All of the texts so far treated in this book employ the category of feminine fallenness to focus but also displace a series of radical threats to identity and self-representation. For Dickens, whose approach is certainly not devoid of sympathy, the fallen woman nonetheless comes to figure extreme conceptions of social determination, narrative inscription, and nonliberatory self-understanding. One might be tempted to attribute to Dickens an idiosyncratic fascination with victimization and systemic forces, yet even a writer such as Gaskell, who sets out to challenge harsh and unforgiving responses to sexual lapses, still uses fallenness to express deep-rooted anxieties about the subject-constituting power of cultural forms such as melodrama and romance (*Mary Barton*) and the dominance and reach of instrumental reason within industrial society (*Ruth*). Both Dickens and Gaskell render problematic the very notion of feminine autonomy or self-knowledge, elaborating ideals of femininity based on selflessness.

Moreover, precisely because the Victorian fallen woman is seen as hopelessly subject to structural forces that do not so powerfully determine more privileged subjects, it becomes difficult for writers to imagine or dramatize scenes in which any form of dialogical reciprocity can occur between fallen and unfallen characters. Eclipsed by a “vivid circle of paint,” the fallen woman fails to make herself understood; she becomes an object of condescending sympathy or violent inscription; she droops or swoons, unequal to the tasks or pleasures of reciprocal recognition.¹ It is certainly true that such

¹. The quote is from Elizabeth Gaskell, *Mary Barton* 169.
moments can insist, sometimes in startling and memorable ways, on the forces, narratives, and structures that condition the social world and mediate human action. Yet the overarching rhetoric that informs such moments tends to cast the fallen woman as a mere systems effect, thereby generating a stark determinism that forecloses any understanding of subjectivity as fundamentally participatory. As we saw in the previous chapter, D. G. Rossetti’s poem “Jenny” displays in a particularly heightened manner the forms of distortion that attend encounters with the prostitute, revealing the powerful interpersonal effects generated by a reifying discourse of otherness.

In contrast to “Jenny,” Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s novel-inverse *Aurora Leigh* more actively confronts and challenges the distortions that afflict encounters with women supposed to be “fallen,” “lost,” or “ruined.” Although primarily the story of a poet’s development, just as *David Copperfield* is primarily the story of a writer’s development, *Aurora Leigh* employs a subplot tracing the fall and redemption of Marian Erle, a lower-class sempstress. It is even somewhat misleading to call the Marian Erle story a subplot, since it becomes so prominently woven into the story of Aurora’s own development. If one imagines David Copperfield marrying Emily or taking her into his household after she is “found,” or imagines Jane Eyre setting up house with Bertha Rochester, one gets a sense of the highly unorthodox nature of the Marian Erle story. One of the most remarkable aspects of *Aurora Leigh* is precisely the significance accorded the intimate and sustained relationship between the pure Aurora and the fallen Marian. This relationship indicates that, for Barrett Browning, there was a need for the woman artist to come to terms with the prevalent literary staging of fallenness. And the fact that Barrett Browning actively struggled not only with the de-

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2. Doris Lessing, in *The Four-Gated City*, writes just such an imaginative revision of the *Jane Eyre* plot, but she does so within a cultural climate very different from Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s. See Elaine Showalter, *A Literature of Their Own* 124. Among the works treated in this book, *Ruth* comes closest to *Aurora Leigh* insofar as the fallen Ruth is brought into the Benson household, though *Aurora Leigh* is more bold in its dramatization of a relation between two women (there is no adult male member of their ménage in Florence). Barrett Browning had read and liked *Ruth*, and it is clearly a source for *Aurora Leigh*. For an excellent discussion of *Aurora Leigh* as a debate with works by other women writers (such as *Corinne*, *Jane Eyre*, and *Ruth*), see Cora Kaplan, Introduction, *Aurora Leigh and Other Poems*. (In this chapter, all quotations from *Aurora Leigh* follow Kaplan’s edition.)
piction of women in art but also with the possibilities for mediating between aesthetic isolation and intersubjective experience made the thematization of the fallen an important site of anxiety and interrogation.

*Aurora Leigh* is a first-person novel-in-verse that recreates the development of a woman artist and attempts, in epic fashion, to take on the largest problems of its own age. It shares affinities with *The Prelude* and *Don Juan*, the epic and the bildungsroman, the courtship novel and the "social problem" novel. Aurora Leigh, born in Italy to an Englishman and an Italian woman, loses both her parents when young (her mother dies when she is four, her father when she is thirteen). After her father's death, she is taken to England to be raised by her father's sister, a severe woman with conservative ideas about the education of women. Her cousin and friend Romney Leigh, who has espoused social reform as a vocation, proposes to Aurora on her twentieth birthday, asking that she join him in his endeavors to ease the sufferings of the poor. Aurora forcefully declines, asserting her independence and her own vocation as a poet, and criticizing Romney for his utilitarian approach to love and to the world. The confrontation between Aurora and Romney during the proposal scene introduces the larger thematic tension between philanthropy and poetry, materiality and spirituality, one that the eventual reconciliation and marriage of Romney and Aurora attempts to resolve. It also introduces the conflict between Aurora's claims to autonomy and more conventional expectations of women's roles, natures, and limitations (as represented not only by Romney but also by Aurora's aunt, who upbraids and then resents her niece for declining Romney's offer). For many readers, the marriage at the end of the book represents a lamentable capitulation to conventionality, one that dilutes the challenge of the proposal scene. The marriage is long deferred, however, and it takes place only after Aurora's significant relationship with Marian Erle.

Shortly after the proposal, the aunt dies, leaving Aurora a very modest sum to live upon. Through indirect means, Romney attempts to add to this amount the vast sum of 30,000 pounds, but Aurora discovers the ruse, tears up the check, and departs for London to write and live on her own. The next Aurora hears of Romney, he is engaged to marry the sempstress Marian Erle, who also selflessly ministers to the unfortunate. Romney conceives the upcoming marriage as a symbolic healing of a class-divided society and so invites
both rich and poor, St. James and St. Giles, to the ceremony. But as a result of the machinations of the evil Lady Waldemar, herself in love with Romney, the wedding never takes place. Having convinced Marian that the marriage threatens Romney’s own interests, Lady Waldemar persuades her to emigrate to Australia in the custody of one of her former servants. The servant, a designing procuress, instead leads Marian to a brothel in Paris, where she is drugged and raped.

Meanwhile Aurora’s poetic career and aesthetic philosophy advance steadily as she works through various lesser forms (the ballad, the pastoral) on her way to the larger epic that will stand as her most mature poetic creation. *Aurora Leigh* is in this respect the story of an artist developing to the point of being able to write *Aurora Leigh*. Yet Aurora repeatedly experiences emotional isolation, which is rendered even more acute when she receives news that Romney is soon to wed Lady Waldemar (although this wedding never takes place either). Aurora decides to return to Italy, the site of her early affections. Stopping over in Paris, she discovers Marian Erle living with her illegitimate baby and takes the two of them along to set up house in Italy. Romney eventually seeks them out, intending to make amends to Marian by marrying her. We discover that Romney’s latest philanthropic endeavor, a phalanstery at his ancestral home, has literally blown up in his face, leaving him blind, chastened, and duly reverential of the spiritual life represented by Aurora. Marian, claiming an exclusive attachment to her child and insisting on the impurity of marriage for one like her, declines Romney’s offer. The poem then ends with a drawn-out reconciliation between Romney and Aurora, both of whom admit earlier blindesses and excesses, though poetry and the inner life of the spirit clearly win out over philanthropy and the world of “external” reform.

