

## Water as Metaphors of Self-Discovery in Elizabeth Barrett

### Browning's *Aurora Leigh*

#### Isadora Quirarte

##### The Final Journey

Elizabeth Barrett Browning's final health decline before her death in the summer of 1861 was arguably accelerated by the death of her beloved sister Henrietta Barrett in 1860. The poet's final days were minutely recollected by her husband and fellow poet Robert Browning, who wrote in the aftermath to his sister Sarianna Browning, of how death seemed to creep softly into Elizabeth Barrett Browning's bed, to carry her away in a comfortable and final embrace. It is through this perspective that the poet's final moments have been depicted as lacking any excruciating physical and emotional pain or spiritual distress. Whether this recollection is factual or was romanticized as Robert Browning's mechanism to cope with the loss, it is impossible to prove. Yet, Browning's emphasis on Elizabeth's final words, some acting as a soliloquy, others showing fragments of closing dialogues between them, depict Barrett Browning's final hours as a placid state of slumber in which death acted as a gentle transition: "My Robert – my heavens, my beloved – kissing me (but I can't tell you)', she said 'Our lives are held by God.' ... She put her arms around me 'God bless you' ... I felt she must be raised, took her in my arms – I felt the struggle to cough begin, and end unavailingly – no pain, no sigh, – only a quiet *sigh* – her head fell on me" (Browning 59, 63). Due to an intoxicated state provided by the high doses of opium prescribed to relieve her ailments, Barrett Browning's final hours seemed to have passed in a dreamlike state, in which reality and hallucination blended subtly. Her words, spoken more likely to herself than to somebody else, "what a fine steamer- how comfortable!" (62) associated her present reality with a water voyage. The possibility for an altered state of perception, in which an arguably hallucinatory state about a water voyage merged with reality, relates to her own poetic tropes rather than to a direct life experience. For years, during her secluded life in London's Wimpole Street, Barrett Browning had no direct contact with the sea. She was not an experienced traveller, and travel by water was the mode of transport she experienced the least during her lifetime. Yet water as a trope was highly significant to the poet as part of a spiritual dimension: the flow of life, death, the irrevocable quality of Fate, transformation and the everlasting movement.

During the closing episode of her life, by entwining her own reality with the metaphorical voyage through water, Barrett Browning would wrap her understanding of life within a poetic shroud. The image of the steamer represented movement, departure and destination, beginning and end. It stood for the individual who would oppose no resistance to the journey, sailing smoothly through the waters. For Barrett

Browning water became the source of motion, and, at the same time, provided the dying poet with physical sensations of comfort: water proved kind, embracing, inviting. By metaphorically corresponding to an external stimulus, water became part of an atmosphere and *permeated* the poet's perception, shifting the dynamics of her engagement with it: water created motion in otherwise completely static scenes. Significantly, a similar use of water metaphors occurs in *Aurora Leigh* in which the main character's understanding and mechanisms for coping with life experience are suddenly disrupted by metaphors which initially seem foreign to Aurora's surroundings or to the natural course of the narrative. Yet, these metaphors both obey Aurora's emotional and mental state while relating to her own perception and place in the world.

In her article "Aquatic Matter: Water in Victorian Fiction," Ursula Kluwick centres her discussion upon four canonical novels: *Jane Eyre*, *Wuthering Heights*, *Lady Audley's Secret*, and *Dracula*, arguing that "water appears as a "vital player" that interacts with human characters and leaves its traces on their bodies and minds" (Kluwick 246). It is relevant to highlight Kluwick's argument about *Jane Eyre*, due to the influence the latter had on *Aurora Leigh*. Unlike Aurora, Jane experiences a conscious and "constant interaction with the natural environment, particularly the water environment" (248) and these instances tend to be interpreted through the "pathetic fallacy" (248). Watery landscapes become deeply entwined with Jane's emotions and mind, but also become engrained in the ill health suffered by all the characters, as an acting agent able to modify their lives (248). This characteristic, so inherent to *Jane Eyre*, which provides its characters with a full roundness and creates an atmosphere of wholeness with the use of time so marked by the change of weather and seasons, is absent in *Aurora Leigh*. Aurora never seems to be fully integrated with the landscape, she is never affected by atmospheric conditions: cold, heat, hunger or thirst are foreign to her narrative. There is not a single scene of rain or snow in *Aurora Leigh*, yet storms, oceans, drowning, ponds, currents, draught and moving streams are constant metaphors within Aurora's mind which explain her state of being.

