts to fit the explosive material more often found in the social novels of the 1840s to the traditional, male form of the epic."⁵ Alison Case is more ambivalent about the status of Barrett Browning's conservatism, and sees the female novel tradition as a means through which she could resist the patriarchal restrictions of the epic.⁶ Susan Stanford Friedman makes a similar argument to Case's but adds a crucial third term: lyric. Friedman sees

2. Elizabeth Barrett Browning to Robert Browning, 27 February 1845, *The Letters of Robert Browning and Elizabeth Barrett Browning*, ed. R. B. Browning (London, 1899), I, 32.

3. Dorothy Mermin writes, "Of all the important Victorian long poems, *Aurora Leigh* is the only 'novel-poem,' or novel in verse." Dorothy Mermin, "Genre and Gender in *Aurora Leigh*," *The Victorian Newsletter* 69 (Spring 1986): 7. I think the Victorian verse-novel is less unusual than Mermin claims: Clough's *Amours de Voyage* is a verse-novella, and Robert Browning's *The Ring and the Book* could be thought of as a proto-Modernist novel in verse.

4. Herbert Tucker, "*Aurora Leigh*: Epic Solutions to Novel Ends," in *Famous Last Words: Changes in Gender and Narrative Closure*, ed. Alison Booth (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1993), 62.

5. Deirdre David, *Intellectual Women and Victorian Patriarchy* (London: The Macmillan Press Ltd., 1987), 98, 102.

6. Alison Case, *Plotting Women: Gender and Narration in the Eighteenth- and Nineteenth-Century British Novel* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1999), 107.

Barrett Browning as entering the imposingly masculine tradition of epic with *Aurora Leigh*, incorporating elements of lyric and the novel (genres more accessible to female authors, dealing with topics more accessible to women) in order to feminize the epic and find a central place for a heroine.⁷ Other descriptions of the poem add more (and more specific) genres to the list of its key components.⁸ Rather than getting lost in a proliferation of specific genres, this chapter focuses on basic elements of the broader categories of lyric and narrative modes, dividing the latter category into retrospective narrative and epistolary narrative. By doing so, I hope to reach a better understanding of the rhetorical purpose of *Aurora Leigh's* generic hybridity.

AURORA'S CHANGING NARRATIVE PERSPECTIVE

The poem manifests its generic hybridity in many ways, but one of the most prominent is the poem's unusual narrative structure. In the first 4 of the 9 books comprising *Aurora Leigh*, Aurora describes her childhood, her early development as a poet, her rejection of her cousin Romney's marriage proposal, and Romney's subsequent failed attempt to marry a working class girl as an emblem of social reform, all from a confident retrospective vantage point as a single woman and established poet. In book 5, however, the time of the story has caught up to the time of discourse: rather than describing events that happened months or years before, Aurora writes about a social gathering that happened earlier that evening. From that point on, the described events happen at a later time than when Aurora wrote the first four books of the poem. In books 6 and 7, Aurora's habits of composition more closely resemble journal

7. Susan Stanford Friedman, "Gender and Genre Anxiety: Elizabeth Barrett Browning and H. D. as Epic Poets," *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature* 5.2 (Fall 1986): 203–28.

8. According to Marjorie Stone, "*Aurora Leigh* combines a verse bildungsroman or spiritual epic like *The Prelude* . . . with a treatise on poetics . . . and a heavily plotted novel . . . all enlivened by liberal dashes of racy social satire in the manner of Byron's *Don Juan*." Marjorie Stone, "Genre Subversion and Gender Inversion: *The Princess* and *Aurora Leigh*," *Victorian Poetry* 25.2 (Summer 1987): 115. Amanda Anderson offers a similar list of genres for *Aurora Leigh*, but specifies two types of novel—"the courtship novel and the 'social problem' novel." Amanda Anderson, *Tainted Souls and Painted Faces: The Rhetoric of Fallenness in Victorian Culture* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993), 169. Dorothy Mermin says of Barrett Browning, "It is as if she held in suspension all the elements of Victorian poetry, all its potential voices, with now one, now another, precipitating into verse. . . . She was always looking for a new subject, a generic innovation." Dorothy Mermin, *Elizabeth Barrett Browning: The Origins of a New Poetry* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 2.

entries than a retrospective autobiography, since she records events that occurred in the near past, sometimes on the same day that she sits down to write about them. In the final two books, the relationship in time between the story events and the composition of the discourse is extremely ambiguous, for reasons I shall discuss later.

This unusual narrative structure has attracted the attention of a number of critics, but to my mind, the most persuasive discussion to date is in Alison Case's book, *Plotting Women*. As she describes it, "The narrative confusions result from the coexistence of two seemingly incompatible plots: a female *Künstlerroman* and a feminine love story, for both of which Aurora serves as heroine-narrator."⁹ Case convincingly argues that, according to nineteenth-century narrative conventions, the two kinds of stories corresponded to two very different narrative techniques. The *Künstlerroman* plot in books one through four "is told as a fully-conceived, retrospective narrative. . . . The form and subject here complement each other, the reader's sense of the narrator's conceptual control of her story, her authority over it, contributing as much to a belief in the tale's telos—successful authorship—as the events of the story itself."¹⁰ But Case's central argument is that the heroine of a love plot, if she is to be perceived as properly feminine, cannot be so assertive of her narrative mastery. Rather, if she is allowed to tell her story herself, she is most often relegated to epistolary or diaristic forms, through which she presents events that she only partly understands, leaving an editor or author to give them narrative shape and meaning. The later books of *Aurora Leigh* adopt these epistolary conventions, and keep them relatively separate from the earlier retrospective *Künstlerroman*. Case not only provides this explanation based on general nineteenth-century literary conventions, but also argues that the narrative structure is necessary for the reader's understanding of character motivation within this particular poem. The early books must be retrospectively told from a point midway through the overall events in order to present convincingly Aurora's initial rejection of Romney as the proper choice at the time.

While Case's description of the poem is accurate and astute, it leaves some of the strangest elements of the narrative structure unexplained. A more complete understanding of *Aurora Leigh* can be attained by moving beyond the dualism of retrospective versus epistolary narrative, and examining a third category crucial to this poem—the lyric. Lyrical sections

9. Case, *Plotting*, 107–8.

10. *Ibid.*, 117.

are scattered throughout the poem, from Aurora's self-coronation with an ivy crown, to her effusions about the Italian landscape, to her meditations on the nature of art. Lyrical elements are also introduced in less direct ways, and the poem's indirect lyricism can clarify sections of the poem that have been viewed as confusing, capricious, or sloppy. The subsequent sections of this chapter examine two of these confusing episodes, in an effort to understand how Barrett Browning juxtaposes lyric and narrative, allowing them to illuminate and critique each other.

First, however, I want to return to the issue of Aurora's retrospective vantage on only part of her poem, and when and how the temporal gaps in Aurora's composition become visible. Herbert Tucker offers a different temporal scheme for the composition of the early books. He claims, "The 'now' from which Aurora has surveyed her youth in books 1 and 2 and the 'now' of book 3, in which she shoos Susan off and tears into today's mail, cannot be identical."¹¹ It is certainly true that if the reader pauses to consider it, the "now" of writing at the beginning of book 1 is not precisely the same as the "now" at the beginning of book 3: at the moment when Susan's interruption is recorded, Aurora has written over 2,400 lines of poetry, which would require a substantial amount of time. While Susan's interruption, which will be discussed at length in the next section, does physically contextualize Aurora's act of writing, its primary effect is not (at least for me as a reader) to draw attention to the temporal gap between writing books 1 and 2 and writing book 3. Moreover, there are indications that the gap in time between Aurora's composition of books 1 and 2 and her composition of book 3 is not a large one. At the end of book 2, Aurora mentions that "it is seven years since" her rejection of Romney's proposal, and one of the letters Susan brings in book 3 is from Vincent Carrington, who arouses Aurora's interest because he knows Romney and "may say a word / Of something as it chanced seven years ago."¹² In addition, the other letters she receives in book 3 contain advice from critics on her latest volume of poetry (3.66–98), and at the beginning of book 1 Aurora declares herself an established poet, saying she has "written much in prose and verse" (1.2). The only possible suggestion of a substantial gap in time between Aurora's composition of books 1 and 2 and her composition of book 3 is found in the lines which end book 2:

. . . we let go hands, my cousin and I,

11. Tucker, "Aurora Leigh," 66.

12. Elizabeth Barrett Browning, *Aurora Leigh*, ed. Margaret Reynolds (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1992), 2.1238, 3.145–46. All subsequent citations are from this edition; book and lines numbers are presented parenthetically.

And, in between us, rushed the torrent-world
 To blanch our faces like divided rocks,
 And bar for ever mutual sight and touch
 Except through swirl of spray and all that roar.
 (2.1244–48)

If Aurora is definitively asserting that she and Romney are “bar[red] for ever [from] mutual sight and touch,” then either she is blatantly lying to her readers, or she writes these lines prior to the events in books 3 and 4, when she sees Romney again. But Aurora does not make this a definitive assertion: she qualifies it by saying “except through swirl of spray and all that roar,” an apt description for the tumultuous failed wedding and the discussions preceding it, narrated in books 3 and 4.

