CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

In examining nineteenth century poets and their contributions to literature, one sees that Elizabeth Barrett Browning is essentially neglected. Her personality may attract considerable critical attention because of her voluminous correspondence and her role as the wife of Robert Browning, but the women who devoted much of her life to the study, writing, and criticism of poetry is little known to twentieth century readers. Yet the poetry of this woman is both individual and representative of the age. Poetry was a consuming interest to her; it was an art she cultivated assiduously, even during periods of illness. It might even be said that it was poetry which drew Robert Browning to her, for it was the publication of the 1844 volume of the Poems that encouraged him to try to meet the secluded Miss Barrett. In spite of all her poems there is little criticism of Elizabeth Barrett Browning's poetry that illuminates the dominant images, ideas, and themes in the corpus of her work, even though her intellectual stance and the poetry itself are part of the panorama of Victorian letters.

From earliest childhood Elizabeth Barrett was consumed by an interest in poetry. Her father dubbed her, in fact, the
Poet Laureate of Hope End. In the early part of her life, passed largely in the environs of Hope End, Herefordshire, near the large market center of Ledbury, she was permitted great freedom to read widely and even to study Greek with her brother's tutor. Elizabeth was lucky by birth, situation and temperament, she had all the time to study. The house at Hope End was an ideal place for study and dreaming. The Poet's mother Mary described the house as follows:

There are deer in the park, and it is surrounded with fine hills covered with wood -- A stream runs through it -- forming a Cascade -- Nothing in short Ever was so picturesque and beautiful -- there are 475 acres.¹

The house looked like an elegant castle complete with towers and a minaret. In this atmosphere the Barrett family grew to include eleven children of whom Elizabeth was the first. Here she passed the early years of her life and wrote her first poems, drawing extravagant praise and support from her doting father. The surrounding woods and countryside afforded endless joy and pleasure to the children, and, in Elizabeth's case, provided a store of images that later surface in her poems.

After an idyllic period in rural England, the family eventually settled in London, a change that provided literary

companionship and stimulation to Elizabeth. After the move to London, she received a request from Richard Hengist Horne for biographical details to be used in compiling his new anthology, *A New Spirit of the Age*. Elizabeth states of herself:

> My first great epic of eleven or twelve years old, in four books, and called *The Battle of Marathon* and of which fifty copies were printed because Papa was bent on spoiling me, it is simply Pope's Homer done over again, or rather undone; for although a curious production for a child, it gives evidence of an imitative faculty, and an ear, and a good deal of reading in a peculiar direction.²

This poem, published in 1820, reveals a generous knowledge of Greek mythology, some understanding of the Greek heroes participating in Homer's war, and a reasonable control of the heroic couplet. It is, like the philosophic, "An Essay on Mind" of 1826, an example of the poet's intellectual bent and facile versifying.

The publication of "An Essay on Mind" had a significant effect upon her life because it brought several important admirers into her range of acquaintances: both Sir Uvedale Price and Hugh Stuart Boyd wrote to the young poet largely to discuss Greek Studies. Boyd became her life-long friend and teacher, for their friendship extended from this point

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until Boyd's death several years after the Brownings' marriage. With Price the young woman studied and compared ideas, and with Boyd she discovered many things in common. The two discussed Greek authorities and texts; they discovered that they both read Greek by quantity, and they considered the possibility of working together in Hebrew. But Elizabeth was weak in this area, and she declined. Although she was the favored pupil, she did not hesitate to voice her opinions to Boyd, when, for example, she disagreed with his judgment of Homer's delineation of character as opposed to Lucan's, she defended Homer. The association with H.S. Boyd was, for many reasons, a valuable one both intellectually and emotionally. It also is an early example of the strong fidelity in friendship that she was to retain throughout her life. She pays homage to Boyd in several poems dedicated to him. The Diary is filled with jealous speculations as to Boyd's feelings about her young woman at a critical time in her life. The Diary also is an early example of the strong intellectual and emotional attachment to Boyd with which the young poet's devotion to Homer's delineation of character as compared to Lucan's is contrasted. She disagreed with Boyd's preoccupation with quantity, and she did not hesitate to voice her opinions. Boyd was, for many reasons, a valuable mentor to her, and she remained close to him throughout her life. See Hope End Letters, 1827-28 in Elizabeth Barrett to Mr. Boyd: Unpublished Letters of Elizabeth Barrett to Mr. Boyd, ed. Barbara McCarthy (Published for Wellesley College by Yale University Press, 1955), p. xix. Boyd Letters, pp. xix, 22.
Robert Coles suggests that the relationship with Boyd was complicated emotionally:

