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Chapter 1

The Liberal Self: Wordsworth and Barrett Browning

> I really believe I am disinterested! At least I feel as if I moved and breathed not for myself!
> —Elizabeth Barrett, "Glimpses into my own life and literary character"[1]

> The Excursion is to the Wordsworthian what it can never be to the disinterested lover of poetry, — a satisfactory work.
> —Mathew Arnold, Preface to The Poems of Wordsworth[2]

This chapter considers the ways that nineteenth-century poetry dramatizes the formation of the liberal self. It explores the negotiation between the individual and the social that is carried out in poetry by William Wordsworth and Elizabeth Barrett Browning and it recognizes this dialectic as the motivating dilemma of a liberal poetic, a dilemma that finds expression in a variety of contexts, from the small social unit of a marriage, to the international arena of liberal republicanism. I begin by tracking the way ideas about the social self are understood and articulated by a liberal philosophical tradition, focusing on developing discourses of interest, disinterest and indifference in John Locke and John Stuart Mill.[3] I then read The Excursion by Wordsworth (1814) and Aurora Leigh by Barrett Browning (1856) as long poems that seek to accommodate individual interest within the disinterested, or mutually interested, structures of nature and society.

The two epigraphs that begin this chapter allude to the dynamic relationship between interest and disinterest that I characterize as liberal. The first, taken from "Glimpses into my own Life and Literary Character," an autobiographical fragment written by a young Elizabeth Barrett, is one of a number of early examples of the young poet's application of Lockean doctrine to her own developing character. Her declaration of disinterest can barely suppress the enthusiastic self-interest that bursts forth onto the page. The repeated use of the first person pronoun, the passionate

exclamations and even the construction "not for myself," which asserts the self while avowing to deny it, all suggest that at the point of writing Barrett, although determined to move and breathe for some other person or cause, could not bring anything other than herself to mind. Disinterest is at once challenged and enlivened by a deeply felt individuality. The poet's strong sense of self both drives her commitment to disinterest and puts it at risk. The second epigraph takes us back to the original liberal literary critic, Matthew Arnold, who directs his disinterested gaze first and foremost towards poetry. Like Barrett's essay, Arnold's comment makes room for both the interested and the disinterested reader. Arnold's words are, on one hand, decisive. Their dismissal of Wordsworth's long poem is uncontroversial in its accord with other Victorian readers—notably John Stuart Mill—who judged the work to be an aesthetic, if not a philosophical, failure.[4] And yet a certain ambivalence haunts his syntax, so that in saying what he means, that The Excursion is an unsatisfactory work, Arnold allows an opposite perspective, that The Excursion is, to the Wordsworthian, a satisfactory work, to be heard. "Satisfactory" is, to be sure, dry praise. Nevertheless, by framing his assessment of Wordsworth in this way, Arnold perhaps exposes his own Wordsworthian bias: Arnold the disinterested lover of poetry makes room for Arnold the interested reader, a figure to whom the name "lover" might more naturally belong. Arnold's remarks are especially apt because he judges The Excursion on its own terms, attempting to regard it with the indifferent gaze of the Wanderer, whose perspective dominates the early part of the poem. This chapter considers Barrett Browning, like Arnold, as a pupil of Wordsworthian disinterest. It begins by tracing the shift from classical to Victorian liberalism via the discourse of interest and disinterest that occupies the ontological and political philosophy of John Locke and John Stuart Mill, and goes on to identify a similar philosophical/poetic transition

between the work of Wordsworth and Barrett Browning. It argues that in Aurora Leigh Barrett Browning shows herself to be heir to Wordsworth's "unsatisfactory" text and pupil of what Elaine Hadley has described as liberalism's "interested disinterest," a characteristic that likewise constitutes the formal balancing act of the Victorian liberal poetic.[5]

Indifference and Interest in John Locke and John Stuart Mill

Whereas Arnold's assessment of The Excursion is informed by a disinterested aesthetic taste, the philosophical inheritance of David Hume and Immanuel Kant,[6] in "Glimpses into my own life and literary character" Barrett commits herself to an avowedly political kind of disinterest. She goes on to exclaim: "I always imagine I was set on the earth for some purpose […] To suffer in the cause of freedom!"[7] By connecting disinterest with freedom Barrett aligns herself once more with John Locke, who bases his argument for the establishment of a political society on a perceived need to balance the various interests of a collection of free individuals. In Two Treatises of Government Locke argues that the principal marker of human freedom is property and he defines freedom as the freedom men have "to order their Actions and dispose of their Possessions and Persons as they see fit."[8] Persons and possessions are one and the same for Locke, who views the body as the principal God-given possession from which all other property derives: "every man has Property in his own Person."[9] "Interest" is a term employed by Locke in conjunction with property ("Paternal Affection secured their Property and Interest"),[10] and is associated with the kinds of human motivations that derive from the ownership of property. Interest is therefore often the source of human error and conflict: "For though the Law

of Nature be plain and intelligible to all rational Creatures; yet Man being biased by their Interest, […] are not apt to allow it as a Law binding to them in the application of it to their particular Cases."[11] Civil society exists to avoid a state of war by establishing a system of government that will judge according to the laws that uphold the state of nature (i.e. "perfect freedom") unmoved by questions of individual interest: "In the State of Nature there wants a known and indifferent Judge, with Authority to determine all differences according to the established Law."[12] Locke's liberal state is thereby conceived as an artificial structure, a necessary compromise of natural freedom, acting indifferently to address the problems inherent to the conflicting interests that make up human society.

Indifference is a near-synonym for disinterest; but its more modern associations with apathy or lack of concern mean that criticism often understands Locke's advocacy of indifference to be the thing that divides his political philosophy from later iterations of liberalism.[13] Crucially, however, Locke is not an advocate of absolute indifference. Setting out his theory of the indifferent mind in the Essay Concerning Human Understanding, he emphasizes its dangers:

> A perfect Indifferency of the Mind, not determinable by its last judgement of the Good or Evil, that is thought to attend its Choice, would be so far from being an advantage and excellency of any intellectual Nature that it would be as great an imperfection as the want of Indifferency [...][14]

For Locke, complete indifference is as bad as total self-interest. "Perfect," or absolute, "Indifferency of Mind" equates to a moral and intellectual vacuity that might lead to the kinds of irrational license that, what Ruth Grant characterizes as Locke's "cautious liberalism," seeks to defend against.[15] Indifference must therefore be determined (which I take to mean framed, measured and limited) by divinely authored moral absolutes. Locke's careful qualification of the indifferent mind emphasizes that

indifference, rather than being a good in itself, only has value when placed in the service of the good.

Of the Conduct of the Understanding (1706), Locke's posthumously published addendum to The Essay is less chary of indifference and establishes its value more securely. Conduct is, as its title suggests, a kind of conduct book for the mind: a set of practical guidelines by which the mind might be disciplined to right thinking. As such it acts as a bridge between the concerns of the Essay and the Treatises, offering the mind as the means by which a just state might be conceived and maintained. Indifference is the keystone of this bridge. In the two sections of this short essay that he devotes to indifference Locke describes indifference as the means by which the understanding frees itself from the habits and passions of prejudice:

> He that by indifferency for all but truth suffers not his assent to go faster than his evidence, nor beyond it, will learn to examine and examine fairly instead of presuming and nobody will be in danger for want of embracing those truths which are necessary in his station and circumstances. In any other way but this all the world are born to orthodoxy.[16]

Just as in the Essay indifference is determined by questions of good and evil, here indifference is anchored to a concern for truth so that it can operate as part of a rational moral framework. Although Conduct is concerned with the workings of the individual mind, it is evident from Locke's reference to a person's "station" and "circumstances" that Locke is interested in the way the mind or understanding effects an individual's engagement with a socio-political arena. Locke's account of indifference teeters between conservatism and progressivism: the indifferent mind is what a person needs in order to perceive only those truths that relate to her social rank and role; but it is only through the exercise of indifferent judgement that humanity will look beyond the orthodoxies of public doctrine that it inherits.

Locke's recognition of the indifferent individual as a social being leads back to Two Treatises, where the mind hands authority to the indifferent state apparatus, which rehearses the mind's structures and practices even as it takes the mind's place:

> And thus all private judgement of every particular member being excluded, the Community comes to be Umpire, by settled standing rules, indifferent, and the same to all parties; and by Men having Authority from the Community, for the execution of those Rules, decides all the differences that may happen between any members of that Society, concerning any matter of right […].[17]

In the same way that Conduct draws attention to the social situation of the individual, Two Treatises acknowledges the individuals acting on behalf of the community, who must exercise indifference in the decision and execution of the laws of the state. Locke argues that political institutions enshrine and curtail the freedom of the individual, extending and formalizing in law the authority of the individual mind over itself in a way that acknowledges self and society as deeply implicated, the one with the other.

John Stuart Mill further develops the relationship between the artificial forms and procedures of the state and the condition of the individual. He theorizes a liberal state that is not only constituted by but also works to constitute the liberal self, and he defines Victorian liberalism against its classical liberal inheritance through the vocabulary of interest.[18] Whereas Locke understands interest in terms of individual identity and individual property and attempts to separate questions of interest from the just operations of the mind and the state, Mill conceives interest as potentially communal: a tie that binds individuals together, rather than, or as well as, a potential cause of social conflict. This formulation of mutual interest is evident from the beginning of the first chapter of On Liberty:

> No argument, we may suppose, can now be needed, against permitting a legislature or an executive, not identified in interest with the people, to prescribe opinions to them, and determine what doctrines or what arguments they shall be allowed to hear.[19]

Mill begins his discussion of free speech by acknowledging the work of philosophical and political history in establishing the principle of elected government. This work is, in part, the work of Locke, whose Two Treatises makes the case against absolute monarchy. However, in acknowledging a debt to Locke, Mill employs the vocabulary of interest in a way that Locke does not recognize, describing the legislature, not as indifferent/disinterested, but as a body that is "identified in interest" with the individuals it governs.

Shared interest becomes for Mill the foundation of a progressive liberal society and the means by which the individual is realized as citizen. Whereas Locke describes an indifferent judiciary whose only role is to arbitrate the various claims of individual interest, Mill's state has interests of its own which must be balanced against those of its individual members:

> To individuality should belong the part of life in which it is chiefly the individual that is interested; to society, the part which chiefly interests society.[20]

Mill continues to insist that the interests of the individual are greater than those of society, but his rhetoric consistently articulates the virtue of individual freedom in the context of social progress. Whereas Locke associates indifference with the virtues (as well as the dangers) of natural freedom, its formal detachment imperfectly replicated by the liberal state; Mill can find no place for indifference within his mutually interested society. He states that his doctrine is not "one of selfish indifference, which pretends that human beings have no business with each other's conduct in life" and asks "How […] can any part of the conduct of a member of society be a matter of indifference to the other members?"[21] Mill employs a Lockean lexicon on these occasions in a way that presents a direct challenge to Locke's liberal philosophy,

bluntly reading the indifferent mind as a selfish mind in order to dismiss it in favor of the socially responsible mind of the Victorian liberal.

Mill contends that dialogue between differently interested parties provides the means to achieve the balance of interest required for the formation of the liberal state. Whereas Locke asserts that truth is the goal of the individual mind, which reasons out of experience, Mill asserts that right thinking is collaborative, the result of "discussion and experience. Not of experience alone," a statement that presents a direct challenge to Locke's indifferent empiricism.[22] Once more, multiple interests are viewed by Mill as a route to community rather than conflict, supplying different parts of a whole: "conflicting doctrines, instead of being one true and the other false, share the truth between them."[23] Mill's liberal methodology, "the steady habit of correcting and completing his own opinion by collating it with those of others," which models itself on a Platonic dialogic,[24] therefore corresponds more readily to multi-vocal literary forms—the drama, the novel—than to the monologic egoism of poetry. Nevertheless, Wordsworth and Barrett Browning, pupils, like Mill, of classical liberalism, seek to develop a modern philosophical poetry that engages with dialogic structures, testing the limits of poetic form.

On Liberty was published in 1859, three years after the publication of Aurora Leigh. Mill's text is a self-consciously modern document, written to address "the stage of progress into which the more civilized portions of the species have now entered."[25] The progress that it describes and to which it contributes is also the work of The Excursion and Aurora Leigh, which together develop a poetics of liberal selfhood that interrogates its philosophical inheritance, testing indifference and experimenting with democratic, dramatic forms of interested disinterest.

"We cannot help suspecting they are liberal": Wordsworth and The Excursion

Two smaller observations concerning Of the Conduct of the Understanding point to ways that Lockean indifference/disinterest might inform a reading of The Excursion and Aurora Leigh as works that engage with and develop Locke's classical liberal model. The first is to do with the long and the short of the liberal mind:

> […] if a man can bring his mind once to be positive and fierce for positions whose evidence he has never once examined, and that in matters of great concernment to him, what shall keep him from being in the short and easy way of being in the right in cases of less moment?[26]

> Thus being content with this short and very imperfect use of his understanding, he never troubles himself to seek out methods of improving his mind, and lives all his life without any notion of close reasoning in a continued connection of a long train of consequences from sure foundations, such as is requisite for the making out and clearing most of the speculative truths most men own to believe and are most concerned in […] you may as well set a countryman who scarce knows the figures and never cast up a sum of three particulars to state a merchant's long account and find the true balance of it.[27]

Locke's language in these sections invites what might be described as a formalist reading of liberal indifference whereby knowledge is understood as the achievement of certain long measures of time and space. Employing a somewhat idiosyncratic turn of phrase, Locke repeatedly draws the reader's attention to the necessary length of true and indifferent understanding.[28] He suggests that to conduct one's understanding according to passionate self-interest is to take a kind of intellectual and moral short cut and goes on to argue that this "short" way of life becomes habitual, so that the understanding must be trained to reason at length in order avoid falling into the trap of unthinking orthodoxy.