Barrett Browning’s innovative formal synthesis of epic poetry and realist fiction corresponds to Aurora’s attempt to forge thematic links between art and philanthropy, the literary and the social, spirit and utility. That is, the attempt to reconcile the poetic and the novelistic

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3. Upon its publication in 1857, *Aurora Leigh* was immediately recognized for its formal innovativeness. Barrett Browning herself initially conceived the work as a synthesis transcending the supposed incompatibility between poetry and prose fiction: “But my chief intention just now is the writing of a sort of novel-poem—a poem as completely modern as ‘Geraldine’s Courtship,’ running into the midst of our
loosely parallels, and is expressive of, the attempt to reconcile literary work and transformative social action—thematic tensions dramatized in the relationship between Aurora and Romney. I say "loosely parallels" because I don't mean to suggest that the novel, or novel writing, can be compared with "transformative social action" in any direct sense. Novelistic form corresponds to the thematic pole of social action or philanthropy only insofar as it attempts to convey "realistically" the material conditions of the age and to particularize and locate social actors within a "realistic" setting. As we shall see, Barrett Browning actually makes claims for the socially transformative power of poetry itself, but she can properly do so only within a work of poetry that integrates novelistic technique, a work that dramatizes the spiritualizing effect of poetry on character and the failure of other forms of engagement with the social realm.4

This chapter explores the significance of Marian Erle to the text's formal and thematic tensions. The flexible figure of Marian Erle in large part enables the text's formal and thematic mediations, insofar as she is seen to be continuous with the category of the poetic as well as symbolic of the social other. As in the case of David Copperfield, the artist's enabling self-definition emerges out of a relation to fall-enness, though the fact that the artist is in this case a woman produces a considerably more vexed and revisionist depiction of falleness. And the conception of falleness as attenuated autonomy takes a very different form than it does in the other works I have examined, connecting expressly to the idea of women's status as "relative creatures." Moreover, even as Aurora assigns Marian a privileged relation to poetry and thereby risks aestheticizing her, she uses the occasion not to reproduce but to interrogate and revise the distorting relation to the other that typifies Victorian inscriptions of impure femininity. By revising her relation to Marian, Aurora at least temporarily moves beyond the stark opposition between aesthetic and intersubjective experience, an opposition that inhabits not only her own conceptions but also the dominant rhetoric of fallen-

4. See Dorothy Mermin, Elizabeth Barrett Browning 183–224.
ness. But if Aurora confronts the reifying tendencies of the rhetoric of fallenness, she nonetheless fails to address adequately the larger tension between art and philanthropy, even though she is sharply critical of what she construes as Romney’s deindividualizing philanthropic relation to Marian and other members of the lower classes. The problem, as we shall see, is that Aurora’s concept of intersubjectivity remains restrictively dyadic and hence cannot generate a larger understanding of social plurality and social hierarchy.

Autonomy and Fallenness

In *Aurora Leigh*, Barrett Browning ends up arguing that poetry is the best form of philanthropy: the problem with Romney’s view of the world, as he dutifully admits to Aurora upon their reconciliation in Florence, is its subordination of the spiritual to the material. During their twilight interview, Romney recalls and endorses lines Aurora spoke at the age of twenty, when she forcefully declined his marriage proposal:

“You will not compass your poor ends
Of barley-feeding and material ease,
Without the poet’s individualism
To work your universal. It takes a soul
To move a body,—it takes a high-souled man
To move the masses, even to a cleaner stye:
It takes the ideal, to blow an inch inside
The dust of the actual: and your Fouriers failed,
Because not poets enough to understand
That life develops from within.”

(VIII, 427–36; also see II, 476–85)

*Aurora Leigh* joins with many industrial novels and other anti-utilitarian texts of Victorian social criticism by promoting the transformative power of art itself. Philanthropy, in its attendance merely on the physical and external, remains impotent to work any real change: the cultivation of spirit, not the rearrangement of matter, elevates a degraded humanity. Barrett Browning thus directly engages the materialist/idealist debate that conditioned Victorian discussions of social reform, making appeal to the primacy of the
individual soul and extending a romantic emphasis on spirituality deriving from Coleridge and Carlyle. The poem's ending finesses the problem of reconciling philanthropy and art by making art at least the precondition, if not the actual means, of social transformation. And at the very end of the poem, both terms, art and philanthropy, are sublated into a higher form: God's love.

There is another major obstacle to Aurora's acknowledging the virtues of the philanthropic attitude as represented by Romney: it not only subordinates the spiritual to the material but also, precisely as an extension of women's relative status, threatens an already precariously held autonomy. In the poem, both these aspects of philanthropy are linked to prostitution, the first literally, the second figuratively. First of all, *Aurora Leigh* actually suggests that a transformed relation to the material would cure the epidemic of urban prostitution, which for Barrett Browning was a tragedy in and of itself as well as a particularly telling symptom of the age. In a rather startling passage, one that dares to envision an undegraded form of sexual passion, Aurora Leigh attributes prostitution to a rampant materialism that prevents a properly spiritual relation to the body itself. Barrett Browning's text thus reflects the larger connection between materialist thinking and the construction of fallenness by making materialism literally responsible for prostitution. For Aurora, art magnifies a truth "which, fully recognised, would change the world / And shift its morals":

If man could feel,
Not one day, in the artist's ecstasy,
But every day, feast, fast, or working-day,
The spiritual significance burn through
The hieroglyphic of material shows,
Henceforward he would paint the globe with wings,
And reverence fish and fowl, the bull, the tree,
And even his very body as a man—
Which now he counts so vile, that all the towns
Make offal of their daughters for its use.

(VII, 856-66)

5. In a letter to Mrs. Martin during the Crimean War, Barrett Browning wrote, "There are worse plagues, deeper griefs, dreader wounds than the physical. What of the forty thousand wretched women in this city? The silent writhing of them is to me more appalling than the roar of cannons." *The Letters of Elizabeth Barrett Browning* 2:213; see also Mermin, *Elizabeth Barrett Browning* 213.
The converted Romney expresses a more extreme version of this same view, virtually equating a materialist philanthropy with prostitution. When the rich and the poor alike care only to satisfy their “gross needs,”

“Why that’s so far from virtue, only vice
Can find excuse for’t that makes libertines,
And slurs our cruel streets from end to end
With eighty thousand women in one smile,
Who only smile at night beneath the gas.”