It matters whether or not Aurora writes the first two books before the events of books 3 and 4 occur, because it affects the emotional resonance and the generic implications of her choice to write. If she writes books 1 and 2 without having seen Romney since rejecting his proposal, then writing so much of him likely implies her longing and regret, and hence emphasizes the romance plot. If she writes all four opening books after Marian leaves Romney at the altar, then Aurora writes so much of him after seeing his symbolic plan for class reconciliation fail. Her romantic longing is then offset by pity that Romney’s scheme has gone awry, and perhaps satisfaction that his overconfidence has proven unfounded. And if Romney has been wrong about the best methods for healing society’s wounds, perhaps he has been wrong, too, in his scornful dismissal of her poetry. If books 1 and 2 were written after the events described in books 3 and 4, as I think they were, then more emphasis falls on the *Künstlerroman* plot and Aurora’s growing confidence in her choice of vocation over marriage.

Firmly establishing the time frame of Aurora’s composition also helps clarify which standards of verisimilitude are being invoked at different points in the narrative. Herbert Tucker, for reasons of verisimilitude, emphasizes the gap between writing book 3 and writing book 5: “If we apply to the scene of writing the same canons of verisimilitude that book 5 theoretically and practically invokes, we must assume that the night of Lord Howe’s party is later than the night on which Susan was sent up to bed in book 3.”¹³ It is logical that the night of Lord Howe’s party is later than the night Susan brings letters to Aurora, but there is

13. Tucker, “*Aurora Leigh*,” 67. More recently, Tucker has reiterated the temporal gap between the composition of book 3 and book 5, but has emphasized book 5 as the decisive break that exposes the changing time of narration. Herbert F. Tucker, *Epic: Britain’s Heroic Muse 1790–1910* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 381.

strong evidence that the books were written at roughly the same period of Aurora's life, and that the poem does not draw much attention to any small gap between their composition. Both these nights, and hence the composition of books 3–5, happen after Marian leaves Romney waiting at the altar, and Aurora takes a firmly retrospective view of that event. Margaret Reynolds has suggested that we can establish Aurora's composition of book 3 as after the failed wedding, because one of the letters Susan brings contains a reference to Romney's use of his family estate as a Fourierian phalanstery, a project he seems to have undertaken after Marian's disappearance.¹⁴ Specifically, the letter from Vincent Carrington asks, "Have you heard of Romney Leigh, / Beyond what's said of him in newspapers, / His phalansteries there, his speeches here" (3.106–08). That the phalansteries were established after the failed wedding is suggested by Aurora's writing in book 5:

. . . I have not seen Romney Leigh
 Full eighteen months . . . add six, you get two years.
 They say he's very busy with good works,—
 Has parted Leigh Hall into almshouses.
 (5.572–75)

The passage suggests Aurora only has second-hand knowledge of Romney's phalansteries, which, in turn, suggests that he implemented the plan after his last parting from Aurora, after the failed wedding to Marian. Vincent Carrington's letter, and Aurora's entire composition of book 3, must happen after Romney is jilted. And her writing book 3 through the beginning of book 5 must happen in a period of time less than eighteen months, perhaps much less than eighteen months.

This passage has itself caused additional speculation on the changing time of Aurora's composition. Alison Case quotes lines 5.572–73 as evidence of "the poet apparently noting with ellipses a lapse of six months during which the manuscript had been abandoned literally midline."¹⁵ Such a casual and yet blatant admission of so much lapsed time might seem realistic but also violates expectations for the organic development of art (which are discussed later in this chapter). It is possible that "add six months" indicates that interval has elapsed between starting book 5 and finishing it the night of Lord Howe's party. (The description of the party begins a few lines later.) But such an inference is only an inference,

14. Margaret Reynolds, "Critical Introduction," in *Aurora Leigh*, ed. Margaret Reynolds (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1992), 30.

15. Case, *Plotting*, 118.

and not definitive, because it is also possible to interpret the remark as indicating that six months from now, it will be two years since seeing Romney. The strange imperative to add six months might be a rhetorical gesture to emphasize the length of time they have been separated. Such an interpretation is strengthened by the adjective “full” in “full eighteen months,” indicating that Aurora feels as if the separation has been long, perhaps feels as if it must be longer than it is. Regardless of whether or not a six-month gap in composition occurs prior to Lord Howe’s party, it is much clearer that after Lord Howe’s party there are gaps in composition. It is also clear that on the night of the party, the time of events has caught up to the time of discourse. Before this evening, readers might fail to notice the potential gaps, and the realistic sense of time passing with composition, noted by Herbert Tucker. After this evening, Aurora’s writing demands to be read as more immediate and intermittent, as a time-bound process resembling sporadic journal entries.

A PRESENT-TENSE INTRUSION

There is, however, a moment well before the start of book 5 that creates a sense of immediacy, an unexpected present-tense intrusion in the otherwise retrospective book 3:

Leave the lamp, Susan, and go up to bed.
 The room does very well; I have to write
 Beyond the stroke of midnight. Get away;
 Your steps, for ever buzzing in the room,
 Tease me like gnats. Ah, letters! throw them down
 At once, as I must have them, to be sure,
 Whether I bid you never bring me such
 At such an hour, or bid you. No excuse;
 You choose to bring them, as I choose perhaps
 To throw them in the fire. Now get to bed,
 And dream, if possible, I am not cross.
 (3.25–35)

Herbert Tucker suggests this very odd moment is a key example of how, by “narratizing its own composition, *Aurora Leigh* renders elastic the relation of the writing present to the written past.”¹⁶ I do think

16. Tucker, “*Aurora Leigh*,” 66.

this moment begins to “narratize” the poem’s composition, precisely because it suggests that writing takes time, that composition is not an indefinitely suspended moment but rather a process that extends over many days and nights. But this temporal process is only suggested, and is not the main focus of the passage. Rather, the dominant effect is to concretize or contextualize the moment of composition. Tucker suggests, “In dismissing her maidservant and introducing a specific context for the writing act, Aurora dismisses the supports of conventional autobiography, and supplants a hypostatized present by an actual, mobile one.”¹⁷ I agree that “an actual, mobile” present replaces an abstract, static one; but in this case, it is not so much retrospective autobiography that is being invoked and undercut, but rather lyric poetry—a genre which can be defined precisely by its abstract, static present, its suspended moment of discourse. My suggestion that we view Susan’s interruption in a lyrical, rather than narrative, context is supported by the nature of Aurora’s poem immediately prior to the interruption—an abstract, allusive, metaphorical meditation on death, youthful aspirations, and social strictures (3.11–24).

By introducing a concrete, particularized moment of composition, Barrett Browning creates a startling contrast to some of the conventions of lyric poetry. Generally, lyric poems emphasize a decontextualized present moment of discourse, which blurs the distinction between the moment of composition and the moment of reception. There are two common ways for poets to create this illusion, and for critics to describe it. The first is to de-emphasize the author. The poem, then, seems to be mysteriously self-creating out of a void, rather than a production of a particular person in a particular social and historical setting. This illusion of ahistoricism is the underlying target of critiques of New Criticism, which deliberately isolated poems as objects of detached aesthetic analysis, separate from social and historical contexts. Lyric poetry’s seeming ahistoricism is also the basis for critiques of it as being politically disengaged.¹⁸ But throughout *Aurora Leigh* we are given very particular social and historical settings, from the slums of Victorian London to high society dinner parties, from Parisian markets to Florentine streets. In their comments on art, both Aurora and Barrett Browning explicitly advocate

17. Ibid.

18. One notable exception is Theodor Adorno, who views lyric’s deliberate avoidance of specific historical contexts and the details of material and social life as a method of political critique. Lyric’s ahistoricism is, paradoxically, “in itself social in nature,” constituting “a protest against a social condition which every individual experiences as hostile, distant, cold, and oppressive.” “Lyric Poetry and Society,” in *The Adorno Reader*, ed. Brian O’Connor (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), 214.

poetry's representation of present times rather than a distant, mythic past, and this poem follows through on the belief. In the passage where Aurora scolds Susan for interrupting her, the sense of the present, the localized, and the particular is taken to an extreme, representing details of the artist's surroundings usually considered too trivial and mundane to be included in poetry.¹⁹

Even though a concrete setting at a particular historical moment has been substituted for the suspended moment of lyric poetry, the poem still creates the sense of extreme immediacy and presentness associated with lyric. The text offers what seem to be Aurora's exact words to Susan, without any framing commentary, and gives the reader the sense of overhearing Aurora as she speaks. This combination of a particular setting, and the illusion of overhearing a speaker's remarks to a particular person, suggests a resemblance to dramatic monologues.²⁰ The resemblance is even more striking when we note that Susan's words are not reported, although the passage clearly implies that she speaks to Aurora: dramatic monologues frequently feature such a silent interlocutor. The passage also resembles a dramatic monologue in that Aurora's speech reveals a specific (in this case, unflattering) aspect of her character, and such a revelation is not her primary intention in speaking. Unlike the speakers of most dramatic monologues, however, Aurora is aware of the negative character traits revealed by her comments. Immediately after she reprimands Susan, Aurora writes, "Why what a pettish, petty thing I grow" (3.36). Because Aurora finds herself at fault, readers are not forced to distance themselves from Aurora in order to judge her. Readers can identify with her without dissonance or ethical discomfort because the identification includes judgment. We can thus

19. Holly Laird asserts that "a nonwriter reading the entire poem could glean from it an accurate description of a successful writer's life. . . . It is precisely through this contextualization that . . . Browning places her theory in action; she refuses to divorce philosophical rationalization from practical contexts." See Holly A. Laird, "Aurora Leigh: An Epical *Ars Poetica*," in *Writing the Woman as Artist: Essays on Poetics, Politics, and Portraiture*, ed. Suzanne W. Jones (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1991), 363.