The second observation concerns a single section of Conduct, titled "Wandering":

> That there is constant succession and flux of ideas in our minds I have observed in the former part of this essay and everyone may take notice of it in himself. This I suppose may deserve some part of our care in the conduct of our understandings; and I think it may be of great advantage if […] some foreign and unsought ideas will offer themselves, that yet we might be able to reject them and keep them from taking off our minds from its present pursuit and hinder them from running away with our thoughts quite from the subject in hand. This is not, I suspect, so easy to be done as perhaps may be imagined; and yet, for ought I know, this may be, if not the chief, yet one of the great differences that carry some men in their reasoning so far beyond others, where they seem to be naturally of equal parts. A proper and effectual remedy for this wandering of thoughts I would be glad to find.[29]

This section cautions those engaged on the long work of the understanding against the perils of distraction. The lengths that the understanding must take are conceived as a journey, a "pursuit" during which the mind might be hijacked, its thoughts carried away from the appointed path. Whereas the other failures of right understanding described in Conduct are put down to a lack of mental exertion, wandering is understood differently, as a natural inclination that cannot be helped. It occurs as the result of the mind's lengthy exertions, and is perhaps a symptom of indifference taken to excess, so that the mind strays beyond the determined course of the will and meanders towards a state of negative liberty.

The Excursion is a poem concerned both with formal and philosophical questions of length and with the temptations of wandering.[30] Wordsworth's long poem, published in 1814, follows the journey of a poet-narrator and records his encounters with the Wanderer, the Solitary and the Pastor, incorporating their stories into his narrative. The title of the poem, which refers to a kind of wayward or digressive progress that can be either geographical or conversational, announces its philosophical formalism, describing the inextricable relationship between the poet's journey and his developing train of thought, both of which are expressed by the poem's rambling structure.[31] An excursion is also a journey away from a fixed spot or a determined course, a kind of movement that takes place in deviant relation to

another journey or location. As such the title also expresses Wordsworth's intention that the poem would make up one part of a grand philosophic epic, called The Recluse, described in the preface as "a long and laborious Work, which is to consist of three parts."[32] By framing The Excursion as a long poem that is to be part of an even longer one, Wordsworth takes Locke's commitment to length to an extreme and appears to open itself to the pleasures and perils of wandering.

When Francis Jeffrey, in his famously scathing review of The Excursion, declared, "This will never do," the scale of the work was among the principal causes of his dismay:

> What Mr Wordsworth's ideas of length are, we have no means of accurately judging: but we cannot help suspecting that they are liberal, to a degree that will alarm the weakness of most modern readers.[33]

Jeffrey's joke is, of course, that Wordsworth views The Excursion's more than 9000 lines as a mere fragment of a long poem, thereby achieving new heights in the egoistic long-windedness for which he had already earned a considerable reputation. Jeffrey goes on to complain of the poem's "long words, long sentences and unwieldy phrases," describing the "prodigious length" of the Solitary's story and the "rather long prayer" with which the poem concludes, identifying the lengths to which The Excursion goes as both its key weakness and its defining formal feature.[34] His review does not attend much to politics, but his unwitting invocation of liberalism ("we cannot help suspecting they are liberal") invites a fruitful misreading that points towards a relationship between form and content, measure and mind.[35] This relationship is again implied when Jeffrey hypothesizes that The Excursion is the result of the poet's "long habits of seclusion and an excessive ambition of originality."[36] It is the poet's "long habits" that have produced this overly long poem.

Wordsworth is a thinker after Locke's long model and is therefore easy prey to Jeffrey's short, opportunistic wit.

Thomas De Quincey was also moved to comment on The Excursion's wearisome scale, complaining that "the big name and the big size are allowed to settle its rank" and going on to reflect:

> Mere decorum requires that the speakers should be prosy. And you yourself, though sometimes disposed to say "Do now dear old soul cut it short" are sensible that he cannot cut it short. Disquisition, in a certain key, can no more turn around upon a sixpence than a coach-and-six.[37]

Unlike Jeffrey, De Quincey reluctantly acknowledges that the poem's lengths are proper to the kind of discourse it contains: form is driven, like a coach-and-six, by content and is therefore unable to accommodate the short taste of the reader. Charles Lamb's more sympathetic review likewise makes an implicit connection between matters formal and philosophical, ascribing to the poem the values of "liberal Quakerism" and singling out Book IV of the poem for its "wide scope of thought and long trains of lofty imagery," praising the ambitious geographies of Wordsworthian wisdom and Wordsworthian composition in a single breath.[38]

However, it is Samuel Taylor Coleridge who addresses the question of philosophy and poetic length most directly:

> Of course I expected the Colors, Music, imaginative Life and Passion of Poetry; but the matter and arrangement of Philosophy—not doubting from the advantages of the Subject that the Totality of a System was not only capable of being harmonized with but even calculated to aid, the unity (Beginning, Middle and End) of a Poem. Thus, whatever the Length of the Work might be, still it was a determinate Length: of the subject announced each would have its own appointed place and excluding repetitions each would relieve and rise in interest above the other.[39]

These remarks are taken from Coleridge's belated review of The Excursion, written as a private letter to Wordsworth in May 1815. Wordsworth's early plans for The Recluse were developed in close collaboration with Coleridge; but by the time The

Excursion was published, Coleridge and Wordsworth had become estranged and Coleridge's dissatisfaction with The Excursion is freighted with larger regrets about the growing intellectual and emotional distance between himself and his friend. His critique of the poem's indeterminate length derives from his sense that The Excursion is a philosophical failure. Coleridge's letter describes his own ambitions for Wordsworth's poem, which he hoped would begin by laying "a solid and immovable foundation for the edifice by removing the sandy sophism of Locke and the mechanic dogmatists, and demonstrating that the senses were living growths and development of the mind and spirit, in a much juster and higher sense."[40] He invokes the parable of the wise and foolish builders in order to compare empiricism and idealism: his reference to Locke's "sandy sophism" draws attention to the grainy materialism of Locke's epistemology while also claiming that the material basis of empirical philosophy is less substantial than the, in his eyes, more "solid" reality of ideal forms. Coleridge's concern with "total" and "determinate" forms, which ignores Locke's concern that indifference should only be practiced according to the determining forces of Good and Evil, is at odds with the long, laborious, progressivism of Lockean thought that, his letter suggests, Wordsworth fails to move beyond.[41]

The origins of The Excursion's formal indeterminacy might be located with the Wanderer, whose perambulating perorations shape the course of the narrative. The Wanderer is a revised iteration of The Pedlar, eponymous hero of an early narrative poem that, along with a second, The Ruined Cottage, formed the germ of Book 1 of The Excursion.[42] Contemporary reviews identify the Wanderer as the poem's hero, frequently associating him more closely with Wordsworth than the poet-narrator of the work. Leigh Hunt, in his review for The British Critic, writes:

> Here are no borders, no gravel walks, no square mechanic enclosures. All is left loose and irregular in the rude chaos of aboriginal nature. The boundaries

> of hill and valley are the poet's only geography as we wander with him incessantly over deep beds of moss and waving fern.[43]

Hunt's review, which collapses form and content in the observations it makes about the loose irregularity of the poem's geography, likewise allows the identities of Wanderer, poet and reader to slide into one another so that we are led to wander with Wordsworth and his characters through the unbounded landscape. A further example of this kind of reading is found in De Quincey's review, which famously suggests that the Wanderer might have given the impoverished and bereaved Margaret "a guinea" or at least "a little rational advice, which costs no more than civility" in place of his lengthy metaphysical reflections. De Quincey offers his suggestion as a criticism of Wordsworth, who is understood to share, or at least to aspire to the perspective of his wandering hero.[44] If, as these reviews assume, the indeterminate lengths of poem and Wanderer are the same, then wandering, which for Locke was a symptom of the individual mind left too freely to its own devices, becomes a similar site of tension for The Excursion. Wandering appears both to generate and to compromise the philosophical practice of The Excursion. Liberal mind and liberal text are poised on the brink of negative liberty, running the risk of becoming indifferent to a fault.

However, Wordsworth's remarks to Eliza Fenwick indicate a more complex relationship between poet, Wanderer and the liberalism that the poem describes:

> […] wandering was [my passion], but this propensity in me was happily counteracted by inability from want of fortune to fulfil my wishes. But had I been born in a class which would have deprived me of what is called a liberal education, it is not unlikely that, being strong in body, I should have taken to a way of life such as that in which my Pedlar passed the greater part of his days.[45]

Wordsworth characterizes himself as a man prevented from wandering by want of fortune, in other words by matters of property or interest.[46] Whereas the Wanderer, who has retired from his work as a Pedlar (a retirement that takes place in the

revisions that rewrite The Ruined Cottage into The Excursion), has thereby disengaged his interest from the communities through which he freely passes, Wordsworth is prevented from this absolute disinterest by the need to make a living. Although Wordsworth is a passionate wanderer, he describes his lack of financial independence as a "happy" circumstance. His account suggests that wandering is an enjoyable but ultimately irresponsible passion, one at odds with the social responsibility of a Lockean liberal subject. The next sentence continues in the same vein, citing Wordsworth's "liberal education" as the thing that distinguishes him from his Wanderer. Wordsworth sounds sceptical about "what is called" his liberal education; but he nevertheless suggests that his university education, which ought, in theory, to have developed him into a socially interested subject, is a path that, once taken, cannot be wandered from.[47]

Whereas Wordsworth is both too poor and too middle-class to enjoy the life of the Wanderer, the Poet, first-person narrator of The Excursion, is simply not very good at wandering. The Poet introduces himself as an inexperienced, unfit wanderer "toiling / With languid feet, which by the slippery ground were baffled" (I. 21-2). He compares his own uncomfortable work with the image of a dreaming man, who, in a state of "careless" ease "With sidelong eye looks out upon the scene, / By that impending covert made more soft, / More low and distant!" (I. 10, 14-17). This imagined condition of perfect indifference that enables the dreamer to achieve a distanced perspective (later editions of the poem exchange "more low and distant" for "a finer distance," emphasising the advantages of the dreamer's remove) finds its near-realization in the Wanderer who is encountered a few lines later, also lying at rest in the shade. However, although the Poet is quite ready to believe that the man he meets embodies his imaginary philosopher, the poem draws fine distinctions between

the two. Whereas the "dreaming man" of the Poet's imagination "Extends his careless limbs along the front / Of some huge cave" (I. 10-11), the Wanderer rests on a "Cottage bench" by "a roofless Hut," "Recumbent in the shade, as if asleep; / An iron-pointed staff lay at his side" (I. 30-7).[48] The Wanderer's repose takes place within, and is to some small extent enabled by, surroundings that bear the marks of human habitation and are therefore different from the natural space of the cave-mouth that frames the figure of the dreamer. The staff that the poet notices lying by his side, which is later described as "the prized memorial of relinquish'd toils" (I. 436) is a reminder both of the commerce that now sustains him in his retirement and of the ultimate frailty of human physicality: its inability to stand alone.[49] The poet also remarks that he had met the Wanderer the previous day "in the middle of the public way" (I. 39), a further reminder of the social bonds and obligations that frame the older man's daily life. The Wanderer is therefore nearly but not quite the image of perfect freedom that is commensurate with Locke's "state of nature." The comparison between dreamer and Wanderer tests the Wanderer's capacity for an indifference that depends on complete freedom from social and economic ties.

The Poet wilfully ignores the traces of community that distinguish the Wanderer from his imaginary dreamer and represents the Wanderer's history as an exemplary account of the cultivation of natural genius. The Wanderer's childhood, much like Wordsworth's description of his own early life in the first books of The Prelude, follows an empiricist model whereby mind is shaped by the formative impressions of the natural world:

> So the foundations of his mind were laid.
> In such communion, not from terror free,
> While yet a child, and long before his time,
> Had he perceived the presence and the power
> Of greatness; and deep feelings had impress'd
> Great objects on his mind, with portraiture

> And colour so distinct, that on his mind
> They lay like substances, and almost seemed
> To haunt the bodily sense. (I. 132-9)

The Poet's account makes the presence of these sublime impressions felt. The movement of the sentence from "perceived" to "presence" to "impressed" to "portraiture" threatens to perplex the form and meaning of the lines by creating a pattern of sound that insists itself onto the eye and ear of the reader. By performing or restaging the formative experiences of the young Wanderer in this way, the poet signals a certain sympathy with, or longing for, the Wanderer's deeply felt, unmediated interchange with nature.[50] Like the dreaming man, who takes pleasure from this harmonious relationship, the young wanderer is a frequenter of "caves forlorn" (I. 154), their "fix'd lineaments" framing his experience in the same way that the "rocky ceiling" of the dreamer's cave "casts / A twilight of its own" (I. 11-12) that throws the landscape into relief. These echoes suggest that the Poet imagines the Wanderer to have maintained a relationship with nature unmediated by human ties or social institutions into mature adulthood.

The wandering that defines the Wanderer's later years begins in revolt against the demands of employment within his local community. When his mother tries to persuade him to teach in the village school he "Found that the wanderings of his thoughts were often then / A misery to him; that he must resign / A task he was unable to perform." (I. 312-14); and continues in his gradual disengagement from "The Scottish Church" of his childhood, which he remembers "with gratitude," but:

> By his habitual wanderings out of doors,
> By loneliness, and goodness, and kind works,
> Whate'er, in docile childhood or in youth
> He had imbibed of fear or darker thought
> Was melted all away; so true was this,
> That sometimes his religion seemed to me
> Self-taught, as of a dreamer in the woods (I. 405-11)

Once again, he experiences wandering as a fundamentally anti-social activity, consistently carrying the subject away from the artificial formality of the institution. The Wanderer's separation from the church returns the Poet once more to the image of the dreamer. The simile allows space for the reader to doubt that the flesh and blood Wanderer and the ideal dreamer of the poet's imagination are quite one and the same. Wordsworth's Poet experiences and expresses a keen desire for the kind of absolute disinterest that the Wanderer's life appears to promise; while Wordsworth's text remains faithful to his own sense that such a life, and the indifferent perspective that it offers, is itself an unrealizable dream.