She "transferred" her devotion from her father to Mr. Boyd, twenty-five years older, blind, highly educated and -- rather like Mr. Barrett -- able to be a literary companion. Much of this happened, moreover, when Elizabeth Barrett was quite without Parents. Her mother died when she was twenty-two... and her father ... spent increasing lengths of time away in London.5

Mr. Barrett was at this time preoccupied with business troubles and with the problem of giving up the much-loved home at Hope End and finding suitable quarters for his family in London. Although Edward Barrett had many pressing affairs to attend to he still found time to select special items for his poet daughter, as Elizabeth notes in a letter to Miss Mitford:

The doves and my books and I have a little slip of sitting room to ourselves; and dearest Papa in his abundant kindness surprised me in it with a whole vision of majestic heads from Bruccani's -- busts of poets and philosophers -- such as he knew that I would care for. You may think how it startled ... me to... know he had found time... to remember so light a thing as my pleasure.6


After the family's move to London in the fall of 1835, Elizabeth's life was enriched by new friendships. The move to the city with its damp climate and somewhat polluted air may have been bad for her health, but these factors were more than compensated for by the opportunities for mental growth and stimulation. In London, John Kenyon, a cousin and friend of the family, became an intimate friend of the poet and Elizabeth had few such friends, partly because of the confinement necessitated by her illness and partly because of her temperament and shyness.

Through the persuasive influence of John Kenyon, the poet did meet many people, among them Mary Russell Mitford, who became a very close friend, and such personages as William Wordsworth and Walter Savage Landor. At this point, she began her correspondence with Richard Hengist Horne regarding her poems and articles. Now mature, she had more confidence than she showed in the earlier relationship with H.S. Boyd. She was steadily growing in her accomplishments, showing the results of her omnivorous reading and her classical studies. In the correspondence with Horne, it appears that she assisted him with writing, editing and preparing materials for the publications of A New Spirit of the Age.\(^7\)

\(^7\)W. Robertson Nicoll and Thomas J. Wise, Literary Anecdotes of the Nineteenth Century: Contributions toward a Literary History of the Period (N.Y.: AMS Press, Inc., 1867), I, 35-36.
even as she contributed to his edition of *The Poems of Geoffrey Chaucer Modernized* in 1841. Curiously enough, both Robert Browning and Alfred Tennyson declined the honour of working on the Chaucer edition.

Not only had Elizabeth Barrett moved into the stream of intellectual people in London; she was also actively writing poetry. This period saw the publication of numerous poems which were later collected in the 1838 volume entitled *The Seraphim and other Poems*. Among the most popular poems to be published were, "The Romaunt of Margre-t" in *New Monthly Magazine* for July, 1836; "The Poet's Vow" in the same journal for October of 1836; "The Island," also in this journal for January, 1837; and two poems honouring the newly crowned Victoria, both published by the *Athenaeum* in July, 1837. Her poetry as Osbert Burdett points out in his biography, reflects the taste of her day: it is enthusiastic but serious; it is romantic, with an emphasized moral.

An examination of this poet's work in her time shows a singular woman who struggles to perfect her art even as she reflects the society around her. She expresses the problems of the artist in his age, but from the special position of a

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woman who was first an isolate and a near recluse and later, an active participant. Eventually, partly through family circumstances and partly because of her health, she becomes, like so many other great artists an exile from her own country. Like Henry James and James Joyce, she is an exile who continues to place most of her works in the familiar setting of home or to create characters who seem to be native Englishmen. Although she begins her career with a stance of alienation and isolation similar in its intensity to that of the Bronte sisters, she, along with several other women authors of this period moves to an emotional life of complete fulfilment in her marriage to Robert Browning and in her late motherhood. She shares with Christina Rossetti an intense preoccupation with religion and with Elizabeth Cleghorn Gaskell a deep desire to correct the wrongs of social institutions. The early themes of love and religious beliefs are never completely abandoned; rather they are incorporated into the major themes of universal love and desire to clarify the position of the artist.

