

SOCIAL AND POLITICAL INTERESTS IN THE
WORKS OF ELIZABETH BARRETT BROWNING

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Elizabeth Barrett Browning





TO ELIZABETH BARRETT BROWNING

Is there no sex of souls, as one hath said?
No Salic law for empire of the mind?
The natural grace of woman did I find
With manly force united when I read;
No truer inspiration uttered
Apollo's priestess, when of old enshrined,
Full of the God, she poured prophetic strain,
And anxious pilgrims to the sacred fane
Hung on her words, in awe-struck wonder stood,
Then turned in silence through the sacred wood.
So, mute with ecstasy and full of fear,
I ask, could female thought dictate these lays?
No earth-born woman she, her home not here,
These are angelic notes, too high for praise!

No frailer vessel held a richer wine,
The wine of poesy thy heart had filled
To overflowing, and a strength distilled
From Wisdom's ripest, most luxuriant wine
Had lent thy work its vigour.
Who could climb
Where thou hast soared, and not find ampler range
Of mental prospect and, extended strange
From Pisgah heights, the promised lands of time?
Thou wert a later Miriam, she with song,
With sound of timbrel, and the seven-stringed lyre,
The fainting sons of Israel would inspire,
While o'er the desert sands they journeyed long;
And thou, too, like thy prototype, must leave
Us in earth's wilderness like loss to grieve!

-- Walter Savage Landor

CHAPTER I
SIGNIFICANT FACTS IN THE LIFE OF
ELIZABETH BARRETT BROWNING

Because the circumstances of Elizabeth Barrett Browning's life influenced her writing and, to a certain extent, moulded her genius, and because the reader can best understand her works through a knowledge of the events of her life, a brief sketch of these facts will preface this study of her social and political interests.

"A bird in a cage could have as good a story," said Elizabeth Barrett Browning of the events of her own life, which began March 6, 1806, at Coxhoe Hall. She was the first child born to Mary Graham-Clarke and Edward Barrett Moulton Barrett,¹ then living at the residence of Mr. Barrett's only brother, Samuel. Elizabeth's birth-place apparently counted for little in her life, for in 1809 the family moved to Herefordshire, where her father had purchased Hope End, a country-seat in the Malvern Hills. It was the Malvern country, where she lived until past twenty and which seemed to be her native earth, that may be

¹As heir to estates bequeathed from his grandfather, Edward Barrett Moulton added the name of Barrett to his own.

happily associated with the impressions of the growing poetess.

Elizabeth's early development was concentrated on her inner being. The delight of her sensitive nature in the out-door world and her daily family relationships developed her spiritually. She herself confesses that the incidents of her early life and her intense pleasures took place in her thoughts. The only one in the Barrett household to whom she really revealed these inner experiences was "Bro," her beloved brother Edward. To him she owed her pet name "Ba," by which she was called to the end of her life by those she loved best.

Intellectually Elizabeth was a precocious child. With her brother Edward she read Greek under Mr. MacSwiney, the tutor whom she preferred to her own governess Mrs. Orme, and later she read for herself. She was also indebted to the blind scholar Hugh Stuart Boyd for the Greek reading in which he assisted her as a friend and Greek enthusiast, not as a tutor. Her broad self-culture in other languages -- Hebrew, German, French, and Italian -- and in subjects such as political history, philosophy, poetry, and poetics was carried on at her own free will.

As a child highly developed emotionally and intellectually, Elizabeth at eight and even earlier wrote verses pouring forth her sense-impressions. Her poems

making family incidents the occasion for song show that her heart was at once at home in poetry. At the age of thirteen she wrote "The Battle of Marathon," an epic poem of which her father had fifty copies printed.

The ill health prominently associated with Elizabeth Barrett began at the age of fifteen. This loss of health is traceable to a strain sustained in tightening a saddle-girth in an impatient attempt to saddle her pony Moses herself. The gradual weakening of the lungs and a nervous condition from which she was never entirely released followed this illness. The development of her mind, however, was not checked; after this illness came her first volume of poems in 1826. Failure of health seemed to have made her devote herself more assiduously to poetry, which she chose as her life-work.

The death of Elizabeth's mother, "whose memory was more precious than any earthly blessing left behind," occurred near the end of the Malvern period. In 1830 the family moved to a temporary home in Sidmouth, Devonshire, and Hope End was sold. This change came as a result of the abolition of slavery in the West Indies which diminished Mr. Barrett's fortunes. Yet the move was beneficial to Elizabeth, for the joy she found in being near the sea brightened her days and brought a return to health. This period of her life closed with the appearance of her first

significant adventure -- a translation of "Prometheus Bound."

For the needs of her brothers' careers a removal to 74 Gloucester Place, London, was made in the summer of 1835. Town life brought physical discomfort, and Elizabeth lapsed into acknowledged invalidism. This disagreeableness was, however, offset by the advantage of receiving visits from Wordsworth and Landor and by gaining Miss Mitford as a friend.

The year 1838 brought the publication of "The Seraphim and Other Poems" and a move to a permanent abode at 50 Wimpole Street. Here Elizabeth's cough became persistent and, after the rupture of a blood vessel, she had to be moved to a milder climate. Her chosen place of exile for three years was 1 Beacon Terrace, Torquay. Edward was with her constantly, and her father and sisters paid her intermittent visits. Elizabeth's greatest sorrow came when her brother, sailing with two friends, was drowned in Babbicombe Bay. The accident was a tremendous shock, and Elizabeth tortured herself for years with the idea that she was responsible for Edward's death. So it was not until September, 1841, that she could return to London; even then she could travel only twenty-five miles a day in a newly patented carriage with springs.

The five succeeding years were spent in a darkened room where she wrote, read, corresponded with many, and saw

only a few privileged friends and her family. During this period her love for poetry grew, as the volume of 1844 attested. The year of 1845 began the history of Elizabeth's friendship with Robert Browning, who was attracted to her poetry when he discovered a reference to himself in the poem "Lady Geraldine's Courtship." Upon the suggestion of John Kenyon, a cousin of Miss Barrett's and a classmate of Robert's father, Browning wrote Elizabeth a letter expressing a love for her poetry. Robert Browning was not permitted an entrance to 50 Wimpole Street until five months after this letter was written, but in those months many self-revealing letters upon their work and all that was dear to them passed between these two poets. On May 21, 1845, Robert Browning visited Miss Barrett for the first time and not long after made an offer of marriage, which was refused. With her new happiness Miss Barrett's health improved so rapidly during the summer of 1845 that when Browning repeated his proposal the third time she yielded. The poets were married privately at Marylebone Church, September 12, 1845, without the consent of Elizabeth's despotic father.² One week later Elizabeth, accompanied by her maid Wilson and her dog Flush, joined her husband, and they crossed to Havre and travelled by easy stages to

²The fact that her father was never reconciled to this marriage cast a shadow over Elizabeth's happy life in Italy.

Paris, Pisa, and finally Florence. In Florence the Brownings made a permanent home at Casa Guidi on the Piazza Pitti, gathered about them many congenial friends largely English and American, and, when their cash accounts permitted, made journeys to Siena, Lucca, Venice, and Milan.

Except for occasional visits to Paris and London Elizabeth Barrett Browning spent the remaining fifteen years of her life in Italy. Here her son Robert Wiedemann Barrett Browning was born in 1849. Here she looked upon the revolutionary events that stirred her sympathy for the cause of Italian independence and voiced her feelings in Casa Guidi Windows. Here the love sonnets entitled Sonnets from the Portuguese were presented to her husband, and Aurora Leigh, the largest fruitage of her poetic life, was framed.

On June 29, 1861, after only a week's illness, Mrs. Browning died in her husband's arms. The last word that she spoke was "Beautiful" in answer to Robert's question, "How do you feel?" Although at one time a proposal was made to move her body to Westminster Abbey, it still rests in Florence.

The town of Florence placed on the walls of Casa Guidi a memorial tablet bearing this inscription by Tommaseo, the Italian poet:

Here wrote and died Elizabeth Barrett Browning, who in her woman's heart reconciled a scholar's learning and a poet's soul and made of her verse a golden ring between Italy and England.

CHAPTER II

MRS. BROWNING'S INTEREST IN THE SOCIAL PROBLEMS OF HER AGE

Like the experiences of her life, the course of public events during the age in which Mrs. Browning lived influenced her profoundly. It is the purpose of this chapter, first, to trace the rise of those grave social problems of western civilization which so deeply interested Mrs. Browning; second, to point out the courage required to discuss public issues long considered taboo for women: and third, to examine in detail her writings on these matters with a view to determining their importance as a contribution to the social and humanitarian thought of the age.

Such drastic changes in the social and economic structure of western Europe were wrought by the application of machinery to productive processes in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries that the period has been designated the era of Industrial Revolution. The changes thus introduced were so great that the term revolution seems altogether warranted in describing them, even though they did not come as rapidly as the word revolution might perhaps imply. The Industrial Revolution exerted its

influence politically as well as socially and economically: this influence is comparable to the influence of the French Revolution in the fact that from each came the overthrow of an old regime. In France the Revolution put an end to an autocratic political order; in England the domestic system was supplanted by the factory system.

England enjoyed industrial primacy during the nineteenth century; it was there that the Industrial Revolution had its beginning. From England it spread -- sometimes with delay because of certain local conditions -- until it embraced almost the whole of western Europe. In this connection it should be remembered that wherever the French Revolution had forced an entrance, it had destroyed the antiquated gild system, thereby creating the free labor market which was already in existence in England and which had been the main cause of the agitation leading up to the machine.¹

The question as to why the revolution had its incipency in England can be readily answered. In England conditions were ripe for the great change. England was fortunate in possessing a damp climate, a requisite to textile manufacture. Swift streams offered a supply of water power for the new machinery, and rich deposits of

¹Ferdinand Schevill, A History of Europe from the Reformation to the Present Day (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1925), pp. 513-514.

coal and iron, indispensable to the growth of industry, lay beneath her soil. England, even after her setback because of the war with America, continued to expand her trade and industry, and might well have been called the workshop of the world. English merchants could sell all the goods they could obtain. Capitalists were ready to invest their fortune in industrial enterprises in order to reap greater wealth. In England, too, men were busy with the problem of the practical application of the science of the century to new mechanical inventions.²

Among the many active minds who were searching for easier and more efficient ways of doing things a few inventors, whose names were connected with revolutionary changes, stand out from the thousands. Kay, Hargreaves, Arkwright, Crompton, Cartwright, and the American Whitney were the men who introduced improvements in the making of cotton cloth. The flying shuttle, the spinning jenny, the water-frame, the "mule," the power-loom, and the cotton gin were the inventions that helped to produce more cloth in a shorter time and consequently at a lower cost. Later James Watt projected his steam-engine into the textile situation, replacing the motive power of man by that of superheated water-vapor. The applications of the steam-engine

²Carlton J. H. Hayes, A Political and Social History of Modern Europe (New York: Macmillan Company, 1916), II, 68-69.

soon led to the building of the steamboat and the steam railway, thus revolutionizing the conditions of travel and transportation. The century was not yet old when a rival of steam was discovered -- electricity -- which, before the end of the century, resulted in a second great revolution in the system of communication. Certainly no previous period of industrial history showed more clearly the influences of great inventions than the nineteenth century.

The direct results of these mechanical inventions appeared in an unprecedented expansion of industry and trade, in a rapid increase in the total population, in the growth of vast cities, and in an enormous increase in the national wealth. Machines made it possible to mine, manufacture, and farm on a large scale. Thus trade expanded because there were more commodities to sell, as well as easier ways of selling them.

One of the first effects of the growth of commerce and industry was a rapid increase in population. Since food could be produced and clothes could be made more easily than ever before in the world's history, more people were enabled to live, and this population came to be largely concentrated in cities. The fact that there was a tendency for various industries to locate in the same place, along with the demands of trade and the supposed attractiveness of the city, caused the growth of many urban communities.

More phenomenal than any of the other results of the mechanical inventions was the great increase in the national wealth. The expansion of production came naturally with the invention of machinery. Though the day of mass production had not yet arrived, goods were produced quantitatively as well as at lower production cost, and so could be placed more cheaply upon the market. The cheaper price attracted buyers and stimulated consumption. This wealth was not evenly distributed among the population, but tended to concentration in the hands of relatively few individuals. It may seem strange that the benefits of the Industrial Revolution should be monopolized by the minority. The reason will be discovered in the second aspect of the revolution; that is, the formation of the factory system.³

Prior to the Industrial Revolution the population in England was on the whole rural. People were then in direct touch with the land. Men and their families lived on their own land or in villages near it, and each household applied labor or tools to the grain, timber, and fibres grown on this land. Their homes were workshops for producing the necessary food, clothing, and furniture. These people did not work for the sake of work itself, but knowing their needs they labored only when necessity occasioned it. Being able to supply the necessities of life,

³Ibid., pp. 76-77.

they were happy and content, although as a group they were poor and uneducated. Yet it is true that even before the invention of machinery this medieval system began to give way. The process of enclosure aided in the removal of the independent farmer-class from the land to the factories. Thus the separation of worker and employer commenced before machinery was invented, but the real revolution did not come until the use of power-machinery and the rise of factories. The peasants' way of life, described above, had to be exchanged for the life of wage-earners in the cities.

There are several reasons why the invention and the improvement of machines in this epoch made the possessor of capital the master of the situation. First of all, machines cost money. Too, special buildings had to be constructed to house the machines, and before a profit could be realized wages had to be paid to the workers in the factories. Thus the rich man came into possession of the means of production, and the age of machines became synonymous with the age of capitalism.

What the Industrial Revolution meant to the new class of machine-workers is a special story of the utmost importance. Lured from the farm to the factory, they found themselves in a deplorable condition. Whereas they had been their own masters, they were now reduced to the

status of wage slaves to factory owners. With long working hours and unhealthful, unsanitary conditions came the deterioration of the working class. Workers and their families were herded into cheap tenements which constituted a slum with filthy streets and scanty supplies of light, water, and heat. In the filth of these sections disease was rampant. Men who spent their days in dark, damp mines or in factories bending over machines spent their leisure in drinking saloons. Young men became victims of sordid dissipation. Young working-women fell into immorality. The employment of women and children in the mines and factories led to the most deplorable social consequences. Babies of the factory women were neglected, and the children who worked in the factories were pale and sickly. Such a picture of social deterioration in the towns indicated the absence of plan on the part of the people in authority. The "captains of industry" were thinking only of greater production and of getting it done by the cheapest means; so it was not until the middle of the century that an attempt was made through legislation to lift the workers from degradation.

An economic and social movement to begin with, the Industrial Revolution necessarily brought with it political upheaval. Its immediate effect was to weaken and impoverish the lower classes while it strengthened and enriched

the middle classes, who had already been for some time slowly adding to their vigor and had begun insisting on a share in the government. It was inevitable that this, the favored class of the Industrial Revolution, should exercise powerful influence upon politics. Their first triumph was the passage of the Reform Bill of 1832, which conferred the privilege of suffrage on a large number of middle-class citizens who had not hitherto enjoyed it. It is important to notice that the towns enfranchised were mainly factory towns and that the people who demanded parliamentary reform were members of the industrial classes. At the same time the business element of the population gained control of many municipal governments. The English middle classes made up the strength of the Whig (or constitutional) party, and during the nineteenth century were identified with various liberal parties. Their program of liberalism was one by which this expanding group proposed to secure the political and economic control necessary for the realization of its ends. In wishing to break down the clergy's interference, liberalism declared for toleration; in desiring to be rid of the political monopoly of the king, it aimed at a constitutional system; and in being anxious to break down the barriers of provincialism, it championed nationalism. Although they met with resistance from the conservative interests in control, their march to power was, on the

whole, uninterrupted. The age of machinery and capitalism was also the age of the middle classes and of middle-class liberalism.⁴

Concurrently with the new impulses in science, in politics, and in practical life came the rise of a new literature -- the literature of social protest, in which attention was focused on social problems and especially on the wrongs and sufferings of the poor. The literature of the Victorian era was marked by a wide variety of themes and purposes, but "its central note was the dominant influence of Sociology -- enthusiasm for social truths as an instrument of social reform."⁵ The Victorian era was not the period of the first appearance of this new literature, but it was the time when the union of social and moral problems certainly came to dominate all western literature. It was during this epoch that a wave of awakened humanitarian literature swept the country, for at this time social and moral criticism received the inflow of the creative minds of such writers as Carlyle, Dickens, and George Eliot and the poets Hood and the Brownings. In fact, it was reserved for Elizabeth Barrett Browning, along with Thomas Hood, to take up the work of Crabbe, the father of humanitarian

⁴Schevill, op. cit., pp. 518-519.