The story of Margaret, a story of destitution, domestic collapse and bereavement, told by the Wanderer to the Poet as the two man stand together by the ruins of Margaret's cottage, is offered as an object lesson in the kind of "sidelong" perspective to which the Poet mistakenly aspires. The Wanderer loves Margaret "as my own child" (I. 500, my italics); but Margaret's relationship with the old man is not, in fact, bound by familial ties. Free from the distorting pull of interest, Margaret's tragedy takes on an aesthetic form, framed by patterns of memory and return as the Wanderer visits her cottage over the course of a number of years. At the conclusion of the tale, the Poet proves unable to match the indifference of his teacher. After hearing the story he turns aside "in weakness" and "with a brother's love / I bless'd her—in the impotence of grief" (I. 919, 923-4). The brother's love that moves the Poet is metaphorical, drawing Poet and Margaret more closely together than the simile that maintains a crucial distance between woman and Wanderer. The Poet goes on:

> At length towards the Cottage I returned; and traced
> Fondly,—and traced, with interest more mild,
> That secret spirit of humanity
> Which, mid the calm oblivious tendencies
> Of Nature, mid her plants and weeds, and flowers,
> And silent overgrowings, still survived. (I. 925-30)

Although his immediate response is inadequate, the Poet begins to learn from the Wanderer, performing a return that mimics those of his friend. This slight return effects a slackening of interest ("with an interest more mild") that is echoed and endorsed by the "calm oblivious tendencies" of nature. The reader is also invited to follow the Wanderer's example and to view the remainder of the poem from his indifferent perspective. However, in taking up this invitation, the reader's indifferent gaze is itself uncoupled from any kind of interested relationship with Wanderer, Poet, Solitary or Pastor, all of whom, Wordsworth's Preface instructs, are framed within the text as dramatic figures:

> Nothing further need be added, than that the first and third parts of the Recluse will consist chiefly of meditations in the Author's own Person; and that in the intermediate part (The Excursion) the intervention of Characters speaking is employed and something of a dramatic form is adopted. ("Preface")[51]

Wordsworth's emphasis on the dramatic form of The Excursion, which he contrasts with the personal address adopted in the other sections of The Recluse, both implies Wordsworth's desire to distinguish himself from his characters and encourages the reader to place herself at a similar kind of critical remove, becoming, like the Wanderer, indifferent judges of events, characters and dialogue. The indifference that the Preface encourages and that the Wanderer teaches enables the reader to return to the Wanderer's story with an eye to the way form and language betray its speaking subject, a perspective that teases us once more out of indifference.

Read "sidelong," Margaret's story refuses to submit to the confident interpretations of its narrator. Instead it resists the narrative control of the Wanderer by offering other versions of and perspectives on a wandering life. The Wanderer's narrative reveals Margaret and her husband to be wanderers too, and so the tale reflects the teller, showing him, in spite of himself, in a potentially troubling light.

Wandering first takes on this disturbing aspect when Margaret's husband, unable to find permanent employment after a severe illness, experiences a gradual psychological decline:

> […] day by day he drooped,
> And he would leave his work – and to the Town
> Without an errand, would direct his steps,
> Or wander here and there among the fields. (I. 581-4)

The steps of Margaret's husband contrast with those of narrator, who travels through the village in order to do business: "'A Wanderer then among the Cottages, / I, with my freight of winter raiment'" (I. 541-2). But the Wanderer is not now what he was "then" and without his pedlar's freight the distinction between husband and narrator becomes less secure.

The next time the Wanderer and Margaret meet, the Wanderer's arrival replaces the looked-for return of the husband. By standing in the husband's stead, the Wanderer once again makes evident to the disinterested reader the similarities that the two men share, similarities of which he himself appears naive. He learns that Margaret's husband has left her to join the army. He leaves without telling her where he is going, afraid "'That I should follow with my babes, and sink / Beneath the misery of that wandering life"' (I. 678-81). Margaret's husband seeks to prevent her from the dangers of wandering; but his departure is the cause of the very thing he aims to prevent. When the Wanderer next encounters her she confesses that she has "'wandered much of late'" (I.754) and describes how,

> "About the fields I wander, knowing this
> Only, that what I seek I cannot find.
> And so I waste my time:" (I. 764-6)

Her words recall and reverse the teaching of Jesus in Matthew 7:7 ("seek and you will find") indicating that her wandering is experienced as a spiritual as well as a psychological and physical deterioration, a kind of sin that she is ashamed of and

must pray to be redeemed from. The fallen-ness that Margaret recognizes as the condition of her aimless roaming provides a counterpoint to the natural religion with which the Wanderer's life is associated. The Wanderer takes Margaret's story as a source of spiritual consolation, regarding her life and death as '"an idle dream, that could not live / Where meditation was"' (I. 951-2). But he can only do so by reading nature rather than scripture, wilfully forgetful of the teachings of the Scottish church that he left behind in childhood. The reader, perhaps less able to disregard the biblical echoes that haunt Margaret's steps, is provided with a route to interpretation that eventually arrives at the door of the Pastor, whose wanderers are held secure within the liberal bonds of family and community.

However, before reaching the vale where the Pastor resides, Poet and Wanderer travel to the home of The Solitary,[52] who proves to be another fallen wanderer:

> But, there, lay open to our daily haunt,
> A range of unappropriated earth,
> Where youth's ambitious feet might move at large;
> Whence, unmolested Wanderers, we beheld
> The shining Giver of the Day diffuse
> His brightness o'er a tract of sea and land
> Gay as our spirits, free as our desires;
> As our enjoyments, boundless. (III. 536-44)

The Solitary's account of the first months of his marriage recall the final lines of *Paradise Lost*:

> The World was all before them, where to choose
> Their place of rest, and Providence their guide:
> They hand in hand with wandering steps and slow,
> Through Eden took their solitary way.[53]

The "solitary way" of Adam and Eve is also the way of the Solitary, who is figured as Adam, standing with his wife at the gates of Eden, a pair of over-reachers who delight in the freedom to wander that their newly fallen state allows. Their ambitious feet

break free from the restraint of the end-stopped lines that describe the scene so that poetic form, like the landscape it describes, reflects the couple's liberated perspective. However, the Solitary prefaces this account with a description of the "never-ending" (perhaps in the sense both of permanent and lengthy) tracks that mark the land they wander in. These traces of human communication, which the Solitary now perceives more clearly than his younger self, give the lie to the condition of natural freedom that he and his young bride think they enjoy. They are, in fact, already bound by the social ties of marriage. These bonds are made manifest by the birth of their first child, which puts an end to the wife's wandering for good: '"my tender mate became / The thankful captive of maternal bonds; / And those wild paths were left to me alone'" (III. 554-6). Walking alone, the Solitary remarks that thoughts of married life, in which he sees reflected the providence of divine authority, '"Endeared my wanderings'" (III. 583), acknowledging that, in a world fallen from the state of nature, freedom acquires value from the bonds of love and law that enclose it.

Together, Margaret and the Solitary provide revised accounts of wandering that call the Wanderer's peripatetic way of life into question. Whereas the objects of Margaret's interest are taken from her, forcing her into a state of meandering indifference that proves fatal, the Solitary describes an ideal period in his life when he could wander in a state of suspended interest that found worth and meaning in the family ties that called him home. Indifferent to a fault, the Wanderer cannot acknowledge any similarity between his own life and the lives he witnesses, lest he become implicated/interested in them and his long gaze fail. Unable or unwilling to see himself in the mirrors that this widow and widower hold up to him, his own wandering becomes symptomatic of the kind of unalloyed indifference, or negative freedom that Locke's liberal state defends against.

It is instead the Poet who is led by these narratives to reflect on his own identity and situation:

> Acknowledgements of gratitude sincere
> Accompanied these musings;—fervent thanks
> For my own peaceful lot and happy choice;
> A choice that from the passions of the world
> Withdrew, and fixed me in a still retreat;
> Sheltered, but not to social duties lost,
> Secluded, but not buried; and with song
> Cheering my days, and with industrious thought;
> With ever-welcome company of books;
> With virtuous friendship's soul-sustaining aid,
> And with the blessings of domestic love. (V. 49-59)

Up until this point the Poet, who has provided a comprehensive account of the Wanderer's biography, has divulged very little about himself. The ties of social duty and domestic love that he describes in these lines seem almost to be forged by the sequence of stories and events that have occupied Poet and reader for the preceding books of the poem. This textual sleight of hand, which creates an identity all of a sudden that must also have existed all along, lends emphasis to the shaping force of poetic narrative and social dialogue. The Poet's identity is created via a series of conversations with the Wanderer and the Solitary. He describes a balance of individual seclusion and social duty that both reflects and is in some way the achievement of the lessons of communal life that are performed and taught by the text's dialogic discourse.

The Poet's reflections anticipate the encounter with the Pastor that draws the text's excursive wanderings to a close. The Pastor's discourse intercedes in a dispute between Wanderer and Solitary, whose respective ideal and sceptical points of view have brought them into conflict. In response to the Wanderer's invitation to "'Accord, good Sir! the light / Of your experience to dispel this gloom'" (V. 481-2), the Pastor

first refuses the premise of the request, arguing that human knowledge is a gloomy business:

> "Our nature," said the Priest, in mild reply,
> "Angels may weigh and fathom: they perceive,
> With undistempered and unclouded spirit,
> The object as it is; but, for ourselves,
> That speculative height we may not reach.
> The good and evil are our own; and we
> Are that which we would contemplate from far.
> Knowledge, for us, is difficult to gain—
> Is difficult to gain, and hard to keep—
> As Virtue's self; like Virtue is beset
> With snares; tried, tempted, subject to decay.
> Love, admiration, fear, desire, and hate,
> Blind were we without these: through these alone
> Are capable to notice or discern
> Or to record; we judge, but cannot be
> Indifferent judges." (V. 485-500)

The Pastor, whose interested discourse makes repeated return to the first-person plural in a way that signals the speaker's fundamental involvement in the case he makes, argues, after Locke, that interest is a defining aspect of the human condition. He describes good and evil as properties (or property) that belong(s) to us ("our own"), securing our interest and clouding our judgement. He also represents knowledge and virtue as kinds of property that can be gained from or lost to the snares that beset them. The line break invites the reader to misread "'love, admiration, fear, desire, and hate'" as five such snares, while at the same time stating that they are the very things that enable right perception. Interested passion is thus represented as both the limit and the source of knowledge and so indifference is taken out of the hands of the individual and enshrined in the "'solemn Institutions'" of church and state (V. 1001). The Pastor concludes his argument by returning to matters geographical. He describes the church as "'the channel, the original bed […] hollowed out and scooped / For Man's affections—else betrayed and lost, /And swallowed up 'mid desarts infinite!"'

(V. 1004-7), offering organized religion as an artificial form that guards against the perils of trackless wandering.

Whereas the Wanderer's story would teach natural indifference untrammelled by social responsibility, the graveyard tales that the Pastor tells create patterns of interest that lend The Excusion a determinate form (although one perhaps too "sandy" for Coleridge's tastes). As Kenneth R. Johnston's masterful reading has shown, the Pastor's stories correspond to one another, implicating each individual life in a community of shared experience from which no one can rest indifferent. Johnston identifies "structural principles" that organize the sequence of tales, the most important of which, he argues, is "the pairing principle by which Wordsworth divided them into four quartets" so that "each story is paired by complement or contrast to its fellow."[54] He goes on:

> The compulsion [to tell tales] arises in response to the Solitary's objection that human life is by nature fragmented, has no significant shape or form […] The artistic problem of significant form is thrust back upon the life-problem of meaning, as though the shape of one's life (fully evident only after death) could answer the problematics of its content.[55]

Johnston views the Pastor's narrative as a response to the Solitary (who, he argues, is to be educated out of his scepticism in order to become the Recluse of the larger poem's title). I suggest that the Pastor also provides a like corrective to the Wanderer. As the Pastor takes up the role of storyteller from the Wanderer, he weaves a web of interest that ensnares the story of the ruined cottage that began the poem, inviting Wanderer, Poet and reader to re-read Margaret's tale as part of the poem's liberal, communal whole.

Margaret's tale returns in the story of Ellen, whose decline and early death is likewise prompted by the disintegration of her family. According to Johnston's system of pairs, Ellen's story partners the story of the Tall Intellectual Woman; but, as

Johnson acknowledges, "Ellen's truly sisterly affinities, directly stressed by Wordsworth, are with Margaret."[56] Ellen's story is a kind of mirror image of Margaret's. Both young women lose the father of their child/children and then the children themselves; but, whereas Margaret's grief at the departure of her husband leads to the fatal neglect of herself and her children, whose departure and death appear almost incidental to her suffering, it is the death of Ellen's child, after the departure of its father, that kills her. Wordsworth stresses the affinity between the two stories via the Poet's response:

> For me, the emotion scarcely was less strong
> Or less benign than that which I had felt
> When seated near my venerable Friend,
> Under those shady elms, from him I heard
> The story that retraced the slow decline
> Of Margaret, sinking on the lonely Heath
> With the neglected House in which she dwelt.
> —I noted that the Solitary's cheek
> Confessed the power of nature. (VI. 1055-1063)

Although the Poet draws attention to the similarity between the two stories, Wordsworth frames this same emotional reaction differently. Moved to tears by Margaret's story, the Poet's response is described in terms of "weakness" and "impotence". By contrast, his emotional response to Ellen's tale is "strong" and "benign," and is matched by the response of the Solitary, whose tears signal a return from intellectual cynicism to "nature." The Wanderer's "serene" (VI. 1066) response to the tragedy is now outnumbered, and, although his indifference still draws the implicit admiration of the Poet, the text demonstrates a developing inclination towards communities of interest.

The way the two narrators act towards and on behalf of their suffering subjects invites further comparison. The Pastor's account of his own intercessions on behalf of Ellen and her child recall De Quincey's suggestion that the Wanderer ought to have

offered Margaret some material or practical assistance. The Priest "fails not" to point out the error of Ellen's employers, who prevent her from visiting the grave of her child (the negative construction of the phrase implies the Wanderer's own failure to assist Margaret) and eventually persuades them to let her return home to her mother. Like the Wanderer, he listens to her, but emphasis is placed on his response, so that his words act within rather than reflecting on the story he tells: '"no pains were spared / To mitigate, as gently as I could, / The sting of self-reproach, with healing words"' (VI.1031-3). These actions, which come too late to save Ellen or her child, still highlight the Pastor's social authority and responsibility. His authority is asserted once more as he leads the community in mourning:

> May I not mention—that, within these walls,
> In due observance of her pious wish,
> The Congregation joined with me in prayer
> For her Soul's good? (VI. 1037-41)

The Pastor appears rather tentative in this last assertion, as if he fears an unsympathetic response from his three guests. His rhetorical question takes his audience into/holds his audience to account. It extends his interest beyond the bounds of his story to include the scene of narration and refigures storytelling as a dialogue of shared consent towards which neither teller nor listener can remain indifferent. This communal discourse mirrors the prayers of the congregation, said within the walls of Ellen's home, which becomes, at the close of the tale, a site of social harmony that contrasts with the natural harmony of Margaret's ruined cottage.