(VIII, 411–15) 6

Although Marian Erle does not become a prostitute, we must view her story in light of Barrett Browning’s idea that materialist philanthropy actively promotes an epidemic of prostitution. That is, even though Marian’s overdetermined fate can be variously attributed to a degraded background, poverty, or the malevolence of bad women (her mother, Lady Waldemar), it remains the case that her ultimate victimization in the brothel of Paris traces in part to Romney’s misconceived philanthropy. And of course, as Dorothy Mermin has pointed out, Romney’s failure as a reformer implicitly extends to his own efforts to help actual prostitutes. 7

The figurative form of fallenness as compromised autonomy, however, assumes a greater prominence in the poem than does the concern with urban prostitution. A disavowal of dependence inaugurates the poem itself: Aurora Leigh announces in the first lines that she will no longer be writing for “others’ uses” but instead for her own “better self” (I, 3, 4). The rejection of Romney’s proposal issues in part out of the conviction that marriage is prostitution: “If I married him, / I should not dare to call my soul my own / Which so he had bought and paid for” (II, 785–87). And in the long interlude on aesthetics in Book V, Aurora describes other-directed acts of writing as a form of feminine vice. After initially lamenting that her art must fail if it fails to move one man (Romney), Aurora in a

6. Ironically, Romney proves his point by using one of the statistics circulating through the prostitution accounts, which were themselves part of the scientific approach to social and moral life that Romney here decryes. And the statistic he provides is by far the largest one that appears in those accounts; it was in fact frequently disputed, others holding the number to be far closer to 8,000. For a different statistic cited by Barrett Browning herself, see n. 5.

7. Mermin, Elizabeth Barrett Browning 203. Also see Aurora Leigh III, 550–52.
characteristic recoil asserts that the need to commend oneself to a chosen audience of one “proves a certain impotence in art”: “This vile woman’s way / Of trailing garments shall not trip me up: / I’ll have no traffic with the personal thought / In Art’s pure temple” (V, 44, 59–62).

In a similar vein, though without the same imagery of feminine seduction, she denigrates contemporary drama and decides not to write in that genre, precisely because it must adapt itself to “the standard of the public taste” and learn “to carry and fetch / The fashions of the day to please the day” (V, 270, 272–73). Actually the shift in imagery signals an important distinction between two kinds of compromised autonomy: the first version of “fallen” art caters to an audience of one, the second to the whole degraded “public.” The woman artist, that is, must not only avoid a general tendency within contemporary art to lower itself to the public taste, but also guard against a peculiarly feminine tendency, “the vile woman’s way” of subordinating her art to the judgment of “some one friend” (V, 49).

Aurora Leigh’s emphasis on feminine artistic autonomy stems from Barrett Browning’s awareness of the obstacles facing women writers within a culture and a literary tradition that defined womanhood precisely in terms of its other-directedness. Aurora’s claim to self-sufficiency when she rejects Romney’s proposal of marriage rests on the conviction that in order to become an artist she must not subordinate herself to the needs and desires of another: “I too have my vocation,—work to do” (II, 455). According to Aurora, Romney cannot acknowledge this conviction because he, like the masculine culture at large, does not accord full moral agency to women:

“You misconceive the question like a man,
Who sees a woman as the complement
Of his sex merely. You forget too much
That every creature, female as the male,
Stands single in responsible act and thought
As also in birth and death.”

(II, 434–39)

As in the other works I examine in this book, fallenness signifies attenuated autonomy, but the terms of the model have shifted to accommodate a specifically feminist critique and aspiration. Barrett Browning does perceive certain nongendered contemporary threats
to human autonomy, particularly the threat that materialism poses to the purity and freedom of the individual soul. Indeed, she apprehends the negative effects of modern industrial society in fundamentally Christian and romantic terms. Ideally, she would like to see the soul released from, transformed out of, its material fetters; and she believes the artist is especially equipped to minister to the spiritual needs of a fallen, materialistic age. This release of the soul will be a release into a kind of freedom, a finding of one’s full powers, even though it will entail submission to God. For Barrett Browning, this essentially Christian and humanist vision of the self is not gender-specific. However, it is also clear that women must guard against particular threats to autonomy, ones that jeopardize this potential empowerment of the soul. As Aurora’s statements to Romney emphasize, women must claim their right to vocation and discrete moral selfhood. Thus a gender-specific struggle for autonomy accompanies the more general call for spiritual rejuvenation.

The gender-specific claim to autonomy bases itself not simply on a critique of women’s “relative” or “complementary” status but also on the perception that in both art and the everyday practical world women are frequently objectified by means of a distinctly aestheticizing gaze. As critics have amply shown, the problem of woman’s objectification appears in poems from all phases of Barrett Browning’s career, from the early ballads to *Sonnets from the Portuguese*, *Aurora Leigh*, and beyond.8 Within the ideology of Victorian culture, women are typically objects for rather than creators of poetry: they are assimilated, in all manner of ways, to the work of art itself, and if they are poets, to their own works of art. One can read *Aurora Leigh* as a long struggle on the part of the poet heroine to become, in Dorothy Mermin’s words, “a subject rather than object in relation to Romney”—and indeed, such a reading provides a clearer explanation for what many consider an excessive treatment of Romney at the end.9 Blind, he can no longer treat Aurora as mere object, ornament, or spectacle. In a sense, for Barrett Browning the woman’s tendency to prostitute herself to a single other involves a kind of self-objectification; this realization is what provokes Aurora Leigh’s

8. This is a central issue in Mermin’s book as well as in Helen Cooper, *Elizabeth Barrett Browning: Woman and Artist*.

rejection of her own self-chastisement for not properly "moving" her audience.

Yet 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. To remain outside of love means failing to achieve the human connection necessary to an art that wants to appropriate the role of philanthropy, which is founded on the proper recognition of, and concern for, others. The crucial book of the poem in this regard is Book VI, in which Aurora undergoes the experience—reencountering Marian—that brings her out of an isolation that is both emotionally and aesthetically debilitating. This encounter constitutes a thinking-through of the tension between aesthetic isolation and social responsiveness. Aurora generates a dialectical interplay between aesthetic and intersubjective experience, and she does so precisely through a reconceptualization of the relation between herself, as a woman artist, and Marian, as a fallen woman. In doing so, she significantly revises the dominant rhetoric of fallenness.

**Poetry and Philanthropy**

In retrieving Marian Erle from a fate whose obscurity is defined through its typicality (the police of Paris cannot find her because there are so many like her), Aurora Leigh addresses within the story what Barrett Browning's depiction of Marian Erle seeks to do in larger terms: she insists on particularizing the fallen woman, on rescuing her from a set of conventions that obscure the perception of her as an individual. At the same time, Aurora's relation to Marian serves as a comment on Romney's previous relation to Marian and in effect revises the terms of interclass encounter that his marriage proposal expresses. Thus two concerns come to focus on Marian Erle: the problem of the depiction of women in art (and by extension, the aestheticizing objectification of women that finds its most extreme manifestation in the fallen woman) and the problem of one's proper relation to the living subjects of philanthropy.

For Romney, Marian serves as the symbolic representative of the
lower class. His proposal to her conceives of their marriage as a symbolic healing of the division between the classes:

“Marian, I being born
What men call noble, and you, issued from
The noble people,—though the tyrannous sword,
Which pierced Christ’s heart, has cleft the world in twain
Twixt class and class, opposing rich to poor,
Shall we keep parted? Not so. Let us lean
And strain together rather, each to each,
Compress the red lips of this gaping wound
As far as two souls can.”

(IV, 120–28)

Aurora Leigh, on the other hand, approves the impending marriage between her cousin and the sempstress because she honors the particularity of the love relation, not its attempt at symbolic reconciliation. It pleases her to suppose Romney “fanatical in love”; she honors his “right in choosing” a wife from the lower class because she perceives Marian as “good, true, noble” (IV, 296, 320, 313). Aurora wishes to uphold a position that is at once romantic and meritocratic: she focuses on Marian’s individual worthiness rather than her affiliation with Romney’s “noble people.” Of course this focus entails separating Marian from her class and elevating her to the status of the Leighs or the “sublime Vandykes” (IV, 309). If Romney sees Marian as representative, Aurora sees her as exceptional: the one brackets individuality, the other abstracts the individual from her surroundings.

