CHAPTER III

RELIGION AND SOCIAL INJUSTICE

The major themes found in the poetry of Mrs. Browning are religion, social injustice and love. As the Poet matures, she brings the force of her intellect to bear upon social and political ideas. Yet her thoughts on religion are always in her poems and they surface even in her love poems.

The theme of religion is central not only in poetry but also in all aspects of Victorian life. The problems associated with religion sometimes camouflage the evils of slum life and the desperate need of the growing lower class. These problems are treated in the works of Charles Dickens and Mrs. Gaskell in particular. For the common man of the early nineteenth century, when Mrs. Brownings' work was gaining popularity, religion was a vital part of life. As Noel Annan points out, a century ago religion was the main refreshment from work for many people. It provided topics for lively discussion in vital groups, from the family to the congregation, wherein people could all together participate on many levels.\(^1\) Either as social institution or religious instrument of salvation,

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the Church played an active role in the Victorian scene.
Religion and religious observances were an important aspect of the Poet's childhood; these services left her with a strong allegiance to Christianity that never deserted her even through the publications of Lyell's discoveries or Darwin's investigations. Although she lived in an intellectual climate of increasing agnosticism and scepticism, she wrote for an audience sharing her own belief, one that is, therefore, receptive to her poems on this theme.

Mrs. Browning's faith stems from her Chapel attendance with her family in the Church of England; her eclecticism may have developed from the influence of parental antipathy to popery and from her occasional attendance at Baptist and Wesleyan Methodist services. Mr. Barrett's influence over his daughter's beliefs and intellect has been noted by all biographical critics, although it has been exaggerated by some. It is from Elizabeth Barrett herself that the best testimony of his influence can be obtained. It is there in the dedication to the 1844 volumes of Poems, with its tender and devoted sentiment, and in remarks made by the Poet, especially in the letters to Miss Mitford on this subject. The young Poet says:

Papa is my chaplain, -- prays with me every night; not out of a book, but simply and warmly at once, -- with one of my hands held in his and nobody besides him and me in the room. That is dear in him, is it not?^3

That her father affection for her was largely egoistic was sharply brought home to her when he later refused Elizabeth permission to leave the family and travel in Italy for her health. The passage noted above indicates the intense sharing of affection and religious ideas in the family; there are numerous other such references that help us to understand the formation of Elizabeth Browning's sincere and serious attitude toward her faith.

As Richard Altick notes, the music of the Chapel and the influence of religion in general on the lives of English people in the early nineteenth century can be said to be of great importance. Elizabeth Barrett wrote hymns, which reflect the Poet's ideas that mankind is evil, earth is cursed, and man's time on earth is but a space for working out the salvation of his soul. The Hymns are of four-line stanzas, rhyming abab, alternating tetrameter with trimeter, in most cases. Man should try to know God; by looking forward to reunion with Him, man can find solace in his earthly life.

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The hymns, written in the 1830's, express the Poet's devotion to God and are songs of praise, petition and fervour. Although, there are only five hymns they contain ideas and images that recur in other poems. The hymns are interrelated and present a small coherent expression in the midst of varied poetic production, reflecting Elizabeth Browning's religious beliefs and her faith in Christianity and expressing her complete reliance on God. In a letter to Miss Mitford, the Poet states that religious interest is necessary to perfect the human being; this interest is the crown of humanity. Still, essentially baring her soul to Mitford, the Poet states even more emphatically that Christ's religion is essentially poetry glorified. Therefore, the importance of the hymns is a partial index to her thinking and affords a glimpse of the Poet's proficiency in treating an idea of central importance to her work and her life.

The first hymn is a reaction to a comment from a sermon heard at Sidmouth in 1833. The Poet has obviously thought about and perhaps mediated upon these words of the minister:

The Lord Jesus, although gone to the Father, and we see Him no more, is still present with His Church: and in His heavenly glory expends upon her as intense

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5Mitford Letters, pp. 102-103.
a love, as in the agony of the garden
and the crucifixion of the tree. Those
eyes that wept, still gaze upon her.  

In the prose of the epigraph there is personification of the
Church and intensity of emotion. The entire hymn that follows
is an apostrophe to God with the Church appearing in a position
of supplication. Mankind, bloodstained and burdened with sin,
can, through the mediating Christ, appeal to the love of God.
Through love, mankind can be elevated and united with God.
Stanza II suggests a confession to Christ and reliance upon him:

O Loving Lord! O slain for love!
Thy blood upon thy garments came --
In wrap their folds our brows above,
Before we tell Thee all our shame!

[CPW, p. 57]

In closing the hymn, the Poet appeals to Christ to shed tears
once more for His Church; like children the people weep. The
hymn climaxes with an appeal to God to move the people from
their present state to one of love and unity.

Hymn II, "The Mediator" praises the virtue and
charity of Christ who is the sacrifice and redeemer. The
hymn's resolution is in the exhortation to seek the bright face
of Christ which can be found in the faces of all men. Because
Christ is the mediator for man, man finds the brightness and
love of God in His face; the Poet ends with an exhortation

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6Complete Poetical Works, p. 57.
to God to seek the darkness of man (the low and foul) in the
divine face of the Redeemer, in other words to be forgiving.

Another Hymn, "The Weeping Savior" is another plea
to the redemptive Christ to pity mankind and to help the
sinner become penitent for his sins. Throughout the hymn
there is a sense of sinful man imprisoned in the darkness and
corruption of the world. The petition of the hymn is that
Jesus as shepherd may watch over His people "Till love the strength
of sorrow wear, / And as Thou weepest, we may weep" [St. V. CPW, p. 58]. The last
stanza depicts a penitent people weeping in gratitude for the divine sacrifice.

Of all the hymns, "The Measure," is the most Hebraic
in feeling. Its tone is more tranquil and less passionate than
that of the other hymns. It counsels acceptance of earth's
sorrow, a frequent petition in other Poems of Mrs. Browning.

God has, the Poet states, "Weighed / The dust of earth and tears
of man in one / Measure" [St. L. CPW, p. 58]. Therefore, the
Poet believes, man must suffer and weep. It is useless to
petition God to remove our sorrow, for that is foreordained.
Her petition in this hymn is for patience with our human role.

"Since Without Thee We Do No Good" is a hymn printed
earlier with the translation of Prometheus Bound in 1833.
Ideas common to other hymns are also expressed: God is omni-
present and Omnipotent. As other hymns used the images of
dust and earth to emphasize the fraility and mortality of
man; so this hymn suggests the life cycle and the many paradoxes
of life. The first stanza states the form and ideas that are
discussed in the rest of the poem:

Since Without Thee we do no good,  
And with Thee do no ill,  
Abide with us in Weal and Woe, --  
In action and in will.

[CPW, p. 61]

The resolution of the poem echoes the ideas expressed in other hymns and religious poetry; man is reminded of his continual need to depend on God and also of the fact that after death his soul will rest with God. This is a typical expression of faith for Elizabeth Barrett Browning and represents a consistent statement of her philosophy. The hymns and many early poems show a reliance upon Christ as mediator and saviour. The hymns, poems and also sonnets demonstrate a deep love of God and a concern for the spiritual state of man. Frequently, the Poet is didactic, urging men to love God, to accept their lot on earth and to be concerned with immortal life. Reunion with God is confidently expected.