20. Herbert Tucker's characterization of Tennyson's and Robert Browning's early dramatic monologues applies equally well, I contend, to this section of *Aurora Leigh*: "The charmed circle of lyric finds itself included by the kind of historical particularity that lyric genres exclude by design." "Dramatic Monologue and the Overhearing of Lyric," in *Lyric Poetry: Beyond New Criticism*, eds. Chaviva Hošek and Patricia Parker (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985), 228. Similarly, Melissa Valiska Gregory notes, "Browning's dramatic monologues inherently bridge or create a generic slippage between the social setting of the novel and the subjective utterance of the Romantic lyric, featuring speakers who firmly locate themselves historically and rhetorically." "Robert Browning and the Lure of the Violent Lyric Voice: Domestic Violence and the Dramatic Monologue," *Victorian Poetry* 38.4 (Winter 2000): 494-95.

react as though overhearing Aurora with the extreme immediacy, even immersion, associated with lyric, rather than with the tensions between judgment and sympathy associated with the dramatic monologue.²¹ In the broader context of the passage, then, the lyric elements begin to outweigh the resemblance to a dramatic monologue.

The idea of poetry as overheard leads to lyric poetry's second common method for blurring the distinction between composition and reception: to de-emphasize the receiver, to present the poet as unconscious of an audience. Perhaps the most famous formulation of this is John Stuart Mill's claim that "eloquence is *heard*, poetry is *overheard*."²² This, in turn, has led to the critique that lyric poetry, especially Romantic lyricism, is overly self-absorbed and isolated, even solipsistic.²³ In this section of *Aurora Leigh*, readers may feel as though they overhear Aurora, but Aurora is not completely isolated. Susan is present, and her intrusion reminds us that many authors, particularly women, have difficulty finding the privacy to write, finding a room of their own. If a poet *does* acquire the necessary privacy, too much isolation might make him or her inconsiderate and antisocial, as Aurora implies in her comments immediately after yelling at Susan. She admits:

Why what a pettish, petty thing I grow,—
 A mere, mere woman, a mere flaccid nerve,
 A kerchief left out all night in the rain,
 Turned soft so,—overtasked and overstrained
 And overlived in this close London life!
 And yet I should be stronger.
 (3.36–41)

21. The classic articulation of the dramatic monologue as creating "tension between sympathy and moral judgment" is Robert Langbaum's *The Poetry of Experience: The Dramatic Monologue in Modern Literary Tradition* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1957), 85. For a detailed discussion of the dramatic monologue, see chapter 4.

22. John Stuart Mill, "Thoughts on Poetry and Its Varieties," in *Collected Works of John Stuart Mill*, vol. 1, eds. John M. Robson and Jack Stillinger (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1981), 348. As stated before, this essay is better known by the title "What Is Poetry?"

23. Sarah M. Zimmerman rightly observes, "Mill's grand gesture of severing poetry from eloquence inaugurates a critical history of divorcing lyricism from rhetorical—and by extension, social—concerns." See Sarah M. Zimmerman, *Romanticism, Lyricism, and History* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1999), 1. For a good discussion of Mill's lasting influence on criticism and the continued association of lyricism with isolated introspection, see Zimmerman 10–19. Zimmerman herself questions the supposed asociality of lyricism and finds subtle and varied forms of social and political engagement in a range of Romantic texts.

There is some ambivalence about what is causing her pettishness. Is it being “overtasked” by straining too much at the traditionally masculine pursuit of poetry, or being “overlived” by being too connected to the feminine private sphere? Is it being isolated in a too “close” room, or being too closely surrounded by bustling London life? Whatever the cause of Aurora’s foul mood, she chides herself for resenting Susan’s presence and for dealing with her too harshly. Aurora recognizes that even poets are not free from social bonds, thus refuting both the illusion of isolation within lyric poems, and the Romantic cult of the socially detached genius who writes such poems.²⁴

An even stronger reminder of the poet’s connection to others, and of readers’ reception of her work, is provided by Aurora’s description of the letters Susan has brought her. This is clearly an instance of Aurora as a reader, as a recipient of other people’s compositions. And the contents of the letters include descriptions of how other people have received Aurora’s poetry. In fact, four of the letters are from critics, with contradictory views on Aurora’s latest volume (3.68–98). Even though the contents of these letters are subject to mild satire, correspondence with others is given value as a source of knowledge. The heroine chides herself, “Never burn / Your letters, poor Aurora! for they stare / With red seals from the table, saying each, / ‘Here’s something that you know not’” (3.41–44).

Such a strong emphasis on the reception of writing is unusual in lyrical contexts, though not without precedent: Byron’s narrator sometimes speculates about the poem’s reception during the lyrical sections of *Don Juan*. As was discussed in chapter 1, some critics might argue that if the reader is aware of the poem’s status as a public, written document, then the reader would also be aware of a gap in time between the poem’s

24. Rachel Blau DuPlessis writes, “Making a female character be a ‘woman of genius’ sets in motion not only conventional notions of womanhood but also conventional romantic notions of the genius, the person apart, who, because unique and gifted, could be released from social ties and expectations” (84–85). She claims that most nineteenth-century works place “their final emphasis on the woman, not the genius” (87). See Rachel Blau DuPlessis, *Writing Beyond the Ending: Narrative Strategies of Twentieth-Century Women Writers* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985). I think that *Aurora Leigh* does emphasize the woman, but does so partly to critique the social irresponsibility of detached male genius. I infer that for Barrett Browning, the model of the poet implied by *The Prelude*, in which the emphasis falls on his relationship to the natural world, is overly isolated. My reading is thus compatible with Amanda Anderson’s suggestion that “despite the manifold ways in which autonomy emerges as an imperative for the woman artist, throughout the story Aurora also struggles *against* isolation and autonomy, partly out of a deep-seated desire for romantic and familial affections but also because of the pretensions to social action lodged within Barrett Browning’s project.” Anderson, 177.

composition and the act of reading, and that such a gap would disrupt the lyric illusion of being caught up in the narrator's present moment. But I do not think such a disruption necessarily follows. In this case, the reader is given a description of the reception of one of Aurora's other poems, and on some level the reader is aware that there are gaps in time between her writing the last poem, its publication, someone reading it, someone writing to Aurora about it, and Aurora reading the letter. But the text that is *Aurora Leigh* still creates the illusion of immediacy, of direct access to the poem's coming-into-being. Barrett Browning's reader experiences the lyric illusion at the very same time that the illusion is exposed. And because this unveiling occurs in a specific social/historical setting, lyric poetry is placed in a social context. In such a context, this odd passage cannot be seen as mere sloppiness or caprice on Barrett Browning's part, but rather as an implied critique of poetic conventions that are resistant to the progressive elements of her politics and poetics.

PAST-TENSE CONFUSIONS

A second strange aspect of *Aurora Leigh* has yet to be adequately explained but benefits from analysis within the context of lyric conventions: the contradictory narrative techniques of the last two books. Book 8 begins simply enough with "One eve it happened" (8.1), presenting a singular past event with the implied promise that it will be told retrospectively, from an unspecified distance in time. But on the next page Aurora slips into the present tense for 15 lines, declaring, "The duomo-bell / Strikes ten" (8.44–45), and "I see it all so clear" (8.59). After this interlude, Aurora's commentary is consistently in the past tense for the remainder of the poem. This sounds fairly straightforward, but such a description is at odds with Margaret Reynolds's reading of the last two books: "The action covered by these two books takes place on the one night, and yet no lapse of time is included which might allow Aurora the opportunity of formally recording the events. Instead, the living Aurora overlaps with the narrating Aurora at the moment of experience."²⁵ According to Reynolds's description, the two books are not retrospective at all, not even allowing the marginal distance of a journal entry or letter. Instead, Aurora's experience of the story-events seems to overlap with the discourse. And yet this section of the poem contains the remark, "But what

25. Reynolds, 31.

he said . . . I have written day by day, / With somewhat even writing" (9.725–26).²⁶ In keeping with the standards of verisimilitude, Aurora writes these pages in the days after the night of the events. But I agree with Reynolds that there is an illusion of immediacy, and I believe it is created by cues to the reader that are at odds with the explicit use of the past tense in most of Aurora's commentary.

There is, as I have mentioned, a brief section told in the present tense. Much more prevalent is the use of dialogue, with very little commentary between direct quotations of Aurora and Romney. The long stretches of direct quotation create a sense of immediacy for their words, with very few reminders that the dialogue occurred in Aurora's past. In some instances, the transcription of Aurora's words mimics the halting way in which she originally spoke them. Aurora's declaration of love to Romney is rendered:

—And if I came and said . . .
 What all this weeping scarce will let me say,
 And yet what women cannot say at all
 But weeping bitterly . . . (the pride keeps up,
 Until the heart breaks under it) . . . I love,—
 I love you, Romney' . . .
 (9.603–8)

The frequent pauses in Aurora's admission are indicated by four sets of ellipses, two dashes, and an aside placed in parentheses, all in just six lines. But perhaps the most crucial method that counteracts, or even contradicts, Aurora's retrospective stance, is her withholding key pieces of information. Even though she reports the events of that night in the past tense, she writes as though she doesn't have the knowledge she gained later that same night, creating instances of paradoxical paralipsis: "an omission or misrepresentation of information on the part of a retrospective homodiegetic narrator that appears to be inconsistent with the knowledge and perspective otherwise assigned to that narrator."²⁷ A representative example is when Aurora reacts to Romney's request that she visit the scorched remnants of his family estate:

26. While books 8 and 9 share the seeming overlap of experience and narration characteristic of simultaneous present-tense narration, this remark and the prevalence of the past tense are crucial differences in technique.