Romney’s position to a certain extent recalls the proposal he made to Aurora, as well as Aurora’s subsequent anger at his conceiving her simply as “a wife to help [his] ends,—in her no end” (II, 403). During her own proposal scene, Aurora’s complaint is that Romney dangerously neglects the individual soul in his privileging of social “diagrams” and “formal universals” (III, 744, 747). Romney’s complaint against Aurora, on the other hand, is that, as a woman, she can “generalise/Oh, nothing,—not even grief!” (II, 183–84). Women remain impotent to comprehend or influence the world, according to Romney, because they cannot think of misery in the aggregate; unable to perceive systemic suffering, they cannot properly work for social change. Their model for charity demands proximity and
generates a dangerous empathy, one that ironically obliterates any proper understanding of the actual social condition of others:

"The human race
To you means, such a child, or such a man,
You saw one morning waiting in the cold,
Beside that gate, perhaps. You gather up
A few such cases, and when strong sometimes
Will write of factories and of slaves, as if
Your father were a negro, and your son
A spinner in the mills. All's yours and you,
All, coloured with your blood, or otherwise
Just nothing to you. Why, I call you hard
To general suffering."

(II, 189–99)

In Romney’s account, the woman’s relation to suffering humanity either reduces to a sympathetic response to a single other or takes the form of an imaginative act in which the familial analogy gives life to, or “colours,” the ostensible object of concern, in this case the negro or the spinner. Women require the actual presence of the sufferers, but only that they may revise them into familiar or familial presences. Romney’s description thus implies that Aurora will remain incapable of any true recognition of those outside her immediate context because, paradoxically, she will inevitably respond to strangers only insofar as she can familiarize them out of their social particularity. As we will see, Aurora’s experience with Marian in Paris in fact emerges out of a need to come to terms with Romney’s accusations of her distance from “the human race.”

Aurora first seeks out Marian Erle when she hears from Lady Waldemar of Romney’s engagement to the sempstress. The poet’s journey to the working-class neighborhood of Saint Margaret’s Court is depicted as bold and dangerous; indeed, the description of Aurora’s initial approach, alone and “close-veiled,” casts the urban environment, and the lower-class individuals who people it, as threatening, vicious, and demonic. A sick child jeers at Aurora as she passes. She encounters a frightening, abusive, painted woman: “a woman, rouged / Upon the angular cheek-bones, kerchief torn,
/ Thin dangling locks, and flat lascivious mouth, / Cursed at a window both ways, in and out, / By turns some bed-rid creature and
myself” (III, 764–65, 768). And when Aurora, from uncertain motives, responds to the curses by emptying her purse upon the stones, “the whole court / Went boiling, bubbling up, from all its doors / And windows” (III, 784–86).

In response to this threat of engulfment, Aurora plunges into Marian’s house, gropes her way up a dark, dilapidated stair, knocks on an attic door, and is met on the threshold by Marian’s “ineffable face” (III, 798). The elevated refuge provides immediate relief, and Marian contrasts vividly with the phantasms of the lower court:

She touched me with her face and with her voice,
This daughter of the people. Such soft flowers
From such rough roots? The people, under there,
Can sin so, curse so, look so, smell so... faugh!
Yet have such daughters?

(III, 805–9)

The encounter with the “pure” Marian is set off against the experience of a threatening, indistinguishable otherness (the court “bubbling up’) and a painted Janus face that provocatively positions itself on the boundary between home and street. Marian provides refuge because she is at once distinct (a discernible “face”) and “ineffable” (not painted or otherwise eclipsed by representation). The two aspects of Marian’s protected status reveal her dual function here: she is the antidote to the faceless threat of the lower class as well as the counterpoint to the distortions of femininity as spectacle or aestheticized object (here demonized through the figure of the vicious painted woman).

Constituting Marian as the antidote to a faceless lower class involves a powerful negation—as the “faugh!” makes blatantly clear. In fleeing to Marian, that is, Aurora escapes rather than revises her objectifying and fantasmatic relation to the lower class. This fantasmatic relation in fact reappears with even greater intensity in Book IV, when Aurora recounts the coming together of rich and poor at the ill-fated wedding ceremony. Barrett Browning’s heightened rhetoric reflects conventional middle-class fears about the working classes and participates in a common compensatory move to obliterate the distinct subjectivity of the poor whenever they are ap-
prehended as a potential force or threatening crowd. We encountered this not atypical Victorian rhetoric in Dombey and Son, where Dickens cast potentially retributive agents as mere chimerical subjects. Barrett Browning’s rhetoric is quite extreme: the “people” become “the humours of the peccant social wound,” descriptively assimilated to death, decay, and disease: “You’d suppose / A finished generation, dead of plague, / Swept outward from their graves into the sun” (IV, 544, 547–50). Barrett Browning accords distinct embodiment to the poor urban dwellers, but only as animate corpses. Even then, she quickly revises them into a seething, inhuman mass (“They clogged the streets, they oozed into the church / In a dark slow stream, like blood” [IV, 553–54]). This strategy of defacement becomes strikingly explicit some lines later, when “an ugly crest of faces” seemingly erupts out of the “crammed mass”:

Faces? . . . phew,
We’ll call them vices, festering to despairs,
Or sorrows, petrifying to vices: not
A finger-touch of God left whole on them,
All ruined, lost—the countenance worn out
As the garment, the will dissolve as the act,
The passions loose and dragging in the dirt
To trip a foot up at the first free step!
Those, faces? ’twas as if you had stirred up hell
To heave its lowest dreg-fiends uppermost
In fiery swirls of slime. . . .

(IV, 579–89)

Given Aurora’s investment in the face-to-face encounter, this explicit defacement of the poor is extreme and reactive indeed. The association with the rhetoric of fallenness is clear. Vice is defacement, obliteration of identity (“ruined” and “lost,” the faces of the poor are as the faded finery of the streetwalker, “worn out”). Purity, on the other hand, manifests itself in the protected identity of the “ineffable” or distinct face. Opposed to the terrifying facelessness of

10. Cora Kaplan argues that Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s descriptions of the poor are based not on actual experience but on reading; she in particular notes the way Barrett Browning reworks scenes from Charles Kingsley’s Alton Locke. Kaplan, Introduction 32–33. Deirdre David similarly argues that Barrett Browning’s descriptions of the poor in Aurora Leigh are “the hellish distillation of her readings in the Victorian discourse of the poor.” Deirdre David, Intellectual Women and Victorian Patriarchy 125.
the threatening crowd, here we find not, as before, the "ineffable" face of the unsullied Marian, but rather the protected and prevailing identity of the upper-class man. As elsewhere in Victorian literature and culture, fallenness is constructed in opposition not only to feminine purity but also to normative masculinity, which is characterized by mastery and control. When the crowd erupts on Marian’s behalf, assuming her failure to appear means that Romney has ruined her, Aurora seeks salvation and self-stabilization precisely through the finding of Romney’s “masterful pale face”: “I struggled to precipitate myself / Head-foremost to the rescue of my soul / In that white face” (IV, 850, 874–76). Whereas elsewhere concrete intersubjective recognition serves as an imperative and ideal, here Aurora negotiates class anxiety through violent strategies of defacement and selective acts of self-serving recognition.