⁵Frederic Harrison, Studies in Early Victorian Literature, third edition (London: Edward Arnold, 1901), p. 9.

idealism in poetry, with such vehemence and passion that the humanitarian writings of these two poets constituted a new era in modern poetry.⁶ To Mrs. Browning, as to Hood, a lover's song, and even the intimations of nature, were less appealing than the grinding toil which submerged the un-comforted poor. Thus came the humanitarianism that so completely suffused the literature of Victorian England.

Here a question that must be answered to the satisfaction of the reader as well as the writer is what factors in the life and personality of Elizabeth Barrett Browning caused her to be the first woman to express the pathos of struggling and repressed life in poetry as Millet expressed it in painting. Aside from the fact that she lived in the Victorian era, the reasons doubtless are Mrs. Browning's personal sorrow and suffering and her conception of the purpose of poetic art. First, the fact that Mrs. Browning, like Hood, was familiar with misfortune serves as a partial explanation of her broad, intense, human sympathies. Mrs. Browning's opulence, however, set her above the bitter struggle that Hood had for a mere existence; her troubles came from other sources. The loss of her brother and her own invalidism took her from the bloom of youth into physical inactivity in a darkened chamber; yet, in this life of languor, her feelings were liberated

⁶W. J. Dawson, The Makers of English Poetry (New York: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1906), p. 165.

and her sympathies were educated into a sensitiveness almost painful. It became impossible for her to write of the world's sorrow without a sense of pathos deep enough to be agonizing. So it was that Mrs. Browning's prolonged comradeship with sorrow taught her how to touch the springs of human sympathy and led her into a comradeship in the sufferings of society.

The other reason for Mrs. Browning's frequent and heart-felt expression of compassion for struggling humanity is that it was her purpose to awaken through her writing a sympathy for the poor and their suffering. She was truly impressed with the seriousness, the earnestness of life. Poetry was "her work, not her pastime" and of this life-work, she wrote:

Poetry has been as serious to me as life itself, and life has been very serious. I never mistook pleasure for the final cause of poetry, nor leisure for the hour of the poet. I have done my work so far as work; not as mere hand and head work apart from the personal being, but as the completest exposition of that being to which I could attain, and as work I offer it to the public, feeling its shortcomings more deeply than any of my readers, because measured by the height of my aspiration.⁷

Again she expressed her conception of poetic art by putting into the mouth of Aurora Leigh, the heroine of her long poem by that name, these words:

⁷Frederic Kenyon (ed.), The Letters of Elizabeth Barrett Browning (New York: Macmillan Company, 1898), I, 9.

I do distrust the poet who discerns
No character or glory in his times.

Nay, if there's room for poets in this world
A little overgrown (I think there is),
Their sole work is to represent the age,
Their age, not Charlemagne's, -- this live,
 throbbing age,
That brawls, cheats, maddens, calculates, aspires,
And spends more passions, more heroic heat,
Betwixt the mirrors of its drawing-rooms,
Than Roland with his knights at Roncesvalles.
To flinch from the modern varnish, coat or flounce,
Is fatal, -- foolish too.

This is living art,
Which thus presents and thus records true life.⁸

How could she, then, with this conception of poetry and her penetrating understanding of the age in which she lived, write otherwise than fervently of the ills of society?

Along with the reasons for Mrs. Browning's influence in the initiation of humanitarianism into poetry, the reader must understand that in her sympathy for humanity she "belonged to no particular country; the world was inscribed upon the banner under which she fought." Social wrong was the enemy with which she wrestled, whether found in England or in America across the sea; she had the courage to attack injustice wherever she discovered it. Concrete examples of this courage will be found in her shorter humanitarian poems in which she openly attacked two major evils.

⁸Elizabeth Barrett Browning, The Complete Poetical Works of Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Cambridge Edition (New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1900), p. 327. All references to Mrs. Browning's poetry are to the Cambridge Edition.

These two problems were the ill-use of children in the mines and factories of England, and the injustice of Negro slavery in America and in the West Indies, where many Englishmen owned estates. Concerning the first of these injustices Mrs. Browning wrote "The Cry of the Children," a companion-piece to Hood's "Song of the Shirt." Through this poem she assumed the task of awakening England, and the modern world, to the suffering of children employed in mines and factories.⁹ In denunciation of this crime against these English children, she declared that they should not be inhibited by such outrageous practices, but that they should be allowed to enjoy the childhood pleasures which are the heritage of every child born in a free country. She cries out not merely against the crime of child-labor itself, but against the intolerable practice of confining children through long hours in the unsanitary conditions which prevailed in the factories:

⁹Amy Cruse in The Victorians and Their Reading, p. 136, says: "Everyone knew, vaguely, that hundreds of English children, some of them only five or six years old, worked in the mines and factories, and that their lot was a hard one; but few had really seen these tortured little ones, until Mrs. Browning's genius set them in the light. The sight filled even the most indifferent with horror and pity. Here were clear, plain statements of terrible facts, not windy talk about the rights of one class and the iniquities of another. Here was something to touch the conscience, and make the sight of one's own happy and well-cared for children a reproach instead of a pleasure. An uneasy feeling of pity and shame grew in the country. All was not well in free, enlightened England."

For all day the wheels are droning, turning;
 Their wind comes in our faces,
 Till our hearts turn, our heads with pulses burning,
 And the walls turn in their places;
 Turns the sky in the high window, blank and reeling,
 Turns the long light that drops adown the wall,
 Turns the black flies that drawl along the ceiling;
 All are turning, all the day, and we with all.¹⁰

As an example of the lamentable result of this practice she narrates the story of the death of little Alice, who no longer had to cry with the other child-workers:

. . . all day, we drag our burden tiring
 Through the coal-dark, underground;
 Or, all day, we drive the wheels of iron
 In the factories, round and round.¹¹

In conclusion the author flings a searing accusation at the "gold-heaper" who exploits young children, and challenges all England by inquiring

. . . how long, O cruel nation,
 Will you stand, to move the world, on a child's
 heart.¹²

The pity and indignation with which Mrs. Browning could write about these defenseless victims of an inhumane economic system spring from something more personal than mere humanitarian feeling. They have their roots in abiding human love. It is probable that her love of children was natural; yet, because large families were the rule with the Barretts, she may have been simply bred to it. Besides,

¹⁰Poetical Works of Elizabeth Barrett Browning, p. 157.

¹¹Ibid.

¹²Ibid., p. 158.

the loss of her mother while some of her brothers were still young placed her, as the eldest child, in a maternal position early in life. At any rate there is no record showing that Elizabeth Barrett Browning ever thought of children as nuisances, and, "The Cry of the Children" for example is evidence that children were to her objects of intense personal affection.

"The Cry of the Children," written after Mrs. Browning had read a "Report on the Employment of Children and Young Persons in Mines and Manufactories" by her correspondent R. H. Horne, appeared almost simultaneously with the great speech on child labor delivered by Lord Shaftesbury before Parliament in 1844. Mrs. Browning's heart-stirring protest in "The Cry"¹³ was written with such profound feeling that the poem, together with Shaftesbury's eloquence, helped the Report and hastened the passage of an act restricting child employment. As an example of the effect which the poem had upon its readers at the time it was published, the writer quotes the following extract

¹³In a letter to Mr. H. S. Boyd, Mrs. Browning wrote that "The Cry of the Children" was considered in America one of her most successful poems but that Mr. Boyd might not agree. After reading the poem Mr. Boyd adversely criticized the rhythm. Mrs. Browning explained that the "whole mystery of the iniquity" was that the first stanza came into her head "in a hurricane," and she was obliged to make the other stanzas like it. She admitted that it lacked melody, that the versification was eccentric and that the subject, factory miseries, was not an agreeable one. (These letters are recorded by Frederic Kenyon, op. cit., I, 120, 153-156.)

from an article in Dublin University Magazine (Vol. XXV, February, 1845, p. 144):

It stands alone for tenderness, fervour, and force, among all the outpourings of the spirit of humanity of our time. It is essentially the protest of a woman on behalf of that infancy of which woman is the proper protectress and advocate. The pillow which God gives to the head of an infant on its mother's breast is not warmer, tenderer, or more peculiarly its own, than the sympathy for these poor children, expressed with such a fervour of sentiment and vividness of imagination in these heart stirring stanzas. You feel your heart ache and your head grow dizzy with the poor young creatures; and as your indignation kindles against their oppressors, you love the noble womanly soul that has made you feel so well what is just and humane. . . . May the people of England lay them to heart, and begin to think what it is they have been doing with God's images, with those who will yet be the fathers and mothers of a future generation.

Another social wrong which aroused Mrs. Browning to vigorous condemnation was Negro slavery. Her position with regard to this ancient evil was simply that it was so hideously wrong as to be a disgrace to any nation that tolerated it. She stated her position, along with the assertion that women had a right to speak upon the matter, in a letter to Mrs. Jameson:

Oh, and is it possible that you think a woman has no business with questions like the question of slavery? Then she had better use a pen no more. She had better subside into slavery and concubinage herself, I think, as in the times of old, shut herself up with the Penelopes in the "women's apartment," and take no rank among thinkers and speakers. Certainly you are not in earnest in these things. A difficult question -- yes! All virtue is difficult. England found it difficult. France found it difficult. But we did not make ourselves an armchair of our sins. As for America,

I honor America in much; but I would not be an American for the world while she wears that shameful scar upon her brow. . . . Observe, I am an abolitionist, not to the fanatical degree, because I hold that compensation should be given by the North to the South, as in England. The States should unite in buying off this national disgrace.¹⁴

When Parliament, in May, 1833, passed a bill manumitting all slaves in the British West Indies, the measure received Mrs. Browning's enthusiastic approval. Writing to Mrs. Martin not long afterward, she declared: "The late Bill has ruined the West Indians. That is settled. The consternation here is very great. Nevertheless I am glad, and always shall be, that the negroes are -- virtually -- free!"¹⁵

"The Runaway Slave at Pilgrim's Point" and "The Curse of a Nation" are two widely known poems of Mrs. Browning that treat this social problem, which was a deeply personal one in her family life.¹⁶ "The Runaway Slave at Pilgrim's Point" is the story told by a Negro slave girl of her life in bondage and of the death of her white-faced

¹⁴Kenyon, op. cit., II, 110-111.

¹⁵Percy Lubbock, Elizabeth Barrett Browning in Her Letters (London: John Murray, 1917), p. 16.

¹⁶Elizabeth Barrett's ancestors had for many years owned large estates in Jamaica and had accumulated great fortunes through the use of slaves on their plantations. Because of this West Indian background, it is therefore surprising that Miss Barrett should have felt the horror of slavery at all and that the thought of all her comfort being tainted with the "cursed blood of slaves" was a bitter one to her; so to welcome freedom of the Negroes argued her independence of family tradition and her belief in justice.

child. She curses the white race that has separated her from the man she loved and marked her wrist with ropes which tied her to the flogging-place. Mrs. Browning's other anti-slavery poem, "The Curse of a Nation," was published in her "thin slice of a wicked book," Poems Before Congress (1860). This poem denounced America for her inconsistency in calling herself the land of liberty while keeping men in bonds. How, she asks, can a nation

stand straight
In the state
Of Freedom's foremost acolyte,
Yet keep calm footing all the time
On writhing bond-slaves?¹⁷

"The Curse of a Nation" may be called a prophecy, since it foretold the agony that lay in store for America. "The thing which you do," she declares in addressing America, "derides what you are."

"The Runaway Slave at Pilgrim's Point," published in a collection called The Liberty Bell to be sold at the Boston Anti-Slavery Bazaar of 1848, and "The Curse of a Nation," which was at first mistakenly understood as directed against England,¹⁸ exerted no little influence in America. They fell in with the ethical fervor of the time and helped deliver America from the evil through the then impending Civil War.

¹⁷Poetical Works of Elizabeth Barrett Browning, p. 423.

¹⁸In one of her letters Mrs. Browning wrote a friend that, although she did not intend the poem for her country, truthfully it might be applied to England.

The foregoing are examples of Mrs. Browning's interest in various social problems as reflected in her short humanitarian poems and in her letters. The remainder of this chapter will be devoted to an analysis of Mrs. Browning's Aurora Leigh,¹⁹ which Barry Cornwall pronounced "a hundred times over the finest poem ever written by a woman." It is a verse-novel in nine books and is thoroughly representative of her age in that it is a "versatile, kaleidoscopic presentment of modern life and issues." This study, supplemented by her letters and by "Lady Geraldine's Courtship," will serve to show her interest in the relation of social classes in Victorian England and her approach to the emerging problem of feminism. It may be remembered also that Aurora Leigh is of importance in a discussion of Christian Socialism, which will be taken up in the succeeding chapter.

¹⁹Of Aurora Leigh Lillian Whiting in A Study of Elizabeth Barrett Browning, pp. 142-143, writes: "Still we return to the dramatic poem of 'Aurora Leigh' as the supreme work of her life. To judge this work (as has often been done) as an economic or social treatise, is to recognize but one element in its kaleidoscopic splendor. It is rather a spiritual autobiography, an intimate and vivid revelation of a woman's nature of the most imaginative and highly organized type. In it, she herself said, are recorded her highest convictions on life and art. It is a work so rich in imaginative suggestion and philosophic insight, so marvellous in its modernity, that we may well linger in its pages. So far as it discusses the problem of love and marriage, it might have been written yesterday. The present decade is one in which the question of marriage versus art seriously confronts numbers of women, and in this poem, written half a century ago, lies the solution to the problem."

A study of Aurora Leigh can best be made by first presenting the essential action of the story. It must be remembered that Mrs. Browning said of the poem, "I have put much of myself in it -- I mean to say, of my soul, my thoughts, emotions, opinions; in other respects, there is not a personal line, of course." The events of the story are perhaps not very unusual in themselves, but they supply an excellent framework for a social analysis of mid-Victorian England, and thus give the author an opportunity of expressing through Aurora Leigh, her artist heroine, her own opinions and feelings upon the social tendencies of the time. For this reason the events of Aurora Leigh will be briefly reviewed.

The story of Aurora Leigh is related by the heroine herself. Aurora, the daughter of an English father and an Italian mother, was born in Florence. When she was five, her mother died and her father retired with her to the mountains. There he taught her of love and grief, the things he knew best, and much of Greek and Latin.

But after a few years her father died, and Aurora was transplanted reluctantly to the English home of her maiden aunt. Still nurturing resentment because of her brother's marriage to an Italian woman, she felt, however, that it was her duty to rear his child.

Aurora loathed but endured her aunt's scheme for educating her. Her pursuits included a thorough study of

religious doctrines, languages, history, geography, and music, and the work of acquiring skill in painting, dancing, glass spinning, wax modeling, and embroidery. Under the rule of this domineering aunt the warmth of Aurora's heart was chilled and her girlish affections were suppressed.