Yet, the Poet's views on religion are rather unorthodox. She states in her letters, for instance, that Christ's religion is essentially poetry glorified. Her religion is both intellectual and aesthetic. She had her moments of rebellion against the outward forms of observance; as a young woman she wished to stay home from Chapel services, but out of respect for her aunt, she

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7Mitford Letters, pp. 102-103.
continued to accompany the family, even though she felt the service to be superficial and hypocritical. She states of the Church that:

I wish the sacramental service were shortened, & weeded of its expression, "holy mysteries" & C. What mystery is there, can there be in this simple rite? Are there not many - [Weak brethren] who shrink back from holy mysteries, and who would hurry on with trembling joy to "do this in remembrance" of their Lord?

Similarly, in several letters to Mr. William Merry, written after reading a religious pamphlet he had published, she deplores controversy and discussion within the Christian Church because it weakens and divides believers. She appeals to her correspondent's love of truth, stating:

I believe that I do not sin against it [The Church schismatically as long as I love Christ, and recognise in Him the brotherhood of all Believers. As there are many mansions in heaven, so are there many Churches on earth: and the true sin of schism is (according to my perception of it) a sin against the unity of all the Churches of Christendom, and more or less... The universal Church of Christ is one and indivisible; and large should be the heart of its members, even as Christ's heart is to them all.

Her beliefs are always wider than sects or groups. In her poems she often uses the image of Jesus Christ as mediator; he is beneficient and is a source of strength. He is kind

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8 Diary of E.B.B., p. 124.
9 Diary of E.B.B., p. 139.
and pure [Hymn II. CPW, p. 57] and is "The Weeping Savior" [Hymn III. CPW, p. 58]. Yet numerous other references are made to the patriarchal aspect of God.

In "The Seraphim" the reader feels with the Poet a sense of God's power and magnificence as the reader obtains an insider's view of heaven through the eyes of the two celestial beings. Man's shortcomings are criticized in the sonnet "Discontent"; man lacks patience and forbearance. His burden of pain is metaphorically described:

...Ay, shouldering weights of pain,
We anchor in deep waters, safe from shore,
And hear submissive O'er the main
God's chartered judgment walk forever more.

[II. 11-14, CPW, p. 102]

Pain is made tangible by the use of the word "weight" in line II, while there is a feeling of calm inevitability in the last line. Here as in Hymn IV [CPW, p. 58], the tone of the poem is Hebraic, showing the Poet's conviction of God's authority. This attribute of God is essentially based upon the Old Testament, although the Poet makes frequent allusions to both Testaments.

Among other images reflecting the power of God is this one from the Sonnets from the Portuguese: "I sank and quailed/As if God's future thundered on my past" [CPW, p. 220]. Also, in sonnet XXXIII of this sequence, the speaker calls God, asking Him to allow her to stop hearing the voice of dead
loved ones so that she can hear the voice of her lover:

"Silence on the bier/While I call God -- call God!" There is awe in the repeated exclamation of God's name. Yet at times his judgements seem heavy, as in "Discontent," for, inspite of finding love, the speaker in sonnet XXXVI seems to feel that she is under a kind of sentence: "though I have grown serene/And strong since then, I think that God has willed/A still renewable fear" [CPW, p. 222].

In other pems, the Poet praises the world as the manifestation of God's creation. "Cheerfulness Taught by Reason" opens with: "I think we are too ready with complaint/
In this fair world of God's" [CPW, p. 102]. Nature is described with a Wordsworthian fervour in many poems. Following Carlyle's philosophy, Mrs. Browning believes that nature is "The living Garment of God"; the whole physical world shows forth his spirit. Nature images abound in "The Lost Bower," a reverie upon a secluded garden, she once found as a child. The poem contains lush, picturesque descriptions like those in "A Soul's Travelling," a poem contrasting city and country images. Some of the Poet's most fervent nature passages are in Aurora Leigh. In Book I, we find Aurora's description of the family mansion:

I threw my hunters off and plunged myself among the deep hills, ...
I dared to rest, or wander, in a rest
Made sweeter for the step upon the grass,
And view the ground's vast gentle dimplement
(As if God's finger touched but did not press
In making England), such an up and down
Of verdure, ...
A ripple of land; such little hills, the sky
Can stoop to tenderly and the wheatfields climb;
Such nooks of valleys lined with orchises,
Fed full of noises by the invisible streams;

[II.1070-1086, CPW, p. 269]
In all the images referred to above, the speaker's spirit is restored by contact with nature, or God's work.

Although, Elizabeth Barrett Browning is a Christian Poet, she studies and corresponds with others about philosophy, and argues points with correspondents like H.S. Boyd and Mr. Merry. She displays characteristics that are more unusual. William James notes in The Varieties of Religious Experience that "The overcoming of all the usual barriers between the individual and the Absolute is the great mystic achievement." Significantly, the barrier between the physical and spiritual world seems to be dissolved for the mystic. This phenomenon suggests itself from a number of passages in the Poet's work. Often there is a vision of heaven described or another world is glimpsed. Also there are lines and passages indicating that the Poet perceives no difference between physical and spiritual reality; indeed, spiritual reality, the concern with essence, is more important to her than material things. John Forster, James notes, was transported, that is, he seemed to be in another states of consciousness induced by certain words. Tennyson also states in his letters that he had experienced a kind of mystic revelatory state, arising from a tranquil, meditation-like period:

11 James, p. 301.
I have never had any revelations through an aesthetics, but a kind of waking trance -- this for lack of a better word -- I have frequently had, quite up from boyhood, when I have been all alone. This has come upon me through repeating my own name to myself silently, till all at once, as it were out of the intensity of the Consciousness of individuality, individuality itself seemed to dissolve and fade away into boundless being, and this is not a confused state but the clearest, the surest of the surest, utterly beyond words -- where death was an almost laughable impossibility -- the loss of personality (if so it were) seeming no extinction, but the only true life. I am ashamed of my feeble description. Have I not said the state is utterly beyond words?¹³

These feelings are possibly the source for Tennyson's poems on the mystic. And this description is comparable to statements made by Mrs. Browning in her letters and in some of the poetry.

Even as Tennyson notes the feeling of being out of himself, so does Mrs. Browning writes to Miss Mitford of a similar feeling. She tells the story of her mental state during grave illness, recalling that she prayed with her father:

I had a sort of vague satisfaction in seeing him kneeling there and in the feeling that he was praying for all of us. It was strange, my state then, and looks to me from hence like a dreamed-of dream! I am sure I never prayed myself.

¹³ "A Letter to Mr. B.P.Blood", quoted in James, p. 302.
for a long while. I seemed to lie too near to God to pray -- as if the sword were close to my neck, and I, lying without hope or fear, could not speak to the striker. It was power and weakness meeting together -- my sense of power in Him -- my sense of weakness in myself... the Hand had struck me and I could not speak.¹⁴

In this passage there is a suspension of the Poet's faculties much like the one described above in Tennyson's account.