Ellen's story is also haunted by traces of the Wanderer. Her description of childbirth employs metaphorical language that draws Wanderer and mother into relationship with one another. Ellen experiences the birth of her child as

> "[…]joy
> Far sweeter than bewildered traveller feels,
> Upon a perilous waste that all night long

> Through darkness he hath toiled and fearful storm,
> When he beholds the first pale speck serene
> Of day-spring—in the gloomy east, revealed,
> And greets it with thanksgiving." (VI. 910-16)

This comparison between Ellen and a traveller, which takes '"bewildered'" to mean both physically lost and mentally confused, connects Ellen, Margaret, Wanderer and Solitary (whose own wanderings were, as we have seen, similarly curtailed by parenthood) together, emphasising their mutual interest and warning once more against the perils of wandering. A trace of the Wanderer appears a second time in the form of another simile, which relates the effect of Ellen's child upon her home, describing it as a "soothing comforter" like "a choice shrub, which he, who passes by / With vacant mind, not seldom may observe / Fair flowering in a thinly peopled house, / Whose window, somewhat sadly, it adorns" (VI. 935-8). The simile compares the Pastor's perspective with that of the disengaged (or indifferent) passer-by, who fails to involve him in the circumstances of the scene he observes. These oblique references to the Wanderer subsume him within a story that, in its first iteration, belonged to him. They write him into the narrative, implicating him in events from which he claimed to stand aloof. His indifference, called into question by the Pastor's socially responsible narrative, is also, these similes hint, an illusion that the text cannot sustain.

The stories of the Poet, the Wanderer, the Solitary and the Pastor constitute a fifth quartet that can be added to the system of four identified by Johnston and The Excursion might therefore be recognized as the Pastor's narrative writ large or long, drawing its four protagonists into society with one another and revealing their mutual interest using a metaphorical language that, as we have seen, repeatedly exchanges one individual identity for another. In identifying these patterns of exchange the reader takes up the challenge of the Preface, "extracting the system" of the poem "for

themselves." As the Preface suggests, Wordsworth requires of the reader the kind of indifferent perspective that is the lesson of The Excursion, which, like so much of Wordsworth's work, teaches the critical method by which it should be judged. The Preface to Poems, published later the same year addresses this method in greater detail:

> Whither then shall we turn for that union of qualifications which must necessarily exist before the decisions of the critic can be of absolute value? For a mind at once poetical, philosophical, for a critic, whose affections are as free and kindly as the spirit of society, and whose understanding is as severe as that of dispassionate government? Where are we to look for that initiatory composure of mind which no selfishness can disturb?[57]

Wordsworth's delineation of the ideal critic is understood in terms of the liberal state. A good reader is defined as one who responds to poetry with a balance of affection (or sympathy) and dispassion (or indifference). The comparison that Wordsworth draws between critical and socio-political frameworks offers an implicit affirmation of individual life governed by institutional law. Whereas the Wanderer would lead Poet and reader to understand that the forms of church and state are poor imitations of the determinate forms of nature that govern his own perspective, Wordsworth sides, in the end, with the Pastor, whose long perspective is shaped by the forms and rituals of social life.

"The sublime of Egotism, disinterested as extreme": Elizabeth Barrett Browning reads The Excursion

Whereas my reading of The Excursion suggests that the journey it undertakes eventually carries the poem and its characters into the interested spaces of community, Victorian readings of the poem tend to focus their attention on representations of disinterest in order to peg Wordsworth as the prophet of sublime

nature, object of the nostalgic longing of a more modern, socially responsible moment. The next section of this chapter explores Barrett Browning's response to Wordsworthian liberalism. It focuses on Barrett Browning's reading of The Excursion as the means by which she formulates her own, more decisively Victorian, poetic philosophy.

In 1846, Elizabeth Barrett and Robert Browning exchanged a sequence of letters in which they debated the responsibility of the individual to social law. In response to Elizabeth's claim that a person need not pay heed to laws that stand in opposition to their own individual judgement, Robert invokes Wordsworth:

> Wordsworth decides he had better go to court—then he must buy or borrow a court dress. He goes because of the poetry in him. What irrationality in the bag and the sword—in the grey duffil gown yonder, he wrote, half thro' the exceeding ease and roominess of it "The Excursion"—how proper he should go in it therefore … beside it will wring his heartstrings to pay down the four-pounds ten and sixpence: good Mr Wordsworth! There's no compulsion—go back to the Lakes and be entirely approved of by Miss Fenwick … but, if you do choose to kiss hands (instead of cheeks "smackingly") why, you must even resolve to "grin and bear it."[58]

Browning's letter alludes to Wordsworth's appointment to the laureateship in 1843. The laureate-elect borrowed an ill-fitting suit of clothes from Samuel Rogers for the occasion, rather than pay for a suit of his own. The point Browning makes is that even such a man as Wordsworth must submit to social form if he chooses to enter the social sphere, even though such forms are "irrational" and uncomfortable. This tight suit of borrowed clothes is compared with the ease and roominess of The Excursion, which is figured as "anti-social" or natural in its accommodating lengths. It is a kind of poetry that, Browning implies, must be left behind if Wordsworth is to take up the role of national poet.

Writing this letter, Robert Browning cannot be prescient of the fact that four years later its recipient would come close to putting on the same "court dress" worn

so reluctantly by "good Mr Wordsworth."[59] Nevertheless, he aims near to home in his representation of Wordsworth, a poet who, for Barrett Browning, embodies poetry's return from the stifling cultural forms of the eighteenth century to a "state of nature." Barrett defines Wordsworth as the poet of natural genius in two critical essays published in the early 1840s: a review of a select edition of Wordsworth's poetry and a chapter on "Wordsworth and Leigh Hunt," a collaboration with Richard Henry Horne that appeared under Horne's name in his New Sprit of the Age in 1844. Both essays focus on matters of form. The Athenaeum review identifies Wordsworth as "chief" in a "visible movement" away from the "restraint," "weakness" and "emasculation" of the previous era's "slavery" to convention and system and "towards nature."[60] Likewise, the New Spirit of the Age states: "[H]e would not separate poetry and nature even in their forms […]" and goes on:

> [H]e spoke out bravely, in language free of the current phraseology and denuded of conventional adornments, the thought which was in him. He testified that the ground was not all lawn or bowling green; and that the forest trees were not clipped upon a pattern.[61]

The natural topography of Wordsworth's poetry is once more located outside or above social life and law, which is dismissed as shallow artifice.

These essays are also conscious of Wordsworth's mediating presence within the natural spaces he inhabits:

> A minute observer of exterior nature, his humanity seems, nevertheless to stand between it and him; and he confounds those two lives—not that he loses himself in the contemplation of things, but that he absorbs them in himself and renders them Wordsworthian […] This is the sublime of egotism, disinterested as extreme.[62]

This subtle refocusing of Keats's Wordsworthian sublime employs "disinterest" to insist on the essential truth and right judgement of Wordsworth's individualism so that Wordsworth the egoist becomes Wordsworth the disinterested prophet:

> He is scarcely, perhaps, of a passionate temperament […], saying of his thoughts, that they "do often lie too deep for tears;" which does not mean that their painfulness will not suffer them to be wept for, but that their closeness to the supreme Truth hallows them, like the cheek of an archangel, from tears.[63]

Quoting the final line of the Immortality Ode, Barrett allows Wordsworth to defend himself against readers who might find his poetry to lack the strong feeling of Byron or Shelley, positing this superficial lack as evidence of the presence of something greater.

The chapter by Horne and Barrett asserts Wordsworth's "dramatic ineptitude" as a necessary corollary of his sublime individualism: "Beyond the habits and purposes of his individuality he cannot carry his sympathies and of all the powerful writers, he is the least dramatic."[64] Barrett and Horne's characterisation of Wordsworth as an incompetent dramatist derives chiefly from Barrett's view, expressed in the Athenaeum article, that The Borderers (1842), Wordsworth's only attempt to write for the stage, was a failure. However, it also ignores Wordsworth's own account of some of his poetical compositions, most notably the "dramatic form" of The Excursion. Barrett's esteem for The Excursion was such that her remarks about its author's dramatic failings are unlikely to have been intended as a slight in its direction. Instead, she leaves The Excursion out of her account of Wordsworth's dramatic writing, an omission that effectively re-categorizes the poem so that it becomes for her, as for so much of its Victorian readership, a philosophical epic.

The Excursion is central to Barrett's understanding of Wordsworth. Criticism has rightly emphasized the significance of The Prelude for Barrett's developing sense of her own poetic identity;[65] but The Prelude's posthumous publication in 1850 (the same year as the publication of Sonnets from the Portuguese), meant that Barrett Browning encountered it when she was already an established poet herself. The poet's correspondence demonstrates that she read The Excursion, to return to a Lockean

formulation, at greater length. As Stephen Gill's work on Wordsworth's Victorian readership has shown, Barrett's sincere esteem for The Excursion is uncontroversial when viewed in its mid-century context,[66] and she was consciously engaged in a reappraisal of the poet that aims to correct the perceived mis-readings of a previous generation. In an exchange of letters with Hugh Stuart-Boyd in the Autumn of 1842 (around the time of the publication of the Athenaeum article), she defends Wordsworth against her one-time tutor's '"words of fire,"' writing, "if I had but a cataract at command I would try to quench them," and directing Boyd towards "the many noble and glorious passages of The Excursion," which she judges to be "Wordsworth at his height."[67] A few weeks later she sent Boyd a copy of the 1836 edition of Wordsworth's Poetical Works. The accompanying letter directs him towards two sections from Book IV of The Excursion and remarks that "Wordsworth is a philosophical and a Christian poet with depths to his soul that poor Byron could never reach."[68] The passing reference to "poor Byron," which echoes the comparisons between the two poets that she makes in the Athenaeum and New Spirit of the Age essays, suggests that Barrett is just as concerned with the rewriting of her own poetic genealogy as she is with challenging the misguided tastes of her friend. Her appreciation of Wordsworth, and of The Excursion in particular, signifies the attainment of a literary and moral maturity that can afford to express wistful regret for the enthusiasms of youth.

Barrett's reading of The Excursion contributes to and confirms her understanding of Wordsworth as the poet of natural freedom and sublime disinterest. Barrett's Wordsworth, described in the Athenaeum article as one whose thoughts do often lie too deep for tears, recalls the Wanderer, who is also marked out by his dry-eyed response to natural beauty and human tragedy. Likewise, the poet's

representation of Wordsworth as the "least dramatic" poet of his age, points towards an approach to the poem that does not distinguish between the poet and the four characters that populate his text. Indeed, the passages of Book IV that she cites in her letter to Boyd as examples of Wordsworth's philosophical depth are taken from the mouth of the Wanderer as he addresses the Solitary in his despondency:

> "Within the soul a faculty abides,
> That with interpositions, which would hide
> And darken, so can deal, that they become
> Contingencies of pomp; and serve to exalt
> Her native brightness. As the ample moon,
> In the deep stillness of a summer even
> Rising behind a thick and lofty Grove,
> Burns, like an unconsuming fire of light,
> In the green trees and, kindling on all sides
> Their leafy umbrage, turns the dusky veil
> Into a substance glorious as her own,
> Yea with her own incorporated, by power
> Capacious and serene. Like power abides
> In man's celestial spirit;" (IV. 1058-1071)

> "I have seen
> A curious child, who dwelt upon a tract
> Of inland ground, applying to his ear
> The convolutions of a smooth-lipped shell;
> To which, in silence hushed, his very soul
> Listened intensely; and his countenance soon
> Brightenend with joy; For from within were heard
> Murmurings, whereby the monitor expressed
> Mysterious union with its native Sea.
> Even such a shell the Universe itself
> Is to the ear of Faith; and there are times,
> I doubt not, when to you it doth impart
> Authentic tidings of invisible things;
> Of ebb and flow, and ever-during power;
> And central peace, subsisting at the heart
> Of endless agitation." (IV. 1133-1147)

Both passages describe the subliming power of the Wanderer's natural religion, offering the moon and the shell as illustrations from nature of a co-determinate interchange between self and world. The first passage, which draws a comparison between the human soul and the reflected light of the moon, provides reader and

Solitary with a model for both thought and art by suggesting a response to tragedy that connects lived experience to a transformative natural aesthetics.[69] In the second extract, the Wanderer describes the hollow form of a shell, which provides an echo chamber for the child's soul. The image is familiar from Book V of The Prelude, where the Arabian guide interprets it as a "Book […] of more worth".[70] Read alongside its later iteration, the shell described by the Wanderer, which produces murmurings from its "smooth lips," can also be recognized as a metaphor that is at once religio-philosophical and literary, so that, once more, the spaces of nature and text coincide.

The second passage also contains something of Barrett herself. The "ebb and flow" of the invisible world constitutes an unwitting pun on Barrett's signature, E.B.B., a pun that Barrett deliberately employs in her sonnet, "On a Portrait of Wordsworth by B.R. Haydon," which was published in 1842, the same year that she sent the Wordsworth edition to Boyd. The sonnet describes Benjamin Robert Haydon's painting of Wordsworth, aged 72, standing in front of the Lake District peak of Helvellyn, which the artist leant to Barrett while it was still unfinished:

> Wordsworth upon Helvellyn! Let the cloud
> Ebb audibly along the mountain-wind
> Then break against the rock, and show behind
> The lowland valleys floating up to crowd
> The sense with beauty. He with forehead bowed
> And humble-lidded eyes, as one inclined
> Before the Sovran thought of his own mind,
> And very meek with inspirations proud,
> Takes here his rightful place as poet-priest
> By the high altar, singing prayer and prayer
> To the higher Heavens. A noble vision free
> Our Haydon's hand has flung out from the mist!
> No portrait this, with Academic air!
> This is the poet and his poetry.[71]

The audible ebb of the clouds, which sounds out Wordsworth's affinity with the voice of nature, is matched by the visual inscription of the younger poet's signature, which

is etched directly beneath Wordsworth's at the beginning of the second line, so that the two names are given near-equal billing.[72] John Woolford records that when Haydon sent a copy of Barrett's sonnet to Wordsworth, Wordsworth recognized the pun, advising that it would be '"obscure to nine readers out of ten"'.[73] The full force of Barrett's punning wordplay, obscure perhaps even to Wordsworth, relies on the fact that "ebb" is Wordsworth's word, borrowed from The Excursion and rewritten as signature, allowing Barrett a proleptic existence within Wordsworth's text, so that Wordsworth is tricked into naming Barrett before she names him. It is a playful tussle, but one that nevertheless invites consideration of what might be at stake for Barrett's poetic identity in her strong reading of Wordsworth as the poet of sublime disinterest.