As we shall see, Aurora’s use of Marian to challenge the depiction of women in art and to revise conventional literary fallenness manifests a politics more progressive and reconstructive than that expressed in the reactive rhetoric of class, perhaps because she is more sensitive to those objectifying tendencies to which she herself, as a woman, has fallen victim. Romney treats Aurora as a muse, a spectacle; her aunt subjects her to a form of scrutiny that is cold, distant, scientific. As Aurora writes of the tense days after Romney’s proposal, when her aunt watches every move she makes, “Being observed, / When observation is not sympathy, / Is just being tortured” (II, 866–68). As this quote implies, the ultimate aim is never entirely to avoid being seen, but rather to suggest how concrete intersubjective relations get distorted through objectification. Ideally, one is observed with the sympathy of a nonobjectifying gaze.11 We first encounter such a gaze in Aurora’s mother: the very first allusion to the mother in fact construes her gaze as a contradiction of the admonitions and interdictions she voices:

But still I catch my mother at her post
Beside the nursery door, with finger up,

11. It’s interesting that Barrett Browning often evokes a nonvisual sense when describing an ideal encountering of another’s face. Hence the description of Aurora’s father’s first sight of Aurora’s mother: “A face flashed like a cymbal on his face / And shook with silent clangour brain and heart, / Transfiguring him to music” (I, 87–89). Or Marian on Romney: “When he looked / It was as if he spoke, and when he spoke / He sang perhaps” (III, 1170–72).
“Hush, hush—here’s too much noise!” while her sweet eyes
Leap forward, taking part against her word
In the child’s riot.

(I, 15–19)

And the loss of the mother marks the loss of her “rare” gaze, a loss exemplified further in the replacement of the mother’s living face by the haunting, uncanny portrait of her corpse (I, 30).

Marian’s “ineffable face” becomes the antithesis of the portrait of the dead mother, which as a painted corpse associates aestheticization with death. That the painter took his likeness from an already dead model suggests that, for Barrett Browning, even ostensibly “realist” representations of women, such as portraiture, employ a dead iconography, one that forecloses the possibility of representing a living individual. But the portrait of the mother, a dense symbolic field comprising every feminine type from angel to fiend, does more than convey a negative or reifying mode of representing women. It comes to inhabit, strangely, all of Aurora’s own imaginative acts, serving as the hovering referent for every aesthetic experience: “And as I grew / In years, I mixed, confused, unconsciously, / Whatever I last read or heard or dreamed, / Abhorrent, admirable, beautiful, / Pathetical, or ghastly, or grotesque, / With still that face” (I, 146–51). Acts of the imagination conjure up, play upon, the image of the fantasmatic painted face; the living encounter remains unrepresentable, protected, “ineffable.” While elsewhere Aurora conceives poetry and art as spiritualizing forces that speak to and transform the human soul, here the aestheticization of women leaves painted corpses in its wake and generates a stark opposition between representation and life.

The apprehension of a deanimating power of representation is, in the case of Aurora Leigh, profoundly overdetermined. It traces not only to Barrett Browning’s critique of feminine objectification in art but also to anxieties about the isolating effects of artistic activity and a perceived tension between aesthetic experience and intersubjec-

12. I don’t mean here to suggest in any way that one could produce an unmediated representation but simply to show that, for Barrett Browning, conventional representations of women are dead types, that representations of women need revision so as to better portray a living individuality.
tivity, between reading texts and encountering people.\textsuperscript{13} (As we shall see, this tension is related but by no means identical to the tension between art and philanthropy.) Like other texts I have analyzed, \textit{Aurora Leigh} expresses fears that intersubjectivity itself will collapse into a model of reading, that representation will obscure, eclipse, or fix the self. Part of this fear stems from Barrett Browning’s Carlylean stance on the need to break free of, or transcend, the encrustations of the literal and the material: the soul must be rescued from the falsifying texts that layer it. It has become a “palimpsest,” an “obscene text” that only dimly reveals traces of “the old Scripture” (I, 826, 829, 832). Barrett Browning also actively denigrates a readerly model of intersubjectivity when Aurora complains that Lady Waldemar treats her like a book:

\begin{quote}
Sweet heaven, she takes me up
As if she had fingered me and dog-eared me
And spelled me by the fireside half a life!
She knows my turns, my feeble points.—What then?
The knowledge of a thing implies the thing;
Of course, she found \textit{that} in me, she saw \textit{that},
Her pencil underscored \textit{this} for a fault,
And I, still ignorant. Shut the book up,—close!
And crush that beetle in the leaves.
\end{quote}

(V, 1053–61)

Reading Aurora like a book is presented as an underhanded and malevolent act on Lady Waldemar’s part, a surreptitious attempt to discover and underscore hidden weaknesses. Moreover, in reading Aurora’s weaknesses, she more deeply inscribes them: her act of reading fixes them, while Aurora remains “still ignorant.”

Barrett Browning thus criticizes what the speaker in “Jenny” for the most part uncritically enacts: the aspects of violent inscription involved in objectifying acts of reading others. Still, \textit{Aurora Leigh} joins “Jenny” in ascribing this negative readerly attitude to women

\textsuperscript{13} Of course there are aspects of Barrett Browning’s own life that might have rendered acute the gap between reading and social intercourse. Her years spent as an isolated invalid at Wimpole Street caused her to refer to herself as a “blind poet”: “How willingly I would as a poet exchange some of this lumbering, ponderous, helpless knowledge of books, for some experience of life & man.” Letter from Elizabeth Barrett Barrett to Robert Browning, March 10, 1845, in \textit{The Letters of Robert Browning and Elizabeth Barrett Barrett} 1:41.
of dubious respectability. Marian, for example, claims to be a "worthier mate" for Romney than ladies who are "wooed in silk among their learned books": "I shall set myself to read his eyes, / Till such grow plainer to me than the French / To wisest ladies" (IV, 230, 231–34). Reading here is metonymically indicated by reading French, an activity of questionable virtue, evoking the forbidden delights of the scandalous novel and the amorous epistle. Illiteracy becomes the guarantee of a "plain" reading of the eyes and face, one not corrupted by the distractions and seductions of textual reading.

But if Marian serves as counterpoint to what is construed as the distorting and deanimating power of representation, then why does Aurora insist on revising and translating the story Marian tells her during their first meeting? Why does Aurora deprive Marian of her voice and transform her into a story of her own making, announcing that she will retell Marian's narrative "with fuller utterance, / As coloured and confirmed in after times / By others and herself too" (III, 828–30)? Aurora retells Marian's story, we soon learn, so as to incorporate not only details gathered later but also, strangely, the refinements that Marian's facial expressions add to her imperfectly narrated tale:

She told the tale with simple, rustic turns,—
Strong leaps of meaning in her sudden eyes
That took the gaps of any imperfect phrase
Of the unschooled speaker: I have rather writ
The thing I understood so, than the thing
I heard so.