Mrs. Browning's mysticism is in a sense defined by the early poem of Alfred Tennyson called "The Mystic." "Angels have talked with him," Tennyson states, and when one reads Mrs. Browning's poem it seems as though they have hovered close about her, for she often addresses them, asking for their support or agreement. The idea is an interesting allegory for communing with the inner self. It appears in "A Curse for a Nation" wherein the Poet says that an angel commands her to write. Metaphorically, it seems her conscience prodded her, yet the manifestation she chooses here and in works to represent this idea is an angel.

Mrs. Browning's mystic bent is even noted by the Athenaeum, which states in its Review of the 1838 Poems that the Poet "addresses herself to sacred songs with an emotional ecstasy suiting rather our Sister Celestines and Angelicas of

Port-Royal, than the religious Poets of our sober protestant communities.... What of the religious ecstasy of some of Herbert's poems, or Crashaw's, or Vaughan's? Perhaps this is one of the qualities of Mrs. Browning's work that contributes to her popularity with Latin readers.

Glimpses of mysticism impress themselves upon the reader's consciousness in reading this Poet's work. So pervasive is her faith that this theme is interwoven into many poems on diverse subjects. Not only does she treat religion as fundamental and necessary to man's happiness but she also tends to move every poem from a specific situation toward a climax or goal, concluding with a metaphysical reference that shifts the plane of the lyric from an earthly to a more esoteric one.

As one reads the Poet's work there is sometimes a sense of the presence of God, as well as a pervasive feeling that the Poet is close to things the reader may have trouble envisioning. Yet there can be little doubt of the reality of these ideas and images for Elizabeth Browning. Mrs. Browning explains herself somewhat in a letter complaining to Miss Mitford about their differences:

> It is not that we differ only by one of us caring for the ideal and the other for the actual, -- but that what You appear to call the ideal, is the very actual with me... as it perhaps will be with you, upon reconsideration. What! is it not true that the soul is as actually as your best seeding geranium? ...that our hold upon the spiritual world,

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15 Athenaeum, July 7, 1838, quoted in Mitford Letters, p. 33.
This idea of the reality of God is apparent in many poems. For instance, in "An Apprehension," she mentions a fear of criticism of friends and a consequent reluctance to confide in them. Then, in this personal sonnet, she mocks herself bitterly by telling of the scrutiny she feels:

...O angels, let your flood
Of bitter scorn dash on me! do ye hear
What I say who bear calmly all the time
This everlasting face to face with God?

[II. 11-14, CPW, p. 102]

Similar suggestions occur in other poems. An angel gazing at the face of God in "The Soul's Travelling," "Forgets the rush and rapture of his wings" [CPW, p. 38] in his awe. "A Thought for a Lonely Death-Bed" conveys the same idea of facing God; here the persona asks that "No deathly angel [interpose] 'twixt my face and thine,/ But stoop Thyself to gather my life's rose,..." [CPW, p. 101]. This sense of the reality of God and the spirit lends a tone of conviction and devotion to much of Mrs. Browning's poetry. Often there seems to be a blurring of the line of demarcation between what is seen and what is perceived; at times the

16Mitford Letters, p. 189.
Poet wishes for a fuller apprehension of the spiritual:

... Jehovah Lord,
Make room for rest, around me! out of sight
Now float me of the vexing land abhorred,
Till in deep calms of space my soul may right
Her nature, shoot large sail on lengthening cord,
And rush exultant on the Infinite.

(II. 9-14, CPW, p. 197)

At times the Poet has even tried to describe heaven from within, as she did in "The Seraphim." Another such view of heaven can be found in "Isobel's Child" [St. XXVIII, XXIX, CPW, p. 28]. Akin to this is the sound of the voice in nature bidding Aurora Leigh cling to life; so does the voice of God speak in "Sounds" [CPW, p. 38]. Though the poem is didactic, it does present a procession of people from all walks of life. Part III gives us a glimpse into the mysterious voice sounding:

...Hearken, hearken!
God speaketh to thy soul,
Using the supreme voice which doth confound
All life with consciousness of Diety,
All senses into one, --
As the seer-saint of Patmos, loving John
(For Whom did backward roll
The cloud-gate of the future) turned to see
The Voice which spake. It speaketh now,
Through the regular breath of the calm creation,
Through the moan of the creature's desolation
Striking, and in its stroke resembling
The memory of solemn vow
Which pierceth the din of a festival
To one in the midst, -- and he letteth fall
The cup with a sudden trembling.

[Part III. CPW, p. 39]
The central idea of the passage is that God's voice speaks through nature; the mystic suggestions are the compression of the senses into one sense and the impression of the transcendent oneness of creation.

"De Profundis" is an illuminating poem to close a discussion of the theme of religion in Mrs. Browning's works. The poem is one of the most moving and powerful ones on this topic because it represents a working out of her grief over her brother Edward's death by drowning off Torquay in 1840. Appearing in Last Poems, the edition prepared by Robert Browning after Elizabeth's death, the poem traces the course of her grief, a subject so painful to her that it was mentioned only twice in the Browning's correspondence during their courtship.

Written in a five-line stanza rhyming aabbc, with 'c' a refrain or variation thereof, the poem reveals the inner heart and mind of a grief-striken persona. The regular rhyme of the iambic tetrameter line in the first stanza is like the monotonous voice of child. The monotony, however, contributes to the tone of despair and disillusion. This tone increases steadily until the middle of the poem, when it reaches an intensity of despair, after which there is a dramatic change of tone. The last stanza shows acceptance of grief and pain, with the speaker throwing herself on God's mercy.

17 Complete Poetical Works, p. 436.
Many images seem quite modern because, like twentieth century Poets, Mrs. Browning groups images referring to anatomy and religion to form clusters of meaning. From the early to the late stanzas, there are suggestions of one or more senses being affected by grief until finally the speaker seeks to bury her cold and weary body [St. XII].

In St. I. the reference is to sight: the lost face of the loved one is dimmed, apparently by death and tears. Then the tongue of the loved one is stilled [St. II] and his heart stopped [St. III]. In stanza IV the point of view shifts to the speaker; she is "Cold before my summer's done" and deaf "in Nature's general tune." Her mental state is changed: she is "fallen too low for special fear,/ and here, with hope no longer here,/While the tears drop" [St. IV]:

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\text{The World goes whispering to its own,} \\
\text{'This anguish pierces to the bone;'} \\
\text{And tender friends go sighing round,} \\
\text{'What love can ever cure this wound?'}
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[St. V. CPW, p. 436]

Again the terms are anatomical, with bone, the sense of hearing (the ear), and the wounded body involved. St. VI suggests physical weariness and the engulfing darkness of a sleepless night: "The past rolls forward on the sun/ And makes all night. O dreams begun, /Not to be ended!" Hopes have been crushed, and any view of the future is difficult. The speaker grows colder; breath freezes [St. VII] and she
is trapped in winter, an idea associated in this Poet's work with isolation and despair. As she seems to slump and fall to earth, she asks permission to "loose these pilgrim-shoon" [St. XI] and to slip her heart into the grave: "Only to lift the turf unmown/ From off the earth where it has grown,... Creep in, Poor Heart." The ideal of burial is multi-layered. Having lost her heart the speaker wishes to bury it; symbolically this idea, however, implies death, for it is the body that will slip into the grave to join the loved one.