27. Alison Case, "Gender and History in Narrative Theory: The Problem of Retrospective Distance in *David Copperfield* and *Bleak House*," in *A Companion to Narrative Theory*, edited by James Phelan and Peter J. Rabinowitz (Malden: Blackwell, 2005), 313. Case builds on James Phelan's discussion of paradoxical paralipsis in *Narrative as Rhetoric*.

I made no answer. Had I any right
 To weep with this man, that I dared to speak?
 A woman stood between his soul and mine,
 And waved us off from touching evermore,
 With those unclean white hands of hers.
 (8.1037–41)

At the time of Romney's question, Aurora falsely believed that he was married to the selfish and superficial, and possibly quite wicked, Lady Waldemar, the woman with "unclean white hands." The *narrating* Aurora knows Romney is not married, since that revelation occurs later in the same conversation with him. But nothing here indicates a gap between Aurora's knowledge then and her knowledge now. There is no flag to the reader to take Aurora's statement that "a woman stood between us" as provisional, as a position that she will later abandon. For the reader, this statement and many similar ones have all the certainty that they had for Aurora at that moment. As a result, this paradoxical paralipsis "allows the reader to experience more fully the shock of the subsequent enlightenment" that Romney and Lady Waldemar are not married.²⁸

This sense of close proximity to the described experience is associated with both epistolary or diaristic narrative, and with lyric poetry. Dorothy Mermin has noted some of the similarities between the two genres: "One thinks of familiar letters as (except for the diary) the most private of literary forms. . . . Like lyric poetry as the Victorians typically conceived it, their essential charm requires the appearance of having sprung spontaneously out of a particular moment, concentrating entirely on the intended recipient and unaware of any other prospective reader."²⁹ Although both genres seem to "spr[ing] spontaneously out of a particular moment," I would argue that lyric allows for an even greater sense of spontaneity and immediacy than either letters or diaries. With epistolary forms, there must be at least some small gap in time between an event and its recording, otherwise we find the writer absurdly in contradiction with our notions of verisimilitude. A classic example of the absurdity produced by extreme epistolary immediacy is Letter VI of *Shamela*: "Thursday Night, Twelve o'Clock. Mrs. Jervis and I are just in bed, and the door unlocked; if my master should come—Odsbobs! I hear him just coming in at the door. You see I write in the present tense, as Parson

28. Case, "Gender and History," 313. Hence, I believe the paradoxical paralipsis in *Aurora Leigh* have the rhetorical effect discussed by James Phelan, rather than "reinforcing the femininity of [the] narrative voice by means of a gendered literary code" as Case reads the use of paralipsis in *Bleak House*. *Ibid.*

29. Mermin, *EBB*, 125.

Williams says. Well, he is in bed between us, we both shamming a sleep; he steals his hand into my bosom. . . ."³⁰ In lyric poetry, however, such questions of verisimilitude are not at issue.³¹ Lyric creates an illusion of experience blurred with discourse, of absolute simultaneity in a suspended moment. As Jonathan Culler has argued, lyric removes elements of experience from the poet's past and places them in "a special temporality which is the set of all moments at which writing can say 'now.'"³² This lyrical merging of experience with discourse is, I believe, the best way to describe the anti-retrospective elements in the last two books of *Aurora Leigh*. Barrett Browning presents *narrative* material through this lyrical technique, however; Aurora's experiences have the immediacy of lyric discourse, but the experiences are allowed to develop in time, rather than remaining in the suspended moment of lyric.

IMPLICATIONS FOR EPISTOLARY AND RETROSPECTIVE FORMS

Such juxtapositions of generic conventions have several important results. First, they may suggest that epistolary forms should not be devalued for their immediacy and sincerity, as was often the case due to nineteenth-century suppositions about gender and genre. Rather, Barrett Browning may imply that epistolary forms should partake of the critical prestige afforded to lyric in the Romantic tradition, since lyric was often valued precisely for its seeming immediacy and sincerity. She may also move Aurora out of the restrictive feminine implications of epistolary writing, and into the more ambivalent gender associations of lyric.

Critics have strongly disagreed about the relationship between gender ideology and lyric poetry in the nineteenth century, likely because the nineteenth-century public expressed contradictory thoughts on the

30. Henry Fielding, *Shamela*, in *Joseph Andrews, Shamela*, ed. Martin C. Battestin (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1961), 313.

31. I acknowledge that there are examples of epistolary immediacy in which verisimilitude is not the primary focus. Alison Case, for example, notes that verisimilitude is violated in Helen Fielding's *Bridget Jones's Diary* when Bridget continues to write anxious diary entries as a deadline rapidly approaches. Case argues that the reader hardly notices the breach of mimetic logic, because the passage heightens the comedy, which is given greater emphasis than mimesis. Alison Case, "Authenticity, Convention, and *Bridget Jones's Diary*," *Narrative* 9.2 (May 2001): 179–80. Since the ending of *Aurora Leigh* aspires to high seriousness, rather than to the comic effects of Henry Fielding or Helen Fielding, I find it more plausible to ascribe its extreme sense of immediacy, not to comic epistolary conventions, but rather to the transcendent efforts of lyric.

32. Jonathan Culler, "Apostrophe," in *The Pursuit of Signs: Semiotics, Literature, Deconstruction* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1981), 149.

subject. Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar argue that women had difficulty writing poetry, particularly lyric poetry, because of its distinctly masculine tradition as self-asserting, dependent on classical education, and aspiring to a priestly role.³³ Dorothy Mermin starts from the opposite premise but ends with the same result for women poets. She thinks “the lyric in particular seemed female to the Victorians—private, nonlogical, purely emotional,” and yet a Victorian woman poet did not necessarily have comfortable access to the genre: “for Victorians writing poetry seemed like woman’s work, even though only men were supposed to do it.”³⁴ Dino Felluga agrees, and discusses the troubling consequences of the “the charge of effeminacy that was increasingly directed at the male poet in the Victorian period.”³⁵ Susan Stanford Friedman discusses the more liberating aspects of lyric. She notes that psychoanalytic feminist theory often claims lyric poetry allows women writers to be subversive of male traditions (though Friedman goes on to explore the subversive potential of narrative as well).³⁶ Susan Wolfson, in her study of gender in the Romantic period, breaks down binary divisions between genders and between genres by exploring “the wavering, arbitrary, and often traversable borderlines that vex and complicate the symbolic order.”³⁷ Just as contemporary critics and the Victorian public are conflicted about the gender associations of lyric, so is Barrett Browning herself. In the lines that serve as the epigraph to this chapter, Aurora says of a poet weighed down with thought, “He can stand / Like Atlas, in the sonnet—and support / His own heavens pregnant with dynastic stars” (5.86–88). Her choice of pronouns establishes the poet writing in the lyric genre of the sonnet as male. Yet this may result from Atlas’s gender, and a spilling over of the simile’s vehicle into its tenor. Matters are further complicated by the mention of the “pregnant” heavens, adding a feminine and maternal element to the lyric poet. It would seem that lyric poetry has the benefit of contested and malleable gender associations, which may

33. Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979), 545–49.

34. Dorothy Mermin, “The Damsel, the Knight, and the Victorian Woman Poet,” *Critical Inquiry* 13.1 (Autumn 1986): 69, 67.

35. Dino Franco Felluga, *The Perversity of Poetry: Romantic Ideology and the Popular Male Poet of Genius* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2005), 153.

36. Susan Stanford Friedman, “Craving Stories: Narrative and Lyric in Contemporary Theory and Women’s Long Poems,” in *Feminist Measures: Soundings in Poetry and Theory*, eds. Lynn Keller and Cristanne Miller (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994), 15.

37. Susan J. Wolfson, *Borderlines: The Shiftings of Gender in British Romanticism* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006), 35.

free Aurora and Barrett Browning from the more restrictively feminine epistolary form, grant them access to the masculine authority remaining to the lyric poet, and allow them an opportunity to critique more stable gender categories.

Elsewhere in the poem, Barrett Browning employs a different strategy to undermine gender-based assumptions about epistolary forms. To reiterate Alison Case's persuasive argument, in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, female epistolary narrators had to be artless in their compositions in order to be perceived as properly feminine. If a woman's letter betrayed signs of study, art, or narrative control, then she would be considered morally suspect and unfeminine.³⁸ In *Aurora Leigh*, the heroine very carefully writes a letter to Lady Waldemar, and pauses to consider the Lady's likely reaction. Aurora speculates, "That's quiet, guarded: though she hold it up / Against the light, she'll not see through it more / Than lies there to be seen" (5.1145–47). This comment presents a woman's letter as planned, and as not completely sincere or revelatory. It also imagines that the female recipient will try to read between the lines, to be an artful and plotting reader. Aurora decides against a certain phrase because she fears Lady Waldemar "would twist it thus," and because she fears "her writing back / Just so" (5.1151, 5.1157–58). This conceives of Aurora as an artful female writer, whom the reader supports in her efforts against the morally suspect Lady Waldemar. The passage thus implicitly critiques the artlessness expected of female letter-writers, and undoes the association between female artfulness and immorality by separating those traits into two different characters.