Thrown upon her own resources, Aurora found solace in poetry and in dreams of an artistic life. One day, betrayed by her poetic ardor, she crowned herself with a wreath of ivy. Thus bedecked, she was discovered by her cousin Romney Leigh, heir to the Leigh estates and an earnest philanthropist. After lecturing Aurora upon the folly of a woman's attempting to do anything with art, he proposed that she leave her art, become his wife, and help him cure the ills of the world. Aurora was displeased with a proposal which ignored her individuality by assuming that her work and her interests should be subordinated to those of her husband. So she dismissed him in anger.

Here they were interrupted by Aurora's aunt. Upon learning of Romney's offer of marriage, she pronounced her astonishment at Aurora's rejection of a life of comfort and fortune. However, she surmised that Aurora loved Romney and advised her to revoke her decision.

Miss Leigh's wrath with her niece and the silent torture which she subsequently inflicted upon her were

ended suddenly by the death of the aunt. Romney now endeavored to bestow upon Aurora a gift of thirty thousand pounds of his inheritance, but her pride compelled her to reject peremptorily this offer, as she had rejected his proposal of marriage.

With only three hundred pounds left her by her aunt, Aurora proceeded to London. Taking a room in Kensington, she employed her time in doing literary work, and after a period of seven years she had gained considerable fame as an author.

One day, at this time, she was visited by the aristocratic Lady Waldemar, a stranger, who confessed her love for Romney and who solicited Aurora's aid in preventing him from consummating a marriage for the sole purpose of furthering his social reforms. Repelled by Lady Waldemar's manner, however, Aurora declined any interference in Romney's affairs.

Aurora immediately sought Marian Erle, the prospective bride, and heard Marian's story from her own lips, and a sordid and pathetic story it was. Marian, an unusually sensitive child, was ill-treated by a drunken father and a revengeful mother. Her ambition to rise above her sordid environment prompted her to snatch hungrily at any educational opportunity which presented itself. She, therefore, cherished the torn, tattered volumes which were tossed to her by transient peddlers and

eagerly exercised the privilege of attending Sunday School. While yet a child, she became so terrified when her mother attempted to sell her that she ran away. Fleeing blindly from her mother and the squire who wished to purchase her, Marian Erle stumbled on until she collapsed into a ditch. As she was regaining consciousness, a wagoner found her and carried her to a hospital. Here Romney Leigh, motivated by his philanthropic interest, met and comforted her. As soon as she recovered from the exposure and shock he secured for her a place as a seamstress's helper. Moved by compassion Marian left this employment to assume the responsibilities incident to nursing a co-worker bed-ridden with consumption. Coming to offer his assistance at the time of this young girl's death, Romney rediscovered Marian Erle. After a brief interval he proposed that she become his wife and fellow worker.

The wedding was an occasion which brought together people from various social stations. The common folk sat in stolid silence and the aristocrats conversed among themselves as they waited for the bride. Shocked surprise followed the announcement that the wedding would not take place. The rabble, suspecting the groom of trickery, vented their wrath upon Romney until they were quelled by the police. Romney was thus left discomfited and solitary.

Two years after this mysterious affair Aurora left England to return to her native land. During a short stay in Paris she encountered poor, wronged Marian Erle with her fatherless child. Aurora's heart warmed toward Marian when she heard the whole of her pitiful story and she suggested that Marian and the baby journey with her to Italy. Trusting Aurora implicitly, Marian accepted this kind offer.

Aurora had not long enjoyed the quietude of her Italian home before Romney appeared. He brought with him a letter from Lady Waldemar in which she related how she had cared for him during a severe illness and how she discovered through reading Aurora's poetry to him that he loved the writer. The letter also revealed Lady Waldemar's duplicity in the affairs of Romney and Marian. This intervention had resulted in broken marriage plans and the subsequent hardships which befell Marian Erle in France.

When Romney learned of Marian's plight, he offered to marry her and adopt the child. This offer was gratefully declined and Romney was left to Aurora. Romney now made known the failure of his schemes for succouring the wretched. He told Aurora of the destruction of Leigh Hall after it had been converted into an almshouse and how he himself had been irretrievably blinded in striving to rescue one of the inmates. Aurora at last avowed her love for Romney, who was content to know that they could work together to serve humanity. Thus came the reconciliation

of Aurora's artistic cultivation of the individual with Romney's altruistic plans for improving the conditions of the masses.

The foregoing summary of Aurora Leigh is intended as a basis for taking cognizance of Mrs. Browning's consuming interest in social and sociological problems of mid-Victorian England. Although these incidents have been condemned as improbable, not to say impossible, they may be taken in a broad sense as a fair delineation of Victorian life in general. In the same way the characters, though admittedly unreal in some respects, do nevertheless conform to the various social types of nineteenth century English life. Indubitably Mrs. Browning apprehended the vast divergence in the physical traits and living conditions of the social classes in the developing action of Aurora Leigh, and much in other poems and records proves this. For instance, in the persons of the elder Miss Leigh, Lady Walde-mar, and Lady Howe is reflected the social tone of the London elite, completely absorbed in the events of their own narrow, selfish lives. On the other hand, in striking variance with them, there is the story of Marian Erle designed to illustrate the effects of oppression upon the lower orders.

Mrs. Browning's contempt for the smug aloofness of the higher classes in the midst of so much social misery

and desolation is susceptible to copious illustration. Her opinion respecting one aspect of English life is seen in a passage from one of her letters:

It is to my mind simply and purely abominable, and I would rather live in a street than be forced to live it out, -- that English country life; for I don't mean life in the country. The social exigencies -- why, nothing can be so bad -- nothing! That is the way by which Englishmen grow up to top the world in their peculiar line of respectable absurdities.²⁰

Such "absurdities" were well-known to Aurora Leigh herself; she dwelt seven years in such an environment and came to abhor it. This episode in Aurora's life affords Mrs. Browning the opportunity of drawing an accurate yet satirical portrait of the prim English gentlewoman in her daily activities. Miss Leigh represents the maiden aunt, of whom it has been said, "Every English family had one."

She stood straight and calm,
Her somewhat narrow forehead braided tight
As if for taming accidental thoughts
From possible pulses; brown hair pricked with gray
By frigid use of life;

.

A close mild mouth, a little soured about
The ends, through speaking unrequited loves
Or peradventure half-truth;
Eyes of no color, -- once they might have smiled,
But never, never lost themselves
In smiling; cheeks, in which was yet a rose
Of perished summers, like a rose in a book,
Kept more for ruth than pleasure.²¹

²⁰Lubbock, op. cit., p. 13.

²¹Poetical Works of Elizabeth Barrett Browning,
p. 258.

Miss Leigh lived out her dull, conventional life in a spacious English country-house. Her days were enlivened only by morning visits from neighbors who dropped in to talk with emphasized reserve of parish news and with serving tea to the vicar and to county-squires. She belonged to a "poor" club, which exercised her Christian gifts of knitting stockings and stitching petticoats; because, after all, she said, everyone is of the same flesh and needs one flannel, with a "proper sense of difference in the quality." For preserving her intellect she was also a member of a book-club, which guarded against "shaking dangerous questions from the crease." This aunt had lived a harmless, if useless, life, which she herself deemed virtuous. Yet it had been such a tranquil one that to Aurora it seemed to have been no life at all. She considered her aunt to have lived a sort of cage-bird life that looked upon leaping from perch to perch as joy enough, but, as Aurora observed, "How silly are the things that live in thickets, and eat berries."

From this section of Aurora Leigh one discerns the English conception of one's natural responsibilities to one's family. Miss Leigh, sorely incensed at her brother's marriage to a foreigner, provoked herself into unmitigated hatred for Aurora's Tuscan mother, whom actually she had never seen. Because she believed that this Italian woman

had lured a wise, good man from his obvious duties, she pronounced her condemnation upon her brother, who, in depriving her of the household precedence, had wronged his tenants and robbed his native land. Nevertheless, her born instinct for upholding the traditions of the English family caused this virtuous, repressed woman to fulfill her duty in rearing her brother's child. In her fashion she was generous, and more courteous than tender in performing this measured duty to the child,

As if fearful that God's saints
Would look down suddenly and say
'Herein
You missed a point, I think, through lack of love.'²²

Aurora's life in London gives further opportunity for a glimpse of the upper class English society as depicted in the character of Lady Waldemar. This aristocratic character may be taken as representative of the feminine half of the so-called privileged classes, the classes of rank and fortune. At this point attention might be called to the use of the word they throughout the account of Lady Waldemar, in view of the assumption that such a usage evidences the broad, instead of limited, scope of the description. The poet writes with the intention of presenting a class in an individual. Lady Waldemar

Had the low voice of your English dames,
Unused, it seems, to need rise half a note
To catch attention, -- and their quiet mood,

²²Ibid., p. 259.

As if they lived too high above the earth
 For that to put them out in anything;
 So gentle, because verily so proud;
 So wary and afraid of hurting you,
 By no means that you are not really vile
 But that ~~they~~ would not touch you with their foot
 To push you to your place; so self-possessed
 Yet gracious and conciliating, it takes
 An effort in their presence to speak the truth.²³

Mrs. Browning was consistent in her portrayal of the English noble woman. Later in this poem qualities similar to those attributed to Lady Waldemar are perceived in the description of Lady Howe:

gracious, with her glossy braids
 And even voice, and gorgeous eyeballs, calm
 As her other jewels. If she's somewhat cold,
 Who wonders, when her blood has stood so long
 In the ducal reservoir she calls her line?²⁴

The same note of satire runs through "Lady Geraldine's Courtship," when we hear again of London ladies "with voices low with fashion."

In direct contrast with such cultured and charming ladies there is Marian Erle, who was nowise beautiful. She was a child of the poor, and had been ill-cared for by her parents. Marian is described as having too much hair for her small head, eyes that outgrew her cheeks, and a large mouth dissolved to an infantine smile. One may look to this girl's life as bringing into its sphere other characteristics representative of the lowest class in England. William Erle, her father, was a worthless poacher,

²³Ibid., p. 293.

²⁴Ibid., p. 332.

drunkard, and tramp who dragged his family from lanes and hills to towns, fairs, and eventually to prison. He was one of the inmates of Romney's almshouse at the time it was destroyed by fire, and it was he who, with a burning brand, administered the brutal blow to Romney which resulted in his blindness. In resentment of her husband's careless acceptance of family responsibilities and his studied cruelty, Mrs. Erle gave vent to her indignation by abusing and neglecting her child. Even though Marian earned some money by mending, her mother despised her, since she was too frail to earn her pennyworth in the factories, as the children of other such families did. When Marian was unable to contribute to the family income, Mrs. Erle, prompted by her uncontrollable avarice, conceived the idea of selling her. Like other parents of her class, she thought little of her child except in terms of money.

In the account of Romney Leigh's proposed marriage to Marian Erle, a daughter of the people, we have an excellent cross-section view of the two extremes of London social life. This wedding brought together an exceedingly incongruous assemblage. From the purlieus of Saint Giles came denizens who were

Lame, blind and worse -- sick, sorrowful and worse
The humors of the peccant social wound,²⁵

²⁵Ibid., p. 214.

and from Saint James, aristocrats "in cloth of gold." Both parties sat curiously waiting to behold a marriage which, supposedly, was to inaugurate a fusion of the classes of society. The faces of the wretched people showed countenances worn out as their garments -- faces as horrible as if "hell had been stirred up to heave its lowest dreg-fiends uppermost." The fashionable simply stared at this serried horde of faces and gossiped among themselves. From their conversation come phrases characteristic of their own interests. One spoke of "waltzing until three hours back," and of having "only time enough to change her shoes." Another pointed out five sisters who were dressed in white to show they were ready to be married. Many of them commented upon Leigh's folly and remarked that the bride, in being late, was "putting on Mayfair manners."

Upon learning of her cousin's decision to unite himself with Marian Erle in order to further his social reforms, Aurora had gone directly to Marian's place of abode. The description of her visit to this section of London's slums is an excellent one for viewing the wretched existence of the poor. Aurora, alone and close-veiled, entered Saint Margaret's Court, where she was greeted with jeers from a child sick of an ague-fit. Passing quickly across the uneven pavement, she was cursed from a window by a woman with dangling locks, rouged, angular cheek-bones,

and a flat, lascivious mouth, alternating her curses between Aurora and a woman within. When Aurora then emptied her purse upon the stones, the whole court bubbled up with a hideous wail of laughs and roar of oaths. Bewildered, she moved hastily to a small side-door and groped her way up a long, narrow stairway between a broken rail and mildewed wall that let the plaster fall to startle her in the darkness. At last she paused before a low door in the roof, and her knock was answered by Marian Erle.²⁶

The preceding descriptions are sufficient to prove how wide was the gulf separating the classes of nineteenth century society. The truth was that the lower class existed in degradation while the upper class lived in luxury, with little concern for any outside their group. Mrs. Browning throughout Aurora Leigh obviously wrote with much sarcasm of the privileged class, "the rich who made the poor," and with a deep, abiding sympathy for the poor who "cursed the rich." The attitude of the poor toward their superiors, summed up in the two lines

This gentry is not honest with the poor;
They bring us up, to trick us,²⁷

is the same that Mrs. Browning upheld and repeatedly and wholeheartedly expressed in all her writings. That the higher classes were able to live in luxury and idleness

²⁶Ibid., pp. 298-299.

²⁷Ibid., p. 318.

because of social maladjustments which kept the poor in squalor and misery was her settled conviction.

Still another aspect of Mrs. Browning's social interest as conveyed in Aurora Leigh was her approach to the woman question. On the side of justice and equality between the sexes W. T. Stead believed that Aurora Leigh exerted more influence even than Mill's famous essay "On the Subjection of Women."²⁸ The very name Aurora Leigh was chosen by Mrs. Browning because it suggested a woman of strong conviction. The genesis of the title of Mrs. Browning's most ambitious poem has been recorded by Harriet Hosmer in writing of her days spent in Florence:

One day at dinner Mrs. Browning said in half-soliloquy, 'I wonder which is the best name, Laura Leigh or Aurora Leigh?' and asked both of us our opinions. Browning gave his vote in favor of Aurora, and I not knowing at all to what she referred and thinking merely of the sound, said, "Oh, Aurora, Laura Leigh lacks backbone." When the book was published Mrs. Browning remembering this casual remark sent me a copy with the message that she "hoped it contained backbone."²⁹

The following discussion of Mrs. Browning's defense of women will indicate the Victorian conception of womanhood and will show how the system by which women were educated was both the cause and the result of such an attitude. It will also show, through other references to educational methods,

²⁸Charles W. Moulton (ed.), The Library of Literary Criticism of English and American Authors (New York: Henry Malkan, 1910), p. 239.

²⁹Jeannette Marks, The Family of the Barrett (New York: Macmillan Company, 1938), pp. 583-584.

that Mrs. Browning's ironic representation of systems in Aurora Leigh is not overdrawn, as well as the very effectual part she must have played in overthrowing it.

In Aurora Leigh one perceives the Victorian conception of womanhood in Romney's lecture to Aurora when she voiced her ambitions to achieve success in the literary world. Romney declared that a woman was too sensitive, too personal, in her views on life to be capable of winning distinction in art. In the event that a woman did succeed in creating anything in art her work would be judged by men not as a "mere work but as mere woman's work," and would be accepted with absolute scorn. Men might recognize a woman writer, but, instead of praising her work, would only "congratulate the country that produced a woman competent to spell." Warning Aurora that dreaming of fame brought headaches, he expounded his belief that a woman's place in the world was by a "safe household fire behind the heads of children." In Romney's opinion women were not capable of thought; they should only sympathize with the thoughts of men. Women were too weak to stand alone; they should merely be helpmates to men. In conclusion he crystalizes his ideas thus:

You give us doating mothers, and perfect wives,
 Sublime Madonnas, and enduring saints!
 We get no Christ from you, -- verily
 We shall not get a poet, in my mind.³⁰

³⁰Poetical Works of Elizabeth Barrett Browning,
 p. 273.