(IV, 151–56)

This is no attempt at sterile transcription, such as we saw in Dickens's ritual recordings of the women's stories at Urania Cottage. Here the eyes communicate "leaps of meaning"; the "fuller utterance" originates with Marian's face; the look completes the text. Ironically, Aurora's appropriation of Marian's voice aims to preserve a spoken narrative, whose mere transcription would empty out the meaningfulness embodied in the expressive face. What this retelling implies, however, in vivid contrast to the apprehension of "dead" representation and distorted readings, is that poetry is an appropriate analogue for the expressiveness of the face, that poetic lan-
guage can itself convey the elusive and nonlinguistic aspects of em­
-bodied subjectivity.

And yet we soon discover that the "ineffable face" can itself be
attributed to the power of poetry. As Aurora tells it, Marian’s own
curiously unmediated form of early reading—snatching fragments
of books from an itinerant pedlar and folding them within her breast
to pore over later—literally produced the contours and motions of
her face:

And thus she had grown, this Marian Erle of ours,
To no book-learning,—she was ignorant
Of authors,—not in the earshot of the things
Outspoken o’er the heads of common men
By men who are uncommon,—but within
The cadenced hum of such, and capable
Of catching from the fringes of the wing
Some fragmentary phrases, here and there,
Of that fine music,—which, being carried in
To her soul, had reproduced itself afresh
In finer motions of the lips and lids.

(III, 998–1008)

This passage, like the previous one, foregrounds the phenomenol­
ogy of the face, though in a very different way. In the first passage,
the expressiveness of the eyes represents the fact that subjectivity
exceeds the limits of any linguistic utterance (and it implies the
importance of the other’s presence, or a poetic version of that pres­
ence, to render communication complete). In the second quote, how­
ever, Marian Erle’s face is itself a paradoxically “fresh reproduction”
of the literary fragments that have, through no conscious act of her
own, passed through the smithy of her soul. Does this mean that
she has, like the painted corpse, been reduced to the status of aes­
thetic object? This is one of the poem’s thorniest points. The depic­
tion of Marian’s peculiar aesthetic education exemplifies Barrett
Browning’s conception of the potentially formative power of poetry
over the living soul, her conviction that this power is more life­
sustaining than any material satisfactions. Yet by creating Marian’s
own face as a literary reproduction, Barrett Browning recapitulates
the assimilation of women to works of art and in fact participates
in the tendency to cast the fallen woman as a written text. In this
passage, Barrett Browning’s poetic philanthropy runs up against her critique of lifeless aestheticization and feminine objectification.

Still, it is here that we see the beginnings of an attempt to set the living encounter and aesthetic experience in dialogue with one another. Written poetry can animate, rather than fix or obscure, the living face and the spoken narrative. What here emerges only fleetingly will achieve fuller elaboration in the section set in Paris, when Aurora reexperiences and more directly confronts her anxiety that intersubjectivity and aesthetic experience—people and texts—are at odds with one another, that the one always negates the other.

**Faces and Fantasies**

During her stay in Paris en route from London to Italy, Aurora suddenly acknowledges a need to study more closely the humanity to which she has had such a fantasmatic relation. Walking the streets of Paris, she vows to remain among the urban crowd and not retreat to the poetic pastoral: “I would be bold and bear / To look into the swarthiest face of things, / For God’s sake who has made them” (VI, 147-49). Aurora’s insistence on the importance of looking steadily on urban humanity leads her to propose art and philanthropy as parallel vocations:

Let us pray
God’s grace to keep God’s image in repute
That so, the poet and philanthropist
(Even I and Romney) may stand side by side,
Because we both stand face to face with men,
Contemplating the people in the rough,
Yet each so follow a vocation, his
And mine.

(VI, 197–204)

Standing “face to face” emerges as equally a poetic and a philanthropic ideal. But what precisely is meant by standing “face to face”? Oddly, it is not a reciprocal activity: the ensuing line defines it exclusively from the perspective of the poet and the philanthropist, as a removed act of contemplation. Moreover, what is being contemplated is not discrete individuals, but “the people in the rough.”
And when Aurora does ostensibly concretize “the people,” through the figure of the “hungry beggar boy,” she does not respond to his material situation but rather endows his inner soul with poetry, “both flowers and firmaments, / And surging seas and aspectable stars” (VI, 194–95). To acknowledge the individual soul one must see past the material; for Aurora, this visionary act is itself philanthropic. Not surprisingly, then, she shifts away from the idea that Romney’s vocation parallels her own in form and importance, wondering instead whether “A larger metaphysics might not help / Our physics, a completer poetry / Adjust our daily life and vulgar wants” (VI, 206–8). Speaking on behalf of poets and prophets, she “thunder[s] down” that “Virtue’s in the word!” (VI, 218).

Just at this point, as she elaborates yet again on the need to transcend material lack in the name of the spirit, Marian’s long-lost face intervenes (“God! what face is that?” [VI, 226]), interrupting her thought and hitting her own face like a physical blow (“What a face, what a look, what a likeness! Full on mine / The sudden blow of it came down” [VI, 232–33]).

It was as if a meditative man
Were dreaming out a summer afternoon
And watching gnats a-prick upon a pond,
When something floats up suddenly, out there,
Turns over . . . a dead face, known once alive . . .
So old, so new! it would be dreadful now
To lose the sight and keep the doubt of this:
He plunges—ha! he has lost it in the splash.

I plunged—I tore the crowd up, either side,
And rushed on, forward, forward, after her.
Her? whom?

(VI, 235–45)

This interesting reworking of Wordsworth’s drowned man episode in Book V of The Prelude registers a deep anxiety over the privileging of metaphysics over physics, poetry over social interaction. Aurora has been meditating specifically on the virtue of the word, the spiritualizing powers of language and of art. The meditation, which completes the flight from “the swarthiest face of things,” is then interrupted by a corpse-like face. What do we make of this? If we look to the passage in Wordsworth, which recounts the poet’s view-
ing of the drowned man retrieved out of Esthwaite Lake, we can begin to get some handle on what is going on here.

Seeking I knew not what, I chanced to cross
One of those open fields, which, shaped like ears,
Make green peninsulas on Esthwaite’s Lake.
Twilight was coming on, yet through the gloom
I saw distinctly on the opposite shore
A heap of garments, left as I supposed
By one who there was bathing. Long I watched,
But no one owned them; meanwhile the calm lake
Grew dark, with all the shadows on its breast,
And now and then a fish up-leaping snapped
The breathless stillness. The succeeding day—
Those unclaimed garments telling a plain tale—
Went there a company, and in their boat
Sounded with grappling-irons and long poles:
At length, the dead man, ’mid that beauteous scene
Of trees and hills and water, bolt upright
Rose with his ghastly face, a spectre shape—
Of terror even. And yet no vulgar fear,
Young as I was, a child not nine years old,
Possessed me, for my inner eye had seen
Such sights before among the shining streams
Of fairyland, the forests of romance—
Thence came a spirit hallowing what I saw
With decoration and ideal grace,
A dignity, a smoothness, like the works
Of Grecian art and purest poetry.

(1805, V, 456–81)14

For Wordsworth, the encounter with the “ghastly face” of the corpse occurs within a pastoral calmness and follows on an uncertain “seeking.” This “ghastly face,” whose manner of appearance seems oddly animate (the corpse rises “bolt upright”), causes a shock that is then swiftly recuperated into the terms of romance, art, and “purest poetry.” The corpse need cause no fear once transmuted into, hallowed by, art. The shock of death, materiality, and otherness is thus contained within a spiritualizing aesthetics.

