Allegories of One's Own Mind

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Published by The Ohio State University Press

Riede, David G.
Allegories of One's Own Mind: Melancholy in Victorian Poetry.
The Ohio State University Press, 2005.
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Consideration of Elizabeth Barrett as a melancholy poet raises the immediate question of whether women can be melancholic, even though the limited female poetic tradition available to Barrett emphasized women’s supposed greater capacity to feel, and specifically to feel sad. Barrett’s most immediate female antecedent, L. E. L. (Letitia Landon), for example, claimed “My power is but a woman’s power, / Of softness and of sadness made” (“The Golden Violet,” 3. 525–26), and Barrett herself was characteristically described by reviewers as writing in what the *Monthly Review* called “a melancholy, but not a morbid vein” (*Correspondence*, 9: 320). Similarly, the *Athenaeum* said that “Much of her verse is profoundly, some of it passionately melancholy, but it is never morbid” (9. 320), and *The League* praised her “divine melancholy” (9: 378). Despite the praise of Barrett’s melancholy, however, contemporaries still saw it as a relatively disempowered female malady, as well characterized by the term “depression”: according to *The Westminster Review*, her poems expressed the “pressure of strong thought and intense emotion, that gives, occasionally, a shade too deep, and an aspect of life too depressing” (9: 377). The reviewers also, to Barrett’s distress, frequently compared her to Tennyson and placed her firmly in the “school of Tennyson,” but ironically, although she is easily seen as a Tennysonian symbol of melancholy like Mariana or the Lady of Shalott, she was not fully granted the male, Tennysonian power of symbol making.

The traditional association of melancholia with specifically male genius, of course, goes back to Aristotle and through Renaissance neo-Platonism, but even in twentieth-century psychiatry there remain powerful arguments to deny women access to melancholy. In her cogent account of the matter, Juliana Schiesari points out the gendered bias of Freud’s immensely influential discussion of melancholy: for Freud, melancholy is the critical attack
by the overdeveloped superego on the ego, but women are characterized
precisely by an “undeveloped” superego (53). In the still more recent psy-
chiatric tradition, the superego is the internalization of patriarchal moral-
ity, the “Law of the Father,” and identification with this law involves an
exclusively male Oedipal relation with the Father. Not surprisingly, melan-
cholia would seem to be an inherently sexist psychological state and an
exclusively male cultural discourse.2

Within this discourse, Elizabeth Barrett would seem to have no access
to the cultural authority of melancholy, though as a particular victim of
patriarchy in the form of her father’s unusually harsh version of the ubiqu-
itous Law of the Father, she had every reason to be sad. Almost entirely
confined to her own bedroom by her father’s strict rules and her own inva-
lidism, she was herself a virtual embodiment of symbolic melancholy—a
Tennysonian Mariana. Though she was the signified, she could not be the
signifier of melancholy. In fact, she has been more generally perceived as
suffering from the female malady of hysteria, a diagnosis that “explains”
her somewhat mysterious invalidism but offers absolutely no cultural val-
idation for her poetry.

Barrett recognized her resemblance to Mariana but resisted the
implications. She regretted her lack of experience of the world, which
deprived her of the subject matter that might have enabled her to be what
Robert Browning called an “objective” poet, “whose endeavour [was] to
reproduce things external” (Poems, 1: 1001), but she found “compensation
to a degree” in her virtual imprisonment: “I have had much of the inner
life—& from the habit of selfconsciousness & selfanalysis, I make great
guesses at human nature in the main” (Correspondence, 10: 133). She was,
consequently, more like the “subjective” poet described by Browning, one
who sees “Not what man sees, but what God sees—the Ideas of Plato,
seeds of creation lying burningly on the Divine Hand . . . and he digs
where he stands—preferring to seek them in his own soul as the nearest
reflex of that absolute Mind” (Poems, 1: 1002). For the nineteenth centu-
ry, the subjective poet would seem to be implicitly melancholy, since
Browning’s primary example was Shelley, the ultimate example of the
melancholic poet for John Stuart Mill, Hallam, and others. Though theo-
retically excluded from the discursive power of melancholy and from the
masculine poetic tradition generally, Barrett struggled to make poetic cap-
ital of her feelings as intensified by her virtual imprisonment, of “the emo-
tion of the trapped.”

Although Barrett accepted Victorian assumptions about gender, her
poetry struggles to formulate a social position for the woman poet’s sepa-
rate will as well as her official sentiments, but she ends up in her early
work reinscribing the accepted role of the female poet with an eloquence
and creativity that highlights the fault lines separating the limits of creativity for women poets from those of men, and distinguishing between a female tradition of sentimental poetry and a male tradition of melancholy. As Antony Harrison has pointed out, “Analysis of her work from 1828 to 1844 would necessarily feature the struggle within it between an apparent acceptance of dominant institutionalized value systems (as these were embedded in the discourses of aestheticism, love, religion, and motherhood) and opposition to those systems” (79). To Harrison’s list of embedded discourses, I add the deeply embedded discourses of melancholy and of the moral authority of melancholy as exclusively male in the powerful poetic tradition handed down most recently by Shelley and, especially, Byron.

One way in which Barrett’s sentimental poetry can be understood as a powerful, socially committed poetry of sorrow is suggested in Isobel Armstrong’s comments about Freudian melancholy and women’s poetry of affect. As Armstrong puts it,

Freud and the ever-open wound of melancholia seem to open a path to the inhibition of symbol formation . . . for this is just what happens to the melancholic. The economics of mourning and loss are attributed to the loss of a loved person, or the loss of some abstraction which has taken the place of one, such as one’s country, liberty, an ideal, and so on. At the heart of the psychic, Freud opens up the social, which is always a presence in the poetry of affect. (“Msrepresentations,” 21)

Armstrong’s comments are made within an argument that nineteenth-century women’s poetry of affect needs to be rescued from “the systematic and even cruel policing of affect” that has seen the “domestic language of the affections” as necessarily a vehicle of “conservative sentiment” (5), but despite her intellectual capacity for radical critique and her often passionate liberal politics, Barrett’s poetry is in fact conservative in its sentimentality at least throughout her early career writing as a trapped “Mariana” figure in her father’s house. This poetry does not achieve the authority of melancholy critique because Barrett was so completely interpellated as a submissive woman in Victorian domestic ideology, not because of any biological or essentialist imperative about who can or cannot be melancholy. As long as Barrett submitted entirely to the hegemonic social morality of her own particularly harsh “Law of the Father,” she had, pace Freud, a conscience or superego that was not too weak, but was too strong to allow room for a genuine dialectic of inwardness: the voice of the separate ego, the individual will, was stifled by the social order, as internalized in conscience.
Barrett’s poetry of this period is unquestionably sad but never “morbid,” because it never eats away at the foundations of the hegemonic Victorian moral order to which it completely submits. As a result, Barrett was able to write with considerable ease and fluency because her sentiment perfectly fit the marketing niche for female sentimentality generated by the poetry annuals and their demand for socially comfortable verse: moving but not subversively disturbing. Arguing for a reevaluation of “the poetics of sensibility and sentiment,” Jerome McGann has suggested that studying such poetry “gives one a specially clear view of how a language of affective meanings—of how language as affective thought—functions” (Poetics, 6); Barrett’s poetry displays, I think, specifically how it functions when the affect is the affect of the age, in sentimental poetry, rather than the affect of the alienated individual, as in melancholy.

Writing at least half seriously about the sentimental poetry of Felicia Hemans, McGann suggests that her poetry “accepts from the start that these kinds of social dreams are the constructions not of the unconsciousness but of the consciousness, even of the super-ego” (Poetics, 191), and I will argue wholly seriously that this is the case with Barrett’s poetry for as long as she wrote under her father’s roof. The majority of Barrett’s most recent critics have argued that even her early poetry is subtly subversive of conventional morality, but I think the subversive possibilities of self-assertion in her early work take the form of latent Byronic melancholy that is, in fact, always kept in check by the “cruel policing” of her orthodox Christian conscience. Paradoxically, it is only when she escapes the entrapment of patriarchal authority and finds happiness that Barrett is able to free her individual will sufficiently to enable a genuine dialectic with her conscience and to engage in a poetics of melancholy in the Sonnets from the Portuguese.

I. Poetry of the Superego

Even as a very young poet, Barrett enthusiastically believed in the loftiest Romantic ideals of poetry and the poetic imagination, but her Romantic enthusiasm was always at odds with her still stronger Christian faith and belief in self-effacing humility. From a very early age she was intent on rivaling the greatest poets of the ages, and though she learned to moderate her aspirations as she matured, she always aspired to a lofty ideal of the poet as a chosen spirit, a visionary in touch with transcendent truth and able to transmit that truth to the larger public. David has compellingly argued that her idealism was a specific legacy of her immediate Romantic predecessors, from whom she learned “that the poet was a gifted being,
called to the practice of poetry . . . she consciously performed as a member of an aesthetically advantaged élite, mythologising herself as a member of that clerisy of poets described by Samuel Coleridge, whose poetic function is redefined in a secular community” (105–6). David’s argument, however, neglects the ways in which Barrett’s fervent dissenting Protestantism conflicted with the somewhat self-aggrandizing claims of Romanticism. Her attempt to achieve the lofty status of the poet-prophet was fraught with difficulty, partly because the Coleridgean assumptions involved an impossibly transcendent ideal of autonomous poetic creativity, partly because her age’s ideal of selflessness in women was radically opposed to the celebration of self involved in the Romantic egotistical sublime, partly because her religious beliefs were diametrically opposed to the secularization of transcendent values implied in the ideal of a clerisy, and partly because her dissenting religious views were opposed to hierarchic structures of spiritual authority.

The religious limits set on Barrett’s Romantic aspirations, to be sure, are not entirely separable from those set by gender. As Dorothy Mermin has argued, for Barrett as for other women, adopting the “traditional role of the religious poet” reinforced “the self-effacement and self-suppression that threaten their existence as writers” and involved a “ready submission to God the Father” that pushes “them back into the childishness that Victorian women artists had to fight their way out of in order to write at all” (Barrett Browning, 70). Barrett plainly saw that devotional feeling was particularly well suited to what she herself regarded as the infirmities of “woman—who from the weakness & softness of her nature should so feel the need & the beauty of that strength & surpassing tenderness found in the religion of Jesus Christ, & only there!” (Correspondence, 3: 288). Nevertheless, her Christian faith cannot be regarded as just another patriarchal obstacle to her high Romantic aspirations since, as her poetry and letters make abundantly clear, her highest aspirations were as a specifically and emphatically Christian poet. Like many other religious poets of her time, most conspicuously John Henry Newman and John Keble, she firmly believed that the highest and best poetry was necessarily religious.

Seemingly, Romantic aesthetics need not be at odds with Christian faith—Coleridge, after all, was the great theorist not only of Romanticism but also of nineteenth-century Christian poetics. For him the egotistical sublime leads directly to worship of God: “we begin with the I KNOW MYSELF, in order to end with the absolute I AM” (Works,1: 283). By the time Barrett began writing, Wordsworth as well as Coleridge firmly believed in the Christian mission of poetry; indeed, the Christian poetics of Newman and Keble were heavily indebted to the criticism and practice
of Wordsworth and Coleridge. But only certain versions of Romanticism and of Christianity were compatible, and only up to a point. In the first place, such writers as Newman and Keble accepted only limited elements of Romantic thought and were careful to exclude the open-ended, speculative spirit that could lead to heterodox opinions. Newman admired Coleridge’s originality but noted that he “indulged a liberty of speculation which no Christian can tolerate, and advocated conclusions which were often heathen rather than Christian” (Fraser, 14). Also, both Newman and Keble were careful to distinguish between secular and sacred literature and to counter what Keble described as a tendency of the age to be “satisfied . . . with that poetry which is but a shadow” of the “higher wisdom of religious truth” (Fraser, 15). And finally, the ultramontane Newman and Keble were advocates of decorous reserve in both their limited Romanticism and their religion, whereas Barrett was an ardent emotionalist in both poetry and religion. Newman and Keble were modified “Lakers” in their Romanticism and high churchmen in their religion, whereas the young Barrett was Byronic in her Romanticism and low church in her religion. And Byronism was an obvious problem for a Christian woman: as Leighton understatedly remarks, “the idea of the poet as warrior, criminal, libertine and religious sceptic . . . seems expressly at odds with the domestic and religious faith required of Victorian women” (Women Poets, 81).