### ***Aurora Leigh***

*Aurora Leigh* (1856), Barrett Browning's major work, is a coming of age of the woman artist and the narrative follows the plot of Aurora's life. *Aurora Leigh*, as a character, has been studied and read from diverse perspectives: as a spiritual Christian visionary, as Linda Lewis, Corinne Davies and Omer Ranen have explored, as a revision of Madame de Staël's *Corinne*, discussed by Cora Kaplan, to the forging of Aurora's identity through her feminist poetics, which are a reflection of Barrett Browning's own as noted by Joyce Zonana and Barbara Barrow. Motherhood (and the absence of it) has been explored by Virginia V. Steinmetz in terms of Aurora's identity, and the destructive aspect of motherhood represented in *Aurora Leigh* has been discussed by Laura J. Faulk. Aurora has also been read as an artistic

autobiography of Barrett Browning herself as noted by Charles LaPorte, with parallelisms in the poetic careers of both character and author.

*Aurora Leigh* is also a rich tapestry in which multiple literary influences can be clearly traced such as Madame de Staël's *Corinne*, George Sand, Eugène Sue's *Les Mystères de Paris*, Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*, Elizabeth Gaskell's *Ruth*, while humorous subtle hints of Alexander Pope's *The Rape of the Lock* entwined with Miltonic epic tonalities enrich Aurora's poetic development. The deeply Wordsworthian influence, especially links with Wordsworth's *Prelude*, has been discussed by Emily V. Epstein Kobayashi. Wordsworth's influence is most evident in the first two books of *Aurora Leigh*, in which the character's childhood and education are depicted, her deep bond with nature due to Aurora's life in the English countryside, along with an autobiographical reference to Barrett Browning's own upbringing in Hope End, Herefordshire. All these influences create an expectation for the rest of the novel-poem to unfold under a Romantic aura in which Nature would play a major role, not just as part of an idyllic setting, but as a metaphorical mirror of Aurora's emotional evolution and poetical growth. However, the idyllic life comes to an end after the sudden death of Aurora's aunt which forces Aurora to leave Leigh Hall and seek a life of her own in London with a modest inheritance left by the latter. From this moment of the narrative onwards, *Aurora Leigh* transforms mostly into an urban narrative, with London, Paris and Florence becoming its major settings. Each city is described with its unique visual, spatial and atmospheric characteristics, which affect the rhythm of the narrative. During Aurora's formative years, surrounded by Nature and open space, the narrative developed at a natural slow pace that corresponded to a contemplative state embedded in the observation of nature and the landscape, fitting the atmosphere of Leigh Hall and its surroundings. This atmosphere reflects Aurora's sheltered life, in which, in spite of being an orphan, she lives protected under her aunt's guardianship. As noted, her aunt's death signified a watershed in Aurora's life, therefore producing major changes in her life's circumstances. The narrative rhythm shifts as a consequence of the changes in setting: it becomes fast-paced, with sudden and dramatic cinematic cuts. Aurora's descriptive palette also comprises different hues, shades and textures which correspond much more with the urban landscape, reflecting Aurora's life story and her poetical development while creating diverse atmospheres.

### **A Journey Through the Waters of Society**

As noted earlier, one of the characteristics of *Aurora Leigh* is that it is a coming-of-age novel which follows Aurora's growth and development from childhood to early maturity as a woman and artist. Aurora has to learn to adapt to different social spheres during her life journey: those of her native Italy, her relocation to England, and later to that of her own independent life as an artist in London and the Continent. While Aurora's travelling within the cities is somewhat limited, it is also mostly done

walking, mostly on her own, following different patterns depending on the city. In contrast, her journey through society obeys a different natural force, for at several instances it is metaphorically linked to water. Water becomes part of the way in which she perceives and understands the world, as well as playing a role in the dynamics of her relationship with others while sometimes opposing the physical stasis and constricted spaces Aurora is subject to. Fluent, sometimes hostile, water appears as an external force against which Aurora has no control, mirroring life and its irrevocable flow, society and its complex currents and Aurora's struggles in adapting to it. Moreover, the journey to seek her own place in the world increases in difficulty due to her inherent feeling of non-belonging.