This current conception of woman's position seems to have influenced the system of instruction to which young women of the Victorian Age were subjected. The system was educational simply in the sense that it portrayed the correct attitude of mind which a woman was expected to adopt. To such an academic regimen Aurora was subjected by her English aunt; yet for such a system she held profound disgust. In order to acquire "instructed piety" Aurora was forced to learn the creeds and the catechism from numerous popular synopses of inhuman doctrines. She studied mathematics to prevent her being frivolous. Royal genealogies and geographical measurements she memorized for the expressed purpose of gaining a general insight into useful facts. Because young girls should be accomplished, she spun glass, stuffed birds, and modelled flowers in wax, and learned the cross-stitch to keep her hands busy on long, dreary nights at home by the fire. Finally, after reading a score of books on womanhood, she was supposed to comprehend a husband's talk, if not too deep, and say "May it please you" or "It is so." From these books she learned never to say "no" when the world said "yes," for that would be fatal.

Mrs. Browning's description of the Victorian educational system is comparable to those given by other persons writing of the Victorian period. In this respect Aurora Leigh has rightfully been called "a mirror of

contemporary life." According to one contemporary, writing in 1847, the education of woman should have four cardinal objectives: 1. The inculcation of moral and religious principles; 2. training in domestic duties; 3. the acquisition of general knowledge; 4. the acquisition of graceful accomplishments. The education of the upper-class young woman has also been described briefly as consisting of instruction in "languages, music, dancing, painting, and the light accomplishments; a sound religious education will supply most other deficiencies."³¹ Literally education for women was a "frenzy of accomplishments." By comparing these methods of instructive discipline with the system of education described in the summary of Aurora Leigh and elaborated on in the preceding discussion one sees that Aurora's education conformed to the rigid pattern followed in teaching Victorian girls.

Mrs. Browning was ever loyal to the cause of women in desiring that they be extended equal rights with men. Her impatience with men's depreciation of woman is expressed in Aurora's retort to Romney's suggestion that women were too personal to become great artists:

The headache is too noble for my sex.
You think the heartache would sound decenter,
Since that's the woman's special, proper ache,

³¹Cecil Willett Cummington, Feminine Attitudes in the Nineteenth Century (New York: Macmillan Company, 1936), p. 115.

And altogether tolerable, except
To a woman.³²

At the same time Mrs. Browning was not blinded to the fact that women were their own enemies in passively allowing the continuance of circumstances which they themselves had the power to alter. She thought, with Aurora, that

The works of women are symbolical.
We sew, sew, prick our fingers, dull our sight,
Producing what? A pair of slippers, sir,
To put on when you're weary -- or a stool
To stumble over and vex you . . . 'curse that
 stool!
Or else at best, a cushion, where you lean
And sleep, and dream of something we are not
But would be for your sake. Alas, alas!
This hurts most, this -- that, after all, we are
 paid
The worth of our work, perhaps.³³

Her loyalty to her sex seems to have been a part of her very nature, from which issued her sympathetic understanding of women and their problems.³⁴

³²Poetical Works of Elizabeth Barrett Browning, p. 272.

³³Ibid., p. 261.

³⁴Jeanette Marks, op. cit. (pp. 586-587), cites an incident pertinent to the subject of Mrs. Browning's interest in women; that is, of Mrs. Browning's signing a petition for a law guaranteeing married women's property rights. The year 1856, the same year Mrs. Browning sent Aurora Leigh to the publisher, was a memorable year in this fight, for the petition was sent to Parliament. It is easily understood why Mrs. Browning would be interested in such a petition. When she married and left home she was incapacitated by law to carry on the business connected with the income of her property. Her father and brothers refused to assist her, and there is no way of knowing what would have become of her property if her cousin John Kenyon had not come to her aid.

Before concluding this chapter on Mrs. Browning's social interests, we should observe that she was pre-eminently a poet of the city. She was one of the first to write in poetry of the city in its tragic social aspects. She lived a great part of her life in London, and the ills of the city weighed upon her mind. She could not shake off its ghastly presence. It may seem incongruous that the poet who wrote so many beautiful passages dealing with nature and simple country life could also write of the thousands of women "who only smile at night beneath the gas," -- of Rose, of whom Marian said:

I heard her laugh last night in Oxford Street.
I'd pour out half my blood to stop that laugh.³⁵

The explanation is given by Mrs. Browning herself in a letter to Mrs. Martin:

In respect to certain objections, I am quite sure you do me the justice to believe that I do not willingly give cause for offence. Without going as far as Robert, who holds that I 'couldn't be coarse if I tried,' (only that!) you will grant that I don't habitually dabble in the dirt; it's not the way of my mind or life. If, therefore, I move certain subjects in this work, it is because my conscience was first moved in me not to ignore them. What has given most offence in the book, more than the story of Marian -- far more! -- has been the reference to the condition of women in our cities, which a woman oughtn't to refer to, by any manner of means, says the conventional tradition. Now I have thought deeply otherwise. If

³⁵Poetical Works of Elizabeth Barrett Browning, p. 301.

a woman ignores these wrongs, then may women as a sex continue to suffer them; there is no help for any of us -- let us be dumb and die.³⁶

In such expressions as this one can measure the depth of the impression that the horror of the city made upon her soul, just as one understands that the wronged children of the city moved her no less deeply.

³⁶Kenyon, op. cit., II, 254.

CHAPTER III
MRS. BROWNING'S CRITICISM OF COLLECTIVISM
AS A BASIS FOR THE ORGANIZATION
OF MODERN SOCIETY

Since a considerable part of Mrs. Browning's writings reflect her interest in the various political philosophies and issues of her time, some acquaintance with the history of political thought during the nineteenth century is necessary for a thorough understanding of her work. The purpose of this chapter is, first, to discuss important fundamental concepts which had arisen to influence the political as well as the social and economic life of the western world since the French Revolution; and, second, to state Mrs. Browning's opinions of these dominant ideas. It would be extremely difficult, and for our present purposes unnecessary to attempt a brief summation of all the political theories of the nineteenth century; therefore, only those which were apparently of interest and concern to Mrs. Browning will be considered.

The general tendency in nineteenth century political development was toward the extension of democracy. Back of political democracy was the spirit demanding that

the rights of the people be recognized, and that equality of opportunity, without special privilege, be accorded to all, regardless of class. Real political democracy was made possible and even imperative by the combined action of the French Revolution and the Industrial Revolution. In so much as the French Revolution had given the watch-words "liberty, equality, and fraternity," democracy became the leading idea at the point of revolutionary bayonets. The democratic movement received its greatest impetus, however, from the economic grievances resulting from the Industrial Revolution. The conditions in mines, factories, and sweatshops aroused the pity of people of philanthropic tendencies, while, at the same time, the working men were moved to desperation by the wretchedness of their economic condition. With more or less cooperation the philanthropists, on one hand, and the more intelligent of the working men on the other, strove to end the economic oppression of the masses. Since the middle class had won freedom, the working classes could indeed go one step farther to demand liberty and equality for all men. Because of the Industrial Revolution, democracy was made more imperative, as well as more easily attainable, in the nineteenth century than ever before. Working classes congregated in great cities were more conscious of their common interests than they would have been working independently. Newspapers and pamphlets could be printed cheaply

and circulated quickly. Most of all, education began to make its way among the masses, enabling them to read the newspapers and to learn new political doctrines from pamphlets of the philosophers. Under these circumstances the democratic movement gained strength. Consequently, the democratic spirit manifested itself in the abolition of slavery, in the removal of religious and property qualifications for voting, in the adoption of written constitutions and of representative institutions, and in various reforms toward religious toleration, universal education, and reform of the criminal law.

In direct opposition to the economists who emphasized the rights of the individual there arose a new class of theorists to demand better things for the working man. Previously Malthus had suggested that the forlorn condition of the working masses was permanent and inevitable. Ricardo had undertaken to prove that the landowner and the capitalist should rightly dominate industry, and James Mill had formulated a rule of economic living, summed up in pitiless competition, with the weaker group always being suppressed. Against the spirit of these doctrines, as well as against the conditions upon which they were based, the new theorists shaped their ideas. They thought more about the betterment of society than about the enrichment of a few individuals; they exhorted man to be socially minded rather than selfish. It was natural, then, that

such reformers should be styled socialists and their speculations named socialism. There arose many varieties of socialists, all sharing the common belief that the means of production -- raw materials, land, and industries -- should be owned by the community as a whole, and their fruits distributed in the interest of all. These various groups, all opposed to the philosophy of individualism, proposed to aid and guide the workers, not to trust them to their own devices. Thus their success was hampered by their own dislike of democracy.

Utopian and Christian Socialism, most influential on immediate practical efforts during the nineteenth century, were the two schools of thought which seemed most to interest Mrs. Browning. For this reason they will be discussed at length.

Utopian socialism is the name applied especially to the economic doctrines taught by Robert Owen in England and by Comte Henri de Saint-Simon, Charles Fourier, Étienne Cabet, and Louis Blanc in France. These men regarded poverty as the principal source of the ills of society, and private property as the main cause of poverty. Robert Owen, one of the best-known of these socialists, began early in the century to determine the relation of employer and employed by cooperation rather than by competition, and he and his followers for half a century preached the re-ordering of

society so as to render the poverty of the wage-earning classes impossible. Owen, who undoubtedly was well acquainted with the evils of the factory system, endeavored to construct model cooperative communities, which came to be known as Owenite communities. His several attempts, however, met with discouraging failure and it soon became certain that society would not be reorganized according to his plan.

The same decades in which Owenism flourished most in England witnessed the rise to prominence of the systems of Henri de Saint-Simon, Charles Fourier, and Étienne Cabet, who were advocating visionary schemes in France. Saint-Simon believed that successful social reform must invest spiritual power in men of science and temporal power in the property-owning class. He suggested building a new order founded upon the teachings of Christ and having for its final object the amelioration of the conditions of the poor. While Saint-Simon suggested a socialization of the entire nation, other Utopian socialists, Fourier and Cabet among them, sought reform in voluntary, local communities. Mercilessly criticizing the existing order, Fourier declared that society should be organized to give everyone joy in work and security in the enjoyment of the fruits of his labors. For carrying his belief into practice he elaborated a system based upon independent industrial communities called phalanges. Fourier's theories would not have

strongly influenced the general public had it not been for Victor Considérant. As the real revealer of Fourier, Considérant made his system more rational and more far-reaching. Cabet, the leader of the last great Utopian movement, appealed to the altruistic feelings of men and believed it possible to reform human nature through education. He outlined a plan of agricultural colonies and national workshops similar to the communities of Owen and Fourier.

In the next generation socialism was represented in France by Louis Blanc. He condemned industrial competition, as the other Utopian socialists had done, and proposed the establishment of "social workshops." Under Blanc's plan the shops would be independent, thereby allowing the working men to choose their own managers and to share in the profits. Unlike earlier socialists who depended on voluntary association, Blanc appealed to the state to carry out his system. Although Blanc and the other Utopian socialists failed to realize their dreams of ideal systems and failed to organize permanent parties, they, at least, forced people to think about social problems and to react against laissez-faire philosophy. Their theories were reflected in the belief of many working men that capitalists were making large profits at wage-earners' expense. The working men turned to trade unions and to democratic agitation. This unrest of the lower classes in the cities,

with demand for democracy and economic equality, profoundly influenced the history of the nineteenth century.

The basic doctrine of the Utopian socialists was also the basic doctrine of the Christian Socialists. That no one could reconcile a policy of unregulated competition with the doctrine of Christianity was their general belief. The Christian Socialists repudiated the idea that Christianity had no concern with political and economic questions. Their creed that Christ invited men to live together as brothers and co-workers also opposed the prevailing economic doctrine that taught men to deal with each other as rivals. Pointing to the miracles and sermons of Christ, they showed that He was interested not in rituals but in seeing that the common man was clothed, fed, and sheltered. Therefore, the Christian Socialist urged the Church to recognize the dignity of human labor and the social responsibility of property, and to see that the principles of Christianity were reflected in the laws of the state.

The Christian Socialist movement in England was led by two Anglican clergymen, who were also men of letters, Charles Kingsley and Frederick Denison Maurice, and by a lawyer, J. M. Ludlow. They described their own movement as "an effort to socialize Christianity and Christianize socialism." These mid-nineteenth century English Christian

Socialists devoted their efforts to the task of educating industrial workers through conferences, free night schools, and cheap periodic publications. Their activities and their writings were very influential in promoting cooperation among working men and in securing the enactment of laws to facilitate the organization of cooperative societies.

One other popular tendency in the nineteenth century was the growth of patriotism or nationalism, which may be termed "consciousness of kind," or the self-determination and self-glorification of a people who think of themselves as a separate entity. As was the case in the democratic movement, the French Revolution gave impetus to nationalism and the Industrial Revolution laid for it a solid foundation. By establishing democratic institutions and uniform laws the French Revolution aroused among all classes a mutual national feeling; for the first time people felt that it was glorious to die for one's country. On the other hand, as a result of the Industrial Revolution, economic interests were concentrated in the factory, and this integration of common interests gave momentum to nationalism. It became clear that nationalism would serve as the strongest standard under which to rally a whole nation behind a government, for by its means Napoleon I had already united all groups in France. Thus, old nations, like France and England, became more firmly knit, while new

nations, like Italy and Germany, came into existence. In fact, nationalism was such a dominating force in the nineteenth century that historians have called the century the "age of nationalism" in Europe.¹

These social and economic theories and their impact upon the course of European history in the nineteenth century became topics for controversial discussions between Mrs. Browning and her friends and between her and her husband. Watching the progress of the world with an anxious, tireless eye and pounding heart, Mrs. Browning, in her later years, came to consider any political question worthy of much thought and discussion and even apropos as a subject for poetry. In fact, politics pervaded the writings of her later years almost to the extent of obliterating subjects formerly of interest to her. Curiously enough Mrs. Browning spoke her political convictions with a tone of authority and decision. She did not seem to reiterate ideas from books and newspapers that she read nor resound the opinions of people to whom she talked and wrote about politics. Frequently her political opinions differed from

¹Raymond G. Gettell, History of Political Thought (New York: Century Company, 1924), pp. 371-383. See also Francis Coker, Recent Political Thought (New York: D. Appleton-Century Company, 1934), pp. 17-20; William Archibald Dunning, A History of Political Theories from Rousseau to Spencer (New York: Macmillan Company, 1922), pp. 340-344; Hayes, op. cit., pp. 100-102, 718-720; John Herman Randall, Jr., The Making of the Modern Mind, Revised Edition (New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1940), pp. 427-430, 453-454; and "Socialism," Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics, XI, 634-637.

those of her friends and more particularly from the beliefs of her husband, whom she considered less tolerant of and less curious about such matters than she herself. Certainly she was not swayed to any great degree by their political thoughts; her expressions on politics are in the strictest sense her own. Once Mrs. Browning formed an opinion, she rarely altered it, and then only when she found conclusive evidence of her error.

An interesting and not unimportant question in regard to Mrs. Browning's enthusiasm for politics is not whether she was right in the views she took nor whether she estimated exactly the confused forces that were acting over England, France, and Italy, but rather why they fastened with insistence upon her mind. Prior to the time of her arrival in Florence, Italy, there is hardly a word to prove that Mrs. Browning had any interest in the making or unmaking of governments or that she even cared to read political reviews or newspapers. Mrs. Browning had been transplanted, at the time of her marriage, from a dull London room, where she had subsisted in a circle of thought strictly literary and academic, into an atmosphere filled with ideas of revolution and reform. It is astonishing, however, to find, within a few years, her mind ranging masterfully over political theories and matters of state. Such a change can not be entirely explained by the mere reference to the change in her external circumstances.

Perhaps the explanation is that her mind had not reached its maturity. Before this change the prostration of her health was due far less to any bodily disease than to a kind of nervous obsession. Under such a pressure the full life of her mind was dormant. When it was removed by her change to a natural, healthy existence, the recluse, accustomed to hiding her feelings and talking only of books, became a politician.