Early autobiographical fragments show Barrett sensing, yet resisting, the conflict between her religious and literary impulses, and aware of the need to restrain herself in both. She saw the need for Christian restraint from her impulse to revel in Byronic “turbmoil of conflicting passions” and “an almost proud consciousness of independance [sic].” Similarly, she struggled to choose between “the deep persuasion of the mild Christian,” which she evidently believed was the proper feeling, and “the wild visions of the enthusiast,” which she saw as intrinsic to her nature (Correspondence, 1: 353, 355, 351). She recognized a need to exercise “command of my self,” but she believed that her essential “self,” her “inmost heart,” was characterized by rebellious and tumultuous “violent inclinations” (Correspondence, 1: 353). In general, she collapsed emotional religious transports with a passionate love of poetry:

My religion is I fear not so ardent but perhaps more reasonable than formerly and yet I must ever regret those enthusiastic visions of what may be called fanaticism which exalted my soul on the wings of fancy to the contemplation of the Deity—My admiration of literature especially of poetic literature can never be subdued nor can it be extinguished but with life. (Correspondence, 1: 353)
As her ambivalence reveals, the conflation of poetry and religion is problematic—poetry seems somewhat at odds with religion, or at least with “reasonable” religion. Not surprisingly, Barrett’s Byronic self-characterization leads her into a Byronic contempt for the “tranquillity” that mild Christianity ought to bring about: “The energy or perhaps impetuosity of my character allows me not to be tranquil and I look upon that tranquillity which I cannot enjoy with a feeling rather like contempt as precluding in great measure the intellectual faculties of the human mind!” (Correspondence, 1: 353).

Though she eventually came to rank Wordsworth as the greatest poet of the age, Barrett’s early Romantic enthusiasm for Byron, the leader of the “Satanic school,” inevitably clashed with her Christianity. In a literal suppression of Byronic melancholy by the “Law of the Father,” her outraged father laid down the law at her apparent endeavor to out-Byron Byron:

> The broodings of your hero are the broodings of a madman—& his egotism is insufferable. Lord Byron lets you look into his melancholy mind, but by glimpses only. There never was such a character as your Theon’s. . . . I cannot read any more—I would not read over again what I have read, for fifty pounds—really not for ten. I advise you to burn the wretched thing. (Correspondence, 1: 359)

She never outgrew her admiration of Byron, but in future she was careful to “speak of the passion & sublimity of Ld. Byron’s genius, not of his moral & pious characteristics” (Correspondence, 2: 112). The fundamental difficulty Barrett faced, then, was to reconcile her religious faith, which called for self-restraint and even self-effacement, with a version of Romanticism committed to individual, even egotistical self-expression. This difficulty, fully internalized, might well have issued in the melancholy dialectic of ego and conscience, and perhaps does lead to occasional lyrics of melancholy when she seems to have given vent to her deepest feelings, as in the very early “The Tempest: A Fragment,” which probably expresses “the poet’s mingled exhilaration and terror at her Promethean or Satanic impulses” (Mermin, Barrett Browning, 51). Most characteristically, however, the early Barrett did not attempt to express the depths of her interiority but chose instead to write morally edifying verse as a conscientious and rigorous Christian.

Attempting to repudiate the notion that the poetry of affect is necessarily conservative, Armstrong concisely summarizes the opposing view:

> A long tradition, passing through eighteenth-century sensibility and the Burkean category of the beautiful, which endowed the non-rational, affective feminine with the pathology of hysterical symptoms—the
limp, lisp, and stutter of disfunctional language—gradates into sentimental poetry. Here, the story goes, a domestic language of the affections, valorizing home and country as forms of one another, rests on conservative sentiment. (“Msrepresentations,” 5)

Barrett can be acquitted, of course, of limping, lisping, or stuttering, but the traditional “story” of sentimental verse seems to fit her case. Two poems about the young Queen Victoria, whose accession was contemporaneous with Barrett’s public emergence as a poet, almost seem deliberately emblematic of the conservatism of sentimental poetry. The feminist recuperation of Victorian women’s poetry has, not surprisingly, seen even these poems as politically progressive, as in Helen Cooper’s comments on “The Young Queen”:

Barrett suggests that token women who attain public prominence feel ambivalent about their status. As she reveals her own anxiety as a woman measuring her feet inside the shoes of her dead literary fathers, so she imagines Victoria to be similarly unnerved at her sudden power. In “The Young Queen,” she delineates how “Her palace walls enring / The dust that was a king—/ And very cold beneath her feet, she feels her father’s grave.” At fourteen Barrett had felt some comfort in walking in Homer’s footsteps and not striking out a path for herself; now she imagines in chilling terms a severance from the father as a woman appropriates power traditionally reserved for him. Instead of guiding her feet, the precursor now numbs them with cold. It is a statement of loss; but it also determines the daughter to walk her own path. (44–45)

The poem, however, seems instead to alleviate any public anxiety about the accession of a woman to the symbolic head of patriarchal power. “The Young Queen” downplays Victoria’s ascension to power, focusing instead on England’s loss of a king and Victoria’s loss of a father, and assuaging grief and anxiety with the balm of women’s tears. In “The Young Queen” Victoria becomes a figure not of commanding authority but of domestic sympathy: “A nation looks to thee / For steadfast sympathy: / Make room within thy bright clear eyes for all its gathered tears” (46–48).

The most remarkable element of “Victoria’s Tears” is the sleight of hand in which the nation’s mourning for its king and Victoria’s for her father are collapsed. Though no one could have been deceived by it, the poem strongly implies that Victoria weeps to ascend the throne left vacant by her father. The dead king, William IV, of course, was not Victoria’s father nor even emotionally close to her, but the pretense of orphaned grief enables
the poem to assuage the country’s supposed grief for the loss of a dubiously “loved one,” and to mix in the presumably genuine domestic grief of William’s widow and of women in general to displace with manageable mourning the possible anxiety or melancholy over the loss of an “abstract ideal”:

The palace sounds with wail—
The courtly dames are pale—
A widow o’er the purple bows, and weeps its splendour dim:
And we who hold the boon,
A king for freedom won,
Do feel eternity rise up between our thanks and him.
And while all things express
All glory’s nothingness,
A royal maiden treadeth firm where that departed trod!
The deathly scented crown
Weighs her shining ringlets down;
But calm she lifts her trusting face, and calleth upon God. (“The Young Queen,” 13–24)

Most significantly, in what turns out to be a characteristic move of Barrett’s sentimental poetry, the actual substitution of a queen for a king is displaced, not by the symbol making of melancholy but by an eschatological shift across the divide of matter and spirit: authority remains fully patriarchal and even spiritualized as the dead king is replaced by the ever-living King of kings, as Victoria is enjoined to meekly bow “While the King of kings shall bless thee by the British peoples’ voice” (63).

Even in poems with much less evident social purposes, Barrett’s early poetry raised concerns about the prevailing gender ideology only to soothe them over with an affect of tender sentiment. Her most popular poems, those that she characteristically wrote to order for literary annuals, are ballads that displace contemporary concerns to a mythic past. “The Romaunt of the Page,” for example, written for Finden’s Tableaux of the Affections: A Series of Picturesque Illustrations of the Womanly Virtues (1839), displaces Barrett’s own desire to apprentice herself to the poetic tradition of Byron with a chivalric legend of a bride who follows her lord to the Crusades as his page and sacrifices her life to spare his. The transgressive gender switch perhaps suggests a desire for female empowerment and a critique of the male code of chivalry, but if so, it is subsumed in the womanly virtue of self-sacrifice and assuaged by the emotional affect of grief for the dead wife.

A more explicit rejection of the Byronic tradition of melancholy is offered in another ballad, “The Poet’s Vow,” which is not set in any
specific era, though its gothic setting suggests a legendary past. The poet of the title, with his lordly scorn and pride, however, is clearly the type of the contemporary Byronic poet that Barrett was in many ways tempted to become. The Poet turns away from the social world, vowing “his blood of brotherhood / To a stagnant place apart” (ll.53–54). The Poet is characterized mainly by his soul-destroying introspection, as his melancholy brooding is described: “His steadfast eye burnt inwardly, / As burning out his soul” (ll.29–30). His “distant, sinful heart,” of course, is explicitly condemned within the Christian scheme of the poem that, characteristically, replaces the possible moral authority of the man of melancholy with the supernatural moral authority of the anagogically substituted Man of sorrow. Certainly this is a poem of the superego: the Christian admonition against poetic pride is made in part by contrasting the haughty, sinful poet not only with Christ himself but also with “three Christians [who] wended by to prayers” and an account of a wedding that goes by without the Poet’s blessing.

“The Poet’s Vow” echoes Coleridge’s “Rime of the Ancient Mariner” in its ballad form and its moral imperative to love all of God’s creatures and even in its representation of a wedding, but by substituting the arrogant Poet for the hapless mariner, Barrett’s poem becomes a much more explicit repudiation of poetic self-sufficiency and of Romantic melancholy. Unlike the mariner’s glittering eyes, the Poet’s are turned inward in self-destructive melancholy and in his egotism, he vows to forego “man’s sympathies” (1.92) and, like Byron’s various heroes, to live apart in splendid isolation from the debased human species he declines to be a part of. Like Byron’s Manfred, the Poet “wore the form” of human existence but “had no sympathy with breathing flesh,” with the “Creatures of Clay that girded” him (Manfred, ii. 56–58). Apparently unconscious that his pride repeats the primal sin, Barrett’s Poet proclaims his exemption from the fallenness of human nature in the universal curse: “our curse! do I partake / The desiccating sin? / Have I the apple at my lips?” (ll.80–82). Rejecting all human ties, he spurns his “plighted bride” (1.136) Rosalind, whose loving innocence is far wiser than the Poet’s cold wisdom: she thought, she says, “The teachings of the heaven and earth / Should keep us soft and low” (ll.167–68).

But Rosalind’s words have no effect on the Poet, and neither do the words of his friend Sir Roland, who castigates him for his “sinful heart / That climbest up so high” (ll.203–4) in a reversal of Christ’s love, which descended to earth in divinely human sympathy. The narrator spells out the very obvious moral:
The self-poised God may dwell alone
With inward glorying,
But God’s chief angel waiteth for
A brother’s voice, to sing;
And a lonely creature of sinful nature
It is an awful thing. (ll.270–75)

In his sublime egotism, the Poet has forgotten the duties of the creature and presumed to take the place of the Creator. But far from achieving even the sublimity of the Satanic antihero, he becomes merely “A lonely man, a feeble man” (1.278).