Things take shape differently in Barrett Browning’s poem. Aurora comes upon the face of a living person in the midst of a crowded city street, but she compares it to coming upon the face of a drowned person in a pastoral setting. We must interpret this passage in light of Aurora’s earlier vow not to retreat to the poetic pastoral. In casting her own meditateness as pastoral (“dreaming out a summer afternoon,” the imagined man watches “gnats a-prick upon a pond”), Aurora acknowledges that she has abstracted herself from the earlier felt demand to recognize and confront social otherness. She has moved from the intention to “be bold and bear / To look into the swarthist face of things” to a position in which she “thunder[s] down” as poet and prophet. The flight to a distanced vantage point recalls not only the scramble from Saint Margaret’s boiling court to Marian’s attic refuge in Book III but also Aurora’s own London home, where the power to write emanated from, was enabled by, the evening ritual of watching “the city perish in the mist / Like Pharaoh’s armaments in the deep Red Sea” (III, 196–97).

If in the analogy of the meditative man Aurora is somehow acknowledging her flight into the safe retreat of the past oral, how then do we read the sudden intervention of Marian’s corpse-like face? Is Marian’s face jolting Aurora back into a more direct perception of otherness, one that forces a more considered understanding of those material conditions Aurora speaks so lightly of in her privileging of the spiritual? After all, Marian has been raped, borne the child of that rape, and now lives in poverty, feeling “dead” in every respect save her maternal role. Or, alternately, is Marian’s reappearance at this particular juncture, and Aurora’s swift and single-minded pursuit of her, repeating the earlier flight, in Saint Margaret’s Court, from a lower class perceived as threatening and all too proximate?

To answer these questions we need to consider the several issues that come together both in the depiction of Marian and in this pivotal passage. For, as I mentioned earlier, Barrett Browning uses Marian not only to explore the dilemmas that attend the philanthropic attitude but also to expose problems in mediating between aesthetic and intersubjective experience, particularly as these problems affect encounters with the fallen. It is for this latter reason, I suggest, that Aurora figures the encounter with Marian as a scene of reading. The meditative man is interrupted suddenly by a face that not only “floats up” but “turns over,” like the page of a book. And as if to carry through this sense of the figure, Aurora writes, “I plunged—
I tore the crowd up, either side, / and rushed on, forward, forward, after her" (VI, 243-44; my emphasis). Unlike Wordsworth, Aurora does not naturalize and transmute the shock of the encounter through an appeal to romance and reading; rather, she breaks past the readerly attitude and rushes in pursuit of the living face. That Aurora likens this living face to a corpse’s face is less a reflection of Marian’s new status than it is a symptom of Aurora’s own anxious guilt. For Aurora fears that the retreat into poetic meditation involves the negation of the living encounter, turning live faces into corpses, or mere pages. The appearance of Marian’s face thus functions differently here than it does in the Saint Margaret’s Court scene. No longer the site of refuge, Marian’s face actively disrupts Aurora’s retreat into the aesthetic. Indeed, in this scene Aurora is reconfronting her own unsatisfactory “use” of Marian as a story that needs to be retold and as the product of literary fragments she (Marian) only half understands.  

Aurora’s pursuit of Marian fails. Losing her in the crowd, she stops and wildly looks in all directions. Only when someone bumps into her is she jolted out of her frantic state. Dazed, she wonders whether she might not have imagined seeing Marian in the first place. For a second time, then, an act of the imagination (in this case “fantasy”; in the first, “contemplation”) is interrupted by the actual, experienced here as the undeniable facticity of another person:

We shape a figure of our fantasy,
Call nothing something, and run after it
And lose it, lose ourselves too in the search,
Till clash against us comes a somebody.

(VI, 285–88)

Perhaps, then, the face that seemed to hit her own was only imagined. But, after continued reflection, Aurora rejects this possibility:

those eyes,
To-day, I do remember, saw me too,
As I saw them, with conscious lids astrain
In recognition. Now a fantasy,

15. Interestingly, Marian was the product of torn pages (torn appears twice in the depiction of the pedlar). See III, 975, 980.
A simple shade of image of the brain,
Is merely passive, does not retro-act,
Is seen, but sees not.

(VI, 325–31)

The living face is opposed to the subjective fancy. The other's recognition of the self, the act of looking back, cannot be assimilated into fantasy or ever fully appropriated. Moreover, the disruption of solipsistic fantasy through intersubjective recognition then in turn disrupts the act of writing itself. Aurora imagines that, Marian being found, she ought to write to Romney, but a fuller remembrance of what she saw in seeing Marian stops her short:

My pen fell,
My hands struck sharp together, as hands do
Which hold at nothing. Can I write to him
A half-truth? can I keep my own soul blind
To the other half, ... the worse?

(VI, 334–38)

We learn that Aurora has suppressed something she saw peripherally, "not hid so well beneath the scanty shawl" (VI, 345). It is a child, an indicting emblem of Marian's impurity.

When Aurora writes, "My pen fell," she clearly refers to the act of letter writing; but at a deeper level the act of writing out her own story is being affected. Indeed, reencountering Marian in Paris coincides with Aurora Leigh's important shift from retrospective narration to the diary form of installments. The first five books of the poem are written by Aurora on the verge of her departure for Italy, and they recount her life up to that point. The next four books, beginning with her arrival in Paris, are written in installments, as an ongoing account. But a total collapse of the text into the present act of writing occurs precisely at the moment that Marian is encountered. Indeed, when Aurora actually finds Marian, she experiences difficulty writing: "I'll write about her, presently. / My hand's a-tremble, as I had just caught up / My heart to write with, in the place of it" (VI, 415–17).

The encounter with Marian in Paris works toward a complicated dialectical act. The foregrounding of the process of writing makes it clear that Barrett Browning does not want to rest with some simple
opposition of imaginative acts of reading and writing to actual encounters with other people. Ultimately, the appeal of the other both checks and prompts the aesthetic attitude. When Aurora actually locates Marian, it happens unexpectedly: she is wandering through the flower market, "musing, with the artist's eye, / That keeps the shade-side of the thing it loves, / Half-absent, whole-observing" (VI, 427–29). Aurora has entered a mood of aesthetic watchfulness, one more open than her earlier isolating contemplation (though this openness is doubtless enabled by the fact that she is observing flowers, not people). As before, the encounter occurs with suddenness and a powerful immediacy: Marian's face turns round "so close upon [Aurora] that [she] felt the sigh / It turned with" (VI, 440–41). The strategy of interruption and surprise that Barrett Browning employs at this juncture is significantly dialectic. The "half absent" aesthetic attitude cannot sustain itself and is importantly superseded by the scenario of recognition and recovery; this scenario then serves to prompt, becomes the occasion for, a renewed and heightened act of writing.

This model revises the one in which the portrait of the dead mother serves as dense symbolic field drawing in everything Aurora reads, hears, or imagines. Yet the productive interplay suggested by this sequence does not hold, precisely because of Marian's own status as a mother figure. The dialectical approach to intersubjectivity and aesthetic experience gives way to an idealized version of the intersubjective sublime, the perfect communion of two ineffable faces, exemplified in Marian's relation to her child:

Self-forgot, cast out of self,  
And drowning in the transport of the sight,  
Her whole pale passionate face, mouth, forehead, eyes,  
One gaze, she stood: then, slowly as he smiled  
She smiled too, slowly, smiling unaware,  
And drawing from his countenance to hers  
A fainter red, as if she watched a flame  
And stood in it a-glow.  