Barrett also expresses her sense of her relationship to Wordsworth in a letter, which she wrote to Julia Martin around the time that she composed her sonnet. The letter reports her excitement at being lent the unfinished portrait of Wordsworth that is the sonnet's subject:

> I write under the eyes of Wordsworth! […] Such a head! Such majesty!—and the poet stands musing upon Helvellyn! And all that,—poet, Helvellyn & all—is in my room!![74]

Like Robert's passing reference to the laureate at court in his letter of 1846, Elizabeth makes a joke of the idea of Wordsworth indoors. His great head (which does indeed loom large in Haydon's portrait), like the Cumbrian mountain on which he muses, are not easily accommodated within the domestic space of Elizabeth's room. In much the same way, the little room of Barrett's sonnet stanza also contrasts with the natural forms of landscape, poet and poetry that it contains, and the poem strains against the discipline imposed by its measure. Its fluid lines, which 'ebb' across the line breaks, echoing the mountain-wind that they describe, develop the tension between the visual

and aural text that the pun on their two names sets up, creating a double work that both aspires towards and withholds itself from the condition of natural freedom that characterizes Wordsworth's own poetry for Barrett.[75] The sonnet's compliment to Haydon is that his work has achieved just such a condition. The line-break allows the "noble vision free" to be both Wordsworth's and Haydon's: Haydon's portrait has been "flung out of the mist," its form emerging in a way that mirrors the appearance of the natural form of the lowland valleys from the breaking clouds above the mountain. Barrett houses the portrait—"poet, Helvellyn and all!"—within the sonnet, maintaining a distinction between herself and her idol that performs the elegist's trick of supersession played as failure.

With the poem's final line, "This is the poet and his poetry," the speaker, who has remained half hidden until this point, finally asserts herself with a concluding declaration that at once celebrates Wordsworth and puts him in his place. This last exclamation holds the older poet secure within the double frame of portrait and sonnet and leaves the reader in little doubt of the younger writer's confident critical gaze. By framing Wordsworth as a poet whose work embodies the perfect freedom of Locke's "state of nature," Barrett ignores the social drama of his poetry in order to appropriate it to her own developing liberal poetic.[76]

"One of the Longest Poems in the World": Aurora Leigh

Aurora Leigh completes this appropriation by rewriting The Excursion. This nine-book narrative poem, published in 1856, which follows the life of an orphaned girl who grows up to become a poet and to marry her cousin, is Barrett Browning's most Wordsworthian text. At the same time it works out a poetry of social contract

that insists on the formative power of social life and law over the natural genius of the Wordsworthian ego and it seeks a departure from Wordsworth's excursive wanderings that nevertheless arrives, with Wordsworth, within the bonds of church and state.[77] In his prefatory note to the 1898 edition of Aurora Leigh Algernon Charles Swinburne considers the poem in the long view:

> The hardest task to which a man can set his judgement is the application of its critical faculty to the estimate of a work neither classical nor contemporary. It is not now of the present, and as yet it is not of the past. We may be unable to forget the impression it made on our boyhood when fresh from the maker's hand and we cannot be too sure that something too much of unconscious reaction from the crudity of juvenile enthusiasm may not now interfere with the impartial temperance of a mature estate. But if there is any real element of eternal life, any touch of greatness in the work, no man whose opinion is worth the record will fail to recognize that there was more of truth, of justice, of sound sense and right instinct, in the enthusiasm that saw no spots on the sun than in the criticism which allowed them to obscure it.[78]

Swinburne's preface describes the difficulty involved in making a sound critical judgement of a well-loved text. Conscious that youthful enthusiasm will unbalance his impartial reading, the poet chooses to make a virtue of it, arguing that a great work receives a more just appreciation from an enthusiastic reader than from the mature critic. Not a disinterested lover of poetry like Arnold, Swinburne outlines a critical approach that balances the long gaze of disinterest with the sense and instinct of interest. Swinburne takes his cue from Aurora's own understanding of poetic practice, exerting a "double vision" that sees "near things as comprehensively / As if afar they took their point of sight, / And distant things as intimately deep / As if they touched them" (V. 185-8).[79] Like Swinburne, Aurora (and Barrett Browning with her) seeks a mode of perception and composition that reconciles individual impulse and the measure of judgement, developing a liberal poetics that negotiates the relationship between the free self and a just society and anticipates Mill's desire to strike a balance

between the "part of life" that interests the individual and the part "which chiefly interests society."

Swinburne's preface describes Aurora Leigh as "one of the longest poems in the world."[80] Like The Excursion, then, Aurora Leigh is a poem of noteworthy length, a fact that is registered by the text itself, which is a long poem within an even longer one. Aurora describes her own finished manuscript, which she completes half way through Barrett's poem, as "my long poem" (V. 1213). It is the result of a lengthy composition process:

> Alas, I still see something to be done,
> And what I do, falls short of what I see,
> Though I waste myself on doing. Long green days,
> Worn bare of grass and sunshine—long calm nights,
> From which the silken sleeps were fretted out,
> Be witness for me, with no amateur's
> Irreverent haste and busy idleness
> I set myself to art! What then? what's done?
> What's done, at last?
> Behold, at last, a book. (V. 344-52)

Describing the completion of her book, Aurora measures out the long and the short of artistic endeavour. The long days and nights spent at work carry a rhythmic weight that offers ample compensation for the fallings short that she perceives in her poetry. This lengthening rhythm works against the sense of the lines so that the days and nights appear more "green" and "calm" than they do "bare" or "fretted," betraying the poet's professional confidence in her lengthy poetic, which is preferred to the haste of the amateur. Announcing the book to herself and the reader, Aurora both finishes her poem and keeps on writing so that the text overspills itself, its length becoming—to use the word Coleridge employed in his critical assessment of The Excursion—indeterminate. Like the preface to the Excursion, which proclaims the poem to be but part of a longer work, Aurora suggests that the long work of poetry is always unfinished, provisional, open to negotiation. This account of authorship marks a

turning point for Barrett Browning's poem, separating the first four books from the liberal drama that brings the long courtship of Aurora and Romney to an end and reconciling the claims of interest and disinterest that they embody.[81] Like The Excursion, then, Aurora Leigh is a liberal work in that it develops via a process of formal self-reflection, viewing itself with the measured gaze of interested disinterest.

Aurora Leigh takes up where The Excursion left off, beginning with a graveyard tale:

> There's a verse he set
> In Santa Croce to her memory—
> "Weep for an infant too young to weep much
> When death removed this mother"—stops the mirth
> Today on women's faces when they walk
> With rosy children hanging on their gowns,
> Under the cloister to escape the sun
> That scorches in the piazza. (I. 101-8)

This memorial for a dead mother, which, unlike the remote, reticent gravestones of The Excursion, is located in a bustling civic space and commands the sympathetic participation of the local community, signals Barrett's poetic reconfiguration of the relationships between individual, text and society. Aurora identifies herself as the victim of another maternal tragedy, the first of two that are central to the plot of Barrett's verse-novel.[82] The death of Aurora's mother and then her father break up the family unit in the same way that the death of Ellen's child and the desertion of Margaret's husband instigates breakdown in the stories told by the Wanderer and the Pastor. But, whereas in The Excursion the Wanderer, the Poet and the Pastor use the tragedies of Margaret and Ellen as exercises in aesthetic judgement, human sympathy and social duty respectively, from the outset of Aurora Leigh Aurora characterizes herself as an interested participant in, rather than a disinterested observer of, her narrative. Unlike Margaret, Ellen and their children, who are silenced in death, Aurora, in spite of her own inclination and the dismal predictions of her aunt's

friends, lives to tell her tale: "I did not die […] slowly, by degrees / I woke, rose up … where was I? In the world; / For uses therefore I must count worth while" (I. 564-6). Her story is not told for the edification of others, but written for her "better self,"[83] her identity developed in conscientious relation to the world in which that self is found.

Represented from the outset as an interested participant in her story, Aurora's identity and perspective are pitted against the indifference of the natural world. Arriving for the first time in England she registers the new landscape with disappointment:

> Was this my father's England?
> […]
> Did Shakespeare and his mates
> Absorb the light here?—not a hill or stone
> With heart to strike a radiant colour up
> Or active outline on the indifferent air (I. 259-269)

England's lack of colour and line is experienced in relation to Aurora's Italian childhood so that its "indifferent air" appears peculiarly English. However, by the time she returns to Italy, Aurora has developed a new understanding of the natural world:

> And now I come, my Italy,
> My own hills! Are you 'ware of me, my hills,
> How I burn toward you? Do you feel tonight
> The urgency and yearning of my soul,
> As sleeping mothers feel their sucking babes
> And smile?—Nay, not so much as when in heat
> Vain lightnings catch at your inviolate tops
> And tremble while ye are steadfast. Still ye go
> Your own determined, calm, indifferent way
> Toward sunrise, shade by shade, and light by light,
> Of all the grand progression nought left out,
> As if God verily made you for yourselves
> And would not interrupt your life with ours. (V.1266-78)

Here, as in earlier books, Aurora views Italy as a surrogate for the mother that lived and died there. As so often in Wordsworth's poetry, landscape is figured as a

nurturing, semi-conscious female body. John Woolford argues that the feminisation of nature in this way constitutes a celebration of femininity that at the same time absorbs feminine subjectivity, transforming it into a passive object.[84] But Aurora interrupts this version of the motherland and replaces it with an image of natural indifference. This new, genderless Italy is described in steady iambs that contrast with and are oblivious to the disordered, passionate appeal of the preceding lines.[85] However, Aurora does not regard Italy with the same hostility that characterized her childish response to the English landscape: her sanguine attitude towards the place of her birth is evidence of a maturing subjectivity. The older Aurora has learned to accept nature's indifference towards her and is confident in her own independence from it.

However, before she reaches the maturity of Book V Aurora experiences nature as a Wordsworthian heroine might. Spared from death, she begins life in England embowered in a natural setting that threatens or invites a similar kind of dissolution:

> I had a little chamber in the house,
> As green as any privet-hedge a bird
> Might choose to build in, though the nest itself
> Could show but dead-brown sticks and straws; the walls
> Were green, the carpet was pure green, the straight
> Small bed was curtained greenly, and the folds
> Hung green about the window which let in
> The outdoor world in all its greenery. (I. 566-73)

Aurora's chamber is remembered as an uncomfortable union of the natural and the domestic.[86] Let in, the abundant greenery of nature besets the room on all sides, threatening its discrete identity in a way that recalls the gradual ruin of Margaret's cottage. However, Aurora's green room resists the long view of indifference that lends harmony to the scene of Margaret's decline and instead strikes a false note: its monotonous "green" sounds hollow and the extended simile, which begins as the

proverbial bird in the bush, takes an unexpected turn, revealing Aurora's nest to be a barren, even a tomb-like space.

In The Excursion the Wanderer invites the reader to look in on the ruined cottage so that the domestic space is framed by its natural surroundings. Aurora reverses this perspective and directs our gaze out of the window:

> You could not push your head out and escape
> A dash of dawn-dew from the honeysuckle,
> But so you were baptised into the grace
> And privilege of seeing…
> First the lime
> (I had enough there, of the lime, be sure—
> My morning dream was often hummed away
> By the bees in it); past the lime, the lawn,
> Which, after sweeping broadly round the house,
> Went trickling through the shrubberies in a stream
> Of tender turf, and wore and lost itself
> Among the acacias, over which you saw
> The irregular line of elms by the deep lane
> Which stopped the grounds and dammed the overflow
> Of arbutus and laurel. Out of sight
> The lane was; sunk so deep, no foreign tramp
> Nor drove of wild ponies out of Wales
> Could guess if lady's hall or tenant's lodge
> Dispensed such odours—though his stick well-crooked
> Might reach the lowest trail of blossoming briar
> Which dipped upon the wall. Behind the elms
> And through their tops, you saw the folded hills
> Striped up and down with hedges (burly oaks
> Projecting from the line to show themselves),
> Through which my cousin Romney's chimney smoked
> As still as when a silent mouth in frost
> Breathes, showing where the woodlands hid Leigh Hall (I. 574-600)

The view from the chamber, which is rendered in detail for the reader in three multi-clausal sentences that draw the eye across line-endings and out beyond the bounds of the greenly curtained window, again shows the natural world in tension with the human. The cultivated forms of the house and grounds struggle against the free reign of nature, which Aurora regards with ambivalence. The scene is introduced via a negative construction that appears at first to be end-stopped—"You could not push

your head out and escape"— leaving Aurora trapped in her room. But it is nature that captivates Aurora and keeps her captive, forcing its benedictions upon her sight. The ellipsis that breaks the line works to remove the window frame from view, immersing Aurora and the reader in the memory of the scene. The water that sprinkles onto Aurora's head in baptism builds into a trickling stream, eventually becoming an overwhelming swell of foliage that threatens to overflow the lane that is described as a dam, but one that is "sunk […] deep," so that its efficacy is cast into doubt. The lane accommodates passing travellers, but they are cut off from Aurora and she from they. Her use of the conditional mood indicates that she cannot see, but only imagine them there. Aurora's only sure knowledge of human society is provided by the smoke from the chimney of Leigh Hall, a place that appears to have greater command over its natural surroundings, situated amongst neatly hedged fields.[87]

Like Margaret, the young Aurora is subject to the perils of wandering. She seeks escape from the stifling society of her Aunt in illicit early-morning walks:

> Capacity for joy
> Admits temptation. It seemed, next, worthwhile
> To dodge the sharp sword set against my life;
> To slip downstairs through all the sleepy house,
> As mute as any dream there, and escape
> As soul from the body, out of doors,
> Glide through the shrubberies, drop into the lane,
> And wander on the hills an hour or two,
> Then back again before the house should stir. (I.689-97)

Aurora's escape into nature is figured as a near-death experience. Wandering outdoors is in once sense a more physical kind of activity than the round of domestic duties that fill her days.[88] But Aurora experiences her early-morning excursions as a kind of disembodiment. Gliding like a dream or a disembodied soul, Aurora's ghost-self not only relinquishes her body but also her voice. Although she is temporarily

freed from the life to which her female body condemns her, Aurora acknowledges her silence to be the cost of this freedom.