The narrative and lyric techniques of *Aurora Leigh* also have consequences for retrospective conventions. As we have seen, the poem resists retrospection at the end, at the moment when readers most expect retrospective security. The exact time of composition, and the interval that has elapsed since the depicted events, remain unclear. No events after Aurora and Romney's conversation are mentioned: Aurora never says, "Reader, I married him." Instead, the final lines are Aurora's description of the dawn—we end with a sense of beginning. This erasure of retrospection has sometimes been seen as a flaw in the poem. One contemporary reviewer said of the poem in general, and the revelations of the last books in particular, "It is difficult to conjecture at what epoch of the story the book purports to have been written. It does not seem to have been written in the form of a journal, while the events were taking place; nor yet after the story was completed. . . . This contradiction confuses

38. Case, *Plotting*; see especially the chapter on *Clarissa*.

the reader, and he feels almost as if he were trifled with."³⁹ Alison Case suggests some of the criticism may be due to readers' inclination to fit the poem within a single set of narrative conventions; as the romance plot and its corresponding epistolary form gain prominence in the latter half of the poem, we seem forced to deny "the artistic/narrative mastery that validates the *Künstlerroman*."⁴⁰

I agree with Case that part of readers' dissatisfaction lies in making an either/or choice between a naive romance heroine and an assured narrative artist, and that the poem makes much more sense if we view Aurora's status as both/and. There are two additional reasons why critiques of Aurora's insufficient narrative mastery over the romance plot are flawed. Viewed from within the level of story, as if the events are real, it is odd to criticize Aurora for not having narrative mastery over events that had not yet happened to her, for not being able to foresee the shape and meaning of her entire life at the tender age of twenty-seven, when she begins to write the poem.⁴¹ Such high expectations are irreconcilable with her character's conformance to basic principles of verisimilitude. Viewed at the level of discourse, as Barrett Browning's fictive creation, the unusual structure of the final books is not necessarily evidence of Barrett Browning's lack of narrative control. On the contrary, I see it as most likely a conscious artistic choice, meant to undermine the authority of retrospective narration. Some of the chief lessons of *Aurora Leigh* are that life stories change, that knowledge is provisional, that people must constantly be open to reevaluating their lives. Marjorie Stone places *Aurora Leigh* in the tradition of Victorian sage discourse, but also finds in the poem a critique of authoritative discourse. She says of Aurora, "Throughout much of the poem she speaks . . . as a sage-in-formation whose wisdom is in process of revision and often contradicted

39. Review of *Poems by Elizabeth Barrett Browning* (October 1857): 421–22. *North American Review* 85.

40. Case, *Plotting*, 112.

41. One could take the opposite view, that instead of finding fault with Aurora for lacking artistic control over future events, we should be pleasantly surprised that she has the prescience to include so much about Romney, Marian, and Lady Waldemar in books 3 and 4, before she can know their direct connection to her own future happiness. That is, when Aurora writes books 3 and 4, it would be difficult to say why the Romney/Marian/Lady Waldemar plot deserves such prominence in Aurora's story of her own artistic and personal development. Of course, it is possible to read that prominence as a symptom of Aurora's repressed love for Romney, or even as self-justification that her choice of art over Romney's schemes was the right one since his scheme failed. A more radical interpretation is that Aurora knows to include the failed wedding plot because she writes the entire poem after all the events have ended, but chooses to present some of the events as if they happened more immediately. If the last two books can be written retrospectively but with an illusion of immediacy, why not the entire poem?

by her own actions. The textual ironies thus generated call in question the authoritative stance so strenuously asserted by some male Victorian sages.⁴² When juxtaposed with Wordsworth's overwhelmingly authoritative stance in *The Prelude*, presenting his poetic development as not only firmly established but also preordained, *Aurora Leigh* provides a marked contrast to and critique of that male Romantic sage's Victorian publication. Barrett Browning's criticism is even more wide-ranging, taking aim at broader targets than Wordsworth in particular or sage discourse in general. I agree with Herbert Tucker that it is Aurora's "need to occupy a commanding [retrospective] vantage . . . that the migrant narrative viewpoint of the poem subjects in turn to structural irony."⁴³ All forms of retrospective authority seem to be questioned by *Aurora Leigh's* unusual mixture of narrative techniques. Epistolary narratives are implied to be more truthful than retrospective ones, precisely because epistolary forms are more willing to incorporate and acknowledge error, rather than to assert the transcendence of error.

"UNLIKE SIMILITUDES"

Barrett Browning also prefers to acknowledge error, rather than disingenuously asserting its transcendence, in the smaller-scale structure of her poetic figures. She does so through her frequent use of simile. In addition, similes allow her to incorporate both narrative progression and lyric elaboration, keeping both elements distinct and clear. In order to understand the capabilities of simile, however, we must first establish its important differences from the Romantic image and symbol.

In his influential essay "The Structure of Romantic Nature Imagery," William Wimsatt claims that Romantic figures "mak[e] less use of the overt statement of similitude" that is so prominent in the classical and Renaissance traditions.⁴⁴ That is, Romantic poets are less likely to use actual similes and much more likely to use images or symbols which feature a "blurring of literal and figurative," a blurring of tenor and vehicle.⁴⁵ Whereas similes maintain a tension between similitude and

42. Marjorie Stone, *Elizabeth Barrett Browning* (London: Macmillan, 1995), 162.

43. Tucker, *Epic*, 382. Tucker also notes that "the forward motion of Aurora's point of view mobilizes an ongoing critique of the obsolescent certitudes that at any given moment she has impulsively, confidently sworn by." *Ibid.*

44. William K. Wimsatt, Jr., "The Structure of Romantic Nature Imagery," (1954) in *Romanticism and Consciousness: Essays in Criticism*, ed. Harold Bloom (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1970), 82.

45. *Ibid.*, 86.

dissimilitude, in Romantic images, “The interest derives not from our being aware of disparity where likeness is firmly insisted on, but in an opposite activity of discerning the design which is latent in the multi-form sensuous picture.”⁴⁶ That is, the similarity expressed by the poet is at least partly attributed to the essential nature of the objects, rather than to the inventive wit of the poet, and the reader is expected to interrogate the poet’s image and agree to its fitness. A Romantic image “can be explored and tested by the wit of the reader,”⁴⁷ and Romantic symbols aspire to express something true about nature or the spiritual world; they aspire to be more than just subjective associations based on the contingencies of physical proximity, memory, and personal history.

This element of Wimsatt’s argument has had a long critical afterlife,⁴⁸ and has sometimes been adopted as a truism about Romanticism by theorists who wish to criticize, rather than valorize, Romantic poets for their transcendental aspirations. In this camp, Paul de Man is among the most influential detractors of Romantic images and symbols. De Man argues that Romantic images’ aspirations to transcendence reveal not essential truths about objects, but rather a misguided denial of the essential difference between objects and language. Such images betray a desire to attribute the permanence and primacy of objects to language: “Poetic language seems to originate in the desire to draw closer and closer to the ontological status of the object. . . . We saw that this movement is essentially paradoxical and condemned in advance to failure. There can be flowers that ‘are’ and poetic words that ‘originate,’ but no poetic words that ‘originate’ as if they ‘were.’”⁴⁹ Even though de Man views the technique as mystificatory rather than productive, he agrees with Wimsatt that Romantic poets tend to blur the vehicle and tenor: “At times, romantic thought and romantic poetry seem to come so close to giving in completely to the nostalgia for the object that it becomes difficult to distinguish between object and image, between imagination

46. *Ibid.*, 83.

47. *Ibid.*, 82.

48. Despite Wimsatt’s influence in creating a prevailing critical assumption that the organic image or symbol is the Romantic figure par excellence, some critics have discussed Romantic usages of simile. I am indebted to Susan Wolfson’s nuanced and insightful discussion of Coleridge’s use of simile in chapter 3 of *Formal Charges: The Shaping of Poetry in British Romanticism* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997). She also approaches similes through the context of Wimsatt’s and de Man’s thoughts on Romantic images and symbols. Chapter 1 of the present book mentions various discussions of Byron’s idiosyncratic use of simile.

49. Paul de Man, “Intentional Structure of the Romantic Image” (1968), in *Romanticism and Consciousness: Essays in Criticism*, ed. Harold Bloom (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1970), 70.

and perception, between an expressive or constitutive and a mimetic or literal language."⁵⁰ I infer that since de Man considers the simile to be "the simplest and most explicit of all metaphorical structures," he would consider the simile as more likely to avoid the mystifications of Romantic symbols.⁵¹ Since similes explicitly call attention to the disjunction between tenor and vehicle, and call attention to their own use of language to assert similarity, they would not occlude the differences among object, idea, and word.⁵²

Given these implications of simile and symbol, *Aurora Leigh* is an intensely contradictory text: Aurora desires the organic correspondence between tenor and vehicle exemplified by the Romantic symbol, yet she incessantly uses the seemingly more artificial figure of simile to express herself. Aurora asks the rhetorical question:

. . . What is art
 But life upon the larger scale, the higher,
 When, graduating up in a spiral line
 Of still expanding and ascending gyres,
 It pushes toward the intense significance
 Of all things, hungry for the Infinite?
 (4.1151–56)

By beginning with "What is art / But life," Aurora ever-so-briefly seems to claim that art *is* life, that sign and referent, language and object, are identical. But Aurora quickly qualifies this as she suggests art also approaches the infinite ("the larger scale, the higher"). Here Aurora does not assert an absolute identity between art and a transcendent idea, between language and permanence, but she does assert an ever-nearer approach of one to the other, resulting in an "intense significance," a discovered Truth. Despite the ostensible optimism about the close relationship between art, life, and truth, several formal elements of the passage undermine Aurora's confidence. By using the metaphor of ever-expanding gyres, Aurora implicitly admits that the path to the infinite is circu-

50. *Ibid.*

51. *Ibid.*, 66.