“The Poet’s Vow” repudiates the excessive claims of Byronic Romanticism, but it generates more questions than answers about the proper role of the poet. At first glance Rosalind might seem to offer a female alternative to male pride—her humility, love, and suffering evidently show far more Christian and poetic feeling than the Poet’s arrogance. But Rosalind is not a poet. She merely dwindles away in grief—ultimately she is less a subjective source of poetry than a subject for poetry, a mournful lady like Tennyson’s roughly contemporaneous Lady of Shalott, Mariana, or Oenone. In fact, before she has any influence at all, Rosalind is reduced literally to an object, a corpse, and presented to the Poet:

It lay before him, humanlike,
Yet so unlike a thing!
More awful in its shrouded pomp
Than any crownèd king:
All calm and cold, as it did hold
Some secret, glorying. (ll.403–8)

In death, the beautiful woman may become “the most poetical topic in the world,” but she hardly becomes a poet herself unless we take seriously the disturbing implication that true poetry is only to be found after death. And that, perhaps, is just the “secret” in which the corpse glories. Strangely, the dead Rosalind does seem to achieve what the Poet had only vainly aspired to. The Poet in his hall had been “As silent as its ancient lords / In the coffined place of stone” (ll.21–22). He had been too calm and too cold and had worn a face as still as those “Beneath the cerement’s roll” (1.26). The Poet had rejected “his humanness” (1.266), and Rosalind had left her humanity behind in the merely “humanlike” husk (1.403). The implication of this unsettling fable is that the aspiration to a poetic power that
transcends ordinary human limitations is sinful, but more, that it is fatal. Becoming a corpse, Rosalind has also become the perfect image of the poet removed from the debased human world to embody an enigmatic wisdom. Like other dead women in Victorian literature, Rosalind’s cadaverous presence simultaneously occupies two places, the here and the nowhere. Neither of this world nor entirely absent from it, the corpse stages a relation between these two incompatible positions. Strangeness emerges because the corpse, resembling the deceased person, is in a sense doubled. It has no relation to the world in which it appears except that of an image. . . . The corpse pre-eminently marks an instance of resemblance, a moment of reduplication that turns back on itself to sever all links to any exterior world. (Bronfen, 104)

Rosalind’s soul, perhaps, occupies a point mediating between God and his creation, but this poet as angel is not to be seen or heard. The corpse, on the other hand, is a visible emblem of the poet cut off from her kind without bringing evidence of a higher life, only unassailable evidence of death and the mystery that lies beyond. The closest the poem comes to transcendence is in Rosalind’s “secret, glorying.” But the secret is incommunicable to fallen mortals: in the end, the Poet, confronted by the absolute silence of Rosalind’s corpse, is reduced to a “wailing human creature” and to feminized, sentimental poetry.

As my comments on some of the poems in Barrett’s first major collection suggest, her sentimental poetry is significantly different from the poetry of melancholy both in its ultimate Christian aspiration and in its figural language. The expression of melancholy is inhibited not by any deep psychic mechanism but by the entirely conscious rejection of poetic figures that turn inward, away from domestic and Christian duties to morbid introspection. The poems in The Seraphim and Other Poems (1838) repeatedly insist that the melancholy poet is a dissonance in God’s creation, a person to be explicitly contrasted with the Christian. As I have discussed at length elsewhere (“The Poet as Angel”), the ambitious title poem is only one of many poems in the volume to make the case that mortal poetry is necessarily fallen and incomplete, so that fully adequate poetry is possible only after death, to disembodied spirits or angels. The highest utterance a mortal woman can achieve, The Seraphim suggests, is akin to the weeping of Mary, mourning at the foot of the cross, “With a spasm, not a speech” (1.481). The epilogue to The Seraphim characterized the speech of the drama as a kind of hybrid, mixing the heavenly perspective of the angels with the “hoarse music” of the mortal speaker, “Cold
with the weeping which mine earth inherits” (ll.1038–39). But this “cadence . . . / Of sin and sorrow” (ll.1040–41) would seem to be the highest song imaginable, mixing the visionary sublime of angels with the passionate Christian love and devotion of the mortal woman.

Still, weeping is not poetry, and with the happy ending of Christian eschatology always in sight, weeping is not melancholy but sentimental. The drama ends up asserting that the human song can only be fulfilled after death, when the poet actually will join the chorus of angels and, as one of the angels anticipates, the music of angels and human souls will “mix the adoring breath / And breathe the full thanksgiving” (ll.663–64). Not surprisingly, then, the poem ends with the speaker longing to be translated to heaven to hear the “most sweet music’s miracle” (1.1046) of the heavenly choir. The poem ends, that is, in a desire for death—if Barrett killed the “angel in the house,” as Virginia Woolf contended, in this early verse it was only in order to translate her to heaven. Adopting the poetic persona of an angel empowers the woman poet, but only in the next world.

Characteristically, Barrett’s sentimental poetry aspires to the condition of breathless rapture beyond language but is compelled to settle for “hoarse weeping.” Trying to transcend fallen mortality, however, the poet looks beyond the earthly veil to last things and the truths of eternity, but Barrett’s poetry differs from that of melancholy and the imagination penetrative because its figurative language gestures not toward mortal remains like the death’s head but toward pure spirit. It is not allegorical but anagogical, and its characteristic figure is not the symbol or metaphor, finding analogies among earthly things, but is typological, substituting the spiritual meanings of earthly words for their material meanings: the heavenly King for the temporal king, the divine MAN for the fallen man, the seraphic angel for the domestic angel.

As Barrett realized from the beginning, her poetry, like any self-expressive poetry, needed to find language to represent unspeakable inwardness, but since her struggle was to express conscious thought rather than inchoate and possibly rebellious feeling, her concerns, as expressed in the juvenile Essay on Mind, are rather different from those of melancholy poets. As the Essay on Mind makes clear, for Barrett language is necessary to thought as well as expression, but as a part of fallen nature it cannot rise to heaven:

> For thoughts uncloth’d by language are, at best,  
> Obscure; while grossness injures those exprest—  
> Through words,—in whose analysis, we find  
> Th’analogies of Matter, not of Mind. (ll.631–34)

Within the fallen world, “no freedom, Learning’s search affords, / Of soul
from body, or of thought from words” (ll.669–70). If thought could be
freed from language, the escape from earthly bounds would not be Genius
but madness—once freed from language, we would be freed from “The
gravitating power of Common-sense” only to be “Through all the depths
of space with Phaeton hurl’d, / T’impair our reason, as he scorchi’d our
world” (ll.672–74). Direct expression of “what passes show,” in other
words, would only be madness, but more, the association with Phaeton,
coupled with an earlier allusion to Icarus, suggests that attempts to soar
into God’s heaven are presumptuous and smack of the sin of pride. The
allusion to Phaeton takes on still more significance in light of Barrett’s
early analysis of the need to keep her passionate nature under “habitual
restraint,” lest she “again be hurled with Phaeton far from every thing
Human . . . every thing reasonable!” (Correspondence, 1: 353).

Emphasizing disembodied reason, or thought, as opposed to emotion
as defining the “human,” Barrett seems to rule out the allegorical clothing
of thought as corrupt “analogies of matter” and to choose eschatological
figures as analogies of “Mind,” but such a choice would hardly seem to
lead to a poetry of the feelings. Another passage from the Essay on Mind,
however, introduces feeling but only, it seems, the feeling of the superego,
“moral feeling”:

Poesy’s whole essence, when defined,
Is elevation of the reasoning mind,
When inward sense from Fancy’s page is taught,
And moral feeling ministers to Thought.
And hence, the natural passions all agree
In seeking Nature’s language—poetry. (ll.944–49)

As long as Barrett remained committed to the belief that the “natural pas-
sions” of women corresponded to “moral feeling,” as official culture
taught, the affect of her poetry, its sentimentality, would refer beyond
material sense to spiritual essence.

The sentimental poetry of moral feeling elevates poetry to its highest
earthly possibility, but as Barrett’s poem upon the death of Felicia Hemans
makes clear, even the best sentimental poetry is necessarily limited. Barrett
does full justice to her fellow poet’s “mystic breath which breathed in all
her breathing, / Which drew, from rocky earth and man, abstractions high
and moving, / Beauty, if not the beautiful, and love, if not the loving”
(ll.22–24). The qualifications are conspicuous—the earthly poet can com-
municate only high abstractions, but these earthly visions cannot commu-
nicate the highest truth: “Such visionings have paled in sight” (1.25) for
Hemans, who has now met her Savior in heaven, where “learneth she the
sweet ‘new song’ she will not mourn in knowing” (ll.27–28). Mortal song, especially for the woman poet, is mournful and incomplete—the true singers are the redeemed souls and angels in the heavenly choir. The best poet is the dead poet. Barrett’s poem, addressed to another poet, Letitia Landon, concludes with the advice to accept mortal limitations and to recognize that her greatest poetic achievement will be her death. At her death, England will say of Landon what it is now saying of Hemans: “Albeit softly in our ears her silver song was ringing, / The foot-fall of her parting soul is softer than her singing” (ll.31–32).

The repeated paradox in Barrett’s various comments about poets and poetry is that poets achieve their highest song only when they are silenced to earthly ears. The reason for this is apparent in a letter of 1836:

How happy—even here—when those, who in the midst of this beautiful earth feel more sensitively than the very beauty, the sin & suffering & infirmity,—are able with hearts moistened & freshened by the blood & tears of Jesus, to look towards that calm & blessed & perpetual place beside His pierced feet, “reserved in the Heavens” for believers. Oh what an unspeakable poetry there is in Christ’s religion! But like the poetry of inferior things, men look at it coldly because without understanding, & do not even cry aloud for an interpreter. (Correspondence, 3: 179)

Barrett was lamenting, in part, that her increasingly secularized contemporary culture was intolerant of devotional poetry because public displays of religious fervor seemed in bad taste; as Barrett complained elsewhere, “Because Christ died for me, I must love HIM—but it is very wrong of me to say it, & very improper—& above all things very unpoetical!” (Correspondence, 4: 182). But a still greater problem is that even apart from social constraints, the full poetry of Christ’s religion is genuinely “unspeakable,” because the full realization of human life is outside of human life, “reserved in the Heavens.” Yet the passage also clearly implies Barrett’s desire for a kind of poetry that would (in the phrase of Browning’s Fra Lippo Lippi) “interpret God to all of you!” The Christian poet, like the Romantic, mediates between the transcendent Truth and fallen human society. But for Barrett, at least in the 1830s, the Romantic idealization of human genius as quasi-divine could only be blasphemous, and she was able to see transcendence of ordinary mortal limitations as possible only in death, or in the guise of an angel.

One obvious problem with this perspective was that it might seem literally insane. As one American reviewer (quite possibly Poe) put it, “We do not believe there is a poetical soul embodied in this world, that—as a cen-
tre of thought—sees further out, toward the periphery permitted to
angels, than Miss Barrett. Yet you would get a verdict of insanity upon her
from any jury in Christendom” (Correspondence, 9: 378). The categories of
Romantic genius and Christian angel tended to collapse in the figure of
the dying woman-as-angel, but this collapse only reaffirmed the margin-
ality of living women within the contemporary world.

In the years following publication of The Seraphim and Other Poems
Barrett came increasingly to accept the Romantic ideal of a secular (but
still spiritual) clerisy, but in her early confrontation with Romanticism,
her evangelical religion left her with no earthly standing ground for her
poetic ambitions. Nevertheless, though some early reviewers were inclined
to deplore the religious fervor of her verse, others were willing to grant her
something like the angelic status she seemed to seek. She was praised for
her “devotional glow, an almost seraph-like enthusiasm” (Correspondence,
4: 383) and was described as a mystic oracle rising “to glory in the spirit”
(Correspondence, 4: 400). The most enthusiastic of reviewers, taking liter-
ally the phrases in other reviews, referred to Barrett as “the Seraphic Poet”
(Correspondence, 4: 399) and hinted at the sublime danger in her passion-
ate “moral feeling”: “A smouldering fire is consuming her, which, if it do
not quickly blaze into radiance, will slay her in the flesh, that, uncon-
trolled, she may rise to glory in the spirit.” In effect, the critic upped the
ante on her, urging her to become “the Perfect Poet and the Perfect
Christian” and to rise in visionary power akin to that of the “Sainted
JOHN”—the ultimate anagogical writer (Correspondence, 4: 400).