Mrs. Browning called herself a democrat. But she used the term in a broad rather than in a specific political sense. She was, in fact, a non-partisan in politics. She honored democracy and was a democrat in the sense that she loved the things for which democracy stands. She loved freedom and justice, and was inspired by thoughts of liberty and progress. Always wholly desirous that her adopted country might be free, she many times praised the Italian love of liberty. She showed her approval of Chartism, a democratic movement of 1848 in England, by saying that she wished there were more of the Chartists. Mrs. Browning believed, too, that the French were a democratic people and called France the most democratic nation in Europe. That institutions founded upon democracy would broaden and deepen was ever her contention. In defending herself against being called a Napoleonist, she wrote:

I am simply a democrat, and hold that the majority of a nation has the right of choice upon

the question of its own government, even where it makes a mistake.²

Again to Miss Mitford she insisted:

I am not a Bonapartist indeed. But I am a Democrat and singularly (in these days) consequent about universal suffrage.³

Mrs. Browning's love of freedom was so great as to seem to surpass even her sympathy with humanity.

Towards the various schools of socialistic and collectivistic thought, she was unsympathetic or even hostile. Though she did credit a few of the socialist leaders with being virtuous, benevolent men with pure and noble aspirations, she firmly believed that they held in their hands "ideas which defile," and that only evil could result from the carrying out of their theories. In answer to the question of whether or not she and her husband were "communists," Mrs. Browning explained to her friend Miss Bayley,

Really we are not communists, farther than to admit the wisdom of voluntary association in matters of material life among the poorer classes. And to legislate even on such points seems as objectionable as possible; all inter-meddlings of government with domesticities, from Lacedaemon to Peru, were and must be objectionable; and of the growth of absolutism, let us theorise as we choose. I would have the government educate the people absolutely, and then give room for the individual to develop himself into life freely. Nothing can be more hateful to me than this communist idea of quenching individualities in

²Kenyon, op. cit., II, 48.

³Ibid., p. 73.

the mass. As if the hope of the world did not always consist in the eliciting of the individual man from the background of the masses, in the evolvment of individual genius, virtue, magnanimity.⁴

Mrs. Browning thought that the only practical and comparatively safe part of collectivism was attainable simply by the consent of individuals who might experiment by associating their families in order to make their existence cheaper. On the whole, "mad" communistic theories promising the impossible, she feared, would in turn make the people mad. She believed that, if socialistic ideas were carried out, they would become the "worst and most crushing kind of despotism." She disliked socialism so much that she expressed her displeasure and regret upon hearing that R. H. Horne, one of her correspondents and a fellow author, admitted his friendship with Louis Blanc, the French socialist. Blanc, she said, "knew not what he spoke," and she denounced his doctrines as the "most desecrating and dishonoring to humanity of all creeds." Because Mrs. Browning loved liberty so much, she hated socialism.

In expressing her opinions of Christian Socialism Mrs. Browning strikes the same note of dislike and distrust.

What is it, after all, but an out-of-door extension of the monastic system? The religious principle, more or less apprehended, may bind men together so, absorbing their individualities, and presenting an aim beyond the world; but upon merely

⁴Ibid., I, 362-363.

human and earthly principles no such system can stand, I feel persuaded, and I thank God for it. If Fourierism could be realized (which it surely cannot) out of a dream, the destinies of our race would shrivel up under the unnatural heat, and human nature would, in my mind, be desecrated and dishonored -- because I do not believe in purification without suffering, in progress without struggle, in virtue without temptation. Least of all do I consider happiness the end of man's life. We look to higher things, have nobler ambitions.⁵

In a society ordered according to these new theories Mrs. Browning saw the individual "ground down into the multitude." She recalled that in every advancement in the world heretofore the individual had led the masses, and that to elicit individuality had been the object of the best political institutions and governments. She felt that to restrict an individual was at the same time to restrict the possibility of progress through the use of the light of genius, which is always individual. She would prefer, she said, to "live under the absolutism of Nicholas of Russia than in the states of perfectibility imagined by socialists such as Fourier and Cabet, with her individuality sucked out by a social air-pump."

In Aurora Leigh Mrs. Browning expresses disapproval of Christian Socialism through the impractical efforts at social reform made by the hero Romney Leigh. Romney, upon whom the "sun of youth had shone too straight and fevered him with dreams of doing good to good-for-nothing people,"

⁵Ibid., pp. 467-468.

represents a Christian Socialist of the nineteenth century. He was unable to look upon the wrongs in the world without "teasing his soul for some great cure." Conditions which "merely touched the average individual's sympathy" caused this zealous reformer to agonize with a "ghastly sense of universal hideous want and wrong." Even during his college days Romney directed his attention to matters of reform legislation, factory bills, and poor bills in preference to the prescribed course of study. Not only did he speak in the Commons and elsewhere upon the social question, but he also took a personal interest in individual social cases, notably the case of Marian Erle. On the other hand, to illustrate the type of general work that Romney might have done, there is the passage in which Aurora Leigh states her reasons, although somewhat exaggerated, for not marrying him.

He might cut
My body into coins to give away
Among his other paupers: change my sons,
While I stood dumb as Griseld, for black babes
Or piteous foundlings; might unquestioned set
My right hand teaching in the Ragged Schools,
My left hand washing in the Public Baths.⁶

Besides, woven into the action of Aurora Leigh are two outstanding attempts at social reform made by Romney. Of these two efforts, which have already been described in the preceding chapter, one is Romney's proposed marriage

⁶Poetical Works of Elizabeth Barrett Browning,
p. 281.

to Marian, a "flower from the other side of the social hedge"; the other is his conversion of Leigh Hall into a phalanstery, "christianized from Fourier's own." That both of these attempts resulted in complete failure shows that Mrs. Browning intentionally meant to discredit the work of the Christian Socialists.

The fact that Romney Leigh was a Christian Socialist gives Mrs. Browning ample opportunity for including references to contemporary socialists and to actual social reforms attempted in the nineteenth century. From the characters Lady Waldemar, Lord Howe, and one of the wedding guests, Mrs. Browning's attitude toward the "modern question of the poor" as approached by the socialists of her age may be ascertained. Aristocratic Lady Waldemar, not because of any personal interest in socialism but because of her love for Romney, heaped upon her tables reports of wicked women and penitentiaries, learned by heart Romney's speeches in the Commons, and gave her name to increase the list of subscriptions to printed socialistic matter. She read "half through the works of Fourier, Proudhon, Considerant, Louis Blanc, and other of the socialists." Had she been less in love with Romney she confessed that she would have cured herself "with gaping." As it was, she quoted from these writers "prettily enough to make them sound half rational to a saner man than Romney." She went so far as to tarry half a week at Leigh Hall,

And milked the cows, and churned, and pressed the curd,
 And said "my sister" to the lowest drab
 Of all the assembled castaways; such girls!
 Ay, sided with them at the washing tub.⁷

Yet with all this professed interest Lady Waldemar considered Romney a fanatic on social reforms and his schemes as absurd and useless. Then there is the wedding guest who looked upon the question of the poor as an interesting topic of conversation "when you're moderate." He speaks of the intermarriage between the "extremes of martyred society" as "anarchial and damnable." In accordance with Lady Waldemar and the wedding guest, Lord Howe, an aristocrat bred radical and educated socialist, considered Romney's plans as futile. He described Romney's scheme for marrying Marian as a play acted by a mad Hamlet who should be bound. Lord Howe compared the poor to King Lear and the rich to Lear's daughters Regan and Goneril who had become so widely separated as never to be reconciled nor united under any such impossible plans as Romney Leigh proposed. Like other members of the upper class, he felt that, in regard to the lower class, a line must be drawn and the old order supported, if England were not to fall. Thus Mrs. Browning has presented Romney's ideas for reform as unacceptable by the majority of the Victorians. Furthermore, she reflects her belief that his schemes were as impractical as those of Fourier and the other nineteenth

⁷Ibid., p. 335.

century socialists.

Mrs. Browning found nationalism acceptable only when a nation could direct it to stimulate its people to self-improvement. When nationalism extended its bounds by ruthlessly intruding upon the rights of other nations, her cosmopolitan viewpoint caused her to dislike and to distrust it. To Mrs. Browning the self-deification of the English nation at the expense of other nations was extremely distasteful. She admitted that the English as a race possess many noble qualities, but she refused to concede that this fact warranted the intense national pride that characterized so many Englishmen of her time. England, or any other nation for that matter, she admonished, should be proud "in the right place, not in the wrong." A passage from Mrs. Browning's preface to Poems Before Congress, dated Rome, February, 1860, will show her precise reactions to nationalism. The passage not only embodies her view of patriotism but also reaffirms the previous statements that she deeply sympathized with all humanity and desired good for all nations of men.

And if patriotism means the flattery of one's nation in very case, then the patriot, take it as you please, is merely the courtier, which I am not, though I have written "Napoleon III in Italy." It is time to limit the significance of certain terms, or to enlarge the significance of certain things. Nationality is excellent in its place; and the instinct of self-love is the root of a man, which will develop into sacrificial virtues. But all the virtues are means and uses; and if we hinder their

tendency to growth and expansion, we both destroy them as virtues and degrade them to that rankest species of corruption reserved for the most noble organizations. For instance, non-intervention in the affairs of neighboring states is a high political virtue; but non-intervention does not mean passing by on the other side when your neighbor falls among thieves -- or Phariseeism would recover it from Christianity. Freedom itself is virtue as well as privilege; but freedom of the seas does not mean piracy; nor freedom of the land, brigandage; nor freedom of the press, freedom to calumniate and lie. So, if patriotism be a virtue indeed, it cannot mean an exclusive devotion to our country's interests, for that is only another form of devotion to personal interests, family interests or provincial interests, all of which, if not driven past themselves, are vulgar and immoral objects. . . . If the man who does not look beyond natural life is of a somewhat narrow order, what must be the man who does not look beyond his own frontier . . . ?

I confess that I dream of the day when an English statesman shall arise with a heart too large for England; having courage in the face of his countrymen to assert of some suggested policy: "This is good for your trade; this is necessary for your domination; but it will vex people hard by; it will hurt a people further off; it will profit nothing to the general humanity; therefore, away with it! -- it is not for you or for me." When a British minister dares to speak so, and when a British public applauds him speaking, then shall the nation be glorious, and her praise, instead of exploding from within from loud civic mouths, come to her from without, as all worthy praise must, from the alliances she has fostered and the population she has saved.⁸

⁸"True Patriotism," The Nation, January 21, 1939, p. 104.

CHAPTER IV

MRS. BROWNING'S INTEREST IN CONTEMPORARY CONTINENTAL POLITICS

Upon going to Italy at the time of her marriage Mrs. Browning discovered such beauty and splendor in that country and found such happiness there that she came to love Italy and to regard Italians as friends and fellow countrymen. Her arrival was coincident with events leading to the ultimate unification of the then disunited states of the great peninsula. These conditions arousing her sympathy, Mrs. Browning immediately identified herself with Italy's struggles for freedom, and her subsequent writings became filled with expressions of desire and hope for Italy's freedom. With this passion for the Italian cause uppermost in her mind and heart Mrs. Browning anxiously watched the turn of political events in France, England, and Austria, as well as Italy. For the most part her exaltation of any individual or nation, alike with her disregard for others, seems to evolve simply from their relation to Italy's fight for independence. To show from her poetry and letters written between 1847 and 1861 (the year of Mrs. Browning's death), how extensive and intensified her political

interests became is, therefore, the purpose of this chapter.

A brief review of the European situation in the middle of the nineteenth century will serve to show why Italy, along with other countries, struck out violently for independence and unification. At the Congress of Vienna, 1815, Metternich and his associates had redrawn the map of Europe to please the great powers, Austria, Great Britain, Prussia, and Russia, which as allies had conquered Napoleon I, and congratulated themselves upon making Europe safe for absolutism. By this treaty Austria obtained territories which augmented and consolidated her power in southern and central Europe. The arrangement at Vienna accorded to Italy the worst treatment of all. The Italian peninsula was divided into a number of states all ruled by princes in whose absolutism Austrian Metternich had full trust. Thus Austria became the great dominant power over Italy, for, with the exception of the duchy of Lucca and the States of the Church, every Italian government was linked to her by a close personal tie. Yet during the succeeding years when absolutism was dominating the countries in Europe, the spirit of nationality which had been called forth by the French Revolution continued to grow. By 1848 central Europe was in a restless, disturbed, expectant state. A revolutionary spirit was at work: the public mind was excited. Even the people of Austria were

tired of absolutism, and, ironic though it was, Metternich's capital first voiced the new freedom. In Italy the news of Metternich's fall was no sooner reported than Lombardy and Venetia, driving out the Austrian troops, declared independence, and in other Italian provinces revolution succeeded revolution with sharp rapidity. Through the centuries local jealousies, the ignorance of the peasant classes, and the inertia of the educated and upper classes had prevented Italy's forming one great nationality. Now Austria's disregard of any national spirit and her "iron rule" had kindled and fanned into flame the modern feeling of nationality. The misrule of the foreigner had become so unbearable that the Italian people at last realized that the only way to be freed from the barbarians was to unite for the purpose of expelling them from their land. Thus the Italians were aroused to a national pride felt no more keenly in any other European country. Although the events of 1848, a year politically tempestuous in all central Europe, ended in failure, the revolutions set in motion the currents of thought and feeling which later brought peace and unity to the revolting countries.

Mrs. Browning became truly interested, as any poet might have been, in the experiment being enacted before her very eyes, and she felt the attraction of the idea of freedom and unification for Italy. To Miss Mitford she wrote,

The great subject with everybody just now is the new hope of Italy, and the liberal constitution, given nobly by our own good, excellent Grand Duke, whose praise is in all the houses, streets, and piazzas.¹

Indeed the "new hope of Italy" was a great subject with Mrs. Browning and came to be a passion with her. Certainly it was a time when hope was justifiable. Pius IX, ascending the papal throne with temporal as well as spiritual sovereignty, had the reputation of being anxious for liberal reforms and for the formation of a united Italy. Charles Albert of Piedmont was also reputed to have the cause of Italy at heart. The Grand Duke of Tuscany had granted a liberal constitution to his people and, in defiance of Austria's threat to occupy any Italian state making concession to popular aspiration, had taken a step toward popular government by instituting a National Guard. Mrs. Browning could, therefore, scarcely fail to have high hope for Italy.

Between the years 1847-1851 Mrs. Browning expresses diverse feelings about the liberation of Italy, which was a great feature in her life. At first she was exultant in her hope for the Italian cause, but later in this period she was thrown into despair because of the failure of measures which she believed would free Italy. Mrs. Browning's first poetry treating politics was the outcome of the events

¹Kenyon, op. cit., I, 356-357.

occurring in Italy during these years. So it is to Casa Guidi Windows² that we turn for her reflections upon Italian politics in general and for a record of happenings in Tuscany to which Mrs. Browning was a witness. The first part of the poem expresses her optimism in believing that the revolutions in Italy would bring freedom to her adopted country; in the second part, written in 1851, Mrs. Browning takes a rather pessimistic view of the whole Italian situation. Casa Guidi Windows, Mrs. Browning claimed, portrays her warm affection for an unfortunate country, and the sincerity with which her feeling was manifested indicated "her own good faith" in the Italian cause. From the first Italy was to her "a living fire, not a bed of ashes."