(VI, 604–11)

16. It also can be set against the important passage in which poetic inspiration is depicted as sexual subjugation by a male muse. See III, 121–43.
Through Marian, Aurora is herself able to experience the ecstatic encounter: the "dewy kiss" in which "the whole child's face at once / [dissolves] on [hers]" (VII, 948, 949–50). In its ultimate form, as the celebration of privatized merging based on the model of the mother-child dyad, Aurora's relation to Marian transmutes into another flight from the rigors of social interaction and the demands of aesthetic mediation. In this respect, it is telling that at Florence Aurora buys a house on a hill, "a tower which keeps / A post of double observation" over both the valley of the Arno and Mount Morello (VII, 516–17). More important still, Aurora stops writing and even reading, lapsing into a passivity broken only by the reappearance of Romney. What was originally an insistence on Marian's particularity gives way to a conventionalized view of Marian as a representation of divine motherhood, and to a mystical view of intersubjective fusion. As in Gaskell's Ruth, the romanticized maternal ideal fails to allow for reciprocal recognition and individuated identity.

During the sequence in Paris, however, Barrett Browning goes beyond the rhetoric of fallenness, reconceiving the relation between art and intersubjectivity and redressing the reifying distortions attending depictions of fallen women. Yet one must keep in mind that Barrett Browning appears to accomplish this reconceptualization at the expense of the lower class. Aurora never gets back to "the swarthiest face of things," never contemplates the people "in the rough": her encounter at the flower market is only with the "flower" of the slums. Moreover, the entire conclusion of the poem subordinates philanthropy to art, casting philanthropy as the imposition of masks onto the concrete particularity of lower-class persons. According to

17. Delores Rosenblum argues in different terms for the centrality of the encounter with Marian to Aurora's development, stressing that the encounter allows for the recovery of the maternal face. Rosenblum focuses primarily on the poem's concern with women's depiction in art: "In Aurora Leigh, Barrett Browning confronts the distorting projections—pictures and ghosts—before which women and men fall silent, replacing them with the schema of the apperceptive maternal face that women can reclaim as an authentic face, as they recover an authentic language." Rosenblum, "Face to Face" 327. What lends particular force to Rosenblum's argument about the recognition scene having everything to do with recognizing oneself in the maternal face is the fact that when writing to Romney, Aurora realizes that she saw not only a face but also, peripherally, a child. For a discussion that centers on the regressive quality of Aurora's attempt to retrieve the mother through the rescue of Marian, see Virginia V. Steinmetz, "Images of 'Mother-Want' in Elizabeth Barrett Browning's Aurora Leigh."
Romney's account of the revolt at Leigh Hall, the subjects of charity "broke up those waxen masks [he] made them wear, / With fierce contortions of the natural face" (VIII, 891–92). Ultimately, a version of Romney's original complaint against Aurora—that she can't generalize grief—can be leveled against Barrett Browning, who simply cannot imagine the poor as a plurality. She wishes only to retrieve the singular individual from objectification: her conception of inter-subjectivity remains exclusionary and dyadic. The love that reconciles all at the end of the poem is primarily "God's love" and "the love of wedded souls" (IX, 881, 882). Romney attempts to include, though only secondarily, filial, fraternal, neighborly, and civic love. Yet when Aurora responds skeptically to these inclusions, he admits that filial love is "thankless," fraternal love is "hard," and, ominously, "the rest is lost" (IX, 894–95). 18

Nevertheless, Barrett Browning's revisions of the conventional apprehensions of otherness that characterize literary depictions of the fallen are arresting and significant, despite both the class elitism and the regressive appeal to a mystified maternal ideal. Surely it is crucial that after her rape and the redemptive birth of her child, Marian emerges strong enough to narrate her own story; indeed, if Aurora seemed to speak for Marian when she first told her story in Book III, that incident only sets further into relief Marian's appropriation of voice at precisely that juncture when a woman is conventionally perceived to be "lost." In vindicating herself to the suspicious Aurora, Marian emerges as intensely self-reliant and utterly convinced of her own innocence. She was not "seduced," she asserts, but rather "murdered" (VI, 770, 771). She powerfully elaborates the story of her own victimization and claims her right of innocence and her right to motherhood, thereby bringing Aurora to the point of utter contrition for her earlier accusations and admonishments. And since her story spans the division between Books VI and VII, she appears to have taken over the story herself, to have appropriated the artist's function, evolving from object of storytelling to storyteller herself.

By the end of the poem, the empowered Marian serves as a double for Aurora; and her actions constitute a sort of alternate ending that

18. For a discussion of the "painful contradictions" in Barrett Browning's "liberal feminist position," in particular as it is expressed in the "vicious picture of the rural and urban poor," see Kaplan, Introduction 11.
preserves the claim to independence represented by Aurora the aspiring artist. This explains why, when Marian rejects Romney’s renewed offer of marriage in Book IX, she is described by Aurora “as one who had authority to speak / And not as Marian” (IX, 250–51). The poet-heroine thus writes in two voices, producing a doubled ending to her story, one in which the exiled woman claims her exile, and the other in which she capitulates to the conventional consolations of the marriage plot. This use of Marian significantly revises conceptions of fallen women and allows a subversive ending to accompany the more recuperative one. As in David Copperfield, the fallen woman is being used to define the artist, but Aurora significantly identifies herself with, and not against, the fallen woman.19

I began my literary readings with an interpretation of Dickens that argued for the importance of Victorian fallenness as both a social and an aesthetic category. I tried to show that for Dickens, fallenness always figures a form of determinism; and while his women of the street are depicted as environmentally determined, he also perceives fallenness in distinctly literary terms—as the threat of narrative forms over the autonomy or recovery of the self, for example, or as the fear that we cannot escape from caricature because we are always already written. Gaskell, by contrast, in Mary Barton is expressly interested to show how literary or cultural forms are themselves powerful social forces; and she uses the prostitute, specifically, to exhibit the power of melodrama to actually constitute or determine character. Precisely because of the prostitute’s generic status, Gaskellian encounters with the fallen threaten to collapse into scenes of reading, thereby losing the quality of interactive face-to-face encounters. This tendency to confuse the fallen woman with a book or a story emerges across the texts I discuss in this book, nowhere more vividly or suggestively than in Rossetti’s “Jenny.”

Aurora Leigh is distinct, however, in its elaboration of a dialectical interplay between aesthetic and intersubjective experience. I conclude with it in order to stress the possibilities for reconceiving or transcending the rhetoric of fallenness that existed within Victorian culture itself. But I don’t mean to disregard the limits of Barrett Browning’s vision, its exclusively dyadic structure and its inattention to the material life of the lower class; nor do I mean, by concluding

19. For a related discussion, see Cooper, Elizabeth Barrett Browning 173, 177.
with Barrett Browning, to cover over the revisionist moments in Dickens, Gaskell, or Rossetti. On the contrary, I have stressed revisionist moments in all the writers so as to argue that ideals of reciprocal recognition and response are not inaccessible or non-existent simply because the objectifying stance of the rhetoric of fallenness is dominant in the discourse of the period.