52. Based on such a description, simile might share some of the features de Man elsewhere attributes to allegory, as distinguished from symbol. Allegory recognizes the incommensurability of the sign with the permanent natural object it signifies, and demonstrates awareness of its functioning within a system of signifiers. See Paul de Man, "The Rhetoric of Temporality," in *Blindness and Insight: Essays in the Rhetoric of Contemporary Criticism*, 2nd ed., Theory and History of Literature, vol. 7 (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983), 187–228.

itous, and may imply that no stable final ground of understanding can ever be reached. The passage as a whole is in the form of a question, rather than an assertion, opening up the possibility of an interlocutor who would answer the question differently than Aurora, suggesting that this is one definition of art among many possible definitions.⁵³ The specific form of the question raises additional problems: "What is art but life . . . when . . . it pushes toward . . . the Infinite?" Initially, the passage suggests that art can be nothing but life, that life is the only possible substance of art. But by following this with a "when" clause, the identity of art with life becomes provisional on either art or life (the antecedent of "it" is ambiguous) aspiring to the infinite, and the passage itself does not address how frequently (if ever) such a condition is fulfilled.

The difficulties of asserting a desired identity among object, language, and idea become even more obvious when similes are used. For this reason, it should come as a surprise that a poet who is so invested in uniting the real and ideal through art⁵⁴ uses similes so frequently. In fact, *Aurora Leigh* contains over 250 similes; the simile is Barrett Browning's preferred poetic figure in the work.⁵⁵ If this figure creates troubling and obvious tensions in the similarity it asserts, why might Barrett Browning rely so heavily on it? There are several plausible and inter-related answers. Similes emphasize the provisionality of knowledge, which would appeal to a poet so determined to expose the dangers of over-confident authority. Similes also invite the audience to agree or disagree with the offered similarity, engaging the reader in the effort to find

53. An imaginary interlocutor is actually given a voice in another description of the nature of poetry:

What's this, Aurora Leigh,
You write so of the poets, and not laugh?
Those virtuous liars, dreamers after dark,
Exaggerators of the sun and moon,
And soothsayers in a teacup?

I write so
Of the only truth-tellers now left to God,
The only speakers of essential truth,
Opposed to relative, comparative,
And temporal truths . . .
(1.854-62)

The passage more explicitly states both possible objections to the truth-value of poetry and Aurora's belief that it does express truth.

54. Readers are encouraged to align Barrett Browning's thoughts on art with Aurora's, by Barrett Browning's remark in the poem's dedication that *Aurora Leigh* contains "my highest convictions upon Life and Art."

55. This counts as a simile any metaphorical comparison that contains "like" or "as" as the link between vehicle and tenor, but excludes pseudo-similes which use the link "as if."

a better approximation to the truth. Finally, similes offer a convenient means to balance lyric and narrative, allowing Barrett Browning to offset the limitations of each genre with the strengths of the other.

Barrett Browning's sense of the advantages and liabilities of simile can be approached by examining one of her self-reflexive descriptions of the figure:

As I spoke, I tore
 The paper up and down, and down and up
 And crosswise, till it fluttered from my hands,
 As forest-leaves, stripped suddenly and rapt
 By a whirlwind on Valdarno, drop again,
 Drop slow, and strew the melancholy ground
 Before the amazèd hills . . . why, so, indeed,
 I'm writing like a poet, somewhat large
 In the type of the image, and exaggerate
 A small thing with a great thing, topping it.
 (2.1162–71)

If similes can be, as Susan Wolfson suggests, a “potent formation, at once intellectual and poetic, whose critical agency is . . . its consciousness of its explicit construction,”⁵⁶ then this example foregrounds such self-consciousness. Here Aurora explicitly critiques the simile she has just constructed, and the inadequacy of its construction. She admits the danger of exaggeration in poetic comparisons, the possibility of the vehicle and tenor being mismatched rather than organically unified. But in this passage, Barrett Browning seems to shy away from a thorough exposure of simile's misfirings. The passage implies that in this simile, the vehicle is the correct “type” for the tenor, like in kind and merely taken to too great a degree. And while the action of tearing a letter in itself may not seem to merit such a comparison, its consequences do: by tearing up the letter, Aurora destroys the evidence through which Romney could have guaranteed she inherit 30,000 pounds, and demonstrates that she must earn her living as a writer. The grandiose vehicle is more than justified by the plot developments which hinge on this action.⁵⁷ Moreover, “the amazèd hills” are an apt reflection of Romney's astonished reaction.

56. Wolfson, *Formal*, 65.

57. Marjorie Stone makes a very similar suggestion when she says of this passage, “Aurora undercuts her own epic pretensions, but perhaps a ‘large’ image is in fact well-suited to the apparently trivial gesture by which she frees herself from any economic dependence upon Romney's patriarchal legacies, since in tearing up the document she gains . . . independence.” Stone, “Genre,” 120–21.

A more thoroughgoing commentary on false similitudes is the description of Aurora and Romney's reaction to Marian's parting letter, which fails to explain clearly why she left Romney at the altar:

. . . For days, her touching, foolish lines
 We mused on with conjectural fantasy,
 As if some riddle of a summer-cloud
 On which one tries unlike similitudes
 Of now a spotted Hydra-skin cast off,
 And now a screen of carven ivory
 That shuts the heavens' conventional secrets up
 From mortals overbold. We sought the sense.
 (4.987-94)

This comparison describes the very process of forging similitude, and everything in it suggests conjecture and mutability rather than certainty and permanence. Strictly speaking, the comparison is in the form of a hypothetical rather than a simile, using "as if" rather than "as." But the "as" of simile itself carries the suggestion of "as if," and this passage makes explicit the hypothetical valence latent in all similes.⁵⁸ Of course, the mention of "unlike similitudes" both invokes the figure of simile and questions its efficacy in stating meaningful connections. Aurora's efforts to find meaning in Marian's letter are presented as "conjectur[e]," "fantasy," passing the time by playing with a "riddle." Despite the devastating consequences of Marian's disappearance, efforts to understand it are denigrated as inefficacious play, calling to mind Romney's critique of poetry as a similarly unproductive distraction. Anxieties about simile as poetic form continue to build in the vehicle that describes the frustrated attempt to extract meaning. The object to be deciphered is compared to a mutable cloud, and the first attempted meaning is a shed skin, a surface detached from what used to lie beneath it. At least in the Hydra-skin comparison, the surface was once attached; the skin at one time had an organic connection as a piece of a whole. But in the second vehicle for a sought meaning, we are given a screen which has no necessary connection to the meaning it hides, and which marks the ideal and transcendent as inaccessible to human understanding.

Susan Wolfson has argued that Coleridge sometimes uses similes as "a meta-trope . . . exposing the unity vested in the privileged form of

58. Susan Wolfson discusses this link between similes and hypotheticals. Wolfson, *Formal*, 69-70.

the symbol as an illusory or factitious (however intensely desired) effect of poetic form."⁵⁹ I believe this passage from *Aurora Leigh* performs a similar function. It describes a disconnection between vehicle and tenor, signifier and signified, stripping away the symbol's illusion of unity. Aurora's hypothetical does itself successfully communicate the unreadability of Marian's letter. Yet it employs the logic of simile to express not only the potential inauthenticity of metaphorical meanings, but also the potential for thwarted communication due to the factitiousness of language itself. Although Barrett Browning acknowledges these potential failures of meaning, she does not seem to despair at them. Her art may never fully realize or convey the Truth to which it aspires, but she still values the pursuit, and suggests that the provisional truths offered by art may provide closer and closer approximations to Truth. Art "pushes toward the intense significance / Of all things, hungry for the Infinite" (4.1155–56). Barrett Browning's use of similes help expose the false confidence of symbols, and in this respect, it mirrors her use of lyric and epistolary forms to expose the false confidence of retrospective narration. In both cases, she implies that human knowledge must be seen as provisional rather than absolute, but is nevertheless still valuable and necessary.⁶⁰

By using similes to acknowledge that the likenesses ascribed by figurative language cannot be unquestioningly attributed to the objects themselves, Barrett Browning places the source of similitudes in the poet's agency or in language itself. And since similes are described as presenting a writer's assertion or a coincidence of language, rather than an objective truth about the world, figurative language can be questioned, interrogated, and possibly disagreed with, by the reader. Similes may expose the possibilities of thwarted communication, but they also contain an invitation for debate, for meaningful dialogue. One of the most explicit instances of a debated simile⁶¹ is Aurora's assertion that the runaway Marian will remain virtuous, followed by Romney's reply:

. . . I hold it true,
As I'm a woman and know womanhood,
That Marian Erle, however lured from place,

59. Wolfson, *Formal*, 66.

60. Again, Wolfson's analysis of Coleridge parallels my analysis of Barrett Browning. She finds in Coleridge's use of the form evidence that similes "prove a resource for representing those very orders of thought that symbol would overcome: the tentative, the provisional, the uncertain, the ambiguous, the illusory." Wolfson, *Formal*, 73.

61. An even more extended debate about the meaning of a simile occurs between Aurora and Lord Howe in lines 5.854–67.

Deceived in way, keeps pure in aim and heart
 As snow that's drifted from the garden-bank
 To the open road.'

'Twas hard to hear him laugh.

'The figure's happy. Well—a dozen carts
 And trampers will secure you presently
 A fine white snow-drift. Leave it there, your snow!
 'Twill pass for soot ere sunset. . . .