²Giving reasons why Casa Guidi Windows has received less appreciation than it deserves and defending its poetic value, Frederic G. Kenyon, op. cit., pp. 2-3, says: "Its political and contemporary character cut it off from the imaginative and historical subjects which form in general the matter of poetry, while its genuinely poetic emotion and language separate it from the political pamphlet or the occasional verse. It is a poetic treatment of a political subject raised to a high level by the genuine enthusiasm and fire with which it is inspired, and these give it a value which lasts beyond the moment of the events which gave it birth. The execution, too, shows an advance on most of Mrs. Browning's previous work. The dangerous experiments in rhyming which characterized many of the poems in the volumes of 1844 are abandoned; the licenses of language are less frequent; the verse runs smoothly and is more uniformly under command. It would appear as if the heat of inspiration which produced the 'Sonnets from the Portuguese' had left a permanent and purifying effect upon her style. The poem has been neglected by those who do not sympathise with its political and religious opinions; but with those who look only to its poetry and to its warm-hearted championship of a great cause, it will always hold a high place of its own among Mrs. Browning's writings."

In the first section of Casa Guidi Windows Mrs. Browning, optimistic in her view of the Italian struggle, catches the real emotion spending its force throughout the peninsula. In the opening lines of the poem is the epitome of the whole revolution:

I heard last night a little child go singing
 'Neath Casa Guidi windows, by the church
O bella libertà, O bella! -- stringing
The same words still on notes he went in search
 Of such a nimble bird to sky from perch
 Must leave the whole bush in a tremble green,
 And that the heart of Italy must beat,
 While such a voice had leave to rise serene
 'Twixt church and palace of a Florence street:
 A little child, too, who not long had been
 By mother's fingers steadied on his feet,
 And still O bella libertà he sang.³

This child's song sets Mrs. Browning to thinking of Italy, "the widow of empires," the "Juliet of nations," and of her great artists, singers, and martyrs. To her the glory of their genius and the present shame of servitude seemed to mock each other. She entreats Italy to forget the shame of centuries of submission and sing hand in hand with the child the song O bella libertà. The poem is filled with recondite allusions to Italy's past; yet, throughout it, Mrs. Browning shouts a war cry for liberty. Italy, she says, should be proud of men like Dante, Petrarch, and Michael Angelo, but she should not live upon the glory of her past. She must leave the dead to build a nobler Italy, an emancipated

³Poetical Works of Elizabeth Barrett Browning,
 p. 224.

Italy; a dead Italy must give place to a living Italy.

Never say 'no more'
 To Italy's life! Her memories undismayed
 Still argue 'evermore;' her graves implore
 Her future to be strong and not afraid;
 Her very statues send their looks before.
 We do not serve the dead -- the past is past.
 God lives, and lifts his glorious mornings up
 Before the eyes of men awake at last,
 Who put away the meats they used to sup,
 And down upon the dust of earth outcast
 The dregs remaining in the ancient cup
 Then turn to wakeful prayer and worthy act.⁴

With a tribute to the past Mrs. Browning looks forward to a glorious future for Italy.

We will not be oblivious
 Of our own lives, because ye lived before,
 Nor of our acts, because ye acted well
 We thank you that ye first unlatched the door,
 But will not make it inaccessible
 By thankings on the threshold any more.
 We hurry onward to extinguish hell
 With our fresh souls, our younger hope and God's
 Maturity of purpose.⁵

Being a witness to the exhibition of Italian enthusiasm displayed before her home in Florence, the capital of Tuscany, Mrs. Browning was able to describe the scene as vividly as any historian. To Miss Mitford on October 1, 1847, she wrote that the Florentines had kept the anniversary of her wedding day and of the establishment of the civic guard by flocking out of the neighborhood to help the expression of public sympathy and overflowing the city.

⁴Ibid., p. 227.

⁵Ibid.

The procession passed under our eyes in the Piazza Pitti, where the Grand Duke and all his family stood at the palace window melting into tears, to receive the thanks of his people. The joy and exultation on all sides were most affecting to look upon. Grave men kissed one another, and grateful young women lifted up their children to the level of their own smiles, and the children themselves mixed their shrill little vivas with the shouts of the people. At once, a more frenetic gladness and a more innocent manifestation of gladness were never witnessed. During three hours and a half the procession wound on past our windows, and every inch of every house seemed alive with gazers all that time, the white handkerchiefs floating down on the heads of those who passed. Banners, too, with inscriptions to suit the popular feeling -- 'Liberty' -- the 'Union of Italy' -- the 'Memory of the Martyrs' -- 'Viva Pio Nono' -- 'Viva Leopoldo Secondo' -- were quite stirred with the breath of the shouters. I am glad to have seen that sight, and to be in Italy at this moment, when such sights are to be seen.⁶

A more detailed picture of the same scene is found in the first part of Casa Guidi Windows. Mrs. Browning looked upon an orderly procession "with banners raised and intermittent bursts of martial strains." She thrilled at the sight of the magistracy with its insignia and of the ripple of blue and scarlet silks cast down from thousands of windows. She gazed with joy upon the lawyers and the black-gowned monks, upon the artists and the trades, and upon the mass of men in blouses, bearing a standard inscribed Il Populo. Following The People she saw the deputies representing every state in Tuscany. To Mrs. Browning the scene was made more brilliant with promise by various groups of citizens from lands

⁶Kenyon, op. cit., I, 346.

where liberty had friends. Greeks, English, and French bore in reverence the symbols of their countries. Having seen people "with accumulated heats and faces turned one way as if one fire both drew and flushed them" gather in front of the Pitti Palace to thank the Grand Duke for permitting the National Guard and to adore him for granting a new constitution, Mrs. Browning regarded their gesture as

The first torch of Italian freedom, lit
To toss in the next tiger's face who should
Approach too near them in a greedy fit.⁷

Pronouncing such a scene good and full of promise, Mrs. Browning heartily applauded it and declared, "That day had noble use among God's days." It was a boon to her hope for Italy to see "men from humble homes and ducal chairs hate wrong together."

Yet such processions, civic splendors, and deafening thunders of applause, Mrs. Browning averred, would not in themselves save Italy. As a nation she must will to be strong; no yoke could be placed upon Italy by Austrian Metternich

Unless the neck agree;
And thine is like the lion's when the thick
Dews shudder from it, and no man would be
The stroker of his mane, which less would prick
His nostrils with a reed. When nations roar

p. 231. ⁷Poetical Works of Elizabeth Barrett Browning.

Like lions, who shall tame them and defraud
Of the due pasture by the river-shore?⁸

Mrs. Browning believed that not merely a popular passion but also a popular conscience was necessary for Italy's deliverance. Thinkers, not fighters only, were needed. She felt, too, that Italy needed some high soul capable of leading the people. Whether the deliverer be pope, prince, or peasant, she thought a "perfect man, complete and all alive" would arise to save his country, for

This country-saving is a glorious thing:
And if a common man achieved it? well.
Say, a rich man did? excellent. A king?
That grows sublime. A priest? improbable.
A pope? Ah, there we stop, and cannot bring
Our faith up to the leap, with history's bell
So heavy round the neck of it -- albeit
We fain would grant the possibility
For thy sake, Pio Nono!⁹

After accepting the papal throne in 1846 Pius IX had broken with the rigid system of government of his predecessor by replacing mercenary troops by a civic guard, releasing political offenders from prison, relaxing censorship laws, and appointing a commission to consider the question of the railways in the States of the Church. He further showed his sincere desire to prepare the way for Italian unity by proposing a customs union between the Italian states. Approving his actions the Italian people hailed Pius IX as a reforming pope, a "pope of progress."

⁸Ibid., p. 234.

⁹Ibid., p. 237.

They immediately came to love and admire this man of culture for his courtesy and graciousness and for his fairness and kindness. The Italians became even more enthusiastic about their liberal pope when they learned that Austria had intended to impose her veto against him. Although Mrs. Browning did not share the full enthusiasm of the people for Pius IX, she did admit that he had some excellent qualities. To Mr. Westwood she wrote,

We are glad to be here just now when there is new animation and energy given to Italy by this new wonderful Pope, who is a great man and doing greatly. I hope you give him your sympathies. Think how seldom the liberation of a people begins from the throne, a fortiori from a papal throne, which is so high and straight.¹⁰

In the first part of Casa Guidi Windows, even though Mrs. Browning granted the possibility of the Pope's becoming Italy's saviour, she feared that Pius IX was only a pope,¹¹ not a man:

He is good and great
According to the deeds a pope can do;
Most liberal, save those bonds; affectionate,
As princes may be, and, as priests are, true;
But only the Ninth Pius after eight,
When all's praised most. At best and hopefullest
He's pope.¹²

¹⁰Kenyon, op. cit., I, 344.

¹¹In a letter to Miss Mitford, written on October 2, 1849, Mrs. Browning declared: "The Pope is just a pope; and, since you give George Sand credit for having known it, I am the more vexed that Blackwood did not publish the poem /the first part of Casa Guidi Windows/ I wrote two years ago, in the full glare and burning of the Pope-enthusiasm, which Robert and I never caught for a moment. Then, I might have passed a little for a prophetess as well as George Sand! Only, to confess a truth, the same poem would have proved how fairly I was taken in by our Tuscan Grand Duke. Oh, the traitor!"

¹²Poetical Works of Elizabeth Barrett Browning, p. 239.

In Duke Leopold II Mrs. Browning had great faith, if not as the destined leader of Italy, as a high, influential official who would prove himself at least worthy of the trust placed in him by the Tuscans. Her heart was touched by the sight of Leopold, standing before the people at the Pitti, with his eyes full of "good warm human tears which unrepressed ran down." Again her heart melted in admiration for him as he drew his children to his side, a gesture suggesting, to Mrs. Browning, that they too would some day govern as the people willed. She liked his face and described his forehead as showing no "capacious genius yet sufficient comprehension" and as being "mild and sad and careful with the care which shuns a lapse of faith and duty." If ever a Grand Duke deserved benediction, Mrs. Browning said, Leopold II did, and so she exclaimed with the Tuscans, "God save the Duke."

By the middle of 1849 the struggle for Italian liberty had everywhere ended in failure. The battle of Novara had prostrated Piedmont and caused Charles Albert, its king, to abdicate. The Tuscan Republic had come and gone, and the Grand Duke had re-entered Florence under the protection of the Austrians. Sicily had been subjected by the Bourbons of Naples. After a heroic stand, Venice capitulated to the Austrians while the French had entered Rome bringing back the Pope cured of his leanings toward reform and constitutional government. The Italian struggle was over for

a time; the cry for liberty was silenced. Under these circumstances one can understand how Mrs. Browning could despair of Italian patriotism and of the men whom she had exalted as staunch in their belief in the Italian cause. Her pessimism is expressed in letters to her friends and in the second part of Casa Guidi Windows. Although Mrs. Browning despaired of the present, she held steadfastly to a spark of hope for the future.

In the second section of Casa Guidi Windows she wrote bitter things because her soul was bitter for the sake of freedom and of her Florence. She found the process of "growing cooler and cooler on the subject of Italian patriotism, valor, and good sense" painful but inevitable, for Italy was politically demoralized. In her opinion Italy understood nothing constitutional. Liberty was a watchword, but as an idea it did not exist in the minds of the people. Discovering that the Italians who were patriotic were not instructed on the aims of the revolution and that the instructed were not patriotic, she despaired of a republic in Italy, or rather of Italy altogether, because

An ignorance of means may minister
To greatness, but an ignorance of aims
Makes it impossible to be great at all.¹³

Her patience with and faith in every species of Italians

¹³Ibid., p. 245.

were tired out. Although there were some brave, good, and even sensible men in Italy, their failure in the revolution proved that they were not strong enough for the mastery of the times. Italy not only lacked a man to lead the people but also lacked men with "stamina, conscience, and self-reverence" to carry the revolution to a satisfactory end. Because of the failure of these "rhetoric" patriots and soldiers, she was mortified, as any Italian should be. Earlier Mrs. Browning had hoped that Italian piazzas would be swept clear of the Austrian breed, but

Alas, alas! it was not so this time.
Conviction was not, courage failed, and truth
Was something to be doubted of.¹⁴

With a little disgust and great disappointment she had seen the Tuscans fail to carry out a planned revolt because of a few scattered showers on the day set for it.¹⁵ She saw the once noisy Tuscans, pale and constrained, press against the walls of their city to watch in silence the invading foe. Still, in the midst of despair, Mrs. Browning clutched at a ray of hope left in her that all was not over and that deliverance would come eventually. To Mrs. Martin she confessed,

I agree with you that much of all is very melancholy and disheartening, though holding fast by my hope and belief that good will be the end, as it always is God's end to man's frenzies, and that all we observe is but the fermentation necessary to

¹⁴Ibid.

¹⁵Mrs. Browning declared that she was not making a bad joke nor speaking sarcastically but was writing an historical fact.

the new wine, which presently we shall drink pure. Meanwhile, the saddest thing is the impossibility (which I, for one, feel) to sympathise, to go along with, the people to whom and to whose cause all my natural sympathies yearn. The word 'Liberty' ceases to make me thrill, as at something great and unmistakable, as, for instance, the other great words Truth and Justice do. The salt has lost its savour, the meaning has escaped from the term; we know nothing of what people will do when they aspire to Liberty. The holiness of Liberty is desecrated by the sign of the ass's hoof. Fixed principles, either of opinion or action, seem clearly gone out of the world. The principle of Destruction is in the place of the principle of Re-integration, or of Radical Reform, as we called it in England. I look all round and can sympathise nowhere. The rulers hold by rottenness, and the people leap into the abyss, and nobody knows why this is, or why that is.¹⁶

The men to whom Mrs. Browning had looked for help she now condemned as traitors to the Italian cause. Through Pius IX she had "almost believed that priesthood could be an honest thing," but she came to learn that the Pope was a weak man and that his interest in Italy's freedom was only false and pretended. Pius IX could not, in her estimation, be glorified for any of his deeds, and without a doubt he was not the person "set with open soul to render man more free." Because of him the Papacy had forever lost its prestige and power over souls. Mrs. Browning heard devout women say, "This cursed Pope! it's all his fault," and she herself berated him as "the old serpent" and an "obstinate idiot." For the future she willed herself to be skeptical of any pope, and of others in Italy she

¹⁶Kenyon, op. cit., I, 389.

questioned:

Who
Will speak a pope's name as they rise again?
What woman or what child will count him true?
What dreamer praise him with the voice or pen?
What man fight for him? -- Pius takes his due.¹⁷

In respect to the character of the Grand Duke of Tuscany Mrs. Browning was also disillusioned. The Duke, whose part she had taken hitherto, she gave up because of the base thing which he did in taking again "his Austrian titles in his proclamations coincidently with the approach of the Austrians." She had seen the Duke return from exile in Gaeta and re-enter Tuscany, where "trees of liberty grew yesterday," with an Austrian army. The Duke had behaved ignobly and had proved himself incapable of being worthy of her previous cry, "Long live the Duke."

For Charles Albert of Piedmont, about whom she did not write in the first part of Casa Guidi Windows, Mrs. Browning speaks less bitter words. Although he may not have lived well, he died a patriot with a discrowned head. Charles Albert should be revered for having tried to shake the Austrian yoke in Piedmont. Italians should say of him:

'Thou, too, hast suffered for our native land!
My brother, thou art one of us! be proud.'¹⁸

At least Mrs. Browning could thank God that this man did not end like popes and dukes.

¹⁷Poetical Works of Elizabeth Barrett Browning, p. 250.

¹⁸Ibid., p. 253.

Although the Italian question was Mrs. Browning's absorbing interest during this period, she wrote intermittently in her letters concerning French affairs of which she read in the newspapers and heard from her friends. By 1851, the time when she first witnessed any actual events in France, the Italian question was in abeyance for the moment, and she turned her entire attention to the French. A better understanding of Mrs. Browning's political writings about France can be gained by first reviewing the events occurring there between the years 1848 and 1852.