The dangers and pleasures of wandering are experienced more intensely when Aurora stumbles upon her father's library:

> Sublimest danger, over which none weeps,
> When any young wayfaring soul goes forth
> Alone, unconscious of the perilous road,
> The day-sun dazzling in his limpid eyes,
> To thrust his own way, he an alien, through
> The world of books! (I. 739-45)

> Would you leave
> A child to wander in a battle-field
> And push his innocent smile against the guns [?] (I. 773-5)

A solitary reader, without father or aunt to guide her, Aurora commits this alien trespass blindly, only appreciating its danger in retrospect. Recalling her haphazard literary education, Aurora invokes the sublime, employing what is, for Barrett Browning, a singularly Wordsworthian idea to articulate the power of text. Some lines earlier Aurora describes with frustration the limitations of the "liberal education" that her aunt imposes on her (I.402); and yet the complete freedom that her father's library affords her is in not necessarily viewed as a preferred alternative. When Aurora begins to write, she represents her ill-determined poetic style as a similar kind of trespass: "Life's violent flood / Abolished bounds—and, which my neighbour's field, / Which mine, what mattered? it is thus in youth!" (I. 960-2). Aurora's various wanderings have taught her a disregard for property and for the interest of ownership, a disregard that she remembers as a symptom of a young poet's immaturity.

If Aurora understands her poetic identity in terms of a developing resistance to the obliterating pull of natural indifference, Romney Leigh, who at first sees Aurora as no more or less than an example of her sex, believes that she is too much in thrall

to the passions of feminine embodiment. Making his inept marriage proposal to his cousin at the beginning of Book II, Romney, speaking of women in general, accuses them thus:

> "You weep for what you know. A red-haired child
> Sick in a fever, if you touch him once,
> Though but so little as with a finger tip,
> Will set you weeping; but a million sick
> You could as soon weep for the rule of three
> Or compound fractions. Therefore, this same world
> Uncomprehended by you, must remain
> Uninfluenced by you.—Women as you are,
> Mere women, personal and passionate,
> You give us doting mothers, and perfect wives,
> Sublime Madonnas, and enduring saints!
> We get no Christ from you—and verily
> We shall not get a poet, in my mind." (II. 212-24)

Romney's lecture recalls the different responses of Poet and Wanderer to the story of Margaret. In the same way that the Wanderer's serenity provides an unspoken critique of the Poet's tears, Romney upbraids Aurora for what he imagines would be her sympathetic response to individual tragedy. He does so in the belief that this kind of personal passion is short-sighted and without use, proposing instead dutiful attention to '"the long sum of ill"' (II. 309) that makes up modern life. An advocate of the long view of social justice, Romney's concerns are different from those that occupy the Wanderer. The indifference that he seeks to practice is political rather than divine or natural, its outcomes material rather than aesthetic. Nevertheless, Romney's tirade against '"moist eyes / And hurrying lips and heaving heart"' (II. 260-1) has aesthetic implications. Romney's ideal poet, male, disembodied and near-divine, is a Wordsworthian figure; and by paying this back-handed compliment to her poet-hero, Barrett Browning makes room for the development of a different kind of poetry that reconciles both social and natural indifference with the interest of human sympathy.

Romney's and Aurora's differing perspectives on the questions of interest and indifference are tested by the story of Marian Erle. The two cousins both participate in this second maternal tragedy in ways that test the limits of disinterest. Although Marian is not silenced in death like Margaret and Ellen, she is still denied the opportunity to tell the reader her tale, which is re-told by Aurora with the "fuller utterance" of hindsight and her poet's skill (III. 828). Her narrative, in contrast with the disinterested voice of Wordsworth's Wanderer, is punctuated with exclamations and rhetorical appeals that invite a like response from the reader. Breaking off to remark, "I tell her story and grow passionate" (III. 846), Aurora acknowledges but makes no apology for the sympathy that affects her narrative. Her account conforms to Romney's generalizations about the moist eyes hurrying lips of women and yet, in so doing, it demands that this poetics of passion be taken seriously so that it becomes less easy to dismiss or deride.

Marian's tragedy begins with a neglected and impoverished childhood that is characterized by the kind of shiftless wandering that signals Margaret's doom in The Excursion. Her father "earned his life by random jobs / Despised by steadier workmen […] Assisting the Welsh drovers, when a drove / Of startled horses plunged into the mist / Below the mountain road, and sowed the wind /With wandering neighings" (III. 858-65). Aurora's description of Marian's father echoes her earlier account of her own adolescent embowerment, sheltered from the gaze of "foreign tramp / Or drove of wild ponies out of Wales" (I. 589-90). This trace of Aurora's own biography, appearing in her version of Marian's life story, is like the patterns of image and metaphor that draw Wordsworth's excursive tales into relation with one another.[89] By half-suggesting that she and Marian may have just missed one another as Marian and her parents passed the walls of her Aunt's property, Aurora's poem creates a pattern

of interest that would draw the two women together. However, whereas in The Excursion it is Wordsworth who forms the different dramatic voices of the poem into a mutually interested community, in Aurora Leigh, it is less easy to attribute the authorship of interest. The poem, both Barrett's and Aurora's, shows Aurora herself to be skilled in the poetics of interest, constructing an imaginary bond with Marian that aims to overcome the fact of the garden wall that prevented their paths from crossing.[90]

Aurora continues to construct her narrative in ways that resonate with her own experience. Marian herself is first described as the child of a pantheistic nature, who, running from home,

> Would find some keyhole toward the secrecy
> Of Heaven's high blue, and, nestling down, peer out
> […]
> A-hungering outward from the barren earth
> For something like joy. She liked, she said,
> To dazzle black her sight against the sky,
> For then, it seemed, like some grand blind Love came down,
> And groped her out, and clasped her with a kiss: (III.885-94)

Like Aurora's girlhood self, Marian's childhood follows a Wordsworthian model. The near-annihilation that nature offers her, which mirrors Aurora's disembodied haunting of the fields beyond her Aunt's property, is fraught with the same attractive dangers. Her hunger for "something like joy" describes a desire for heavenly rapture that constitutes a kind of death wish, a suicidal impulse that is rehearsed by the infant girl as she "dazzles black her sight," deadening her senses in order to release her soul. But, like Aurora, Marian lives. Escaping the clutches of her parents and the death that she unconsciously desires, Marian is rescued by Romney, who comforts her with the promise of God's love, experienced in life as well as death: '"Yet be taught, / He's better to us than many mothers are, / And children cannot wander beyond reach / Of the sweep of his white raiment"' (III. 1203-6). This rescue, which puts an end to

Marian's wandering for a time, creates a further connection between the two women, recalling Aurora's own early encounters with her cousin. Like Marian, Aurora attributes her survival, in part, to Romney ("A little by his act, perhaps […] I woke, rose up" (I. 555 and 565)). She emphasizes this similarity by reducing both herself and Marian to worms under Romney's gaze:

> I was a worm too, and he looked on me' (I.550-55).
>
> When he changed
> To Marian, saying "And you? you're going, where?"—
> She, moveless as a worm beneath a stone
> Which someone's stumbling foot has spurned aside,
> Writhed suddenly, (III.1179-83)

As worms and as potential wives, Aurora and Marian are brought into further relationship with one another via their relationship with Romney, each one narrowly avoiding incorporation into the forms and systems of his social engineering in the same way that they just barely resist the subliming force of nature.

However, Marian's subjectivity also risks falling victim to Aurora's sympathetic narrative. Incorporated into Aurora's autobiographical poem, which speaks about her and on her behalf, Marian becomes Aurora's double, the form and imagery of the text insisting on a likeness that, while it lends passion to Aurora's account of the younger woman's life, hazards Marian's autonomy.[91] As Marian's tale reaches its climax in Romney's proposal of marriage, Aurora breaks off:

> She told the tale with simple, rustic turns—
> Strong leaps of meaning in her sudden eyes
> That took the gaps of any imperfect phrase
> Of the unschooled speaker: I have rather writ
> The thing I understood so, than the thing
> I heard so. And I cannot render right
> Her quick gesticulation, wild yet soft […] (IV. 151-7)

Aurora's reference to Marian's own voice is the second of just two moments when Aurora interrupts herself to draw attention to the textual artifice of her narrative and

confess poetic license. The lines draw attention to the inadequacy of Marian's own narrative powers, her "imperfect," "unschooled" tongue excusing Aurora's intervention. Aurora compares Marian to "a dumb creature (now / A rustling bird, and now a wandering deer, Or squirrel)" (IV. 159-60), similes that also betray a troubling similarity between her narrative and Wordsworthian accounts of natural femininity. In extending her sympathy towards Marian, Aurora performs an act of recognition that both acknowledges sameness and overrides/overwrites difference, making Marian's identity reducible to the pattern of her own.

It is only by absenting herself from her marriage to Romney and from the poem that Marian is able to assert herself against Romney's subliming indifference and Aurora's subsuming interest. Marian's disappearance throws both the narrative and its protagonists into crisis introducing a variety of voices and perspectives that compromise Aurora's authority. At first it is not Marian's voice but the voices of the congregation awaiting the marriage ceremony, "a ripple of women's talk […], quite as audible /As louder phrases thrown out by the men" (IV.610-13), that take possession of the narrative as it gradually becomes clear that the bride is not going to materialize. This gossipy democracy suffers only brief interventions from Aurora, who leaves the reader to piece the story together from the different snatches of dialogue. Likewise, Marian's letter to Romney, which arrives in her place, does not tell the whole story of her disappearance; it is a textual intervention that renders her indecipherable to the Leigh cousins who "For days, her touching, foolish lines / We mused on with conjectural fantasy" (IV. 988). Marian speaks for herself in ways that render her a disruptive blank within Aurora's narrative, evading her sympathy and insisting on an interpretive gap that separates them.

Marian's departure prompts the debate over poetic genre that constitutes Book V of Aurora Leigh. The object of her tale having removed herself, Aurora is left with the tale alone, which in turn becomes the object of her scrutiny. Aurora's defence of modern poetics, which rejects the ballad and the pastoral in favour of the epic returns again to Wordsworth, whose prefatory essay to Poems (1815), published, in part, as supplement to The Excursion's brief preface, separated poetry into different classes: the narrative, the dramatic and the lyric. According to Wordsworth's preface, the epic, along with its modern incarnation, the "metrical novel," is a kind of narrative poetry, its defining characteristic being that: "the Narrator, however liberally his speaking agents be introduced, is himself the source from which everything primarily flows."[92] In Wordsworthian terms, Aurora's choice of genre not only makes a strong claim for poetry as a significant record of the modern age, but also reasserts the power of the poet, as the single organizing vision and voice of the text.[93]

However, although Aurora determines to write epics, of the different genres that Aurora debates in Book V, it is the drama that holds her attention the longest. According to Wordsworth's essay the drama and the epic are opposites. Whereas epic poetry is controlled by the narrator's perspective, in the drama, "the Poet does not appear at all in his own person, and […] the whole action is carried on by speech and dialogue of the agents."[94] Aurora appears to reject playwriting for herself on the grounds that it relies too heavily on the taste of the audience:

> I will write no plays;
> Because the drama, less sublime in this,
> Makes low appeals, submits more menially,
> Adopts the standard of the public taste
> To chalk its height on, (V.267-71)

Aurora's perspective differs from Wordsworth's; but both are concerned with the drama as a democratic form. For Wordsworth, its democracy lies in the multiple

voices that make up the text. For Aurora its integrity is put at risk because it is at the mercy of the voice of the people. Deploring the state of modern theatre, she nevertheless maintains that it is in "Drama's throne-room" that "the rulers of our art" reside (V.105-6). The great dramatists, she argues:

> […] from the imagination's crucial heat,
> Catch up their men and women all a-flame
> For action, all alive and forced to prove
> Their life by living out heart, brain, and nerve,
> Until mankind makes witness, "These be men
> As we are," (V. 310-15)

Aurora's understanding of drama in its ideal form still rests on the relationship between text and audience. Rather than stooping to appeal to a debased public taste, the best drama raises its audience to meet its characters in recognition of kinship. Concluding, she suggests that the solution to the problem of modern drama is to have done with performance and "take for a worthier stage the soul itself" (V. 340). In so doing she makes the materials of drama available for poetry. Her description of a drama without the material trappings of theatre may have the closet productions of Lord Byron and Joanna Baillie in mind, but it can also be brought to bear on her own work, suggesting, as Wordsworth does of The Excursion, that it might contain something of the dramatic.[95]

In the same way that The Excursion resolves in dialogic exchange, the second half of Aurora Leigh gradually abandons the narrative mode for the dramatic, concluding with a marriage that is represented as the balancing of voices in measured conversation. This formal shift is set in motion by Aurora's completion of her book, which she leaves with her publisher in England before setting off for Italy. The relationship between this published work and the text of Aurora Leigh is complex: it may or may not be the same as the first five books of the poem we have in front of us.[96] Either way, Aurora's book cannot include Books VI-IX of Barrett's poem. As

Aurora travels through Europe, meeting Marian and her child and then encountering Romney once more, Aurora's book is involved in a plot of its own that eventually coincides with the plot of Aurora Leigh when Romney reads it and is thereby moved to seek Aurora out:

> He turned his face upon me with its smile
> As if to crush me. "I have read your book,
> Aurora."
> "You have read it," I replied,
> "And I have writ it—we have done with it.
> And now the rest?"
> "The rest is like the first,"
> He answered—"for the book is in my heart,
> Lives in me, wakes in me, and dreams in me:
> My daily bread tastes of it—and my wine
> Which has no smack of it, I pour it out,
> It seems unnatural drinking." (VIII. 260-9)

This exchange between Romney and Aurora mirrors the scene in Book II in which Romney finds another book of Aurora's poems but does not read it. In that earlier scene, his marriage proposal fails. Now, as a reader of poetry, Romney is recast as a successful suitor. By achieving their reunion and the resolution of the story the book makes a strong claim for the power and relevance of epic narrative. As strong as this claim is, however, it is rivalled by the one made by the drama of *Aurora Leigh's* final books in which the voice of the poet is met and matched by those of Romney and Marian. The account of Aurora's first reunion with Romney sets the pattern for Books XIII and IX. The voice of Aurora's narrator is all but replaced by the separate voices of Romney and Aurora, which constitute the unified form and content of the blank verse, as lines, ideas and images are taken up by one and completed by the other. Aurora's book, the object of this conversation, is thereby rendered mute even as Romney describes its significance, revised into a mutually interested dialogue of, to return to Mill, "conflicting doctrines," which "instead of being one true and the other false, share the truth between them."