(4.1066–75)

Romney agrees with Aurora's choice of vehicle, but only because he assigns to it the opposite meaning that Aurora does. Case cites this passage as an instance of a misused metaphor that implies the opposite of what Aurora intends and undermines Aurora's artistic control, and she notes that the poem fulfills the unintended implication—Marian is sullied.⁶² It is equally important to recognize that the poem also fulfills Aurora's intention: Marian may be labeled as sullied and fallen by societal conventions, but she was assaulted against her will and hence remained "pure in aim and heart." Aurora and Romney are both right, and the use of a simile, rather than a symbol or image, invites the discussion and disagreement that can show the simultaneous validity of two seemingly opposite interpretations.

Barrett Browning's incessant use of similes also provides a method of advancing the plot while introducing elements that call attention to the work's status as poetry. In a simile, the tenor and vehicle, the literal and figurative elements, are kept separated by "like" or "as," keeping them more grammatically distinct than is the case in a metaphor or symbol. A seamless blending of the two elements, the apparent unity of tenor and vehicle celebrated by Wimsatt and deplored by de Man in their descriptions of Romantic images and symbols, is much more difficult to effect in a simile. This semantic and syntactic separation which is, by definition, so marked in a simile, has consequences for Barrett Browning's use of both lyric and narrative elements. A simile's literal meaning, what is actually happening, is explicitly stated and is a discrete unit, thus leaving the plot remarkably clear. But a figurative element is attached to the literal one, allowing for self-consciously poetic moments with all the formal play and virtuosity of lyric. As Dorothy Mermin has remarked, *Aurora Leigh's* "heightened feeling and language, especially its elaborate metaphors and ostentatious epic similes, are deeply and

62. Case, *Plotting*, 119–20.

often obtrusively ‘poetical.’”⁶³ Barrett Browning can clearly refer to a character or action, keeping the current plot line in the reader’s mind, but add lyric elaboration of thought, which reminds the reader of the craftedness of the discourse and very briefly delays the advancement of the plot.

Such issues are explicitly addressed in Aurora’s comments on the ballad, a narrative genre, and the sonnet, a lyric genre. Returning again to this chapter’s epigraph:

My ballads prospered; but the ballad’s race
Is rapid for a poet who bears weights
Of thought and golden image. He can stand
Like Atlas, in the sonnet,—and support
His own heavens pregnant with dynastic stars;
But then he must stand still, nor take a step.
(5.84–89)

Since Aurora makes the complementary complaints that narrative moves too quickly to appreciate subtleties of thought and beauties of imagery, and that lyric can appreciate them endlessly without making any progress, she implies that finding a compromise between the two, a slow but steady pace, would be more appealing. A simile allows Barrett Browning to maintain such a compromise. For every small step in the narrative, a lyric pause follows, creating discrete but regular motion forward. This passage contains a simile (“stand / Like Atlas . . .”), and enacts the problem it describes and the solution it implies. It begins by rapidly summarizing a period in Aurora’s poetic career—“My ballads prospered.” This certainly provides narrative clarity, but it oversimplifies the matter. Aurora then pauses to use a metaphor to explain her thoughts on the drawbacks of such rapid narrative. While her reference to “weights of thought” may initially suggest that thought is a burden in general rather than merely an impediment to narrative, this suggestion is canceled by the positive connotations of “golden image[s],” and the overall implication is that rapid narrative excludes that which Aurora values. The passage then goes on to provide just such a gleaming image, describing in suggestive detail Atlas with a whole universe, rather than one world, on his back. The vehicle of this simile reveals, in turn, two problems with lyric forms. First, lyric must “stand still” and resists the incorporation or enactment of change, lest the universe come toppling

63. Mermin, “Genre,” 8.

down. Second, lyric thought may be pregnant with only the poet's "own heavens"; that is, it may be restricted to gestating subjective thoughts. The combination of these two critiques amounts to the common fear that lyric is isolated and solipsistic, unable to recognize social concerns or advocate social change.

Taken as a whole, the passage links a narrative beginning to a lyric end, and offsets the limitations of each genre with the strengths of the other, incorporating both socially contextualized story progression and subtle lyric elaboration. If we agree with Holly Laird that "[Barrett] Browning's central aesthetic choice and worry appears to be between the Wordsworthian advocacy of a solitary songster inspired by the deep urgings of nature and the Carlylian demand for a didactic writer with urban concerns that he records through rhetorical narratives,"⁶⁴ then in her use of similes Barrett Browning can keep both concerns operative, joined together by the hinge of "like" or "as." Even if we do not label these two tendencies as specifically Wordsworthian and Carlylian, the general point still remains valid. By constantly placing lyric song and didactic narrative side by side, Barrett Browning can have the space to develop subtleties of thought, but still put them in a social context to serve a rhetorical purpose.

One of the dangers of this technique is that the poet's *overindulgence* in lyrical elaboration and poetic play will prove too great a distraction for the reader, who will lose track of the simile's tenor and hence lose track of the plot. Some contemporary critics of *Aurora Leigh* had just such a reaction, finding some of its poetical effects overwhelming and confusing. W. E. Aytoun complained of Barrett Browning, "She has a decided tendency, not only to multiply, but to intensify images, and occasionally carries this so far as to bewilder the reader."⁶⁵ In his review, John Nichol quoted lines 1.154–63, in which Aurora describes her perceptions of her mother's portrait, and called it "a perfect shoal of mangled and pompous similes."⁶⁶ Not all of Barrett Browning's readers, however, reacted to her similes with such scorn. George Eliot was much more forgiving,

64. Laird, 357.

65. W. E. Aytoun, review of *Aurora Leigh*, by Elizabeth Barrett Browning, *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine* 81 (January 1857): 37.

66. John Nichol, review of *Aurora Leigh*, by Elizabeth Barrett Browning, *Westminster Review* 68 (July and October 1857): 401. More recent criticism has found much more value in this passage, since Barbara Gelpi has convincingly argued that the portrait represents Aurora's conflicted feelings about her own femininity and traditional gender roles for women. See Barbara Charlesworth Gelpi, "Aurora Leigh: The Vocation of the Woman Poet," *Victorian Poetry* 19.1 (Spring 1981): 35–48.

claiming, "There is no petty striving after special effects, no heaping up of images for their own sake, no trivial play of fancy run quite astray from the control of deeper sensibility."⁶⁷

PRODUCTIVE FRAGMENTATION

If *Aurora Leigh* is composed of bits of retrospective narrative, epistolary and diaristic forms, and lyric poetry, all intricately interacting, then what are readers to make of the overall structure of this poem? Stone claims that "Barrett Browning does not merely mingle genres; she fuses them together to form a new whole,"⁶⁸ but other readers have thought the poem's generic parts remain distinct rather than forming a coherent whole. Kerry McSweeney celebrates its diverse offerings, calling the poem a "bravura performance" that "unscrupulously mixes genres . . . and holds them all suspended in a cornucopian fluency of discourse."⁶⁹ Alison Case is more critical, and "suggest[s] that Barrett Browning's juggling of narrative modes does not so much reconcile these conflicting roles and impulses as allow them an uneasy coexistence."⁷⁰ I agree that the different generic conventions are not blended harmoniously, and are instead left as discrete units, but I think their "uneasy coexistence" creates productive tensions. By weaving together threads of conflicting genres, Barrett Browning exposes arbitrary generic conventions. Such an exposure is important for both the heroine and the author of *Aurora Leigh*. Aurora frequently complains about the constriction of abstract and arbitrary conventions, and Barrett Browning's poetic practice in *Aurora Leigh* suggests she agrees with her heroine on these matters.

One of the most explicit complaints against traditional literary forms appears in the midst of Aurora's *ars poetica* in book 5:

What form is best for poems? Let me think
Of forms less, and the external. Trust the spirit,
As sovran nature does, to make the form;
For otherwise we only imprison spirit

67. George Eliot, review of *Aurora Leigh*, by Elizabeth Barrett Browning, *Westminster Review* 67 (January 1857): 307.

68. Stone, "Genre," 115.

69. Kerry McSweeney, Introduction to *Aurora Leigh*, by Elizabeth Barrett Browning (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), xx.

70. Case, *Plotting*, 108.

And not embody. Inward evermore
 To outward,—so in life, and so in art
 Which still is life.

Five acts to make a play.
 And why not fifteen? why not ten? or seven?
 What matter for the number of the leaves,
 Supposing the tree lives and grows? exact
 The literal unities of time and place,
 When 'tis the essence of passion to ignore
 Both time and place? Absurd. Keep up the fire,
 And leave the generous flames to shape themselves.
 (5.223–36)

Aurora challenges the arbitrariness, even randomness, of literary convention by questioning why plays have five acts, when they might just as reasonably have fifteen or seven. Note that Aurora suggests only the possibility of plays with *more* acts than is common; she does not suggest the possibility of a two-act or four-act play. This preference for expansiveness may bring to mind the length of *Aurora Leigh* itself, and a displeased reviewer's remark that "this poem is two thousand lines longer than 'Paradise Lost.'"⁷¹ But her loquaciousness does have an ostensible purpose. Literary forms are arbitrary, but an artist who constricts the forms further, makes works smaller, only exacerbates the problem. Writing more expansive poems or plays is a straightforward strategy for including more (and potentially more diverse) material, and is a clear argument for fitting the size of the work to the material, rather than fitting the material to traditional forms. Barrett Browning reiterates her disdain for constraining conventions in her dismissal of "the literal unities of time and place."