After this crisis of despair, a voice, not nature's but God's sounds; the speaker turns from a cry of despair to a song of praise for the world, physical and spiritual. St. XIX contains an image referring back to St. I: the speaker has felt anguish "which made pale the Sun." Then the weight of grief, symbolized by the thorn-wreath, is removed from her head, and she accepts her lot [St. XXI-XXII]. St. XXIII summarizes the emotions of the poem:

Through dark and dearth, through fire and frost, With emptied arms and treasure lost, I thank the.... [St.XXIII, CPW, p. 437]

The conclusion of the poem suggests an immersion somewhat like drowning:

And having in thy life-depth thrown Being and suffering (which are one), As a child drops his pebble small Down some deep well, and hears it fall Smiling -- so I. [St. XXIV. CPW, p. 437]
The oblique reference to Edward's death by drowning reveals a sense of identification with the dead brother.

Images, a mournful tone created by the use of assonance, and language conveying complete involvement of self; all work together in this poem to convey overpowering grief. After the speaker has suffered paralyzing anguish, her loss is accepted. We have heard her wish to hide in nature by slipping into the earth [St. XIII-XIV]. Then the voice of the poem changes the lament to a hymn of praise.

There is a mystic tone in:

He reigns above, He reigns alone;
Systems burn out and leave his throne;
Fair mists of seraphs melt and fall
Around Him, changeless amid all,—
Ancient of Days, whose days go on.

[St. XVII. CPW, p. 437]

The mood of darkness of the first half of the poem is transmuted into one of acceptance of the divine will and of resignation mixed with joy.

The grief of the poem is shown not only in terms of complete physical suffering but also is presented through Christian images such as the broken heart, the wounded body, the cup, the crown of thorns, and new vine. Passing through her dark journey deep into despair, the persona emerges on the other side of the passage into a joyous transport suggesting union with the deity. In archetypal terms, the motif is death and resurrection, that is, the speaker is nearly
extinguished by her burden of grief; she desires death (the burial images at the middle) and arrive at spiritual renewal (resurrection) by the conclusion. In this poem as in so many others, one of the Poet's fundamental beliefs is demonstrated: suffering is the necessary pathway to knowledge and understanding. While for many Victorians religion was a superficial thing or an attempt to cover deep doubts and scepticism, for Mrs. Browning it was a source of strength and solace. Her faith was not a convention but a profound conviction upon which many of the poems seem to be a meditation.

The religious side of Elizabeth Browning's character enriches her works; it can also be traced and understood by careful reading of the poems. The central ideas on religion tinged with mysticism are found in her works.

Heavenly life, which is free of strife and imperfection, is not like Utopia. Humankind is perfectible, not perfected; and Barrett Browning writes often of the flaws or circumstances which are the limitations impeding perfect human understanding. In "Pain in Pleasure" thoughts grow "nettle-rough" [I.10], and in "The Prisoner" the Poet's weak body prohibits her from expressing the "strange wild music" [I.8] of nature which she hears but which is becoming only "Visionary Pain" [I.11]. In "Perplexed Music" only angles can admire the harmony "Of God's will in His worlds" [I.4]; of which humankind has only partial view. In the Sonnet "Insufficiency," the mortal Poet chafes under the restrictions earthly life puts on fully
expressing the soul. The weak flesh, hindered by mortal limitations, struggles to translate its "inward thought" into Poetry. Her soul's urgency to express "the individual" and "The Universe,/In consummation of right harmony" [II. 5-6] overwhelms her careful rationality which seeks to make verse, and chaos ensues. She is left thinking that freedom to do so will come only in heaven:

Wait, soul, until thine ashen garments fall.
And then resume thy broken strains, and seek
Fit peroration without let or thrall.

[II. 12-14]

The spiritual side of Mrs. Browning's character seems to make biographers and critics uncomfortable at times. Its existence also seems to have diverted them to rather biased and unjust way of regarding her as a person. She is often dismissed as hysterical and unstable. Yet when the biography of the Brownings is considered in all its detail, it is often Elizabeth who comforts Robert Browning (who went into a decline after his mother's death, for instance). In Robert Browning this reaction is termed sensitive: in Elizabeth Browning her sensitivity is treated as evidence of her neurotic or unstable behaviour. Although it was this sensitivity of Elizabeth Barrett which made her write in protest against the inhuman treatment of the little children and the other social problems prevalent in England.

The extent of the change that Barrett Browning's
attitudes toward children and her manner of expression on the subject undergo may be observed in a comparison of two poems on similar topics: one, "The Cry of the Children," is from Poems of 1844, and the other is "A Song for the Ragged Schools of London" of the Last Poems. Not only do other political considerations enter the later poem (the relationship of England and Italy), but the poem reveals none of the obvious appeals to sentimentality used in the earlier poems.

The major social problem of the period, child labour, is excoriated in "The Cry of the Children" often compared with Hood's "Song of the Shirt," the poem has been called a classic of the dumb many who have been cheated of their birthright. Mrs. Browning frequently writes descriptive cameos of children but the description of working children evoked in this poem is almost painful. Like other poems of the 1830's and 40's, this one utilizes a dialogue between the children and their auditors. The Poet exhorts the reader to listen to the cries of these small workers. She seeks to involve the reader by making a Carlylean appeal to brotherhood and by addressing her audience as "My brothers."

Stanza I opens with a reference to the title: "Do ye hear the children weeping, O my brothers,/Ere the sorrow comes with years? Even if they are comforted by their mothers, they

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combine to weep over their labour. They are compared to other young creatures, kids, birds, fawns, and flowers. All these young creatures are free to play in nature, only the children already seem weighted down by age.

The young lambs are bleating in the meadows,
The young birds are chirping in the nest,
The young fawns are playing with the shadows,
The young flowers are blowing toward the West—But the young, young children, O my brothers,
They are weeping bitterly!

[St.I. CPW, p. 157]

Stanza II contrasts the young of stanza I with the old concluding that "The old hope is hardest to be lost."
The children only seem to hope for rest [St.II. 4], stating that one of their number, Alice, who has died, is smiling, "merry go her moments, lulled and still" in the grave [1.49, CPW, p. 156]. Resigned to their lot, they say, "'It is good when it happens,... That we die before our time'" [II.51-52, CPW, p. 157]. Leave these dreary thoughts, the Poet asks in St. V; go out and play in the meadow:

But they answer, 'Are your cowslips of the meadows Like our weeds anear the mine? Leave us quiet in the dark of the coal-shadows From your pleasures fair and fine!'

[II.61-64, CPW, p.157]

Weary of working, the children ask only for rest. Their cry is pathetic and are weary and overworked:

They look up with their pale and sunken faces, And their looks are sad to see,
For the man's hoary anguish draws and presses
Down the cheeks of infancy;
"Your old earth," they say, "is very dreary,
Our young feet," they say," are very weak;
Few paces have we taken, yet are weary --
Our grave-rest is very far to seek."