The national spirit, similar to that which exerted its influence in Italy and caused revolutions against absolutism, brought in 1848 a revolution against the French monarchy. King Louis Philippe was forced to abdicate, whereupon a republic was established and a constitution was set up. The new constitution vested the legislative power in a single assembly of seven hundred members, elected by universal manhood suffrage, and conferred the executive power upon a president elected for four years. To inaugurate this new constitution an election was ordered for December 10, 1848. As a result of the election Louis Napoleon became the President of France. In May, 1849, the election to the Assembly of an immense majority from the monarchial party indicated that France was not ready for a republic. The only reason that the republic

was not then overthrown was that the monarchists were divided into three groups: Legitimists, favoring the Bourbon line; Orleanists, devoted to the family of Louis Philippe; and Bonapartists, supporting the President. Desiring to strengthen the number of his personal supporters and at the same time to weaken the republic, Louis Napoleon urged the monarchists in the Assembly to reduce the popular rights secured by the recent revolution. Accordingly the Assembly limited the freedom of the press, forbade political meetings, and practically put an end to universal suffrage by making it dependent upon certain residence and tax requirements. The President further indicated his attachment to the monarchists by sending an expedition against the Roman Republic in 1849. While the responsibility for this action falls upon Napoleon, he could not have carried it through without the support of the reactionaries. In 1851 Napoleon asked the Assembly to repeal the legislation which fixed the president's term at four years without the right to re-election. When the legislature refused, he overthrew the government, and, when the people were called upon to voice an opinion on the coup d'etat, they endorsed it. During the preceding months Louis Napoleon had won over the leaders of the army. When the government was overthrown, therefore, the troops occupied Paris, closed the hall of deputies, and put the president's opponents under lock and key. Louis Napoleon

then completed his government on the basis of a granted constitution providing for a legislature elected by universal suffrage but carefully deprived of any effective powers. Hence the control of the government was concentrated in the hands of the President.

When the French Republic was first established Mrs. Browning expressed an "adhesion to it in a cordial manner." But it was not long until she saw that the French people were not ready to accept a republic. At first to her the Republic seemed to be a "man in an iron mask"; however, upon discovering that it was a "military dictatorship, a throttling of the press, a starving of finance, and an election of Louis Napoleon to be the President," she despaired of it. To Mrs. Martin she wrote:

My tears (which I really couldn't help at the time of the expulsion of poor Louis Philippe and his family, not being very strong just then) are justified, it appears, though my husband thought them foolish (and so did I). . . . Louis Philippe was better than all this, take him at worst, and at worst he did not deserve the mud and stones cast at him, which I have always maintained and maintain still.¹⁹

At first Mrs. Browning considered Louis Napoleon to be a weak man and was vexed with the selection of him as president. By the latter part of 1849, however, she began to justify the selection by the "firmness and apparent integrity of the man," for Louis Napoleon, to her mind, was

¹⁹Kenyon, op. cit., I, 390.

giving proof of "prudence and conscientious patriotism," and was filling a difficult position most honorably.

One other French action of which Mrs. Browning wrote before 1851 was the sending of French expeditionary forces to Rome. She did not at first understand the aim of the French Republicans in going to Rome to extinguish the republic, but she said:

If they have at Rome such a republic as we have had at Florence, without a public, imposed by a few bawlers and brawlers on many mutes and cowards, why, the sooner it goes to pieces the better, of course.²⁰

Even though France was pledged under the constitution never to employ its forces against the liberties of another people, Mrs. Browning condoned French intervention as the only means of saving Rome from the hoofs of the Austrian absolutists whom she hated. Yet, since the old abuses were restored, Mrs. Browning thought that it was an unfortunate and disgraceful move on the part of France, "a blot upon the character of Napoleon's government." She wished that Austria had been left to do "her own dirty work."

From the time when Mrs. Browning first went to Italy until 1851 she had not ventured beyond the bounds of Tuscany. For summer excursions she had gone from Florence only to Vallombroso, Lucca, or Siena, all within the province. Now, in June, 1851, she and her family travelled to

²⁰Ibid., p. 400.

England for a short visit and early in the autumn settled in Paris for a period of not quite a year. For those who felt no personal apprehensions and who liked to be near the scene of great events it was a fortunate time to be in Paris. Either because of their temperaments or because of their experiences in Italy, the Brownings were never unduly disturbed by revolutions. Mrs. Browning, many times before, had told anxious friends that she and her husband with their child, in the midst of revolutions in Florence, had stayed on there and continued to improve their home. Certainly they were not afraid, as were certain other English people, who, Mrs. Browning said, were "flying from Florence in a helter skelter, just as they always do fly." So having been unafraid in Florence, they suffered no fear in Paris, nor were they in any danger.

In fact, Mrs. Browning at all times loved Paris, since the memorable fortnight she spent there directly after her marriage. The atmosphere of movement and intelligence appealed to her, and the very lightness of the air made the place agreeable. Now she found Paris delightful and fascinating; it was a beautiful, splendid city -- a city in the country, she called it, because of the bright green trees and the gardens everywhere. She rejoiced in the restless life of the restaurants, where she could "mix up her dinners with heaps of newspapers," in the variety of shops, and in the general stir of a city where the art

of living was finely cultivated. In such an environment, now that the Italian question was put aside for a time, Mrs. Browning converted her energy into expressions of her admiration for the French nation.

Her love of and admiration for the French people was so great that her husband called them her "beloved French." Her faith in the French, at this time, was far stronger than that ordinarily felt by her countrymen; for in England it was "strictly the fashion to despair of France." Being a democrat "to the bone," Mrs. Browning based her faith in the French upon her belief that the nation was more democratic than any other in Europe and that the French idea of liberty was exceedingly high, even higher than that of the English. One thing in particular which Mrs. Browning approved of in France was the just division of property. To her even the faults of the French lay in their excess of aspiration and ideality. So with her love of France and her profound belief in the loftiness of the national ideals it is no wonder that Mrs. Browning was concerned about the future of France.

In 1851 in Paris the march of affairs became far more thrilling than the intrigues and miniature revolutions which Mrs. Browning had witnessed in Florence, and which had greatly disappointed her. The struggle between Louis Napoleon, who had been chosen President of France in 1848, and the Legislative Assembly reached its height in

the coup d'etat, and in Paris Mrs. Browning saw the "grand spectacle of the second of December," which she would not have missed for anything in the world -- not even for a sight of the Alps. She saw the President ride by her windows, through much shouting, and to her no sight could have been grander. On December 10, only eight days after the coup d'etat, she wrote to Mrs. Jameson a short account of what she knew of the situation in Paris:

The natural emotion of the situation one could not escape from, and on Thursday night I sate [sic] in my dressing gown till nearly one, listening to the distant firing from the boulevards. Thursday was the only day in which there was fighting of any serious kind. There has been no resistance on the part of the real people -- nothing but sympathy for the President, I believe, if you except the natural mortification and disappointment of baffled parties.²¹

The following day she wrote similarly to Mrs. Martin:

The result of my own impression is a conviction that from the beginning he had the sympathy of the whole population here with him, to speak generally, and exclusively of particular parties. All our tradespeople, for instance, milkman, breadman, wine merchant, and the rest, yes, even the shrewd old washerwoman, and the concierge, and our little lively servant were in a glow of sympathy and admiration.²²

In the same letter Mrs. Browning mentioned that she had been down the boulevards "to see the field of action on the terrible Thursday," counted the holes in the walls bored by cannon, and had looked at the windows which had been smashed.

²¹Kenyon, op. cit., II, 33.

²²Ibid., p. 36.

Even then, although the "asphalte was black with crowds," she noticed that the quiet was absolute. Most of the shops had reopened, theatres were full as usual, and Champs-Elysees had its regular promenaders. Then, in justifying the situation in Paris to her own satisfaction, she said:

For my part, I am too good a democrat to be afraid of being thrown back upon the primitive popular element, from impossible paper constitutions and unrepresenting representative assemblies. The situation was in a deadlock, and all the conflicting parties were full of dangerous hope of taking advantage of it; and I don't see, for my part, what better could be done for the French nation than to sweep the board clear and bid them begin again. With no sort of prejudice in favour of Louis Napoleon (except, I confess to you, some artistical admiration for the consummate ability and courage shown in his coup d'etat), with no particular faith in the purity of his patriotism, I yet hold him justified so far, that is, I hold that a pure patriot would be perfectly justifiable in taking the same steps which up to this moment he has taken.²³

Although Mrs. Browning had not raised Louis Napoleon to the pinnacle on which his intervention on the behalf of Italy subsequently caused her to place him, she was at least disposed to put a favorably construction upon his actions at this time. Granting that the coup d'etat was lawful, Mrs. Browning could not object to the dictatorship which was its natural outcome. She admitted the present necessity for the dictatorship and did not expect the full liberty and ease of a regular government under it. She did not altogether approve of the repressive measures taken by

²³Ibid., p. 35.

Louis Napoleon; yet, she hoped that his government and constitution would work. She considered "the initiative of the laws, put out of the power of the legislative assembly," a stupidity. Too, she could not endorse the restrictions placed upon the press; and even though no prospect of comparative liberty of the press had been offered, she felt that "as tranquillity is established, there will be certain modifications; this, indeed, has been intimated, and I think the Press will by degrees attain its emancipation."²⁴ Mrs. Browning realized that the constitution was not a model one; however, she said:

It may wear itself into shape by being worked calmly. These new boots will be easier, to the feet after half an hour's walking. Not that I like the pinching meanwhile. Not that the stringencies upon the Press please me -- no, nor arrests and imprisonments. I like these things, God knows, as little as the loudest curser.²⁵

Mrs. Browning had heard Louis Napoleon reproached "with every iniquity possible to anybody's public and private life," but even so she refused to believe, "even infinitesimally," the things talked on the subject. "It is really a good deal the simple recoil from manifest falsehood and gross exaggeration," she said, "which has thrown me on the ground of his defenders." Whether the furtherance of his own selfish ambitions or the desire to serve

²⁴Ibid., p. 52.

²⁵Ibid., p. 54.

his country was the real motive actuating Louis Napoleon at this time is uncertain, but Mrs. Browning believed that a Washington might have dissolved the assembly as he did and appealed to the people. Even though Mrs. Browning recognized the fact that the French people required "a visible type of hero-worship" and found it in the name of Napoleon, she still maintained that they were essentially democratic in their tendencies. Therefore, it was not astonishing to her nor shameful to them that, when Napoleon appealed to them on democratic principles, they supported him. In her eyes the government became respectable when it received their approval. Mrs. Browning was always eager and happy to hear anyone else praise Louis Napoleon. She never failed to avail herself of an opportunity to quote to friends who disagreed with her any laudatory comments that she heard. She was pleased that two of the strongest minded persons she met in Paris were inclined to take favorable views of the President's personal character, that Rothschild said Napoleon had great financial ability, and that Landor believed him to be a man of wonderful genius. She held that Louis Napoleon was honest, for he had "acted no dishonesty as yet." To her he was "an upright man with noble impulses," and she believed that France as a great nation would right herself under him.

In defending Louis Napoleon and his government Mrs. Browning was outraged at the attitude of the English people

and the English press toward him and his actions in France. She considered the English press "highly immoral in its tone toward France" and "infamous in its abuse of the government" because of its falsifications and exaggerations. She thought that the English tried to exceed one another in discoloration and distortion of the circumstances. Indignantly she wrote:

I don't think it necessary and lawful to exaggerate and over-colour, nor to paint the cheeks of sorrows into horrors nor to talk . . . of two thousand and four hundred persons being cut to mince-meat in the streets of Paris, nor to call boldness hypocrisy (because hypocrisy is the worse word), and the appeal to the sovereignty of the people usurpation, and universal suffrage the pricking of the bayonets.²⁶

According to Mrs. Browning's way of thinking the outcry in England that the votes for Louis Napoleon were forced by bayonets was simply stupid. That he was elected by seven and one half million Frenchmen should justify Louis Napoleon, even in England. To one of her English friends she wrote:

When your English press denies the fact of the choice (a fact which the most passionate partyman does not think of denying here) I seem to have a right to another opinion which might strike you as unpatriotic if I uttered it in this place.²⁷

Mrs. Browning was also incensed at Napoleon's being called by the English a "wretch" and a "reptile." Whether Napoleon was an "ape or a demi-god," Mrs. Browning considered that

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid., p. 52.

to insult him was at the same time to insult the French people who placed him where he was. When the English chose to call Napoleon's government a "military despotism," Mrs. Browning reminded them that, even with "ugly signs of despotism in its face," the French government stood upon democracy and, therefore, could be and would be overthrown the moment it disappointed the people. Mrs. Browning said that even her husband, who certainly had no love nor admiration for Louis Napoleon, confessed that the "excessive and contradictory nonsense he heard among Legitimists, Orleanists, and the English against the movement inclined him almost to a revulsion of feeling."²⁸ So it was that Mrs. Browning marveled at the extraordinary ignorance of the English press and agreed with one of her acquaintances in Paris that its writers did not know the "ABC of France."

Upon returning to Florence in November, 1852, Mrs. Browning found this city quiet and dull after the excitement of Paris. At this time she wrote little of political affairs except to bewail the condition of Tuscany and of Italy in general. To Isa Blagden she said:

The state of things here in Tuscany is infamous and cruel. The old serpent, the Pope, is wriggling his venom into the heart of all possibilities of free thought and action. It is a dreadful state of things. Austria the hand, the papal power the brain! and no energy in the victim for resistance -- only for hatred. They do hate here, I am glad to say.²⁹

²⁸Ibid.,, p. 37.

²⁹Kenyon, op. cit., II, 98.

Mrs Browning could not help sympathizing with the "poor Italians in their utter prostrations," for she did not mistake their sentiment toward the actual regime. She hated, as all Italians did, the Austrian rule, and to her the "unanimity of despair on all sides was an affecting thing."

In 1854 Mrs. Browning wrote of the War in the Crimea as "terrible" and "dismal." The only consolation she found in it was the alliance between England and France.³⁰ From English friends coming from France she heard of the general feeling of good will between the two countries and of how the French had lavished affectionate greetings upon them as Englishmen. For the rest of the war, she said, "One shuts one's eyes and ears -- the rest is too horrible." Yet the horrors of the Crimean War brought forth from her an outburst of bitterness against England, against the ministry and the whole English system of government. Aside from the individual suffering borne in the Crimea, she hoped that some good might come to England from the war.³¹ She thought, since here England's inferiority was proved for once, that the country might awaken to a correction of its fault of always talking of her moral, political, and all other superiorities, which Mrs. Browning was tired of

³⁰England and France were allies for the first time in two centuries.