Despite her critical success as a seraphic singer, by the early 1840s
Barrett was becoming convinced that full self-expression involved more
than “moral feelings” and religious fervor, and she was attempting to move
beyond the sentimental poetry of the superego. As a passing comment on
Spenser made clear, by 1842 Barrett had come to regard the figure of the
angel as inadequate for the expression of human actualities—Spenser’s
poetry, she said, “is like the singing of an angel in a dream: it has not
enough of contrary for waking music” (The Greek Christian Poets, 138).
Arguably the same was true of her own poetry to this point—her more
rebellious passions were so entirely excluded that there had been no “con-
trary” to the dictates of social morality in the conscience, and consequent-
ly no “dialogue of the mind with itself,” no genuine dialectic of inward-
ness. Responding to criticism, she agreed that “a cold mystical poetry
strikes & falls from us like the hail,” and she aimed in future to “make my
access to human feelings through human feelings” (Correspondence, 5: 59).

She did not, however, repudiate her angelic stance entirely but rather
qualified it. In her 1842 essays on The English Poets, she argued that the
true poet may achieve a transcendent vision, but not without reflecting the
flesh and blood of the fallen, material world: somewhat like the angelic speakers of *The Seraphim*, “the poetic temperament” is suspended “halfway between the light of the ideal and the darkness of the real,” but unlike the angels, the poet is “Unable, without a struggle, to pass out clear and calm into either, [and] bears the impress of the necessary conflict in dust and blood” (*The Greek Christian Poets*, 135). The conflict between the ideal and the real, fully internalized as a dialogue of the mind with itself, is a version of the dialectic of inwardness that I have characterized as Victorian melancholy, so it is evident that Barrett was attempting in the early 1840s to move from the poetry of the superego to something more like the poetry of melancholy. Barrett’s reasoning in the early 1840s reconciled Romantic self-expression with Christian humility or self-effacement and enabled her to insist confidently on the all-importance of individuality, originality, and sincerity in poetry: “to express the truth of his inward soul, is the business—and approves the original faculty of every true poet” (*Correspondence*, 8: 16). By 1844 she seemed confident in her Romantic-Christian aesthetic and in her ability to write sincere, morally earnest, original poetry. She believed that her own poetry had value precisely because she had replaced merely conventional writing with sincere self-expression: the difference between her past and present poetry was not merely “the difference between immaturity & maturity” but “the difference between the dead & the living . . . between a copy & individuality; between what is myself and what is not myself” (*Correspondence*, 9: 81). The “not myself” can, perhaps, be understood as the moral perspective of the contemporary ideology represented in her earlier poetry, but the distinction between the dead and the living and between a copy and an individuality is not as clear as Barrett’s language suggests; rather, the “copy” is internalized and becomes part of the individuality, so that the “myself” exists as a conflict, or dialectic, of ideology as conscience and the inchoate feeling of flesh and blood. That is, it exists as melancholy.

Expressing her confidence in the *Poems* of 1844, she wrote that “The present volumes have, I hope & believe, some further advance of life & strength in them. Poetry is more to me than ever . . . & dearer . . . & (in an earthly sense) it is a vital organ left me to breathe with” (*Correspondence*, 9: 66). As her confidence in the aesthetics of full self-expression grew, Barrett began to rank poetry as at least the moral equal of religion. As her reliance on the external forms of religion decreased, she felt more able to draw from her own interiority with confidence that the resulting poetry, though melancholy, would be “vital” as well as morally purposeful—she was beginning to justify the poetry of melancholy that she had previously eschewed on religious grounds, and to find a poetic mode in which sorrow was not sentimentality and moral purposefulness not a lifeless copy of ide-
ology. Her letters of this period are far less religious in tone than previously, and they tend increasingly to present poetry as the highest good: poetry, she writes, has been to her “the Life-light of existence” (Correspondence, 9: 67). And again, evidently neglecting religion for the moment, she comments that “All the life & strength which are in me, seem to have passed into my poetry. It is my POUS TOO [the place Archimedes sought for his lever] . . . not to move the world, . . . but to live on in” (Correspondence, 9: 66).

The danger in Romantic idealization of poetry was that it might displace the worship of God with an idolization of human “genius,” and, in fact, Barrett frequently referred to herself as a Carlylean “hero-worshipper” and observed that “it is difficult, nay, impossible for me to believe that the hero, the true genius, is not morally greater, more generous, more fruitful, more tender-hearted than the troop of vulgar men” (Correspondence, 6: 50). As a hero-worshipper, she was a devotee of “the religion of genius, or you will say superstition” (Correspondence, 4: 185). But even in this admission, significantly, the faith in poetry is qualified by a nagging doubt, a nagging fear of falling into idolatry and superstition. Further, some of her most emphatic comments about the importance of originality and individuality suggest at least a latent possibility that the self-singing of the poet may result in separation from rather than unity with God’s creation: poetic “power,” she argued, consisted precisely of “originality, which is individuality—the sign of the separate mind” (Correspondence, 5: 120).

Like Coleridge and Carlyle, she believed that the full expression of the mind of “genius”—the mind of a Shakespeare or a Wordsworth—would be necessarily religious, necessarily in harmony with divine truth. But as Marjorie Stone has shown, she was also much influenced by Byron, whose melancholy self-expression of a less than full and deep genius was morally dangerous. Despite his greatness, Byron failed as a poet to the extent that he, too, simply identified “poetry and passion. Poetry ought to be the revelation of the complete man—and Byron’s manhood having no completion nor entirety, his poems discovered not a heart, but the wound of a heart; not humanity, but disease; not a life, but a crisis” (The Greek Christian Poets, 197). The implications are troubling for a woman poet within an ideology where the woman was assumed to have a great capacity for feeling but was in other respects regarded as something less than—or at the very least other than—“the complete man.” Even for a man, assuming the capacity of “genius” in order to justify self-expression might smack of spiritual pride, but for a woman the danger was especially obvious. Consequently, even the praise of “divine melancholy” (Correspondence, 9: 378) in the strong reviews of Poems in 1844 did not
remove Barrett’s poetry from the stigma of being something less than the utterance of a “complete man.”

The Wordsworthian and Coleridgean version of Romanticism fit well with Barrett’s Christian principles, but as a woman she appeared to lack Wordsworthian wholeness of being, and her poetry of sorrow obviously lacked the validating authority of “joy.” In her conflation of Romantic egotism and Christian worship Barrett invariably praised Wordsworth as “a philosophical & Christian poet, with depths in his soul to which poor Byron could never reach” (Correspondence, 6: 127), but she nevertheless remained powerfully attracted to Byron as “a great and wonderful poet” with “more passion & intensity” than Wordsworth could muster (Correspondence, 6: 171, 8: 123). She was powerfully drawn, in short, to a Romantic “religion of genius” in which genius ought always to express Christian truth, but she was also uncomfortably aware that in a fallen world imperfect genius might instead represent only melancholy discontent, a diseased version of human nature. Nevertheless, in her Poems of 1844, she expressed confidence that Romantic self-expression and Christian praise could be one and the same. The point is emphatic in the closing stanza of “The Dead Pan,” a poem she valued highly and insisted on placing at the end of the collection as a kind of manifesto:

O brave poets, keep back nothing,
Nor mix falsehood with the whole!
Look up Godward; speak the truth in
Worthy song from earnest soul:
Hold, in high poetic duty,
    Truest Truth the fairest Beauty! (ll.267–72)

The poet who expresses innermost personal being, or soul, looks not only inward but “Godward” and sings in praise of God, not of self.

Less ostentatiously programmatic poems in the volume, however, indicate that Barrett was in fact not following the path of Christian Romanticism but that of second-generation Romantic melancholy. Even in the preface to the collection she insisted on the sorrow and suffering necessary to the poet, and she quoted from Shelley’s “Julian and Maddalo” to clinch her argument that “we learn in suffering what we teach in song.” An aesthetic of suffering is not, quite obviously, at odds with Christianity, but it does complicate Barrett’s Romanticism by associating it, at least in part, with the rebellious “Satanic school” rather than with the pious Lake poets.

A series of sonnets explores Barrett’s thought on the implications of her mixed Romantic and Christian beliefs and her concerns that, for example,
mortal singers cannot understand the harmonies of God’s will but are troubled by thoughts of mortality that, as in Keats’s “Ode to a Nightingale,” call us back from visionary fancies:

deathly colds
Fall on us while we hear, and countermand
Our sanguine heart back from the fancyland
With nightingales in visionary wolds. (“Perplexed Music,” ll.5–8)

And in this poem suffering is not a source of poetic power but a sign that the earthly poet is far below the seraph, who hears and understands immortal harmonies. Another sonnet suggests that sentimental sorrow, deepened by Romantic melancholy, takes the form of inexpressible dejection or depression:

I tell you, hopeless grief is passionless;
That only men incredulous of despair,
Half-taught in anguish, through the midnight air
Beat upward to God’s throne in loud access
Of shrieking and reproach. (“Grief,” ll.1–5)

Within these sonnets Barrett faces the familiar Victorian difficulty of finding ways to represent inwardness beyond the reach of conscious thought and language. In “The Soul’s Expression,” the octave describes the extreme difficulty of the “struggle to deliver right / That music of my nature” (ll.3–4), and the sestet asserts that reaching the impossible goal of self-expression would lift her out of mortal existence altogether:

This song of soul I struggle to outbear
Through portals of the sense, sublime and whole,
And utter all myself into the air:
But if I did it,—as the thunder-roll
Breaks its own cloud, my flesh would perish there,
Before that dread apocalypse of soul. (ll.9–14)

As in the poems of The Seraphim volume, earthly song is necessarily inadequate—the full song of self-revelation can only come from the disembodied soul when life is completed by death. “Insufficiency,” similarly, describes the struggle to “utter forth in verse / Some inward thought” (ll.1–2) and the impossibility of bringing together the truth of the individual and the universe “In consummation of right harmony” (1.6). As in Arnold’s “The Buried Life,” satisfactory communication is impossible in
fallen life: “The effluence of each is false to all, / And what we best con-
ceive we fail to speak” (ll.10–11). But unlike the agnostic Arnold, Barrett
avoids despair by displacing Romantic hopes with Christian faith in an
afterlife of full self-knowledge: “Wait, soul, until thine ashen garments fall.
/ And then resume thy broken strains, and seek / Fit peroration without let
or thrall” (ll.12–14). Unfortunately, of course, the religious consolation
only emphasizes the impossibility of genuinely uttering forth the earthly
self. As in the earlier work, poetry is fully realized only after death.