Conclusion

Barrett Browning's finished book, like Aurora's, finds its way into the hands of her cousin:

> The words "cousin" and "friend" are constantly recurring in the poem, the last pages of which have been finished under the hospitality of your roof, my own dearest cousin and friend—cousin and friend, in a sense of less equality and greater disinterestedness than Romney's.
>
> Ending, therefore, and preparing once more to quit England, I venture to leave in your hands this book […]; that as, through my various efforts in literature and steps in life, you have believed in me, borne with me, and been generous to me, far beyond the uses of mere relationship or sympathy of mind, so you might kindly accept, in sight of the public, this poor sign of esteem, gratitude and affection. ("Dedication")

Barrett Browning's dedication, made to John Kenyon—the man who, as well as being responsible for introducing Barrett to Robert Browning, also arranged a meeting between Barrett and Wordsworth—expresses the thanks of a grateful guest to her accommodating host, who has provided hospitality without requiring anything in return. Kenyon's "disinterestedness," made manifest in the free gift of his hospitality, which has extended "far beyond the common uses of mere relationship or sympathy of mind," is not described using the same high register that Barrett affords the Wordsworthian sublime; but it is associated with the same kind of detachment from the "common" (as in both "run-of-the-mill" and "shared") stuff of social life so that his relationship with his cousin seems to exist outwith the ties of kinship or even human sympathy. Despite this gracious acknowledgement of disinterested hospitality, Barrett Browning repays Kenyon's disinterested generosity in a way that insists upon the kind of social obligation from which he stands aloof: the poem is given to Kenyon in the sight of the public as a material "sign" that creates and marks a social, familial bond. The dedication is therefore a wholly appropriate preface to Aurora Leigh, a

poem that reconciles disinterest to interest. The long courtship of Aurora and Romney that the poem documents settles the claims of natural freedom and social obligation. At the end of the poem, matrimonial law replaces natural law: a social form founded on mutual interest replaces the indifference of the natural sublime. Aurora's progress from dispossessed wanderer to married woman is a mirror image of the lives of Margaret, Ellen and The Solitary described in The Excursion; and Barrett Browning's reversal of Wordsworth's interconnected narratives constitutes the younger poet's most sustained response to her poetic forbear. By sublimating The Excursion's dramatic critique of natural indifference and its drive towards community, and by characterizing Wordsworth, against the grain, as sublime prophet and failed dramatist, Barrett Browning lays the foundations on which she builds the liberal edifice of her own long poem. She achieves this via a process of self-reflection, learned from Locke, that is as much to do with literary form as it is with individual self-hood. It is a process that allows Aurora Leigh and Aurora Leigh to come into their own simultaneously. Just as Aurora, poet and wife, will work towards the quickening of a new world that "'shall grow spontaneously / New churches, new economies, new laws / Admitting freedom'" (IX. 945-7), Aurora Leigh's experimental form, which incorporates epic, novel and, I have suggested, drama, performs a teleological progress that incorporates itself into and promises radically to transform the material stuff and structures of social life. The chapters that follow explore the way nineteenth-century poetry responds to and acts within some of these structures.

[1] Elizabeth Barrett Browning, "Glimpses into my own life and literary character," in Sandra Donaldson, Rita Patteson, Marjorie Stone and Beverley Taylor (eds.), *The Works of Elizabeth Barrett Browning*, 5 vols. (London: Pickering and Chatto, 2010), vol. 4, 351.

[2] Matthew Arnold, Preface to *The Poems of Wordsworth*, *The Complete Prose Works*, ed. R.H. Super, 11 vols. (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1960-1977), vol. 9, 48.

[3] Erik Gray's fine study, *The Poetry of Indifference* is an important precursor to my engagement with theories of indifference. Gray understands nineteenth-century poetry as "consolation" for the indifference that he understands to be an "indispensible element" of human life. My consideration of liberal indifference suggests that poetry is less consolatory and more critical of an indifferent condition (Erik Gray, *The Poetry of Indifference from the Romantics to the Rubáiyát* (Amherst and Boston: University of Massachusetts Press, 2005), viii).

[4] "I had looked into *The Excursion* a few years before and had found little in it" (John Stuart Mill, *Autobiography*, *The Collected Works of John Stuart Mill*, ed. John M. Robson, 33 vols. (Oxford: Routledge, 1963-1991), vol. 1, 151).

[5] Elaine Hadley, *Living Liberalism: Practical Citizenship in Mid-Victorian Britain* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010),116. My readings are indebted to Hadley, who draws attention to the disinterested formalism frequently invoked by a liberal philosophical tradition. Hadley's study takes in a range of different liberal forms, from the novel to the ballot box, demonstrating how in each case individual freedom is simultaneously guaranteed and curtailed by liberalism's formal procedures. She acknowledges that this kind of liberal formalism extends its influence to "some poetry" (10), but does not choose to take this avenue of exploration any further, maintaining the conventional view that the liberal aesthetic is the preserve of the novel, the rise of which coincides with the birth of modern liberalism. My work challenges this view by exploring the disinterest of poetic form and its role in the formation of the liberal subject. Like Hadley, my readings affirm an understanding of liberalism's conservative force, but I also contend that, in the poems under discussion, this force is frequently met by a destabilising, "interested" impulse against which it perpetually reasserts itself.

[6] See Kevin McLaughlin, "Culture and Messianism: Disinterestedness in Arnold," *Victorian Studies* 50.4 (Summer 2008): 615-38. Hume's disinterested aesthetics are set out in his essay, "Of the Standard of Taste" (1757) (see Eugene F. Miller (ed.), *Essays Moral, Political and Literary* (Indianapolis: Liberty Classics, 1985), 226-253).

[7] Barrett Browning, "Glimpses into my own life and literary character," 356.

[8] John Locke, *Two Treatises of Government*, ed. Peter Laslett (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 269.

[9] Locke, *Two Treatises*, 287.

[10] Locke, *Two Treatises*, 337.

[11] Locke, *Two Treatises*, 351.

[12] Locke, *Two Treatises*, 351. Locke's understanding of interest and disinterest is itself a response to Hobbes: "While for Hobbes the ability of the public to disinterest the private rests on the *many* being represented by, or becoming, the one, the sovereign, for Locke, disinterest rests on the *one*, the individual, being a representative of, or 'becoming', the *many.*" (Sean Gaston, *Derrida and Disinterest* (London: Continuum, 2005), 38).

[13] See Lauren M. Goodlad, '"Character worth speaking of': Individuality, John Stuart Mill and the Critique of Liberalism,' *Victorian Institutes Journal* 36 (2008): 7-46.

[14] John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, ed. Peter H. Nidditch (Oxford: Clarendon, 1975), 264.

[15] Ruth W. Grant, *John Locke's Liberalism* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 204.

[16] John Locke, *Of the Conduct of the Understanding*, ed. F.W. Garforth (New York, Teachers College Press, 1966), 110.

[17] Locke, *Two Treatises*, 324.

[18] Duncan Bell provides a detailed critique of Locke's reception history in the Victorian period, emphasizing that Mill's principle engagement with Locke was as a metaphysician (Duncan Bell, "What is Liberalism?", *Political Theory* 42.6 (2014): 696). Mill makes references to his encounters with Locke's philosophy in a draft of the *Autobiography*, recalling, "I read Locke's *Essay on the Human Understanding* and wrote out an account of it" and referring to "the instructive gropings and feelings-about for psychological explanations of Locke" (Mill, *Autobiography*, 70).

[19] John Stuart Mill, *On Liberty, The Collected Works of John Stuart Mill*, vol. 18, 228.

[20] Mill, *On Liberty*, 276.

[21] Mill, *On Liberty*, 280.

[22] Mill, *On Liberty*, 231.

[23] Mill, *On Liberty*, 251.

[24] Mill argues that rather than "seeking contrivances" to establish a principle of free discussion, the reader should look back to "the Socratic dialectics, so magnificently exemplified in the dialogues of Plato" (*On Liberty*, 242).

[25] Mill, *On Liberty*, 5.

[26] Locke, *Conduct*, 34.

[27] Locke, *Conduct*, 28.

[28] See also *Two Treatises of Government*, where Locke critiques Robert Filmer's *Patriarcha*, referring to it as a "short Model" (*Two Treatises*, 142). As Uday Singh Mehta observes, Locke "links the carrying away of all liberty with Filmer's short model […], challenging the fashionable urge to model politics by reducing it to some essentially axiomatic core" (*The Anxiety of Freedom: Imagination and Individuality in Locke's Political Thought* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1992), 54).

[29] Locke, *Conduct*, 96.

[30] Simon Jarvis has argued in a similar vein that the philosophical work done by the metres and rhythms of Wordsworth's poetry are key to understanding Wordsworth's "philosophic song": "the song itself—*as song*—is philosophic […] verse is itself a kind of cognition, with its own resistances and difficulties" (*Wordsworth's Philosophic Song* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 4).

[31] The *OED* records Samuel Johnson's definition of "excursion" as a "progression beyond fixed limits" (*OED Online*).

[32] William Wordsworth, Preface to *The Excursion*, ed. Sally Bushell, James A. Butler, Michael C. Jaye, David Garcia (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2008), 38.

[33] Francis Jeffrey, review of *The Excursion*, *Edinburgh Review* XLVII (November 1814): 1.

[34] Jeffrey, review of *The Excursion*, 4 and 9.

[35] See also Kenneth R. Johnston, who writes that the poem's "omnibus quality resembles a liberal journal" (*Wordsworth and* The Recluse (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984), 3.

[36] Jeffrey, review of *The Excursion*, 3.

[37] Thomas De Quincey, "On Wordsworth's Poetry," *Tait's Edinburgh Magazine* (September 1845): 547.

[38] Charles Lamb, review of *The Excursion*, *Quarterly Review* (October 1814): 110-11.

[39] Coleridge, *Collected Letters of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, vol. 4, 969.

[40] Coleridge, *Letters*, vol. 4, 969.

[41] Coleridge, *Collected Letters of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, 969. For a comprehensive, unsurpassed account, both of the relationship between *The Excursion* and *The Recluse* and of the contest between empiricism and idealism in Wordsworth and Coleridge, see Johnston, *Wordsworth and* The Recluse*.* Johnston observes that "both Wordsworth and Coleridge still conceived of philosophy as a logically integrated system of metaphysical articulations about the universe rather than the human-centred programs of psychology, history or language that have become modern refinements" and goes on to argue that "Wordsworth and Coleridge were in the process of writing a new form of poetry while still in thrall to an older concept of philosophy" (xiv). Wordsworth's failure to complete *The Recluse* take him both towards this more modern conception of philosophy and back to Locke. See also Jonathan Farina, "The Mighty Commonwealth of Things": The Deep Characters of Knowledge in Wordsworth's *The Excursion*, *Wordsworth Circle* 39.1/2 (2008): 11-15; and Herbert Tucker, who describes *The Excursion* as "a transcendental vision broken to mundane harness for its own good" (*Epic: Britain's Heroic Muse 1790-1910* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 178).

[42] Coleridge's letter of 1815 compares *The Excursion* with *The Ruined Cottage*, describing *The Ruined Cottage* as "the finest poem in our language, comparing it with any of the same or similar *length*", a remark that again turns on questions of appropriate and relative length and suggests that *The Excursion* constitutes an unnecessary elaboration of an ideal or complete formal whole.

[43] William Hazlitt, "Review of William Wordsworth *The Excursion*," the *Examiner* (August 1814): 541.

[44] De Quincey, 549. The same interpretation is at the heart of Celeste Langan's critique of the poem, which also identifies wandering as a model for a Romantic liberal poetic. Langan argues that "the encounter between the missionary salesman [the Wanderer] and the disconsolate subject [Margaret] produces for Wordsworth the cure […] we now call liberalism" (*Romantic Vagrancy: Wordsworth and the Simulation of Freedom* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 229). My own reading, which views the Wanderer as both more genuinely disinterested and more dramatically rendered than Langan allows, is therefore offered as an alternative to the deep skepticism with which she regards Wordsworthian liberalism.

[45] William Wordsworth, *The Fenwick Notes*, ed. Jared Curtis (London: Bristol Classical Press, 1993), 79.

[46] Paul H. Fry makes a similar distinction, arguing that "Even though the Wanderer has "the vision and the faculty divine, without the hoofs or oars of metre he is not a poet" ("The Progress of Poetry," *The Wordsworth Circle* 37.1 (2006): 24). See also Kenneth R. Johnston, who asserts that, "much as [Wordsworth] loved wandering, he loved homecoming more, and these poems beat with the pulse of this dialectical pressure" (Johnson, *Wordsworth and* The Recluse, 8).

[47] I return to the question of Wordsworth's liberal education in the next chapter.

[48] Kenneth Johnston also notes a crucial difference between the two men's states of mind, pointing out that the Pedlar is meditating rather than dreaming (Johnston, *Wordsworth and* The Recluse, 4).

[49] Another Wordsworthian vagrant who relies on a staff for support is the Discharged Soldier. In Wordsworth's account of their meeting, composed in 1798, the same year that he composed *The Ruined Cottage*, the soldier's staff appears at first to be notable by its absence, a symbol of the soldier's absolute isolation: "He was alone, / Had no attendant, neither dog, nor staff, / Nor knapsack" (61-3). I address this incident in detail in Chapter Two.