Like many of her contemporaries, Elizabeth Barrett Browning holds a philosophy about Poetry that is social and moral rather than prosodic or aesthetic. Her three requirements for writing good poetry are, first that the writer be involved with people, not isolated from them. Second, the poet must recognize that the vocation is a humble calling,
though poetic insights confer distinction on the Poet. And third, the Poet's work should bring people closer to each other and should reveal the presence of divine force in the universe. Thus, poetry must be written about and from experiences, thoughts, and emotions that are shared with non-Poets or can be readily understood by them.

In this thesis I discuss the four specific areas in Elizabeth Barrett Browning's Poetry: Love, Religion, Social Injustice and feminism.

In chapter II, I have discussed the theme of Love woven in the poetry of Elizabeth Browning. Love, both of human and spiritual is a major subject of her poetry. By means of dramatic poems the Poet often admonishes man to love God more. She urges men to honour their fellowmen in this life and to prepare for immortal life. Many didactic poems serve as sermons, lecturing men on their evil ways, reminding them of Primal Sin, and encouraging them to live a righteous life, always in fear of God's judgement. Many of the early poems reflect the Poet's interest in the medieval and her love of Byron's poetry. "The Rhyme of the Duchess May" has a medieval setting. A wilful heroine defies her guardian, marries her chosen love, and, in a besieged castle, chooses death with her bridegroom over life with a hated rival. "The Romaunt of age" is another medieval tale. In this poem the heroine poses as a page to accompany her husband to war, only to find that he does not love her and would be horrified at finding his
lady disguised as a page. In spite of his narrow attitude, the girl sacrifices herself for him.

Mrs. Browning's concern for the love of God and for romantic love is about equally divided. But her highest expression of romantic love is contained in the Sonnets from the Portuguese. These Sonnets, apparently written as a gift for Robert Browning, stand as a lofty expression of love. They represent the height of intense lyric expression for Mrs. Browning; they reflect the voluminous love letters of the pair; and they provide an intimate look at the development of one of the most spectacular romances and elopements of the century.

In Chapter III, I have discussed the religious feelings, the poetry of Elizabeth Barrett Browning projects in her various hymns. The Poet draws many of these poems from the religious training within her family. She also reflects both her love of music and her religious devotion by writing the hymns of the 1838 volume. Along with religious conviction, the Poet has strong moral feelings on the various social injustices prevalent in society. She advocates an active Christianity, one that shows concern and a willingness to attempt to change the lot of others. "The Cry of the Children" is a powerful attempt to make the public aware of abuse of child labour. She protests against moral injustice contained in the divorce laws in "Void in Law," which appears in Last Poems. America's institution of slavery is attacked in two poems, "The Runaway Slave at Pilgrim's Point" and "A Curse for a Nation." She voices her concern over such
social problems as prostitution. In *Aurora Leigh* (1856), the plight of Marian Erie is heartrending. All these strong statements run contrary to the placid surface morality many Victorians sought to preserve.

In Chapter IV, I have discussed Elizabeth Barrett Browning's theories and beliefs about a woman's capacities for self-development, which she had held since childhood. In *Aurora Leigh*, Aurora is both a Poet and woman. In satisfying the criteria Barrett Browning has established for Poets, Aurora suffers when she isolates herself in order to pursue her career, loses her sense of proud isolation, and sees her work put to use in bettering all of human kind. Aurora is triumphantly alive because her story is essentially Barrett Browning's own intellectual and emotional history.

Barrett Browning's philosophies about her work and her life must be taken seriously by readers and critics alike because she held these principles staunchly throughout her life. None of these principles, however, is held so rigidly that she does not allow them to be modified or expanded as they are tested by experience, particularly the experience of marriage and motherhood. In her life she proves her theories correct, thus unifying her canon. Neither the Poetic philosophy nor the feminist principles described in Barrett Browning's work are unique or original; what is original is her joining them and expressing them vividly in *Aurora Leigh*. 
For love, to give up acres and degrees,
I yield the grave for thy sake, and exchange
My near sweet view of Heaven, for earth with thee!

[XXII.11.12-14, CPW, p. 221]