In the major poems of the 1844 volume Barrett ambitiously explores
the possibilities and limits of sentimental religious poetry, the extent to
which her poetry could be original and self-expressive, even melancholy,
without falling into sinful morbidity. “A Vision of Poets” is a dream poem
akin to Keats’s “The Fall of Hyperion,” which, as Stone remarks, it “uncan-
nily resembles” even though Keats’s poem was not yet published in 1844
(52, 85). Barrett’s description of her poem could almost be a description
of Keats’s:

I have attempted to indicate the necessary relations of genius to suf-
f ering and self-sacrifice. . . . I have attempted to express in this poem,
my view of the mission of the poet, of the self-abnegation implied in
it, of the great work involved in it, of the duty and glory of what
Balzac has beautifully and truly called “la patience angélique du
genie.” (Works, 2: 147)

In both “The Fall of Hyperion” and “A Vision of Poets” a poet experiences
a dream vision in which a powerful figure compels him to experience the
utmost agonies of human existence in order to qualify as a genuine poet.
But the differences between the two poems are significant. “The Fall of
Hyperion” is spoken in the first person and uses the machinery of Greek
myth. “A Vision of Poets” is spoken in the third person about a specifical-
ly male poet—and so is doubly distanced from the actual poet, Elizabeth
Barrett, who consequently cannot be said to be making any claims for her
own inward sublime. And “A Vision of Poets” uses Christian symbolism.
Keats’s speaker had ascended the steps of an ancient temple, but Barrett’s
ascends to a vast celestial church, with an altar presided over by an angel
and a flock of dead poets, from Homer and Aeschylus to Shelley, Byron,
and Coleridge (Wordsworth, of course, was still alive). Through suffering,
evidently, the poet of genius will eventually become a poet-priest—but
even in this ambitious celebration of poetry, the great poets of the Western
tradition are imagined as fulfilling their song only after death, in heaven.
The truly authoritative presence in the poem is not the protagonist Poet,
or any of the dead earthly poets, but the “chief angel.” Further, though the
poets have given their hearts to swell the cosmic harmony, they can hardly be said to be singers—their hearts have been literally removed, formed into a giant clavier to be played upon by the angel. The poets are reified as things, like the mere mechanical strings of the many versions of Romantic aeolian harps. The individual hearts of the mortal poets can produce only “undertones / Of perplex'd chords” (ll.493–94) until the angel blends them into Harmony. Even though Barrett plainly saw her somewhat confused allegory as celebrating the great poets, her Christian argument undermines her Romantic worship of genius by reducing the work of even the greatest poets to “perplex'd chords.” As in *The Seraphim*, human song is reduced to inarticulate wail, and the ideal poetic persona is an earthly impossibility—an angel. Even at her most visionary, and when she most closely resembles her Romantic predecessors, she is unable to find an earthly standing point for the poetry to which she aspires.

The difficulties of achieving an authoritatively self-assertive yet humbly self-abnegating Christian, female voice are especially evident in *A Drama of Exile*, the most ambitious of Barrett’s *Poems* of 1844. A closet drama depicting the events immediately following the expulsion from Eden, *A Drama of Exile* represents cosmic history not only from the fallen perspective of Adam and Eve but also from the visionary perspectives of fallen and unfallen angels, of various Spirits of Earth, and even of God himself in the person of Christ. The work is reminiscent of *The Seraphim*, but in this case the setting is at least brought down to earth, brought down from just outside the gates of heaven to just outside the gates of Eden. Nevertheless, Barrett is still attempting to write with the more than human authority of angels, though the presence of Adam and Eve affords “access to human feelings through human feelings,” and especially, as Barrett saw it, to women’s feelings. Her account of the subject indicates that she was self-consciously attempting to find scope for a thoroughly ambitious yet specifically female poetry:

My subject was the new and strange experience of the fallen humanity, as it went forth from Paradise into the wilderness; with a peculiar reference to Eve’s allotted grief, which, considering that self-sacrifice belonged to her womanhood, and the consciousness of originating the Fall to her offence,—appeared to me imperfectly apprehended hitherto, and more expressible by a woman than a man. There was room, at least, for lyrical emotion in those first steps into the wilderness,—in that first sense of desolation after wrath,—in that first audible gathering of the recriminating “groan of the whole creation”—in that first darkening of the hills from the recoiling feet of angels—and in that first silence of the voice of God. (*Works*, 2: 143–44)
Dorothy Mermin, among others, has argued that Barrett “redefines Milton’s subject by focussing on Eve’s guilt and repentance and redefines the role of the poet by asserting that suffering is a source of knowledge—a source to which even those who lack a classical education or the authority of male experience may have access” (Barrett Browning, 87). But the authority of suffering is problematic for a woman in the Romantic tradition. Even as Barrett attempts to empower herself as a female poet, she accepts the repressive ideology that disables her as a woman—the original guilt of woman compels her to a perpetual martyrdom of self-sacrifice.

Barrett wanted to believe that in true poetic inspiration the poet’s word echoes the divine creative Word, yet she seems to assert here that the poetry of fallen humanity, the poetry of exile, must take place in the “silence of the voice of God.” Consequently, despite the very obvious visionary ambition of the poem itself, the preface reduces her claims to the mere utterance of the “lyrical emotion” of grief and loss—and the poetry of lamentation had long been recognized as the appropriate province of the poetress, who was, as a woman, expected to have more feeling than intellect. The Christian dispensation leaves little room for a woman’s authoritative voice because, despite the preface, the “voice of God” is not “silent” within the drama but is present in Christ’s words and even, as we shall see, in Adam’s. Because Christianity is overwhelmingly patriarchal, anagogical poetry always points to ultimate masculine authority, and the earthly figures of that authority are masculine as well.

Wherever Barrett looked, exclusively masculine authority was thoroughly and, in her view, justly entrenched in a lineage leading all the way back to God the Father. Not surprisingly, as the preface continued, she acknowledged a fear that she had not, after all, found a distinctively female space within the Christian tradition:

But when all was done, I felt afraid . . . of my position. I had promised my own prudence to shut close the gates of Eden between Milton and myself, so that none might say I dared to walk in his footsteps. He should be within, I thought, with his Adam and Eve unfallen or falling,—and I, without, with my EXILES—I also an exile! It would not do. The subject and his glory covering it, swept through the gates, and I stood full in it against my will, and contrary to my vow. (Works, 2: 144)

These comments could easily be seen as representing what Harold Bloom calls the “anxiety of influence,” the fear that a poetic father is, in Bloom’s apt words, a “covering cherub” blocking access to the divine vision. But in this case the attempt to achieve an independent vision is evidently
perverse. The space Barrett had allotted to herself was the space of exile, yet the whole tendency of her Christian life was to seek return to the Father, and the recurrent themes of her earlier poetry are the quest to re-enter the gates of Eden and the desire to join rather than to resist the angelic hosts. The only possible space for a genuinely original or genuinely female visionary poetry would be as an exile from God and from the prophetic and literary tradition. But for Barrett this would mean an exile from Truth—an independent position, perhaps, but, for her, an utterly false one.

Barrett’s declared intention as she began work on the poem was to emphasize Eve’s role as “first & deepest in the sorrow” (Correspondence, 8: 117; original emphasis), but as she neared completion she saw the poem as more about the male figures of exile: “It refers to Lucifer’s exile, and to That other mystical exile of the Divine Being, which was the means of the return homewards of Adam & Eve” (Correspondence, 8: 267). She must, perforce, submit to the male tradition and allow her own voice to be subsumed by it. How else, indeed, could her voice swell the harmony of Christian praise rather than strike the jarring, dissonant note of individual pride? And worse, to the extent that the anagogical referent of exile is Lucifer, the poem suggests that the eschatological end of woman, Eve, is not the domestic angel, or the heavenly seraph, but the fallen angel.

Barrett clearly was not endorsing the conclusions of the “Satanic school” that Lucifer’s Prometheanism was admirable: the self-evidently mistaken, damnable, and damned character of Lucifer parodically reveals the error of Byronic autonomy and defiance simply by proclaiming it:

I CHOSE this ruin; I elected it
Of my will, not of service. What I do,
I do volitient, not obedient,
And overtop thy crown with my despair.
My sorrow crowns me. (ll.90–94)

Throughout the drama, Lucifer continues to rant, though at times his agony of despair seems almost remorseful—but he resolutely denies any repentance, and in doing so seems perfectly to characterize the error of melancholy Byronism.

Barrett felt empowered to write this ambitious work because of her affinity with Eve, but of course the Christian story, especially the Miltonic version, represents selfless female love as powerlessly submissive to masculine authority. Eve presents herself within the Miltonic scheme: “He for God only; she for God in him.” For her, “the shadow on [Adam’s] face” is “awfuller” (1.415) than the light of the “angelic hosts” (1.405), and her
repentant posture is that of a literally fallen woman, abased and prostrate: “I, also, after tempting, writhe on the ground, / And I would feed on ashes from thine hand, / As suits me, O my tempted” (ll.436–38). But though she likens herself to the serpent in her prostration, Eve is in some respects empowered by this posture. As the drama makes clear, in the lapsarian state, the highest and holiest apprehension of divinity is felt through grief for sin, a notion that confirms, perhaps, that the highest kind of poetry available to fallen humankind is the poetry of the superego, the sentimental poetry she had been writing all along.

Though Eve is consistently represented as less wise than Adam, she is also represented as more fully humbled by grief, more conciliatory, and perhaps more loving. She fully accepts her role within patriarchy and within the Victorian ideology that claimed to exalt women precisely by humbling them: “Only my humbleness shall make me great, / My humbleness exalt me” (ll.1278–79). In confronting a fallen and hostile nature, Adam is proud and defiant, but Eve is meek and yielding. Adam even seems to retain a taint of Lucifer’s pride. Shortly after Lucifer has proclaimed himself “Self-orphaned by my will, and self-elect / To kingship of resistant agony,” Adam (echoing Byron’s “Prometheus” as well as Lucifer) defies the spirit of earth:

By my free will that chose sin,
By mine agony within
Round the passage of the fire,
   By the pinings which disclose
That my native soul is higher
   Than what it chose,
We are yet too high, O Spirits, for your disdain! (ll.1505–11)

Eve, on the other hand, pleads for love and reconciliation. Within the Christian scheme, her humility is ultimately more powerful for human good than Adam’s pride as, presumably, female sentimental poetry is more powerful for good than male melancholia. When Christ intercedes to subdue nature to humankind, it is in response to Eve’s appeal for God’s pity, not Adam’s appeal for God’s power.

Barrett’s empowerment of the female in this respect, however, can hardly be affirmed as a feminist gesture since it simply reinforces the prevalent gender ideology. Eve’s only power, evidently, is that of the vessel of male seed, the maternal power that will enable her (as generic Woman) to be the mother of Christ. Her prayer is to Christ as the “mystic Seed that shalt be!” (1.1749)—her prayer is one of submission to a divine order, but also to a male line. She prays to the Son who is also the Father, and she submits to
the authority of her own male progeny. When Christ intercedes, his charge to the spirits of nature may be taken as a charge also to women to be domestic angels:

Be ye to man as angels are to God,  
Servants in pleasure, singers of delight,  
Suggesters to his soul of higher things  
Than any of your highest! (ll.1802–5)

Both Eve and, apparently, Barrett accept the gratifications of serving God by serving Man as sufficient recompense, and even as Woman's high calling:

I accept  
For me and for my daughters this high part  
Which lowly shall be counted. Noble work  
Shall hold me in the place of garden-rest,  
And in the place of Eden's lost delight  
Worthy endurance of permitted pain. (ll.1897–1902)

Eve accepts, in short, the role of domestic angel. As Adam's speech makes explicit, she is to be a substitute for the angels lost to the service of man by her transgression:

thou shalt go forth  
An angel of the woe thou didst achieve  
Found acceptable to the world instead  
Of others of that name, of whose bright steps  
Thy deed stripped bare the hills. (ll.1852–56)

But to be empowered as an angel in this context is scarcely to be empowered at all. In her representations of the woman poet's aspiration toward angelic song, Barrett had envisioned the poet serving God directly and mediating between God and humanity, but in this case the mere mortal is only a substitute angel, serving Man directly as Man mediates between her and God. As David has pointed out, Christ and Adam discipline Eve to accept a subservient role, so that the “poem inspired by Barrett Browning's desire to give utterance to Eve's (and woman's) 'peculiar anguish,' becomes a silencing of Eve's expressive voice” (109). It becomes a revelation of how inevitably, for Barrett, women's sentimental poetry returns to the “domestic language of the affections” and ends in “conservative sentiment.”