A feminine force in its own terms, deeply rooted to the figure of the mother through its symbolism, water appears in the narrative closely connected with Aurora's mother. This first metaphorical connection between Aurora and the element is triggered by the early death of the mother, the child's grief and her natural attachment to the mother's portrait as the only source of tangible memory:

[...] I, a little child, would crouch  
For hours upon the floor with knees drawn up,  
And gaze across them, half in terror, half  
In adoration, at the picture there, –  
That swan-like supernatural white life  
Just sailing upward from the red stiff silk  
Which seemed to have no part in it nor power  
To keep it from quite breaking out of bounds.  
For hours I sate and stared. Assunta's awe  
And my poor father's melancholy eyes  
Still pointed that way. (I. 135-45)

To the child Aurora, the contemplation of the portrait becomes an ecstatic experience. While the narrative suggests that her father spends perhaps as much time as she does gazing at the portrait, their experiences are completely different: his is full of melancholy and longing for the deceased wife while Aurora finds iconographic meanings under the child's wonderful fascination, rather than through personal memories of *her* own mother. Laura J. Faulk writes of this portrait that "Aurora sees her both as murdered and murderess, lifelike and dead, but regardless of the portrait's strange mix of activity and passivity, the mother is constantly tied to death" (Faulk 44), and these representations that seem to move between the realms of life and death not only explore different meanings and symbolisms, but also cross temporal boundaries, transforming Aurora's mother into an atemporal, eternal being. Within the blending of representations in Aurora's imagination, the swan-like image strikes with supernatural force which almost brings back to life the portrayed subject. Swans are known to mate forever, and the idea of the swan-like quality in the sitter enhances the grief and heart-brokenness of Aurora's father due to his condition as a widower, while

explaining also the morbid attachment the man has to the painting. The red stiff silk is clearly referring to the dress; nevertheless, the movement achieved by the skills of the painter, which make the “supernatural white life sail upward” (I.139) fills the sitter with dramatic movement conveying naval victorious power, escaping thus oceans of blood. Aurora’s mother stands out as majestic and striking, categorized as a waterfowl. Furthermore, the swan-like quality achieved in the portrait acts in two layers: the first one, as noted, is to provide the sitter with movement, and the second is to hint that – metaphorically – Aurora’s maternal bloodline belongs to a different breed from her paternal one. The natural link of the swan to the water, with the implication of the animal’s mastery of it, points towards Aurora’s relationship with the metaphorical water within her own narrative her inherent ability to adapt in the future.

After the death of both of her parents, Aurora is sent to England under the guardianship of her paternal aunt. Aunt Leigh is opposite to Aurora’s father, not only in her ideas on how Aurora should be educated, but in the expressing of her affection towards the young girl. Sheila Cordner explores education in *Aurora Leigh*, emphasizing both Aurora’s self-educating process (similar to Barrett Browning’s) in contrast to Aunt Leigh’s ideal of what a woman should be, satirized by Aurora: “the language Aurora uses to describe this education ironically suggests a superficially ordered method to learning. ... Aurora’s aunt’s supposedly utilitarian education, intended to be useful to Aurora when she embraces her role as a wife” (Cordner 237). This utilitarian education, of course, oppresses Aurora’s poetic enterprises, as it consumes much of her time and energy to fit into the expected role of a Victorian young woman of her upbringing. In spite of the aunt’s oppressive education, Aurora still has the freedom to pursue a self-taught education, guided through her father’s books. It is perhaps these contrasts in methods and interests that enhances her sense of oppression which develops into satire:

In looking down  
 Those years of education (to return)  
 I wonder if Brinvilliers suffered more  
 In the water-torture, . . . flood succeeding flood  
 To drench the incapable throat and split the veins. .  
 Than I did. (I. 465-70)