[St.II.CPW, p. 157]

The images of the next few stanzas use sound and motion to suggest machinery. Rhythm also alters, there is a repetition of the verb 'turns' in stanza VII that almost makes the reader reel with these pitiful speakers. The children:

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

[St.VI. CPW, p.157]

The assonance of 'ground' and 'round' adds to the general cry. Then these images are intensified to show heat and vertigo:

'For all day the wheels are droning, turning;
Their winds comes in our faces,
Til 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,
Turn the black flies that crawl along the ceiling:--
And all day the iron wheels are droning--

[St.VII.77-85,CPW,p.157]

The verbals add a monotonous sound that also suggests continuous motion. The whole scene depicted in the stanza above suggests imprisonment.
After the noise of these stanzas, the Poet looks to silence for contrast, as if to give the children a respite. Having shown us their state of near-desperation, she now allows them the solace of human contact: "Let them hear each other breathing,... Let them touch each other's hand" [St.VIII.CPW, p. 157]. Her ideas suggest both Carlyle and Ruskin to the reader, for she reminds us of their souls. She flings defiance at the noisy wheels:

"Let them prove their living souls against the nation
That they live in you, or under you, O Wheels".

[St.VIII. 95-96,CPW,p.157]

The children cry but they do not believe that God hears their cries; they fear the noise of the machinery drowning them out. God is "Speechless as stone"/And they tell us, in His image is the Master/Who commands us to work on" [11.126-128, CPW, p. 158]. Appealing to brotherhood once more, the Poet asks the reader to remember his religious instruction: "Do you hear the children weeping and disproving,/O my brothers, what ye Preach?" Without support from their fellowmen and acknowledgement of their wretched existence, the children cannot believe in God's mercy.

St. XII is a strong catalogue summarizing the children's plight:

They have never seen the sunshine,...
They know the grief of man, without its wisdom;
They sink in man's despair, without its calm;
Are slaves without the liberty in Christdom,
Are martyrs, by the pang without the palm:
Are worn as if with age, yet unretrievably
The harvest of its memories cannot reap,—
Are orphans of the earthly love and heavenly.
Let them weep! let them weep!

[St.XII.CPW, p. 158]

Having presented this graphic picture of misery to her readers, the Poet uses a concluding image certain to have shocked Victorian sensibility. The nation is personified; it treads on the children's hearts with a "mailed heel," moving onward to its throne leaving a purple path of the child-worker's blood. The last lines of the poem show a public cursed by the children sobbing in silence. The Poem presents a plea that could fail to move only the most hardened. A recent biography of Robert Browning notes that with this poem the Poet had shown herself to be a devoted partisan of the poor and the weak; the poem had succeeded in moving all England.¹⁹

Among the devices that contribute to its effectiveness are the numerous onomatopoetic ones suggesting the noise of machine and factory, the catalogues of St. VII and XIII, and the frequent dactylic and anapestic rhythms that seem to make the poem rush to its agonized conclusion.

Somewhat allied to this well-known poem is one called "A Song for the Ragged Schools of London," written in 1854 and published in a small pamphlet with a poem of Robert Browning's for a benefit presided over by Arabella Moulton Barrett. Although the speaker in this poem acknowledges her geographic distance from England, she calls upon her countrymen and women to see the plight of the children. Their attention in this case is directed toward a particular, not a generalized appeal. The early stanzas of the poem, purporting to be uttered in Italian voices show England's excessive economic power and might. She is "rich in Coal and Oak" [I.5] "her wealth of golden coin/Works the welfare of nations" [II. 11-12]; yet in her prosperity she has victims [I.16, CPW, p. 431]. Again these victims are the "children small,/Split like blots about the city,/ Quay and street and palace-wall" [II. 45-46, CPW, p. 43]. There is a ring of Blake's "London" in the last lines quoted, although it is doubtful that the Poet read his work.

The children are no longer seen as lambs, birds, flowers, or fawns; rather they are shown in real destitution:

Ragged children, hungry-eyed,
Huddled up out of the coldness
On your doorstep, side by side,
Till your footman damns their boldness.

---

^Complete Poetical Works, p. 431.
In the alleys, in the squares,
Begging, lying little rebels;
In the noisy thoroughfares,
Struggling on with piteous trebles.

[II.53-60, CPW, p. 432]

These children are diverse -- patient and wicked, sickly and healthy; what they share is their poverty, both financial and spiritual. The ragged children of the poem seem to be afflicted not by work and by industry, but by idleness, ignorance, hunger and the elements. As they huddle on doorsteps in the cold or cry as they beg in the streets, they suggest the well-known character of the little match girl from the Hans Christian Anderson tale or some of Charles Dickens' London waifs. The imagery of the poem creates marked contrasts between rich and poor, noble and lowly people, and plenty and want. Appealing not just to brotherhood as in the earlier poem but also to motherhood, the Poet attempts to enlist the reader's sympathy to support a program of education to relieve the suffering of these little ones, to "put a thought beneath their rags"[I.3] and to give them:

...a place in RAGGED SCHOOLS,
Where the outcasts may tomorrow
Learn by gentle words and rules
Just the uses of their sorrow.

[II. 121-124, CPW, p. 432]

The lines above allude to the Poet's philosophy of man learning to bear his lot in life, living with sorrow and burdened by
life's trials. It is doubtful that the 'thought beneath their rags' could possibly find room there if the children's physical wants remain unsatisfied, but the idea is the Poet's ever-present idealistic and humanistic one. Mrs. Browning often deals well with the abstract, treating the idea while taking little or no practical thought for ways to implement it. At least, as in Aurora Leigh, her work points out many existing problems, bringing them dramatically to the public's wandering attention.

The most interesting lines of the poem may not be those pointing out the indifference and ills of the mother country but rather those that sketch portraits of lovely English children and appeal to the maternal side of her readers. One imagines the tenderness of Mrs. Browning toward her own small child is partly responsible for the glowing portraits of these lines. The needy children are:

Healthy children, with those blue English eyes, fresh from their Maker, Fierce and ravenous, staring through At the brown loaves of the baker.

[II. 73-76, CPW, p. 432]

These lines conjure up Les Miserables. Moving from this picture of want, the Poet remarks on the Roman comment that "'English children pass in bloom/All the prettiest made for blessing'" [II. 79-80, CPW, p. 432].

The glowing children seem like angels, the Poet
states. Then turning maternal instinct to her purpose in this work, she asks:

Can we smooth down the bright hair,  
O my sisters, calm, unthrilled in  
Our heart's pulse? Can we bear  
The sweet looks of our own children,  
While those others, lean and small,...  
Spot our streets,...

[II.85-91, CPW, p. 432]

Springing as they do out of a topical reference or request, both poems may be considered occasional verse, but the earlier poem has more focus on the topic at hand. It contains more hard original images and is less derivative. However, the same tone of righteous anger against society sounds through both. The images and the shaping of the poems are both distinctly Mrs. Browning's.

Two other powerful poems of social protest are "The Runway Slave at Pilgrim's Point" and "A Curse for a Nation." The first poem is a monologue delivered by a black woman who has been the victim of forced miscegenation. The poem first appeared in America in 1848 in The Liberty Bell, the publication of the national Anti-slavery Bazaar in Boston.21 The Poet states in a letter to Mr. Boyd that the poem is so ferocious that it may not be published, but she says this with apparent

21 Complete Poetical Works, p. 191.
satisfaction. The humanitarian theme of this poem is close to the Poet's heart for Mrs. Browning writes another scathing condemnation of slavery, "A Curse for a Nation," which appears in Poems Before Congress, 1860.