As an alternative to such restrictive conventions, Barrett Browning offers up the Romantic ideal of organic form. The number of acts in a play should come as naturally as the leaves on a tree, the crucial point being not the number of parts, but the energy and development of the whole: "What matter for the number of the leaves, / Supposing the tree lives and grows?" The idea that artistic production should resemble organic growth is made even more explicit in Barrett Browning's plea that poets should "trust the spirit, / As sovran nature does, to make the form." The Romantic tradition usually expects organic forms to produce unity, beauty, and a sense of fitness or naturalness. Such an expectation

⁷¹ Coventry Patmore, review of *Aurora Leigh*, by Elizabeth Barrett Browning, *North British Review* 26 (February 1857): 240.

is found in Barrett Browning's letter to Mary Russell Mitford, with which this book opened: "I want to write a poem of a new class, in a measure—a Don Juan, without the mockery & impurity, . . . under one aspect,—& having unity, as a work of art,—& admitting of as much philosophical dreaming and digression (which is in fact a characteristic of the age) as I like to use."⁷² We may still wonder what would be left of *Don Juan* if its "mockery and impurity" were taken away, but one possible remainder is its digressiveness, and Barrett Browning desires the freedom to digress in her own poem. She also wants to give it the "unity, as a work of art" that characterizes organic form, and to fuse the digressiveness "under one aspect." By these standards, Barrett Browning's form for *Aurora Leigh* has sometimes been found lacking. One of the poem's earliest reviewers complained, "We have no experience of such a mingling of what is precious with what is mean—of the voice of clarion and the lyric cadence of harp with the cracked school-room spinet. . . . Milton's organ is put by Mrs. Browning to play polkas in May-Fair drawing-rooms."⁷³

Aurora Leigh often undermines a sense of the unified and natural on both the small scale of poetic practice and the large scale of narrative structure. An example of small-scale disruption occurs in the very poetic passage just under discussion. Ironically, this endorsement of organic form and critique of literary conventions is contained within a section of text that, at the limits of perception, suggests the formal restrictions of end-rhymed forms generally, and the sonnet in particular. This section is a fourteen-line unit, set off from the text before and after as a separate verse paragraph, in iambic pentameter: it is the proper size for a sonnet. Of course, it lacks the elaborate rhyme scheme of a sonnet proper, but it does have suggestions of end rhyme, with "evermore" and "ignore" almost unnoticeably rhyming because of their distance from each other, and with many examples of consonance in the words at lines' ends.⁷⁴

72. Elizabeth Barrett Browning to Mary Russell Mitford, 30 December 1844, *The Letters of Elizabeth Barrett Browning to Mary Russell Mitford, 1836–1854*, vol. 3, eds. Meredith B. Raymond and Mary Rose Sullivan (Waco, Tex.: Armstrong Browning Library of Baylor University, 1983), 49.

73. H. F. Chorley, review of *Aurora Leigh*, by Elizabeth Barrett Browning, *The Athenaeum* (22 November 1856): 1425.

74. To specify the approximate end rhymes: "spirit" is repeated, and if its two syllables are elided into one (as they might be to avoid the extra syllable and the feminine ending), then it produces consonance with "art"; "evermore" is an approximate rhyme with "form," and the sounds are repeated in the second half with "ignore" and its consonance with "fire" in the next line; "play" and "place" have both alliteration and assonance; and there is consonance among "seven," "leaves," and "themselves." The passage also contains many internal repetitions: "form," "forms," and "form"; "inward" and "outward"; "life" is repeated; "acts" and "exact"; "leaves," "lives," and "leave"; and "time and place" is repeated.

The passage, then, both invokes restrictive conventions and creates a sense of fragmentation and disruption. On a larger scale, the narrative structure is fragmented and seemingly suffers from disruptions.

Barrett Browning does occasionally describe the dangers of her literary practices. In book 3 *Aurora* voices dissatisfaction with her earliest poetic productions, but thinks that her more recent poems are more vibrant and organic:

. . . But I felt
 My heart's life throbbing in my verse to show
 It lived, it also—certes incomplete,
 Disordered with all Adam in the blood,
 But even its very tumours, warts and wens
 Still organised by and implying life.
 (3.338–43)

The biological metaphors and the claim that these poems were “organised by and implying life” suggest they meet *Aurora*’s standard of organic growth. Yet these works are disfigured. Barrett Browning thus suggests that beauty and uniformity do not necessarily follow from organicism, and that they are less important than organic growth itself. A poem’s “tumours, warts and wens” paradoxically may indicate a poem’s healthfulness, since they constitute evidence of a poem’s unconventionality.⁷⁵ Here again, the poem presents deviations from expected literary forms as a type of superabundance, as growth beyond normal boundaries, suggesting that poetry should be more expansive in its range.

Aurora Leigh may not embody with complete success the organic form it advocates, and many of its readers may find its “tumours, warts and wens” to be a fault, rather than an asset. But there are advantages to the poem’s patchwork of genres, benefits to be gained from allowing its generic components to remain fragmentary. Both Mermin and Stone argue that *Aurora Leigh* crosses boundaries of genre in order to question traditional boundaries of gender.⁷⁶ Of course, this practice also questions boundaries of genre, and the poem successfully displays the faults of various traditional literary forms. Mermin claims that in *Aurora Leigh*, “Juxtapositions of lyric intensity and modern daily life are not

75. Barrett Browning seems to posit the organic and the conventional as opposite terms in literary production, with slavish imitation being an extreme form of the conventional, but with no middle term between convention and nature. That is, she does not acknowledge the possibility of a poem being both unconventional and unnatural in form.

76. Mermin, “Genre,” 11; Stone, “Genre,” 103.

intended (whatever their effect may be) to play off against or diminish each other."⁷⁷ I agree that such juxtapositions are not included for comic effect, nor are they meant to diminish the importance of either lyric intensity or the representation of daily life. But I suggest the poem's generic juxtapositions *are* meant to play off one genre against another: the strength of *Aurora Leigh's* fragmentary structure lies precisely in exposing the limitations and insufficiencies of any one fragment, any one genre. Since each individual genre is viewed as flawed and insufficient, *Aurora Leigh* implies that, for a work of its scope and ambition to be successful, it must incorporate many genres, offsetting the limitations of one with the strengths of another. In this respect, when Virginia Woolf writes, "The best compliment we can pay *Aurora Leigh* is that it makes us wonder why it has left no successors,"⁷⁸ she misses a crucial point. Because Barrett Browning is against the slavish imitation of preexisting forms, the best compliment her followers could pay her is to create their own experimental generic hybrids, rather than to write works that are recognizably imitations of *Aurora Leigh*.

Certainly, not all of Barrett Browning's readers went on to write their own experimental works of fiction, but the poem does invite other, somewhat less demanding, responses as well. The poem displays great faith in the reader as an active participant, who will both re-experience Aurora's development, and will infer a subtle critique of a wide range of literary forms from Barrett Browning's complex construction of the poem. Usually in works with female epistolary narrators, as Case describes it, "Rather than being subjected to their narrative authority, we [the readers] are invited to assume authority over them—to construct a plot and a meaning out of their words that they themselves cannot understand, or do not wish us to know."⁷⁹ For this reason, "a great part of the pleasure feminine narration provides is that it thus appears to reverse the power relations of narrator and reader."⁸⁰ Even though the latter half of *Aurora Leigh* resembles feminine epistolary forms, and even though Aurora does misunderstand or deny her own feelings for Romney through much of the work, the audience may respond differently to this particular text. In some aspects of her life, Aurora is intelligent and insightful, and she is given the control of retrospective narration for part of the work, making it difficult for the reader to adopt an attitude of superiority over her. More importantly, although at times the implied

77. Mermin, "Genre," 9.

78. Woolf, 192.

79. Case, *Plotting*, 30.

80. *Ibid.*, 16.

author may know, and readers may infer, more than Aurora knows, the tone of the text generally treats Aurora's errors with sympathy, rather than ridicule. The reader is invited to identify with Aurora and to accept her changing knowledge, beliefs, and actions.⁸¹

If the reader's identification with Aurora requires an acceptance of change, and a constantly revised understanding, then so, too, does the reader's identification of the poem's form. Reynolds says of *Aurora Leigh's* formal features, "These constantly renewed attempts at repetition, variety, and revision suggest the inadequacy of any absolute conclusion. But they also indicate the potential for an approximation to vision through this legible, if fragmented, text."⁸² Just as Barrett Browning shows the inadequacy of an unwillingness to change, of remaining locked in an absolute conclusion, she also demonstrates the inadequacy of formally restrictive genres, which lock a poet's ideas into a preexisting form. The fragmentation of *Aurora Leigh* is necessary and illuminating, because it exposes the limitations of various genres when taken individually. Barrett Browning sometimes exposes narrative conventions to promote the purposes of lyric, and sometimes exposes lyric to promote narrative. The poem's readers are not asked to judge Aurora harshly, but they are expected to judge literary forms, and to see the necessity of the generic hybridity the poem embodies.

The next chapter examines a poem whose goal is precisely the judgment of the poem's speakers—Robert Browning's *The Ring and the Book*, a work that fuses, rather than fragments, lyric and narrative through its use and expansion of the dramatic monologue.

81. I agree with Reynolds that rather than judging Aurora, "The reader is asked to share all the fluctuating opinions of the actor-narrator enacted before her, not to demand consistency but to experience each step toward a notional growth as and when Aurora herself experiences it." Reynolds, 28.

82. *Ibid.*, 48.