Her representation of divine song in A Drama of Exile is once again that of a chorus of angels, whose praises of God reverberate through the cos-
mos and may be distantly apprehended by fallen mortals. But since it is impossible for a mortal to sing in the angelic chorus, perhaps the next best thing is to be an earthly substitute. Within the cosmic scheme set forth in this drama, the apotheosis of Barrett's anagogical mode, this kind of substitution is revealed as the very essence of God's economy. Lucifer, the Angel of the Morning Star, has been lost, but he is replaced by Christ, the "Bright and Morning-Star" ever present from the dawn of redemptive time. Further, in this poem about exile, Lucifer's pride is to be the ultimate exile, the king of exiles, but even in this, he learns, he is displaced by the incarnate Christ, self-exiled from heaven: "He will be an exile from his heaven, / To lead those exiles homeward" (ll.2223–24). Within this typological scheme, then, the things of fallen time take upon themselves a very different sense seen from the aspect of eternity—the ultimate mortal exile is God Himself, and by the same token, the domestic angel, from the perspective of eternity, may be a veritable heavenly angel. From God's perspective, the substitutions are not metaphors but truths. As Christ puts it,

Eternity stands alway fronting God;
A stern colossal image, with blind eyes
And grand dim lips that murmur evermore
God! God! God! (ll.1934–37)

All of the sounds of the universe are, as in Coleridge's theology, echoes of the all-creative Word of God, and this Word, moreover, is precisely the burden of the angelic chorus; it is the "WORD innumerous angels straightway lift / Wide on celestial altitudes of song / And choral adoration" (ll.1947–49). The ultimate WORD, however, is not sung by the angels but spoken by a mortal at the moment of death—it is a word empowered by despair. As in The Seraphim, the focus of providential time is on the moment of Christ's fullest humanity in his momentary despair on the cross:

in the noon of time
Eternity shall wax as dumb as Death,
While a new voice beneath the spheres shall cry,
"God! why hast thou forsaken me, my God?"
And not a voice in Heaven shall answer it.
[The transfiguration is complete in sadness.] (ll.1951–56)

Evidently the highest utterance is a human one after all, and further, it is an apotheosis of human sadness that fulfills the Atonement and restores humanity to God. Consequently, it is not surprising that the highest
visionary power available to mortals is achieved through “the passion of our grief.” And arguably, precisely because the burden of the curse is placed most emphatically on Eve until Christ comes to lift it, it is she—or Woman generally—whose passion of grief and consequent empowerment is greatest. In this way, perhaps, the Christian Woman displaces the melancholy “Satanic” Man as the highest visionary.

But there are evident problems with this logic. In the first place, Christ’s words are spoken as the culmination of mortal despair—they express the agony of exile rather than the serenity of submission (Barrett chose not to quote Christ’s final words, as she had done in *The Seraphim*: “FATHER! MY SPIRIT TO THINE HANDS IS GIVEN”). Even Christ’s words lead, in mortal terms, to a continuing acceptance of tyranny, a sense of empowerment through martyrdom. In addition, the poem’s logic might be said to repeat rather than repeal the logic of Satanic self-singing. Arguably the domestic angel, the mortal angel, is not simply a substitute for the heavenly angel—she might just as reasonably be described as a fallen angel. Her claims for power through humility are closely akin to Lucifer’s claim that because he is the most agonized and fallen of sinners, he is the most empowered. Her own comments in the preface seem to concede this point: “I took pleasure in driving in, like a pile, stroke upon stroke, the Idea of EXILE,—admitting Lucifer as an extreme Adam, to represent the ultimate tendencies of sin and loss—that it might be strong to bear up the contrary idea of the Heavenly love and purity” (*Works*, 2:144). Within the drama this Luciferian logic is echoed without irony by Christ, as he castigates the Spirits of Earth for opposing themselves to fallen humanity: “Which of you disdains / These sinners who in falling proved their height / Above you by their liberty to fall?” (ll.1774–76). Despite earlier comments in the preface implying that the poetry of exile is the peculiar province of women, it becomes clear that even the experience of exile is essentially masculine, most fully known to “Lucifer as an extreme Adam,” not to Eve. But of course Lucifer (and by implication, Adam) cultivates defiance rather than remorse in grief, precisely the attitude that, for Barrett, spiritually crippled the melancholy poets of the Satanic school. Yet her poetry seems dependent upon the melancholy she rejects, if only in the form adopted as appropriate to the theme of exile—the closet drama of mortals and supernatural beings inevitably reminded contemporaries of Byron’s *Manfred* and *Cain* and, to a lesser extent, Shelley’s *Prometheus Unbound*. Immediately upon finishing the drama, in fact, Barrett sensed that its strength was primarily in the depiction of Lucifer’s lot; at one point, she said, “I determined to make one or two extracts from Lucifer’s speeches & mix them up into a monodram[a] which I might call ‘Lucifer’” (*Correspondence*, 8: 271). But her
stronger impulse was to throw the whole manuscript into the fire—as perhaps the best place for Lucifer (she was dissuaded by John Kenyon’s praise of the poem).

Even without deconstructing the poem’s logic to show the similitude of Eve’s grief with Satan’s eternally doomed rebellion, it is clear that the preservation of traditional gender hierarchy leaves Man, not Woman, both in temporal power and in the spiritual authority of speaking with the primal Word of God’s breath. The dominant idea, the idea to which Eve’s or Satan’s voice can only offer a counterpoint, is represented as emphatically masculine since the Christian drama necessarily finds the incarnation and apotheosis of “heavenly love and pity” in the masculine figure of Christ. Not only is Lucifer more a type for Adam’s exile than for Eve’s, but Christ is more a type for Adam’s love and pity than for Eve’s.

A Drama of Exile makes powerful though traditional claims for the authority of Christian vision, but despite Barrett’s evident desire to empower women’s speech, it leaves women in the thoroughly subordinate role of subservient angel. The alternative, which Barrett at least half-recognized but wholly resisted, is the role of rebellious, fallen angel—or demon. In fact, like at least one other Romantic woman writer of her time, Barrett expressed some fear that inspiration itself might be morally compromising. Charlotte Brontë defended the passion of her writing by asserting that “When authors write best . . . an influence seems to waken in them, which becomes their master—which will have its own way—putting out of view all behests but its own” (quoted in Gaskell, 239–40). A man may submit himself to his muse without raising moral issues, but for a woman to allow a male master to “have its own way” with her begins to sound problematic. Barrett herself stated in 1844 that “I write from impulse & conviction of heart & mind—that my faculty, whether it be, angel or demon, rather possesses than is possessed by me” (Correspondence, 9: 154). Barrett’s language is not, I think, merely figurative—she was, in fact, simultaneously fascinated and repulsed at this time by the idea of mesmerism, which she perceived as a kind of usurpation of the soul, closely akin to demonic possession.12

There can be little doubt, of course, that Barrett believed in the moral worthiness of her writing and that she saw her inspiration as angelic rather than demonic, though her fear of the latter possibility was quite genuine. Such a fear sounds almost comic to modern ears, but it is consistent with Barrett’s interest in mesmerism, and contemporary critics entertained it as a possibility, especially in the more outspoken works that followed the 1844 Poems. W. E. Aytoun, commenting on Poems before Congress, explained Barrett’s “poetic aberrations” by insisting that like a “Pythoness” “under the influence of her cacodaemon” she “had been seized with a . . . fit of
insanity.” Henry Chorley said that Barrett had taken “to its extremity the right of the ‘insane prophet’ to lose his head and to loose his tongue,” and he also expressed his suspicion that the poet of *Casa Guidi Windows* “had been biologized by infernal spirits” (*Correspondence*, 12: 406–7). The critics were surely writing figuratively, but Barrett’s writings persistently reveal at least a hint of uncertainty about the moral propriety of inspiration for women. The uncertainty surfaces emphatically in her mixed feelings of admiration and moral repulsion for George Sand, whom she regarded as “shameless,” yet a “true woman of genius” and “eloquent as a fallen angel” (*Correspondence*, 6: 163). Her two sonnets addressed to George Sand in the 1844 *Poems* express both admiration and censure—both sonnets call upon Sand to be less defiant, more womanly. But most significantly, neither sonnet can imagine Sand as a fully realized woman and author. In both, Barrett can only envision a redemption from fallen angel to heavenly angel. In the first, she hopes that Sand “to woman’s claim / And man’s, mightst join the angel’s grace.” In the second, the fulfillment of woman’s creativity is once again deferred until death, “Till God unsex thee on the heavenly shore / Where unincarnate spirits purely aspire!”

Barrett’s *Poems* of 1844 are rightly viewed as a turning point in her career, a shift from the perspective of the meek Christian “poetess” to that of the outspoken Romantic prophet-bard—but the collection is especially interesting because it so clearly contrasts the claims of female sentimental poetry with Romantic melancholy. Still, despite her obvious desire to speak out her full personal being in the *Poems* of 1844, Barrett could not fully articulate a role for an inspired woman poet.

II. Melancholy Eros in *Sonnets from the Portuguese*

Until the relatively recent rehabilitation of *Aurora Leigh*, Barrett Browning’s position in the canon of Victorian poetry was secured almost exclusively by *Sonnets from the Portuguese*. As Tricia Lootens has demonstrated, in the early days of canon formation the sonnets not only secured Barrett’s canonical status but constituted almost the entire “representation of her sex in the Victorian era” (136), and well into the 1970s the sonnets were still being described as Barrett’s one clear claim to a “modest immortality” (117). But as Lootens has also convincingly shown, the effect of this emphasis was to efface not only Barrett’s other poetry but even the genuine poetic achievement of the sonnets, displacing the poetry with the legend of the Brownings’ immortal love. The sonnets were characteristically viewed as artless expressions of ideal female love, and in their representa-
tion of the feminine virtues of “abnegation, hope and Faith” they were a “testament to the indispensable ‘relations of art and marriage, where the female genius is concerned’” (138). Not her poetry but her happy and fulfilled womanhood, “the apotheosis of womanhood,” is her enduring achievement, with the paradoxical result that even as the poetry was canonized readers were encouraged not to study it, or read it with care, but only to look past it, “to read the truth through this slight veil, and to see the woman more than the poet” (133). The highly sexist effect of praising the sonnets on these grounds as “the definitive works of women’s poetry altogether” is to encourage readers to look past, or overlook, “women’s poetry altogether,” to find poetry not in women’s words but in their happy love for men. For the late Victorians,

E. B. B.’s futile attempt at “competition with men” hence becomes a “glorious [if inadvertent] success, as a higher illustration than was ever otherwise afforded of what a woman is, and of what she may do in her own exalted and luminous sphere.” A monument to True Womanhood glimmers behind Barrett Browning’s verse, refuting the poet’s own articulated feminism. (130)

By misreading or cursorily reading the sonnets, critics simultaneously canonized and disabled Barrett’s poetry.