The speaker in the poem, "The Runaway Slave at Pilgrim's Point," a black woman, is fleeing from slave-hunting pursuers in the poem. She has felt oppression, but also she has known the love of a black man, until the couple were separated, the husband killed and the wife physically and sexually abused by her owners. The child she subsequently bears looks white, and the mere sight of it maddens the mother, so that she strangles it and flees to the woods to bury it. Afterwards the mother feels soothed and reconciled with her child's spirit. The speaker, who feels herself to be surrounded by pilgrim-ghosts in the night, realizes that these ghosts are changed with the morning light into real pursuers. As she is about to be captured, she turns on the hunters, and in the manner of the hunted in ancient story, curses them. She dies, however, lifting her curse in the name of her spiritual union with her white child.

Powerful in its use of the moment of heightened emotion and its multiple images of maternity and cruelty, light and dark, the poem shows the Poet at the height of her powers, lamenting the plight of a woman placed in a particular position by society.

^Complete Poetical Works, p. 191.
Using a first-person narrative technique, the Poet shows us the feelings of the oppressed person from within.

The images of light and darkness, suggest both literal and allegorical meanings in the poem. First, there is the contrast of skin colour between the hunter and the hunted; second, the use of night, which comforts and conceals, as opposed to daylight which exposes ruthlessly. Darkness in the poem is associated with goodness, and whiteness or white skin in particular, with evil. The first point, the difference in skin colour between the woman and her hunters, serves to heighten the tension and terror between the groups. Also, the difference in skin colour between mother and child is the reason for the woman's madness. This idea points to the evils of miscegenation. The second point is an interesting reversal of the usual treatment of darkness as evil and concealing. In this case darkness is good and kind; it helps generate sympathy for the black persona, and it identifies her with goodness.

Darkness not only conceals the black woman; it also comforts. The dark forest she flees to is not to be feared, but is rather a place of refuge. After white angels free the child's spirit, the mother buries the child while angels mock her:

> Through the forest - tops the angels far,  
> With a white sharp finger from every star,  
> Did point and mock at what was done.

[St.XXVI. CPW, p. 194]

Note that the white star is evil, representing the white society's view of the speaker, and reinforcing the feeling of
pursuit and oppression in the poem. During the burial of the child, the desperate mother is comforted as earth intervenes between her and her child:

All, changed to black earth, nothing white,  
A dark child in the dark! ensued  
Some comfort,...

[St.XXVII. CPW, p.194]

Throughout the poem allusions to Pilgrim's Point and the setting of American colonialism occur. In fact, the speaker stands on pilgrim's point, and kneels down "on this mark." We may assume that the poet intended us to visualize Plymouth Rock itself. Another point reinforcing this idea is the use of the soul of pilgrim ancestors, they are the audience addressed throughout the poem, except for the last stanzas. Then the audience addressed becomes the pack of white hunters who are, ironically, descendants of the first fathers: "their hunter sons" [St. XXX. CPW, p. 194]. White becomes evil in this portion of the poem, as daylight reveals the speaker, and the hunters close in like a wolf-pack. They surround the speaker, but she holds them off with her curse and her vivid reminder that she, too, is human. She taunts them with origin "of the Washington race/ And this land is the free America" [St. XXXII. CPW, p.194]; she shows the marks of her whippings in servitude. Then, in the name of her dead child, she curses the children of her
captors, and calls on her fellow-slaves to revolt. But the real curse is on the nation:

For in this UNION you have set
Two kinds of men in adverse rows,
Each loathing each; and all forget
The seven wounds in Christ's body fair,
While HE sees gaping everywhere
Our countless wounds that pay no debt.

[St. XXXV. CPW, p. 195]

The conflicts brewing in America at mid-century are dramatized by means of the image of opposing rows; the Christian reference is clearly a reminder of the basic human concept of brotherhood.

Thus, in a poem treating a volatile contemporary issue, we find a heroine who is despised and tormented, one who makes the reader see and feel her situation and her humanity. The universal values of the Poet surface through the dramatic monologue so that we feel sympathy not only for the central character but for the large groups of people caught up in the racial strife of a nation. There is also for the American reader an almost familiar ring about the dialogue of this heroine, for in her madness as well as in the morbidity of the description of the strangling of the child, they are reminded of the bizarre narrators of Edgar Allan Poe's short stories.

Mrs. Browning comments in a letter that the poem was written at the request of friends in America; she arranged in the 1850 edition of the Poems that "it should come next to the 'Cry of the Children' to appear impartial as to national
In 1853, Mrs. Jameson apparently wrote to the Poet expressing disapproval of Harriet Beecher Stowe's "Uncle Tom's Cabin" and the author's choice of topics. Mrs. Browning's reply is vehement in defense of her American friend:

Is it possible you think that a woman has no business with questions like the questions of slavery? Then she had better use a pen no more. She had better subside into slavery and concubinage herself, I think, as in times of old, shut herself up with the penelopes in the "woman's apartment" and take no rank among thinkers and speakers... A difficult question -- Yes! All virtue is difficult.24

"The Runaway Slave at Pilgrim's Point", written in 1846 is essentially about a different topic, slavery. Barrett Browning's views on motherhood are tinctured by the political point being made, namely, that the slave system perverts all human relationships touched by bondage. Nevertheless, the poem does hint that she is undergoing a change in attitude toward children. In killing the baby, the slave mother is killing her white master, the baby's father, from whom she has just escaped. In death the child is freed to go to heaven, but the mother is left behind feeling cold and accused.

Barrett Browning cannot allow the enslaved mother to damn herself, however, and in the last stanza the mother

envisions herself being reunited with her child in heaven. At 
her death (thus her freedom) at the hands of white slave catchers 
of Plymouth, she says, "I leave you all curse free/In my broken 
heart's disdain" [II.252-53]. The absolution is due more to 
Barrett Browning's Christian orthodoxy than to any tenderness 
to the slave (or Barrett Browning) feels toward the pursuers -- 
Barrett Browning could not let her die damned for cursing. The 
woman's death is enough of a curse on her hunters; she need not 
add a further curse for they are already damned by their actions. 
Instead the slave looks forward to reconciliation with her child 
in heaven where there are no distinctions between black and 
white, and her last words are spoken in grief not anger.

The changing attitude, then, that the poem offers is 
the possibility that a child could be other than mysterious 
and delicately beautiful. This particular relationship between 
mother and child is meant to be regarded as unnatural, but Barrett 
Browning expands her sympathies in allowing that a mother might 
not be totally devoted to her baby and might even feel the need 
to kill it. Her acknowledging the reality of child-abuse is 
a step away from romantic fantasies of motherhood. The ambivalence 
of the mother's loving, hating and fearing the child -- a pervers-
sion wrought by slavery, of course -- can be seen in this passage:

My own, own child! I could not bear 
To look in his face, it was so white; 
I covered him up with a kerchief there, 
I covered his face in close and tight:
And he moaned and struggled, as well might be,  
For the white child wanted liberty --  
Ha, ha! he wanted the master-right  
He moaned and beat with his head and feet,  
His little feet that never grew;  
He struck them out, as it was meet,  
Against my heart to break it through:  
I might have sung and made him mild,  
But I dared not sing to the white-faced child  
The only song I knew.

[II. 120-33, CPW, p. 195]

The "only song" is the name of the man she loves, who has been beaten and dragged away from her.