³¹The War of the Crimea was the most ill-managed campaign in English history. The English sent men into battle with no forethought of how they were to be fed, clothed, warmed, and cared for.

hearing recounted. She wrote:

Oh, the Crimea! How dismal, how full of despair and horror! The results will, however, be good if we are induced to come down from the English pedestal in Europe of incessant self-glorification, and learn that our close, stifling, corrupt system gives no air nor scope for healthy and effective organization anywhere. We are oligarchic in all things, from our parliament to our army. Individual interests are admitted as obstacles to the general prosperity. This plague runs through all things with us.³²

Her thoughts about the war and England she expressed again in a fuller account to Miss Browning:

I do not doubt that the Aberdeen side of the Cabinet has been greatly to blame, but the system is the root of the whole evil; if they don't tear up the system they may tear up the Aberdeens 'world without end,' and not better the matter; if they do tear up the system, then shall we all have reason to rejoice at these disasters, apart from our sympathy with individual sufferings. More good will have been done by this one great shock to the heart of England than by fifty years' more patching, and pottering, and knocking impotent heads together. What makes me most angry is the ministerial apology. 'It's always so with us for three campaigns,' '!!!' 'it's our way,' 'it's want of experience,' etc., etc. That is precisely the thing complained of. As to want of experience, if the French have had Algerine experiences, we have had our Indian wars, Chinese wars, Caffre wars, and military and naval expenses exceeding those of France from year to year. If our people had never had to pay for an army, they might sit down quietly under the taunt of wanting experience. But we have soldiers, and soldiers should have military education as well as red coats, and be led by properly qualified officers, instead of Lord Nincompoop's youngest sons. As it is in the army, so it is in the State. Places given away, here and there, to incompetent heads; nobody being responsible, no unity of idea and purpose anywhere -- the individual interest always in the way of the general good. There

³²Lubbock, op. cit., p.324.

is a noble heart in our people, strong enough if once roused, to work out into light and progression, and correct these evils.³³

In 1859 Mrs. Browning was again to experience high hope for the Italian cause. Piedmont, the strongest province in Italy, had aided France and England in the Crimean War. Now, in this year, Cavour, chief minister to Victor Emanuel II, turned to France for assistance after concluding that England could not be counted on to help Italy gain independence. On April 29, 1859, the Austrians crossed the Ticino into Piedmont, and war was declared. Napoleon immediately proclaimed France as an ally of Piedmont. He stated that his purpose in going into the war was to aid Italy gain freedom and to give France a friendly people on her frontier, a people gratefully owing her independence to France. Cavour, not wanting French predominance, had secured the cooperation of volunteers from other parts of Italy. Mrs. Browning considered this time the "hour for the complete resurrection of Italy." She declared that she had expected as much of Louis Napoleon always, and that Italians had put the "full weight of their hopes" upon him since he first came into power. Viewing the situation in 1859, Mrs. Browning saw the scene of 1848 re-enacted with "matured, regenerated actors." She rejoiced, because

The unanimity and constancy of the Italian people are beautiful to witness. The affliction of

³³Kenyon, op. cit., II, 203-204.

ten years has ripened these souls. Never was a contrast greater than what is today and what was in '48. No more distrust, nor division, nor vacillation, and a gratitude to the French nation which is quite pathetic.³⁴

Mrs. Browning, who had lived in Italy all these years, knew the "full pestilent meaning of Austria everywhere" and, therefore, could thank God for the new "light and hope of deliverance."

With this renewed hope for Italy Mrs. Browning received enthusiastically the news of Napoleon's victories at Magenta and Solferino. After such victories the peace of Villafranca, a compromise between Napoleon III and Franz Joseph of Austria, came as a shock to her. Her hopes for Italy were abruptly, if only momentarily, shattered, and she was thrown into a fit of despair, even greater than that of 1848, and into subsequent illness. She expressed her feelings to Miss Browning:

But though it may sound absurd to you, it was the blow on the heart, the peace after all that excitement and exultation, that walking on the clouds for weeks and months, and then the sudden stroke and fall, and the impotent rage against all the nations of the earth -- selfish, inhuman, wicked -- who forced the hand of Napoleon, and truncated his great intentions. Many young men of Florence were confined to their beds by the emotion of the news. As for me, I was struck, couldn't sleep, talked too much, and at last this bad attack came on.³⁵

To Isa Blagden she described her feeling thus:

³⁴Ibid., p. 314.

³⁵Ibid., p. 320.

I dreamed lately that I followed a mystic woman down a long suite of palatial rooms. She was in white, with a white mask, on her head the likeness of a crown. I knew she was Italy, but I couldn't see through the mask. All through my illness political dreams have repeated themselves, in inscrutable articles of peace and eternal provisional governments. Walking on the mountains of the moon, hand in hand with a Dream more beautiful than them all, then falling suddenly on the hard earth-ground on one's head, no wonder that one should suffer. Oh, Isa, the tears are even now in my eyes to think of it!³⁶

Yet as ever before Mrs. Browning soon took up hope again.

To Mrs. Martin she wrote:

The peace fell like a bomb on us all, and for my part, you may still find somewhere on the ground splinters of my heart, if you look hard. But by the time your letter reached me we had recovered the blow spiritually, had understood that it was necessary, and that the Emperor Napoleon, though forced to abandon one arena, was prepared to carry on the struggle for Italy on another.³⁷

Mrs. Browning wrote two poems expressing her disappointment in the premature peace at Villafranca: these are "A Tale of Villafranca," published in Poems Before Congress, and "First News from Villafranca," in her Last Poems. The first poem is Mrs. Browning's version of the significance of the peace signed at Villafranca. She thought Napoleon's intervention on the behalf of Italy "a great deed imagined by a great man." That sovereigns and statesmen of other nations should have arisen "in wrath and fear" against his actions was heinous. Because Napoleon was only one against

³⁶Ibid., p. 321.

³⁷Ibid., pp. 324-325.

the world his deed was crushed, and Italy was forced to wait for her freedom. She ends the tale on the pessimistic note:

In this low world, where great Deeds die
What matter if we live?³⁸

In "First News from Villafranca" Mrs. Browning asks, "Peace, peace, peace, do you say?" Indeed a peace made "with the enemy's guns in our ears and with the country's wrong not rendered back" was not the kind of peace that Mrs. Browning could willingly and joyfully accept. Even the reverend Dead, she said, would cry "absurd" to such a peace and "clamor that they died in vain." Yet, she thought, it might have been better to have died instead,

Still dreaming peace meant liberty,
And did not, could not mean despair.³⁹

Even the peace of Villafranca, however, did not shake Mrs. Browning's faith in Louis Napoleon. She forgave his abrupt dismissal of the Italian cause for freedom by believing that the intrigues of other countries such as England, Germany, and Prussia, forced him into the peace and frustrated his good intentions toward Italy. In "Napoleon III in Italy" she declared that she never cursed the day, as some did, when Napoleon was made Emperor, because he was "translated to the sphere of domination by

³⁸Poetical Works of Elizabeth Barrett Browning, p. 417.

³⁹Ibid., p. 438.

democratic passion." She found him worthy of her praise because he left behind the "purple throng of vulgar monarchs" to tread "higher in deed than stair of throne can lead" to help Italy become strong. Others might distrust Napoleon, but Mrs. Browning would not believe that he could "barter and cheat with the people's heart in his breast." In comparing him to others who had governed and led she found him

Larger so much by the heart
Larger so much by the head.⁴⁰

Even when Savoy and Nice were annexed to France, she would not believe that Napoleon was merely an ambitious man, and she did not object to the annexation, on the grounds that the people wished it. It was Mrs. Browning's belief that Napoleon had always been loyal to Italy, and always would be. She hailed him "Sublime Deliverer" of Italy. In fact, she said, Napoleon III was more Italian than French.

At the same time that she praised Napoleon, Mrs. Browning exhausted herself "with indignation and protestation" against England for the ignoble way in which England had behaved at the time of this war in Italy. England had tried to avert the war, and, although she would do nothing for Italy herself, she objected to Napoleon's aiding Italy. She feared that he was too ambitious. When England called the war "unnecessary and inexcusable" Mrs. Browning flung

⁴⁰Ibid., p. 414.

back that it was the only "hope of a nation agonizing between life and death." She condemned the Times newspaper for printing lies, not mistakes, about Italy. For instance, she said,

While the very peasants here are giving their crazie, the very labourers their day's work (once a week or so) -- while everybody gives, and every man almost (who can go) goes -- the 'Times' says that Piedmont had derived neither paul nor soldier from Tuscany. Tell me what people get by lying so? Faustus sold himself to the Devil. Does Austria pay a higher price, I wonder?⁴¹

and, again, in defending Napoleon against the falsifications of the Times:

The war did more than 'give a province to Piedmont.' The first French charge freed Italy potentially from north to south. At this moment Austria cannot stir anywhere. Here we can live, breathe, and have our national being.' Certainly if Napoleon did what the 'Times' has declared he would do -- intervene with armed force against the people, prevent the elections, or tamper with the elections by means of -- such means as he was 'familiar' with; if he did these things, I should cry aloud, 'Immoral, vile, a traitor!' But the facts deny all these imputations. He has walked steadily on along one path, and the development of Italy as a nation is at the end of it.⁴²

In "Italy and the World" Mrs. Browning, "viewing England o'er Alps and sea," said:

I loved her more in her ancient fashion:
She carries rifles too thick for me
Who spares them so in the cause of a brother.
.
The sword, kept sheathless at peacetime, rusts.
None fears for himself while he feels for another.⁴³

⁴¹Kenyon, op. cit., II, 316.

⁴²Ibid., p. 327.

⁴³Poetical Works of Elizabeth Barrett Browning, p. 422.

Self-love was one "great malady in England" which Mrs. Browning particularly disliked. She, therefore, looks forward to a time when

Love's one centre devours these centres
Of many self-loves; and the patriot's trick
To better his land by egotist ventures
Defamed from a virtue, shall make men sick,
As the scalp at the belt of some red hero.
.

And when, in the session
Of nations, the separate language is heard,
Each shall aspire, in sublime indiscretion,
To help with a thought or exalt with a word
Less her own than her rival's honor.⁴⁴

She declared that she could never forgive England for the "damnable part taken in Italian affairs."

On the other hand, Mrs. Browning was ever grateful to the French for their interest in Italy. She wrote two poems which she asserted were based upon historical incidents that show the brotherly feeling existing between the Italians and the French. "The Dance," describing the merriment of Italian girls and gallant French officers dancing in the piazzone in Florence, is a symbol of Italian gratitude to the French. In "The Court Lady" Mrs. Browning describes a display of patriotism made by a grand dame of Milan. This Italian woman visited men and boys who had fought valiantly for Italy's freedom. She went from one to another of the wounded and dying soldiers from Lombard, Romagnole, Tuscany, Piedmont, and Venetia, cheering

⁴⁴Ibid.

them and thanking them for their efforts. Among these Italians she found a Frenchman, whom she addressed as "brother." Showing how Italy was united from north to south in the great Italian cause, the poem, at the same time, shows how the French were "daring to be strong" for her and how grateful the Italians were for their support.

With her concern for Italy it was natural that Mrs. Browning should be interested in Italian leaders, and express her opinions of them. Besides those already mentioned Mazzini, Cavour, Garibaldi, and Victor Emanuel II are others of whom she wrote.

Mazzini was a personal friend of the Brownings. In her letters Mrs. Browning writes of his visiting her and her husband, and of his giving them a letter of introduction to George Sand. Although Mrs. Browning thought Mazzini was virtuous and heroic, she thought him also indiscreet and "without conscience." She could not refrain from calling him the truest hero and patriot that Italy had to boast of in 1849; yet, she said, Mazzini could merely die for his fatherland, for he never could cause Italy to live. Once when he escaped from Italy Mrs. Browning expressed her relief, because she had constantly been fearful that he would be taken or shot. The outrage of Orsini's attempted assassination of the Emperor Napoleon calls from Mrs. Browning a passionate outburst against Mazzini, "that man

of unscrupulous theory," and the whole group of agitators whom he represented. With all her enthusiasm for the Italian cause she was never betrayed into sympathizing with conspiracy as a means of undermining tyranny instead of attacking it in an open fight. Even the pure ardour of men like Mazzini failed to move her when she felt that it was not based upon principles of honor. Even though Mazzini was the "Christ of the century" to some, to her he was only a good friend.

In Cavour Mrs. Browning had more faith as a leader in Italy's fight for freedom than she had in Mazzini. It was always to the wisdom of men like Cavour that she looked for salvation rather than to the theorists and visionaries, of whom she wrote, "For nights I have been disturbed in my sleep with the thoughts of them." It was to Cavour that Mrs. Browning looked for a heroic leadership capable of bringing the consummation of Italy. On June 6, 1861, Cavour died at the zenith of his career, and Mrs. Browning, taking his death much to heart, wrote in her last letter:

I can scarcely command voice or hand to name Cavour. That great soul, which meditated and made Italy, has gone to a Diviner country. If tears or blood could have saved him to us, he should have had mine. I feel yet as if I could scarcely comprehend the greatness of the vacancy. A hundred Garibaldis for such a man.⁴⁵

Of Garibaldi Mrs. Browning writes only at the time

⁴⁵Kenyon, op. cit., II, 449.

of his Sicilian expedition. At first she had little hope for his success, though she wished him the best of luck. After his taking Palermo, an extraordinary military achievement, Mrs. Browning wrote:

We are all talking and dreaming Garibaldi just now in great anxiety. Scarcely since the world was a world has there been such a feat of arms. All modern heroes grow pale before him. It was necessary, however, for us all even here, and at Turin just as in Paris, to be ready to disavow him. The whole good of Central Italy was hazarded by it. If it had not been success it would have been an evil beyond failure. The enterprise was forlornier than a forlorn hope. The hero, if he had perished, would scarcely have been sure of his epitaph even.⁴⁶

In her Last Poems Mrs. Browning included a short poem called "The King's Gift," telling of King Victor's presenting Garibaldi's daughter Teresita a necklace in lieu of gifts and honors which Garibaldi himself had refused. She also makes Garibaldi the subject of another of the Last Poems, in which he speaks of the defeats he suffered in trying to help Italy and of the joy of taking Palermo.

Mrs. Browning proclaimed King Victor Emanuel "first soldier of Italy" in her poem written upon his entering Florence as King. Many of the states of Italy were being united under him and when Tuscany's turn came Mrs. Browning was glad. In her estimation Victor Emanuel was a true man, and had been faithful in every word and deed to the Italian cause. She related in "The Sword of Castruccio

⁴⁶Ibid., p. 398.

Castracani" how in Lucca the King was presented with the sword of a former dictator, given to him because he had "wiped away a foe and delivered the land by the sword."

Even to the moment of Mrs. Browning's death she was interested in political affairs. When she was told that the new Italian premier Ricasoli said that his policy and Cavour's were identical, she "smiled like Italy" and replied, "I am glad of it."

CHAPTER V

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

In this study the social and political trends of the nineteenth century have been reflected through the brilliant mind of Elizabeth Barrett Browning. Her interest in humanity and its problems has been viewed in the light of three important factors which greatly influenced her social and political writings: the age in which she lived, the circumstances of her own life, and her conception of the purpose of poetic art. These are the factors which equally contributed in converting a super-sensitive woman and a poetic genius into a humanitarian and a politician.

As a humanitarian Mrs. Browning had an overwhelming sympathy for all who suffered and were oppressed, for she herself had known personal sorrow and suffering. Living in an age when social problems were arising and demanding attention and subsequent solution, she wrote with deep understanding and compassion of the degradation of the poor, of the ill-use of children in mines and factories, the conditions of women in the cities, and of the slavery problem. These things she abhorred because she desired

freedom and justice for all human beings. Mrs. Browning believed that so long as such evils were ignored they would continue to exist; therefore, she felt no hesitancy in writing of them.

Being a witness to political upheavals and revolutions in France and Italy Mrs. Browning ever expressed her wish that liberty should reign in these and all other countries. When any individual or nation mistreated another, her sympathy for the abused was so deeply and so keenly felt that she could not refrain from "cursing" the abuser. On the other hand, when any person or group of people proved themselves strong enough to aid the oppressed and down-trodden, she exalted them to the limit of her expression. Because of her desire that liberty should triumph, she enthusiastically identified herself with Italy's fight for freedom; she exalted France for her generous aid in the war for Italian independence; and she condemned her own country for its cold neutrality in the same war.

Mrs. Browning's courage in writing of the things she saw and felt lay in her conception of the aim of poetic art. She regarded the events of daily living and the problems of human kind as fit subjects for poetry. That any writer could think that the poet's business was to "rhyme the stars and walk apart" when he could write of "great tragic movements, such as a war for the life of a nation," she could not comprehend. After reading Mrs.

Browning's poetry, one can not deny that she was ever true to her aim, and with her own conception of poetic art in mind one can not believe that the social and political matters upon which she chose to write were unworthy of poetic expression.

If Mrs. Browning's social and political interests can be measured by the intensity of feeling she projected into her writing and by the amount of her poetry which is devoted to social and political themes, then truly these were her two abiding, all-consuming interests. At least we can say, in conclusion, with Kate Field, "Her life was one long, large-souled, large-hearted prayer for the triumph of Right, Justice, Liberty."

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