As her best critics now realize, the sonnets are not the artless outpouring of true womanhood but a complex introduction of a woman’s voice into the exclusively male tradition of courtly love. The prolonged failure to read them in this light, perhaps, was caused both by a reticence to see pure womanhood sullied by erotic desire and by an inclination to see the speaker’s self-abasement not as an expression of eroticism but as proper female submissiveness and even, as Mermin points out, as an “embarrassing” and, to modern ears, degrading submission to male superiority (Barrett Browning, 141). Such abasement, evidently melancholy in man, was seen as a source of happiness in a woman, so that even as astute and sympathetic a reader as Christina Rossetti could not see the sonnets as an effective intervention in the melancholy male tradition of courtly love. In a brief prefatory comment to her own intervention in the tradition, Monna Innominata, Rossetti lamented that none of the beloved women addressed by courtly lovers ever left a record of her own voice:

Had such a lady spoken for herself, the portrait left us might have appeared more tender, if less dignified, than any drawn even by a devoted friend. Or had the Great Poetess of our own day and nation only been unhappy instead of happy, her circumstance would have invited
her to bequeath to us, in lieu of the “Portuguese Sonnets,” an inimitable “donna innominata” drawn not from fancy but from feeling, and worthy to occupy a niche beside Beatrice and Laura. (Works, 329)

There is some justification for this comment, to be sure, insofar as the “Portuguese” ends up with a satisfying exchange of love, a “happy ending,” whereas masculine courtly love, from its beginnings in Ficino’s De Amore, had been seen as an erotic desire seeking an impossible fulfillment, and ineluctably melancholy precisely because, as in Alastor and Endymion, the beloved has been internalized as an ego-ideal. As Giorgio Agamben lucidly describes the process, courtly love is necessarily unhappy since “Not an external body but an internal image, that is, the phantasm impressed on the phantastic spirits by the gaze, is the origin and object of falling in love” (23). Agamben’s comments on courtly love and melancholy are well worth quoting at some length as a way of approaching both Barrett’s difficult enterprise in the sonnets and the long tradition of misreading them:

The imaginary loss that so obsessively occupies the melancholic tendency has no real object, because its funereal strategy is directed to the impossible capture of the phantasm. The lost object is but the appearance that desire creates for its courting of the phantasm, and the introjection of the libido is only one of the facets of a process in which what is real loses its reality so that what is unreal may become real. . . . If the external world is in fact narcissistically denied to the melancholic as an object of love, the phantasm yet receives from this negation a reality principle that emerges from the mute interior crypt in order to enter a new and fundamental dimension. No longer a phantasm and not yet a sign, the unreal object of melancholy introjection opens. . . . [an] intermediate epiphanic place, located in the no-man’s land between narcissistic self-love and external object choice. The locus severus (austere place) of melancholy, which according to Aristotle signifies genius and prudence, is also the lusus severus (serious play) of the word and of the symbolic forms through which, according to Freud, man succeeds in “enjoying [his] own day-dreams without self-reproach or shame.” The topology of the unreal that melancholy designs in its immobile dialectic is, at the same time, a topology of culture. (25–26)

According to Ficino,

every love begins with sight [and internalizes the beloved in the visual phantasm held in the mind]. But the love of the contemplative
[Saturnian, melancholy] man ascends from sight to intellect. That of the voluptuous man descends from sight to touch. That of the active man remains in sight... the love of the contemplative man is called divine; that of the active man, human; that of the voluptuous man, bestial. (Commentary, 119–20)

Evidently the difficulty of writing about fulfilled, happy love in the courtly tradition is that the shift from the melancholy inward dialectic of contemplation to fulfillment moves the lover from the high cultural plane of the divine, short-circuiting the poetic creativity of melancholy in the *locus severus* of genius and the *lusus severus* of the word. More drastically, it lowers the lover from the divine to the bestial, so it is not wholly surprising that Barrett’s contemporaries, shocked by the scandal of the elopement and carnal consummation of the Brownings, were inclined to shy away from discussion of the sonnets. As Lootens puts it, for them “the general operating consensus seems to have been the less said about the whole business, the better” (126).

From our distant perspective, however, a closer look reveals that the sonnets, the last major book written by Elizabeth Barrett as opposed to Barrett Browning, intervene in the courtly love tradition precisely by dwelling in the melancholy of desire until ultimately Barrett adopts the woman’s prerogative of crossing through the “no-man’s land” between narcissistic self-love and external object choice, and so short-circuits the courtly love tradition and passes through melancholy to a more socially directed mode. As various critics have noted, with the *Sonnets from the Portuguese*, Barrett began to find a public voice very different from the sentimentality of her enclosed, “trapped” consciousness. She had, of course, previously intervened in the public sphere in such poems as “The Cry of the Children,” but her general shift after the sonnets was sufficiently marked to justify Cora Kaplan’s remark that “Elizabeth Barrett was a lyric poet with an interest in political and social questions; Elizabeth Barrett Browning was primarily a political poet” (71).

Before the external object choice is fully made, the sonnets represent melancholy as the “emotion of the trapped.” The choice of the sonnet form is itself the choice of a confining form, and the choice of courtly love implied by the formal decision is the choice of a tradition of melancholy. Angela Leighton has noted that among the “old generic postures and conventions” of the amatory sonnet tradition is the figure of “the woman who waits” (“Stirring,” 222) and that Barrett specifically compared herself to the most conspicuous contemporary figure of the melancholy waiting woman: she wrote to Browning that she was “Like Mariana in the moated grange and [would] sit listening too often to the mouse in the wainscot” (223). Leighton makes the point even more
emphatically with reference to another letter to Browning: “As for me,’
Elizabeth writes at one point, ‘I have done most of my talking by post of late
years—as people shut up in dungeons, take up with scrawling mottos on the
walls.’ The scene of writing, for this woman poet, is the prison” (225). Like
many of Barrett’s self-characterizations in the letters, the sense of imprisoned
isolation belongs also to the speaker of the sonnets, especially sonnet 4, which
echoes the lonely moated grange, the “dreamy house” of Mariana waiting in
desolation for her lover to come to her from his palace:

Thou hast thy calling to some palace-floor,
Most gracious singer of high poems! where
The dancers will break footing, from the care
Of watching up thy pregnant lips for more,
And dost thou lift this house’s latch too poor
For hand of thine? and canst thou think and bear
To let thy music drop here unaware
In folds of golden fulness at my door?
Look up and see the casement broken in,
The bats and owlets builders in the roof!
My cricket chirps against thy mandolin.
Hush, call no echo up in further proof
Of desolation! there’s a voice within
That weeps . . . as thou must sing . . . alone, aloof.

Unlike Mariana’s, this speaker’s lover will come, and does come, and the
prisoner will eventually manage a prison break, but for much of the
sequence she chirps, as here, in the melancholy isolation that provides at
least a locus severus for her voice, even if only to weep, and maintaining the
separation of the lovers enables them both to sing “alone, aloof.” As
Leighton points out, courtly love traditionally sets obstacles to sexual con-
summation, “constantly resists its material expenditure in either sexual sat-
isfaction or social bonding. It is a sentiment, satisfied in the indefinite
postponement of its final gratification. In that postponement, the lover
finds time to speak” (“Stirring,” 219–20).

From the beginning of the sequence obstacles to love are described, but
described as providing a time for love to speak. In the second sonnet, for
example, all separation, even to “heaven being rolled between us” (1.13),
leads only to love’s speech: “We should but vow the faster for the stars” (1.14).
Further, the echoes of desolation in sonnet 4, like the “old voices” heard by
Tennyson’s Mariana, suggest a reverberation of the old voice of a poetic tra-
dition belatedly entered. Reverberation suggests the possibility of belated
song, but only as a re-verbing of what has already been sung. Despite the
common misconception that Barrett’s sonnets were the unmediated expression of her feeling, the insistent intertextuality of the poems (beginning with an explicit reference to Theocritus in the opening line of the sequence) indicates that Barrett herself was well aware that her language, coming so late in the tradition, would inevitably refer not to her unique feeling but to other texts, so that the language of her love operates like all emblems in melancholy allegory to refer, as de Man puts it, only to the sign that precedes it, so that the “meaning” of the words “can then consist only in the repetition . . . since it is in the essence of this previous sign to be pure anteriority.”

Leighton makes a similar point about the echoing of old voices in the sonnets:

The lover’s discourse, according to Barthes, “proceeds from others, from the language, or from books.” He concludes, “no love is original.” The “dreamy house” is haunted by other voices. The text of feeling has been written already. This déjà vu, or rather, déjà écrit, inevitably turns the lover’s passion into a pose; the lover’s poem into another, older one. Feeling suffers the anxiety of having been preempted by literature. (“Stirring,” 228)

The sense of melancholy as the emotion of the trapped is perhaps overdetermined in the sonnets, by the sonnet form itself, the courtly love tradition, the distance from original feeling, and even the modern Nietzschean sense of language itself as a prison house, but entrapment also provides a place of safety, a refuge where love can rest in contemplation without risking descent into the actual:

On me thou lookest with no doubting care,
As on a bee shut in a crystalline;
Since sorrow hath shut me safe in love’s divine,
And to spread wing and fly in the outer air
Were most impossible failure, if I strove
To fail so. (15. 5–10)

From the very first sonnet, the sequence begins an inward dialectic in which the speaker balances the promise of love against her long-held infatuation with death, with the visions of past years and past loved ones. Whichever way she turns, she is mastered, constrained, trapped in her own longing:

I thought once how Theocritus had sung
Of the sweet years, the dear and wished-for years,
Who each one in a gracious hand appears
To bear a gift for mortals, old or young:
And, as I mused it in his antique tongue,
I saw, in gradual vision through my tears,
The sweet, sad years, the melancholy years,
Those of my own life, who by turns had flung
A shadow across me. Straightway I was 'ware,
So weeping, how a mystic Shape did move
Behind me, and drew me backward by the hair;
And a voice said in mastery, while I strove,—
"Guess now who holds thee?"—"Death," I said. But, there,
The silver answer rang,—"Not Death, but Love."

Love presents itself not as an alternative to the sweet, sad immobility of melancholy but as another form of it. The sonnet anticipates the process of the entire sequence, in which the speaker will exchange the familiar, poetically enabling melancholy in which she lived “with visions for my company” (26. 1) for a love that puts at risk the poetic safety of melancholy enclosure. Eventually love triumphs to draw her forth from the prison of melancholy interiority, but for much of the sequence this escape from “vision” to an external world of “men and women” (26. 2) is deferred to make a space for language. Startled from her security in sonnet 1, the speaker immediately retreats behind God’s interdiction in sonnet 2: “God ... laid the curse / So darkly on my eyelids, as to amerce / My sight from seeing you” (4–6). The gradual shift from infatuation with Death to Love can occur only when Love displaces the “visions” with a phantasm of its own. Rather than leave the solipsistic security of her isolated inner world, the speaker, after the proper Ficinian method, draws the lover into her inner world as a phantasmal image of himself. The process by which she fends off the threat of actuality by internalizing the lover is described with surprising precision in sonnet 6:

Go from me. Yet I feel that I shall stand
Henceforward in thy shadow. Nevermore
Alone upon the threshold of my door
Of individual life, I shall command
The uses of my soul, nor lift my hand
Serenely in the sunshine as before,
Without the sense of that which I forebore—
Thy touch upon the palm. The widest land
Doom takes to part us, leaves thy heart in mine
With pulses that beat double. What I do
And what I dream include thee, as the wine
Must taste of its own grapes. And when I sue
The external, physical figure of the lover is banished so that the immaterial image may be internalized, not compelling the speaker out of her solitary contemplation—curtailing dialogue, perhaps, but enabling a dialectic of inwardness as the speaker communes with her phantasmal lover. In Ficino’s terms this is the highest love, divine love, and in poetic terms it is a new inspiration as the speaker is “taught the whole / Of life in a new rhythm” (7. 6–7). Breaking from the neo-Platonic tradition, however, the speaker not only contemplates the divine love but incarnates love—the physical transformation in sonnet 6 is soon seen in audacious religious language not just as a transformation but as a “transfiguration” (sonnet 10). Unlike neo-Platonic love, which can only raise its sights to heaven, the speaker’s Christian love, in a bold “imitatio Christi,” can bring the divine love into the actual:

I stand transfigured, glorified aright,
With conscience of the new rays that proceed
Out of my face toward thine. There’s nothing low
In love, when love the lowest: meanest creatures
Who love God, God accepts while loving so.
And what I feel, across the inferior features
Of what I am, doth flash itself, and show
How that great work of Love enhances Nature’s. (10. 7–14)