The mother's motive for killing the child is a combination of fury and fear that she might be driven to damn the innocent child:

Why, in that single glance I had  
Of my child's face, ... I tell you all,  
I saw a look that made me mad!  
The master's look, that used to fall  
On my soul like his lash... or worse!  
And so, to save it from my curse,  
I twisted it round in my shawl.

[II. 141-47, CPW, p. 195]

She later says, by way of explanation, "I am not mad: I am black" [I. 218]. Jeanette Marks notes that, "Not a little of the interest in American Slavery was due to the influence of her own family history. The vehemence of her attack on American slavery suggests something compensatory for her helplessness as the granddaughter and daughter of men who had owned thousands of slaves, and her knowledge that the bread
in her mouth and the privilege of her day were the result of "American" or colonial slave labour."\(^\text{25}\)

Mrs. Browning wrote another poem, "A Curse for a Nation," on the subject of slavery that aroused public controversy. She attacked American slavery, yet some people apparently thought that she had launched another salvo at England. Preston noted:

We ourselves got, and indeed richly deserved, a sharp taste of Mrs. Browning's denunciatory eloquence in the piece entitled "A Curse for a Nation," which stands at the end of the Poems Before Congress.... No doubt we were in mortal sin when these words were written, and escaped only by a speedy and terrible purgation the greater part of the woes which they denounced. But the oldest and most inexplicable part of the whole matter is that many people in England, including the astute Mr. Chorley, who himself reviewed the Poems Before Congress in the Athenaeum, understood the Curse to be launched against England.\(^\text{26}\)

England is accused of self-interest and other crimes in the Prologue, but the Curse contains many clear references to America. In both parts of the poem the Poet draws upon images of the Bible; the opening suggests the vision of St. John at the beginning of Revelations, for the Poet states that she is commanded by an angel to write. Obviously, the


\(^{26}\)Complete Poetical Works, pp. 537-538.
command is an inner-compulsion, one that is frequently objectified by this Poet as an angel. Trying like Job to avoid the command, she states that she would rather not write for she is "bound by gratitude,/By love and blood,/To brothers of mine across the sea," and her own country is not without blame: "'What curse to another land assign,/When heavy-souled for the sins of mine'" [II. 31-32, CPW, p. 423]. But the angel is insistent that she write for other women who "weep and curse":

'And thou shalt take their part tonight,  
Weep and write.  
A curse from the depths of womanhood  
Is very salt, and bitter, and good.'

Complying, the Poet sends her work over the sea. Obviously she sees herself in the role of Carlylean Poet-seer. After this prologue of justification, she vilifies America, largely for doing evil and being blind to the hypocrisy of her actions that deny her great charters. Although the language and the accusations of the poem seem excessive. When they are examined stanza by stanza, they are just ones. It is the cumulative effect of these verses that almost offends by its bitterness of tone. Even though America has 'broken its own chain' by its revolution, it still dares to "bear down with brand and thong/on the souls of others" [II.3-4,CPW, p. 423]. Americans stand:

In the State  
Of Freedom's foremost acolyte,  
Yet keep calm footing all the time  
On writhing bond - slaves,...

[II. 7-9, CPW, p. 423]
They apparently see no injustice in this.

Elizabeth Barrett described herself as imperatively called to reprove American slavery, over her own protest that there were social evils in England which should prevent her from criticizing those of other countries:

My heart is sore
For my own land's sins: for little feet
Of children bleeding along the street.

[II. 18-20, CPW, p. 423]

Part II of the Curse shifts to a six-line stanza rhyming aab ccbx (refrain); the tone condemns this nation to a position of shame while it watches the injustices perpetuated by other nations around the world, yet scarcely dares to lift its own voice to protest:

Your scorn ye shall somewhat abate
As ye took O'er the wall;
For your conscience, tradition, and name
Explode with a deadlier blame
Than the worst of them all.
This is the curse. Write.

[II. 51-56, CPW, p. 424]

Here, the refrain 'Write' is powerful, echoing like the angel's command. This repetition, like that of "The Rhyme of Duchess May," becomes irritating. As far as content is concerned, when one considers the Poet's curse in the light of America's performance in the arena of world affairs since 1860, one feels her voice was only too prophetic.
Similar sentiments are also expressed in the Poet's prose. In a letter to John Ruskin on the topic of slavery, she is equally vehement. On some points she has common sympathies with him:

So far in sympathy. In regard to the slaves, no, no, no; I belong to a family of West Indian slaveholders, and if I believed in curses, I should be afraid. I can at least thank God that I am not an American. How you look serenely at slavery, I cannot understand, and I distrust your power to explain. Do you indeed?27

In another poem the Poet defends a woman she regards as helpless. "Void in Law" presents a woman wronged by the society, in her view. The speaker is a divorced mother; like Isobel and the Virgin Mother of the earlier poems she addresses her small child. Noting the child's resemblance to his father, the mother derives comfort and strength from the thought that even though the court's decree sets her husband free of matrimonial bonds, "we twain the decision refuse" [St. VI. CPW, p. 426]. Justice, she believes, will await her and her former husband:

Let him learn we are waiting before The grave's mouth, the heaven's gate, God's face, With implacable love evermore.

[St. VII. CWP, p. 426]

The mother's plea is quite sympathetic because she addresses not a tribunal or her former husband but the tiny child she holds. We also note an intermingling of the themes of religion and social protest because the poem concludes with a metaphysical idea, an appeal to Christ to protect the child. There is also an interesting twist in the last stanza, for the mother notes that the infant Christ "came to his own who rejected Him here/But the Magi brought gifts all the same" [St. XI. CPW, p. 427]. The mother's gift to her child is her sorrow: "My gifts are the griefs I declaim!" By overcoming her sorrow and offering her child all her love, the mother hopes she can make up to it for the loss of its father, by the decree of man's, not God's, laws.

Mrs. Brownings' protests against the conduct of England in relation to other actions is noted above in the references to the Prologue of "A Curse for a Nation." In other works in Poems Before Congress and in ones that appeared posthumously in Last Poems the Poet raises her voice loudly against England's indifference to the plight of Italy in the throes of its attempted revolution even as she pointed out hypocrisy and indifference to problems at home in "The Cry of the children" and "A song for the Ragged Schools." Elizabeth's anger against duplicity in high places extends also to the Papacy in "A View across the Roman Campagna" (1861). This poem is an extended metaphor based on Jesus' walking on the
sea of Galilee. "Saint Peter's Church" is seen as a ship
wracked by storm, in danger of being wrecked. But Peter's
voice is silent. The Poet calls on him to walk on the stormy
water with Christ. There is a sharp allusion to the riches
of the Papal See, in stanza VI:

Peter, Peter! He does not stir;
His nets are heavy with silent fish;
He reckons his gains, and is keen to refer
--'The broil on the shore, if the Lord should wish;
But the sturgeon goes to the Cesar's dish.'

[St.VI.26-30, CPW, p. 445]

The conclusion shows the Poet's fear that because of capitula-
tion to the French only death can come to Rome; after "the
triple crown off the Gallic cock... what bird comes next in
the tempest-shock?/ -- Vultures!"

Mrs. Browning writes with fierce anger against all
the factions, she sees as working against the central cause
of Italian unification and freedom from foreign domination.