Aurora’s satire takes a darker tone in which the figure of her aunt, from being simply “generous, bland, more courteous than tender” (I. 364-65) here becomes a cruel torturer, under whose hand Aurora has to suffer. Water-torture was a horrendous process in which the victim was forced to drink large amounts of water, by having it poured through a funnel down the throat, while the nose was pinched. This process would not kill the victim immediately but was calculated to distend the stomach of the victim to the point of rupture. Vomiting was induced so the process would start all over again. The choice of this type of torture is also significant as not only does it show water in its most destructive phase, but it simultaneously *drowns* Aurora’s voice:

the act of continuous flooding, horrifying yet not fatal, succeeds nevertheless in the momentous metaphorical annihilation of the process of breath and voice. Moreover, it is voice that Aurora is, at that point in her life story, seeking. But Aurora does not place herself as an ordinary victim. Her comparison to Madame de Brinvilliers, Marquise de Brinvilliers (22 July 1630 – 16 July 1676) provides her metaphor with a very interesting tint: Brinvilliers was an infamous French aristocrat who allegedly committed several murders, including those of her father and brothers, by poisoning them. At her trial she was found guilty and part of her sentence was to be tortured before execution. The connection lies in the fact that Brinvilliers was accused of murdering her relatives, therefore symbolizing the ruin of her own kin. In Aunt Leigh's eyes, Aurora embodies the downfall of her Leigh brother, for his Tuscan wife (Aurora's mother): "had wronged his tenants, robbed his native land, / and made him mad, alike in life and death, / In love and sorrow" (I. 346-48). By comparing herself to Brinvilliers, Aurora hyperbolizes the negative connotation her aunt provides her with, falling into a certain victimization of her own condition. To a certain extent, this position allows Aurora a justification of her passiveness on allowing herself to be subdued to her aunt's authority and never to question face-to-face her educational system. In the same scene, Aurora continues:

... I only thought  
Of lying quiet where I was thrown  
Like sea-weed on the rocks, and suffering her  
To prick me to a pattern with her pin  
Fibre from fibre, delicate leaf from leaf,  
And dry out from my drowned anatomy  
The last sea-salt left in me. (I. 379-84)

Margaret Reynolds has highlighted this passage, for it shows an important trait in Aunt Leigh's personality: a need for order and classification, and her duty towards Aurora assumed to be fitting her within a social mould. Aurora, nevertheless, undermines her aunt's intentions to educate her by downgrading herself as a collectible natural specimen subject to mere chance: "thrown / Like sea-weed on the rocks" with no will of her own, unable to walk again into the sea; the sea becomes the source of a fate which Aurora cannot fight against. Aurora's feelings are highlighted by the metaphorical action of being pricked by a pin, of being constantly hurt (emotionally and mentally) by her aunt's criticism.

Luckily for Aurora, this educational regime did not last for long: Aunt Leigh's sudden death provides Aurora with a freedom she had longed for, as she is then able to move to London on her own and pursue her career as a poet, choosing her own activities both professional and leisure. While primordially preferring her own company and that of her books and poems, she also engages in a few social activities such as attending parties at Lord Howe's. The river Thames is a major feature in London, but Aurora never mentions the river in her depictions of the city: water is absent as part of

her physical reality. Nevertheless, it will be within a social setting where the water metaphor will be present again: at Lord Howe's party.

While acting like a protective and generally positive figure in Aurora's life, Lord Howe also falls into the conventions of what is best for a young Victorian woman: friend in common to Romney and Aurora, Lord Howe *feels* Aurora should marry, in order have a secure future, suggesting a friend in common, John Eglinton, who is apparently romantically interested in her. His claim is that in England it is almost impossible to live from Art, and Aurora is likely to find more difficulties as a woman and a poet: "it is hard to stand for art, / Unless some golden tripod from the sea / Be fished up, by Apollo's divine chance, / To throne such feet as yours, my prophetess, / at Delphi [...] To be plain, dear friend, / You're poor" (V, 939-43, 948-49), echoing Aunt Leigh's words that place Aurora almost as destitute. Their exchange is significant, for, while to Aunt Leigh, Aurora "spoke veritable words but passionate, / Too passionate perhaps . . . ground up with sobs / To shapeless endings" (II. 721-23), towards her friend she shows control and certain emotional maturity: "so speaking, with less anger in my voice / Than sorrow, I rose quietly to depart" (V. 972-73); Aurora is able to make her point of her lack of interest in marriage, due to her full-time commitment to her Art, emerging victorious, refusing the suggestion of a suitor, showing full command of her own life choices.