The incarnation of love as Christ sets the example of the sanctifying incarnation of love in the flesh, justifying even erotic physical love as divine, not bestial. Dismissing any spiritual presumptions of love by insisting on materialist criteria, Iago says of Desdemona that “The wine she drinks is made of grapes” (Othello, II.i.251–52), but the speaker of Sonnets from the Portuguese accepts that “the wine / Must taste of its own grapes” (6. 12–13), conceiving spiritual distillation not as transcendence but as transfiguration of the body. The speaker consequently moves from God’s law, the “Law of the Father,” to God’s love, the incarnate love of the Son. Ironically, it is only when Barrett has moved beyond conventional asceticism to embrace erotic love that she is able to figure in her eschatological scheme of things as a figura for Christ. In biographical terms it is easy enough to see that the Christian allegory submerged in the sonnets constitutes a reasoned and devout justification of Barrett’s ultimate denial of the prohibitions of her own father and her choice of erotic love, and in the sonnets it provides a newfound sense of worthiness to love and to be loved.
The image of love as fire indicates the extent to which this Christian reasoning liberates the demure, modest speaker into erotic passion:

Yet, love, mere love, is beautiful indeed
And worthy of acceptation. Fire is bright,
Let temple burn, or flax; an equal light
Leaps in the flame from cedar-plank or weed:
And love is fire. And when I say at need
I love thee . . . mark! . . . I love thee, in thy sight
I stand transfigured. . . . (10. 1–7)

Leighton, Mermin, and Cooper have all argued that the utterance, I love thee, from a woman speaker transforms the courtly love tradition by switching the amatory gender roles of lover and beloved, and for the first time makes a woman the subject rather than merely the object of loving. In her excellent reading of the sequence Mermin fully demonstrates the extent to which Barrett renovated the traditional sonnet sequence by making room for two subjectivities (rather than the traditional male subject and female object) and consequently emphasized the reciprocity of love (Browning, 130). I want only to emphasize here that the lovers’ exchanges all follow from the exchange of divine contemplation for earthly love. This is a choice to leave melancholy behind, and it is reiterated many times in the sonnets:

my soul, instead
Of dreams of death, resumes life’s lower range

. . .
I yield the grave for thy sake, and exchange
My near sweet view of heaven, for earth with thee! (23. 8–9, 13–14)

Similarly, she chooses “men and women” instead of “visions for [her] company” because “God’s gifts put man’s best dreams to shame” (26. 14). In effect, she exchanges a dialectic of inwardness for the outward exchange of dialogue, and even insists on the almost sordid social world of exchange in the tit for tat of “What can I give thee back?” (8. 1). The exchanges of locks of hair, of “I love yous,” and of poems for flowers are all put in the extreme social context of exchange as the marketing of merchandise. Referring pointedly (for Browning) back to Browning’s description of selling his intellectual efforts on “the Rialto where verse-merchants most do congregate,” she leaves solitary contemplation, at least metaphorically, for the busy world, “The soul’s Rialto [which] hath its merchandise” (19. 1). The exchange, like all barter, moreover, must be on equal terms—for the
sweet melancholy that she gives up, she must receive equal value: “If I leave all for thee, wilt thou exchange / And be all to me? (35. 1–2). The exchange of her inner world of visions, thoughts, and images for the real presence of her lover is shown most clearly in sonnet 30, where she contrasts the internalized, imaged lover with the corporeal presence: “I see thine image through my tears to-night, / And yet to-day I saw thee smiling. How / Refer the cause?” (1–3). Working through the problem, she remains sad, but the description of her tears as “hot and real” (14) suggests a tentative entry into actuality and physical expression. Ultimately what the lovers exchange is a melancholy eros in which the lover is possessed only as a neo-Platonic phantasm, for a physical eros in which he is seen as himself, an external and autonomous individual. The process is metaphorically described in sonnet 29:

I think of thee!—my thoughts do twine and bud
About thee, as wild vines, about a tree,
Put out broad leaves, and soon there’s nought to see
Except the straggling green which hides the wood.
Yet, O my palm-tree, be it understood
I will not have my thoughts instead of thee
Who art dearer, better! Rather, instantly
Renew thy presence; as a strong tree should,
Rustle thy boughs and set thy trunk all bare,
And let these bands of greenery which insphere thee
Drop heavily down,—burst, shattered, everywhere!
Because, in this deep joy to see and hear thee
And breathe within thy shadow a new air,
I do not think of thee—I am too near.

Leaving her isolated, contemplative life, the speaker gives up her poetic prerogative of a green thought in a green shade, replacing her fantasy for the actual lover, imagined in strikingly phallic terms as she reveals the hard wood usually hidden behind the veil of poetic idealization. Further, the green vine has a biographical significance for Barrett, calling to mind the ivy that grew in her bedroom window, more deeply closing her into the imprisoning cocoon of her solitary life. Ultimately, in the final poem of the sequence, the vine is seen to figure not only the speaker’s thoughts but also the poems produced from melancholy. In the exchange for his flowers the speaker offers her lover the vine, the eglantine and ivy which have grown in her “heart’s ground” (44. 8, 10–11).

Accepting Browning as her lover and breaking from the prison of her melancholy isolation under her father’s roof, Barrett passed up a source of
melancholia in her own poetry, though she gave it up in fair exchange for
life with real “men and women” and with the “Men and Women” of
Browning’s poetry. All of this, of course, contributes to the most famous
of the sonnets, sonnet 43, the sonnet by which Barrett is best known,
though misknown as a writer of sentimental pap:

How do I love thee? Let me count the ways.
I love thee to the depth and breadth and height
My soul can reach, when feeling out of sight
For the ends of Being and ideal Grace.
I love thee to the level of everyday’s
Most quiet need, by sun and candle-light.
I love thee freely, as men strive for Right;
I love thee purely, as they turn from Praise.
I love thee with the passion put to use
In my old griefs, and with my childhood’s faith.
I love thee with a love I seemed to lose
With my lost saints,—I love thee with the breath,
Smiles, tears, of all my life!—and, if God choose,
I shall but love thee better after death.

The opening quatrains is a Pauline allusion that integrates the beloved into
the Christian faith that has enabled the speaker’s acceptance of incarnate
love. The allusion, in fact, leads to the image of the heart’s ground in the
next and final poem: Paul prays “that Christ may dwell in your hearts by
faith; that ye, being rooted and grounded in love, may be able to compre-
hend with all saints what is the breadth and length, and depth and height;
and to know the love of Christ, which passeth knowledge, that ye might
be filled with all the fulness of God” (Ephesians 3:17–18).

What is surprising about the sonnet is its acquiescence in the actual
and earthly. While leaving the transcendent idealism of the courtly love
tradition to pursue the infinite ideal that “passeth knowledge” “out of
sight,” the earthly love is rooted in and is replete with the measurable
“depth and breadth and height” of the actuality that is apparent in terres-
trial light. In a sense Barrett is accepting a poetic role somewhat dimin-
ished from the possibly vainglorious desire of the 1844 sonnets to “utter
all myself into the air” and so speak the “dread apocalypse of soul” that
would discard the fleshly tabernacle of the body, but she is embodying
the highest earthly poetic role instead of aspiring futilely to express the
“ends of Being and ideal Grace” only available to the disembodied spirit.
The love and passion invoked are not the infinite, mortally impossible
ideals of courtly love but are drawn from what might be called the earth-
ly idealism of “everyday’s” use and need. An infinite love may come after death, but for the purposes of life, the bodily realities of breath, smiles, and tears are sufficient.

Far from being the simple unmediated effusion it is generally taken for, the sonnet is heavily mediated by both the literary and religious traditions, and it offers the complicated exchange of the speaker’s safe and familiar melancholy for the world and human love. In effect, the lover’s melancholy is cast off when the prolonged grieving for lost saints, Barrett’s mother and brother, is resolved as normal mourning and its emotional depths are transferred to erotic love. Finally, it seems, Barrett had found a way through melancholy to an affirmative poetic voice, negotiating a subjectivity of her own grounded in both Christian teaching and erotic human love.

From a feminist perspective it might at first seem tempting to think that Barrett was a greater poet before meeting Browning, that her acceptance of patriarchal marriage was destructive of her autonomous poetic gift. Such a view seems preferable, at any rate, to the late Victorian view that her greatest poetic achievement was turning herself into a wife and mother, the “apotheosis of womanhood.” The truth, however, is that her most outspoken feminist works were written after her marriage. It is not that her marriage qua marriage was liberating, but her affirmation of an autonomous selfhood grounded in erotic love did coincide with a decided change in her poetic practice.

Several critics have, in recent decades, affirmed that Barrett first established a poetic voice of her own in *Sonnets from the Portuguese*, and that thereafter she wrote in a confidently public, often political and occasionally inflammatory voice in *Casa Guidi Windows, Aurora Leigh, Poems before Congress*, and *Last Poems*. When she adopted and worked through the poetics of melancholy by working through the dialectic of the *Sonnets*, she finally worked her way through the influence of the second-generation Romantics and also overcame the prevailing female tradition of poetry grounded in submissive sorrow. Like Carlyle, she shut up her Byron and took up not Goethe but the Carlylean mode of heroic utterance to which she had been attracted throughout the 1840s. In *Casa Guidi Windows*, she explicitly rejected melancholy as an adequate response to the “stress of conscience,” calling for poets to lead rather than indolently “To gaze long / On mournful masks and sad effigies” (i. 45–47). She set aside the sorrowful voice of the woman poet and of melancholy to raise, in part I, a voice of exultant prophecy, refusing to align herself with “rhythms sonneteering in their sleep, / And archaists mumbling dry bones up the land, / And sketchers lauding ruined towns a-heap,—” (i. 148–50). Rather, she made a point of separating herself from sentimentalists who would
Sigh for Italy with some safe sigh
Cooped up in music ’twixt an oh and ah,—
Nay, hand in hand with that young child will I
Go singing rather “Bella libertà,”
Than, with those poets, croon the dead or cry
“Se tu men bella fossi, Italia!” (i. 163–68)

Still, after the bitter disappointment of her hopes for Italian liberty, in part II her anger draws on the stuff of melancholy for a sense of solemnity:

If I speak
These bitter things against the jugglery
Of days that . . . proved blind and weak,
It is that tears are bitter. When we see
The brown skulls grin at death in the churchyards bleak,
We do not cry “This Yorick is too light,”
For death grows deathlier with the mouth he makes.
So with my mocking: bitter things I write
Because my soul is bitter for your sake,
O freedom! O my Florence! (ii. 185–94)

In her most ambitious poem, *Aurora Leigh*, Barrett Browning emphatically sought to write of the actualities of her

live, throbbing age,
That brawls, cheats, maddens, calculates, aspires,
And spends more passion, more heroic heat,
Betwixt the mirrors of its drawing-rooms,
Than Roland with his knights at Roncesvalles. (v. 203–7)

In representing the growth of a woman poet’s mind, she indicates that the conventional passive sentimentality of women poets is inadequate, that Aurora must grow beyond the popular sentimental ballads of women’s poetry and direct her art outward, to actions, because “Passion is / But something suffered after all” (v. 364–65). Crucially, however, she affirms that the artist’s lifeblood is her passionate interiority. The poet must work through the depths of melancholy, as Barrett had done, before turning to the world of actualities and action:

The artist’s part is both to be and do,
Transfixing with a special, central power
The flat experience of the common man,
And turning outward, with a sudden wrench,
Half agony, half ecstasy, the thing
He feels the inmost. (v. 367–72)

The passionate interiority, moreover, is experienced precisely as a melancholy dialogue of the mind with itself, a dialectic between a severe conscience and an inner personal life:

Does a torch less burn
For burning next reflectors of blue steel,
That he should be the colder for his place
'Twixt two incessant fires,—his personal life's
And that intense refraction which burns back
Perpetually against him from the round
Of crystal conscience he was born into
If artist born? O sorrowful great gift
Conferred on poets, of a twofold life,
When one life has been found enough for pain! (v. 373–82)

For Barrett Browning, of course, the conscience is not simply the contemporary moral ideology but the voice of God, the “universal” truth. Still, the universal is embodied in the vesture of the age, the “times we live in” (v. 182), so that her poetry, or Aurora’s, is grounded in the melancholy dialectic of the personal and the internalized social order.