[50] The repetitions recall the opening lines of the poem in which "shadows" "showed far off" (I. 4-5) so that, once more, human perception and natural scene sound almost indivisible.

[51] My reading of *The Excursion* is heavily indebted to Sally Bushell's work and to her assertion that "the philosophy of the poem is defined as 'performative' in that its intention is to communicate by active involvement at a dramatic level and for the reader" (*Re-Reading the Excursion* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2002), 65). Bushell locates the origins of this kind of philosophical poetic with a dialogic method that originates with Plato and is taken up, in Wordsworth's lifetime, by Shaftesbury (110). This chapter takes a slightly different perspective, identifying liberalism as key to both the method and the matter of *The Excursion*'s dramatic exchanges.

[52] Gray's reading of *The Excursion* identifies the Solitary, rather than the Wanderer as the poem's "Indifferent Man" (Gray, *The Poetry of Indifference*, 23).

[53] John Milton, *Paradise Lost*, ed. Alastair Fowler (Harlow: Longman, 2014), 678, XII. 648-9.

[54] See Johnston, *Wordsworth and* The Recluse, 298 for an outline of these connecting structures.

[55] Johnston, *Wordsworth and* The Recluse*,* 289.

[56] Johnston, *Wordsworth and* The Recluse, 303.

[57] Wordsworth, "Essay, Supplementary to The Preface," *Shorter Poems, 1807-1820*, ed. Carl H. Ketcham (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989), 645.

[58] Philip Kelley and Ronald Hudson (ed.), *The Brownings' Correspondence*, 23 vols. (Kansas: Wedgestone Press, 1984-), vol. 12, 223.

[59] In 1850 an article in the *Athenaeum* proposed Barrett Browning as the best candidate to take up the laureateship following Wordsworth's death. See Angela Leighton, *Elizabeth Barrett Browning* (Brighton: Harvester, 1986), 1.

[60] Elizabeth Barrett Browning, review of William Wordsworth, *Poems, chiefly of early and late years*, the *Athenaeum* 774 (August 1842): 758.

[61] R.H. Horne, *A New Spirit of the Age* (London: Smith Elder & Co., 1844), 311.
[62] Horne, *Spirit of the Age*, 13.

[63] Barrett Browning, review of Wordsworth, 758.

[64] Horne, *Spirit of the Age*, 225.

[65] See, for example, Kathleen Blake, "Elizabeth Barrett Browning and Wordsworth: The Romantic Poet as Woman," *Victorian Poetry* 24.4 (1986): 387–98; and Chris R. Vanden Bossche and Laura E. Haigwood, "Revising *The Prelude*: Aurora Leigh as Laureate," *Studies in Browning and His Circle* 22 (May 1999): 29-42.

[66] "*The Excursion* was regarded as Wordsworth's great poem." (Stephen Gill, *Wordsworth and the Victorians* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 2). Gill's important work carries out illuminating and detailed studies of the importance of *The Excursion* for Ruskin, Arnold and George Eliot. As Sally Bushell observes, *The Excursion*'s popularity with a Victorian readership is partly to blame for its fall from critical favor in the twentieth century (Bushell, *Re-reading* The Excursion, 7).

[67] Kelly and Hudson (ed.), *The Brownings' Correspondence*, vol. 6, 75.

[68] Kelly and Hudson (ed.), *The Brownings' Correspondence*, vol. 6, 171.

[69] The significance of these lines for the Wanderer's narrative method is underlined two books later, when the same words are used to describe the Wanderer's response to Ellen's tragedy: "Pleased though sad, / More pleased than sad, the grey-haired Wanderer sate; / Thanks to his pure imaginative soul / *Capacious and serene*;" (VI. 1063-6, my italics).

[70] William Wordsworth, *The Thirteen-Book Prelude*, ed. Mark L. Reed, 2 vols (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991), V. 87-90. It is perhaps worth noting that in *The Prelude* the dreamer is not Wordsworth, but "a Friend," probably Coleridge, so that the story of the shell and the book is once more placed at a dramatic distance from the poet.

[71] Elizabeth Barrett Browning, "On a Portrait of Wordsworth by B.R. Haydon," Donaldson (ed.), *The Works of Elizabeth Barrett Browning*, vol. 2, 73-7.

[72] See Herbert Tucker, "An Ebbigrammar of Motives; or, Ba for Short", *Victorian Poetry* 44.4 (Winter 2006): 444-65, for a discussion of the punning uses to which Barrett put her various nicknames in her poetry.

[73] John Woolford, "Elizabeth Barrett and William Wordsworth," *Studies in Browning and His Circle* 20 (1993): 57-8. Woolford's essay also argues that Barrett, although a devoted disciple of Wordsworth, rejects Wordsworthian nature to a certain degree. His argument, which focuses on Wordsworth's frequent feminization of nature and his incorporation of the feminine subject into the natural landscape, often in death, holds interesting implications for Barrett Browning's response to the Ruined Cottage, which is discussed below.

[74] Kelly and Hudson (ed.), *The Brownings' Correspondence*, vol. 6, 118.

[75] I take the term "double poem" from Isobel Armstrong, *Victorian Poetry: Poetry, Poetics, Politics* (London and New York: Routledge, 1993), 14.

[76] At the same time, the brevity of the sonnet's final line leaves a space on the page that implies something left unsaid. It is possible to sound out the line in a way that fulfils the metrical demands of the pentameter; but in order to do so the words "poet" and "poetry" become laboured and the repeated sounds create a sense of tautology that might be described as Wordsworthian. In his Note to "The Thorn," another poem about maternal bereavement, included as part of Wordsworth and Coleridge's collaborative experiment, *Lyrical Ballads* (1798), Wordsworth writes, "words, a Poet's words more particularly, ought to be weighed in the balance of feeling and not measured by the space which they occupy upon paper." He identifies tautology as evidence of "impassioned feeling" accompanied by a consciousness of "the inadequateness of our own powers or the deficiencies of language', writing that 'during such efforts there will be a craving in the mind, and as long as it is unsatisfied the Speaker will cling to the same words, or words of the same character" (note on "The Thorn", *Lyrical Ballads and Other Poems*, ed. James Butler and Karen Green (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1992), 351). In Barrett's sonnet, the last line constitutes a moment of linguistic inadequacy that undercuts the claim that both portrait and poem capture and describe their shared subject. As reader and theorist, Wordsworth therefore asserts his own gaze onto Barrett's text, providing a means by which he can both evade and influence the younger poet.

[77] Lana L. Dalley is another critic to have considered *Aurora Leigh* as a liberal text. Her article, '"The least "Angelical" poem in the language': Political Economy, Gender and the Heritage of *Aurora Leigh*', *Victorian Poetry* 44.4 (Winter 2006): 525-542, focuses on the poem's engagement with liberal economics, arguing that Aurora's experience of working life exposes the limits of patriarchal theories of political economy. My own reading is less concerned with the economics of gender (which I address in Chapter 3), and focuses instead on Barrett Browning's engagement with questions of subjectivity and selfhood.

[78] Algernon Charles Swinburne, "Note," in Elizabeth Barrett Browning, *Aurora Leigh* (London: Smith Elder and Co, 1898), vi.

[79] Elizabeth Barrett Browning, *Aurora Leigh*, in Donaldson et al. (ed.), *The Works of Elizabeth Barrett Browning*, vol. 3. All further quotations from this poem will be taken from this edition.

[80] Swinburne, "Note," vi.

[81] My reading, which emphasizes Aurora's continual, self-reflexive development responds to critical accounts that view Book V as the conclusion of Aurora's professional development. Alison Case provides one such account, arguing that in Book V, "Aurora's position is now as self-assured as it can be" and that the rest of the poem turns towards the separate matter of her emotional engagement (Alison Case, "Gender and Narration in *Aurora Leigh*," *Victorian Poetry* 29.1 (1991): 25).

[82] Angela Leighton makes the deaths of Aurora's parents, especially her father, the focus of her reading, arguing that, "In *Aurora Leigh* Barrett browning builds her hopeful political message of independence and equality for women upon a last hidden quest for the father" (Leighton, *Elizabeth Barrett Browning*, 116).

[83] Aurora's determination to use autobiography as a means to self-improvement echoes Barrett Browning's early autobiographical sketches, which, as I discuss in the introduction, are influenced by Locke's belief in self-reflection as the key to development.

[84] Woolford, "Elizabeth Barrett and William Wordsworth," 57-8.

[85] Dorothy Mermin's seminal reading of Aurora Leigh also draws attention to Aurora's complex relationship with the natural world and she observes that "the nature that corresponds to her deepest experience and inspires some of her richest poetry represents female self-sufficiency rather than maternal generosity or redemption by God" (Dorothy Mermin, *Elizabeth Barrett Browning: The Origins of a New Poetry* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 206). My reading contrasts slightly with Mermin's in that, whereas Mermin views the Italy of Book V as a symbol of "female self-sufficiency", I suggest that nature's self-sufficiency means that Aurora must learn to look elsewhere for role-models.

[86] Harry W. McCraw takes a different view of this passage, describing Aurora's room as a "green paradise and refuge," which he compares with Fanny Price's domestic retreat in an unused room at Mansfield Park (Harry McCraw, '"I had a Little Chamber in the House": A Comparison of E.B. Browning's *Aurora Leigh* and Jane's Austen's *Mansfield Park*', *Studies in Browning and His Circle* 19 (1993): 28. Likewise Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar describe the room as a "natural paradise," one of a number that they identify in the work of women poets, from Simone de Beauvoir to Emily Dickinson, which are represented as the birthplace of feminine creativity. Gilbert and Gubar also observe that the woman poet frequently has to renounce this paradise in order to gain maturity (*The Madwoman in the Attic* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984), 643-5). I suggest that, in the case of Aurora, the bower that she renounces is represented as a false paradise that is not so much lost as escaped from.

[87] The greenery that dominates Aurora's view, the hedgerows and the line of smoke that rises from the chimney of Leigh Hall suggests a second Wordsworthian intertext:

> These plots of cottage-ground, these orchard-tufts,
> Which, at this season, with their unripe fruits,
> Among the woods and copses lose themselves,
> Nor, with their green and simple hue, disturb
> The wild green landscape. Once again I see
> These hedge-rows, hardly hedge-rows, little lines
> Of sportive wood run wild; these pastoral farms,
> Green to the very door; and wreathes of smoke
> Sent up, in silence, from among the trees,
> With some uncertain notice, as might seem,
> Of vagrant dwellers in the houseless woods,
> Or of some hermit's cave, where by his fire
> The hermit sits alone. ("Lines Written a Few Miles Above Tintern Abbey," 9-21)

Tintern Abbey, viewed at the double remove of distance and memory draws attention to Aurora's near-sighted perspective as she looks out from within the scene she describes. Absorbed in the landscape, Aurora has more in common with the "Dear, dear sister" who accompanies Wordsworth on his return to the landscape of his youth and whose unreflective response to nature lacks the measured recollection of his own mature poetic gaze. Like the young Aurora, Dorothy is an apprentice poet who requires a guide through the world of books. However, it is Wordsworth who imagines and articulates Dorothy's future; his blessing asserts control over the course of her development. By contrast the view from Aurora's chamber window is also a memory, providing an opportunity for reflection and reply that is seldom afforded to Wordsworth's heroines.

[88] Anne D. Wallace, who also carries out a comparative reading of *Aurora Leigh* and *The Excursion* is more optimistic in her interpretation of Aurora's nature walks, arguing that "Barrett Browning narrativizes Aurora's growing self-consciousness, and particularly her identity as a poet, as an increasing ability to

walk outdoors" (Anne D. Wallace, '"Nor in Fading Silks Compose': Sewing, Walking and Poetic Labor in *Aurora Leigh*," *English Literary History* 64.1 (1997): 233).

[89] Marian's tale also comes into direct contact with *The Excursion*, when she encounters a "pedlar',"who facilitates her haphazard literary education by giving her "Some stray odd volume from his heavy pack, / A Thomson's Seasons, mulcted of the Spring, Or half a page of Shakespeare's torn across" (III. 973-5).

[90] It is worth pointing out that Barrett Browning signals at least partial complicity in the construction of mutually interested narratives in the names that she gives her protagonists: Romney Leigh, Aurora Leigh (called Aurora Vain in an earlier draft) and Marion Erle all sound like jumbled versions of one another, putting their independent identities at risk. Barrett Browning shows herself to be fond of this kind of name-play in Marion's letter to Romney in Book IV: '"Farewell, my Romney. Let me write it once—/ My Romney. 'Tis so pretty a coupled word'" (IV. 895-6).

[91] Barbara Charlesworth Gelpi also asserts the significance of the images Aurora uses to construct her narrative, arguing that, "although no personal line comes through the plot, the *images* of the poem tell a separate story." ("*Aurora Leigh:* The Vocation of a Woman Poet," *Victorian Poetry* 19.1 (1981): 36).

[92] Wordsworth, "Essay, Supplementary to the Preface," Carl H. Ketcham (ed.), *Shorter Poems 1807-1820* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989), 654.

[93] Barrett Browning also describes her verse-novel in terms that accord with Wordsworth's definition, claiming that she wishes to speak "the truth as I conceive of it, out plainly" (Kelley and Hudson (ed.), *The Brownings' Correspondence*, vol. 10, 103). The best discussion of *Aurora Leigh* as verse-novel is Dorothy Mermin, "Gender and Genre in *Aurora Leigh*," *Victorian Newsletter* 69 (Spring 1986): 7-12.

[94] Wordsworth, "Essay Supplementary to the Preface," 654.

[95] Other critics to have considered the dramatic aspects of *Aurora Leigh* include Charles LaPorte, who traces the influence of *A Life Drama* by spasmodic poet, Alexander Smith (1853) on Barrett Browning's long poem and draws attention to the dramatic experiments carried out in her juvenile poems, *The Seraphim* (1838) and *A Drama of Exile* (1835-6) ("*Aurora Leigh, A Life Drama* and Victorian Poetic Autobiography," *Studies in English Literature 1500-1900* 53.4 (2013): 829-51).

[96] Margaret Reynolds offers a convincing account of the first five books of the poem in her article, "*Aurora Leigh*: Writing her story for her better self," *Browning Society Notes* 17.1-3 (1987-8): 5-10.