She decides to leave the party, and at this stage, water recurs. Due to Lord Howe's place in Aurora's life, in addition to a possible maturity of the character, the water metaphor appears as a less threatening force of nature: "As we passed / Lord Howe insisting that his friendly arm / Should oar me across the sparkling brawling stream / Which swept from room to room" (V. 983-86). In opposition to the torturous and destructive form water had metaphorically presented before – representing Aunt Leigh's overwhelming authority – water here appears as an external force which symbolises Lord Howe's social sphere embodied in the "sparkling brawling stream" with movement from one room to another. The crowd in the party therefore loses all sense of humanity, becoming detached from Aurora. Perhaps as a sign of truce and warm friendship, Aurora subdues herself entirely to Lord Howe's control by taking his arm and letting herself be guided by the oarsman. Howe becomes Charon, oarsman of the underworld, carrying Aurora through the stream. Comfort, along with Aurora's sense of security within a familiar setting, create the atmosphere of a safe water journey to be navigated through. The fact that Howe becomes the oarsman implies not only the certainty that he knows his element to perfection, but also the deep attachment he has to it: that social stream is the one he inherently belongs to.

By acting as a mere passenger, Aurora states her intention of remaining as a mere visitor who is simply passing through, unwilling to form any sort of attachment within that social sphere. Furthermore, she is not subject to the force of water to the point of torture, as in the metaphor concerning her education; the act of navigating reflects

confidence, independence and also the ability to break free from the force symbolized by water and its current. This condition relates to Aurora's own perception of and interaction within her own social circle and her independence. As mentioned, Lord Howe is one of the few people Aurora interacts with outside her family. Aurora's other important interaction belongs to the literary sphere, with other poets, readers and critics. These interactions are constructed via written correspondence, very much like that experienced by Barrett Browning in her youth, during her secluded years and later throughout her life. In her correspondence, as explored in her monologues, Aurora expresses her ideas in a clear and expanded manner, while in social gatherings like this party, she mostly remains silent, to the point of almost becoming invisible to other guests: "a Pallas in the Vatican; – you mind / The face, Sir Blaise? – intensely calm and sad, / As wisdom cut it off from fellowship, —/ but *that* spoke louder. Not a word from *you!*" (V. 799-802). Howe's observation of her, in spite of her almost hieratic silence, provides Aurora with a certain air of superiority distinct from that of her fellows. By being compared to a statue, Aurora acquires a detached status, yet at the same time becomes static, in contrast to the swift and easy flow she acquires when she is removed from that society, once she decides to leave the party, taking the arm of her friend in order to be driven out. The statue, motionless and heavy, nevertheless becomes human again under a friendly arm, almost drifted away by the current.

In spite of this episode in which the emotional maturity shows Aurora's command of her own life, as the plot develops, it is possible to read Aurora's emotional strain as increasing, evidencing a bleak trait in her personality accentuated due to the possibility of Romney marrying Lady Waldemar. Due to this turmoil, water will be absent: instead of a current, torture device or "brawling stream" water will be highlighted through its absence in a dramatic image of water flux drained by human action:

I'm not too much  
A woman, not to be a man for once  
And bury all my Dead like Alaric,  
Depositing the treasures of my soul  
In this drained water-course, then letting flow  
The river of life again with commerce-ships  
And pleasure-barges full of silks and songs. (VII. 984-90)

Aurora's association with Alaric (c. 370-410), Goth conqueror of Rome, magnifies her own feelings. Alaric was buried – along with his treasures – in the riverbed of the Busento, with water previously drained for this procedure to hide from the public his final resting place. Aurora's feeling of insufficiency as a woman, as well as the impossibility of being a man, cause her to ask for a metaphorical death which, due to the heroic reference, would not signify oblivion. While not obvious in the text, Aurora's treasures are her produced poems and this morbid image echoes what is perhaps her most significant conversation with Romney occurring years earlier when



he found her manuscript book: “‘My book! / You found it!’ . . . / ‘In the hollow by the stream’” (II: 80-82). At that time, Aurora’s poetry was full of the enthusiasm of youth and she was still developing her own voice. Found lying “in the hollow by the stream” suggests the book occupied a spot within a Romantic setting, as if it were the poet herself in contemplation. By therefore remaining “buried by the river,” Aurora suggests a metaphorical final resting place mirroring the moment in which she initially embraced her profession by crowning herself. Water, fluent, shall mark the passing of time with its current, while allowing poetic memories to drift away. The “drained water-course,” marking the absence of water, had to happen before the metaphorical death, the man-made drainage suggests the role society plays in Aurora’s self-perception of her role as woman and artist. Moreover, and unlike her glorious moment of youth, the drought signifies Aurora’s present moment of emotional and creative stagnation, her sense of insufficiency, her intellectual dryness after having achieved her major work, and an everlasting emotional thirst due to Romney’s silent absence.