In the poem "Mother and Poet" in Last Poems, the
grief of the mother is shown who has lost both her sons in
Italian cause; and thus, the waste of lives in war is depicted.
The Poet torn by anguish because she had taught her sons to
fight for freedom, feels cut off from her writing by her
emotions. A conflict exists between filial love and patriotism.
As in Aurora Leigh, art counts for less than love, in this
case mother love. This mother's situation transcends the
particular instance and states the feeling of all women in wartime:

Both boys dead? but that's out of nature...
And, when Italy's made, for what end is it done
If we have not a son?

The birth-pangs of nations will wring us at length
Into wail such as this-- and we sit on forlorn
When the man-child is born.

[St. XV. XIX. CPW, p. 448]

The last lines are a cry against the futility of war
and its destruction of life.

The waste of war is also deplored by a young woman
in "Parting lovers." Even while she accepts the need of men
to fight, she shows the woman's side, throws aside protesta-
tions of false modesty, and admits her love. She will stand
by his side, saying, "Our Italy invokes the youth/To die if
need be" [St. IX. CPW, p. 446]. But not only the men sacrificed:

Heroic males the country bears,--
But daughters give up more than sons:
Flags wave, drums beat, and unawares
You flash your souls out with the guns,
And take your Heaven at once.

But we! -- we empty heart and home
Of life's life, love! we bear, to think
You're gone-- to feel you may not come,--
To hear the door-latch stir and clink,
Yet no more you!... nor sink.

[St.XI.XII. CPW, p. 446]

In these lines the Poet captures all the quiet desolation
of woman's lot in wartime, showing the waiting for someone
who may never come home again.

Similarly, "The Forced Recruit" [CPW, p. 442] shows a young man who is conscripted by the Austrians and sent into battle against his countrymen. He faces the line with an unloaded gun, dying courageously, the Poet feels. She deplores the waste of human life but feels that if the cause succeeds it will have been worth the sacrifice.

Barrett Browning was also aware of child beating (though she saw it as a lower class people's phenomenon) and was not unsympathetic to the causes for it. Barrett Browning deplored such a behaviour in a woman and Marian Erle's plight as a child is told in *Aurora Leigh*. Aurora, retells the story of Marian's birth, a retelling somewhat coloured by passionate outrage against the forces in society which contributed to Marian's degradation. Marian, was most unwelcome as a baby; was treated cruelly, both physically and psychically; and became the family "tramped," - could not even bring in sufficient money at child labour as did other children from poor families:

> Her first cry in our strange and strangling air,  
> When cast in spasms out by the shuddering womb,  
> Was wrong against the social code -- forced wrong...  
> What business had the baby to cry there?

[Book III. CPW, p. 843-46]

The abuse which Marian's mother administered is depicted by
Elizabeth Barrett in the following lines:

...In between the gaps
Of such irregular work he drank and slept,
And cursed his wife because, the pence being out,
She could not buy more drink. At which she turned
(The worm), and beat her baby in revenge
For her own broken heart.

(Book III. CPW, p. 865-70)

Mrs. Browning also wrote about Prostitution with much courage and frankness, and shocked many of her contemporaries terribly. Her own brother thought that Aurora Leigh was unfit for any girl to read, and indeed many English girls were forbidden by their mothers to read it, while the 'Dublin University Magazine' considered that no women ought to read it because of its indecencies. Mrs. Browning as happily married women of the unblemished reputation, could afford to say what she felt must be said on behalf of her sex. When she was in London during Crimean War, she had written to a friend about the pathetic state of women: "War, War? It is terrible certainly. But there are worse plagues, deeper griefs, dreader wounds than the physical. What of the forty thousand wretched women in this city? The silent writhing of them is to me more appalling than the roar of the canons." She was determined to champion their cause in the poem on which she was then engaged i.e. Aurora Leigh expecting

that as a result she would be labelled 'as a disorderly woman and free thinking Poet.' She referred to the libertive materialism that:

Slurs our cruel streets from end to end
With eighty thousand women in one smile,
Who only smile at night beneath the gas.
The body's satisfaction and no more,
Is used for argument against the soul's
Here, too; the want, here too, implies the right.

The reaction to this plight of women was not sympathetic but rather something which should be talked behind closed door. In a letter to Mrs. Martin, he says:

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 ought not to refer to, by any manner of means, says conventional tradition. Now I have thought deeply otherwise. If 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. I have spoken therefore, and in speaking have used plain words - words which look like blots, and which you yourself would put away - words which, if blurred or softened, would imperil perhaps the force and righteousness of the moral influence.29

Mrs. Browning's very sensible views about sex must have helped to free minds of other women of her day. Herself irreproachably respectable, she was not at all conscious about other women who lived in sin, so long as they openly admitted

it and were not hypocritical or furtive about it. She was tolerant with all such women, from George Sand, and George Eliot to Isa Blagden's little maid who had been dismissed because she was pregnant; 'I am very sorry for her... there was a wild-fruit flavour about that poor girl with her sudden radiance of a smile - Oh, that wretched man. But Isa, I'm afraid you don't sufficiently realise to yourself the physical tendencies of the sexes.' What she despised was the hypocrisy, the different standards for men and women, which enveloped the subject of sex relations. 'The censure "with a difference" extended by our gracious world to male and female offenders - the crushing into dust for the woman - and the "Oh you naughty man" ism for the betrayer - appears to me an injustice which cries upward from the earth.' Elizabeth Browning had charity for ignorant servant girls who were seduced, but none at all for the 'light women of a thrifty vice' who are, 'hard upon the rent. In any sister's virtue,' their own being so darned and patched with perfidy that from a distance it passes as whole:

They top the poor street-walker by their lie
And look the better for being so much worse:
The devil's most devilish when respectable.

30 Kenyon Transcript, Undated letter to Isa Blagden.
Such plain speaking, such a preference for honest sexuality over hypocritical pretence, was most alarming to Mrs. Browning's contemporaries. She shocked Thackeray by her poem 'Lord Walter's Wife' in which wife shames her husband's friend out of his desire for her by describing in plain words the desire which he was not ashamed to feel, but was disgusted to hear spoken of.'

These men! Oh these men over-vice,
Who are shocked if a colour not virtuous,
is frankly put on by a vice.

Thackeray told Mrs. Browning that any poem which, like this one, contained 'an account of unlawful passion, felt by a man for a woman' would cause an outcry among his readers, however good the moral of the story was. Mrs. Browning's reply seems wonderfully uninhibited and full of common sense by comparison. "I am not a 'fast woman.' I don't like coarse subjects but I am deeply convinced that the corruption of our society requires not shut doors and windows, but light and air: and that it is exactly because pure and prosperous women chose to ignore vice, that miserable women suffer wrong by it everywhere."

Mrs. Browning sees the Poet as Vates, the Seer. Her concern for the moral obligation of the Poet places her in the company of Wordsworth, Tennyson, Arnold; and Robert Browning. Her strong feelings on social injustice shows her kinship with Carlyle, Ruskin, and Arnold. Yet her voice is distinctive; it is, like Mrs. Gaskell's very much a woman's voice expressing concern over problems from a particular perspective. But the perspective is not narrow.
Deal with us nobly, women though we be,  
And honour us with truth if not with Praise.  

["Aurora Leigh"Part V.CPW,p.82-83]