Aurora’s emotional dryness (due to the lack of love from Romney), represented earlier through the dramatic drought image, reflecting as well her poetic stasis, shifts suddenly into an image of an excess of water, with a violent image of being drowned by the river. This image appears shortly after Aurora reads her friend Vincent Carrington’s letter, developing quickly into a threatening oceanic water force with spiritual significance, mirroring thus the sudden image of the flood:

Thou who hast Thyself,  
Endured this fleshhood, knowing how as a soaked  
And sucking vesture, it can drag us down  
And choke us in the melancholy Deep,  
Sustain me, that with Thee I walk these waves,  
Resisting! – breathe me upward, Thou in me  
Aspiring who art the way, the truth, the life, –  
That no truth henceforth seem indifferent,  
No way to truth laborious, and no life,  
Not even this life I live, intolerable! (VII. 1030-39)

Margaret Reynolds (245) has noted in this passage the clear biblical reference (Matthew 14.24 -31) to when Christ walks on the water and Peter wonders if he too can walk on the water, and when he fails to do so, Christ questions his Faith. The men were at sea, and “the wind was contrary” (Matthew 14. 25). Peter is horrified by the storm, falls into the water: “beginning to sink, he cried, saying, Lord, save me (Matthew 14.31)”. In the passage from *Aurora Leigh*, Aurora’s closing statement “not even this life I live, intolerable!” highlights that she has reached a point in her life in which pain and uncertainty have made existence intolerable. Previously, she had placed her own metaphorical death with that of a hero, while this time, she further magnifies her suffering by comparing it to Christ’s Calvary, thus adding a spiritual

dimension. While for Christ, his own body became the source of pain, for Aurora the source of suffering originates from an external factor, transforming into an ocean, with undercurrents able to “drag us down / and choke us in the melancholy Deep”. Aurora’s fear and plea for spiritual support reverberate in Peter’s call, with the “melancholy Deep” signifying an emotional state, a current dragging her down, against which Aurora no longer has any strength to swim. She, therefore, places herself both as Christ through Calvary and as fearful Peter. In doing so, Aurora’s suffering is placed in two dimensions: a deeply personal one in which her own emotions are those dragging her down, and a social one in which, like Christ, Aurora must endure the pain inflicted on her by her peers. This twofold layering of her suffering reflects her own perception of her place in the world: while her personal sufferings remain in the human sphere, equating to Peter’s natural fear of dying drowned, her public suffering, such as her poetical work being *dissected* by critics, places her as a spiritual messiah who is called to sacrifice in order to achieve illumination. In both instances, suffering becomes a source for illumination, with Faith being the sole sustaining force for achieving that goal.

### **Mirrors Upon the Water**

While all these water metaphors and imagery have represented Aurora’s journey *through* society, as well as her feelings and coping mechanisms, water also appears as part of Aurora’s inner journey which is as significant, or perhaps even more relevant to her development, for it occurs within deeper layers of self-discovery. Moreover, water stops being the means of representation of the social, to become a much more intimate and immediate source for the exploration of the self, acting like a mirror. While this transformation is related to the myth of Narcissus with the risk of drowning in one’s own image, it is also reminiscent of the will to engage with the inner self, in order to immerse oneself in self-knowledge and understanding, to ultimately achieve personal growth. Just as occurred in its role as social metaphor, water as mirror acts upon Aurora in two layers of being: woman and artist. It is through this inner journey, which goes hand in hand with Aurora’s poetic development, that another character - Marian Erle – plays a major role. As Angela Leighton has noted (Leighton 115), Marian Erle becomes part of Aurora’s poetic quest as it is through her that Aurora finds the maturity of her poetic voice. Marian Erle, a runaway who later and thanks to Romney’s charity becomes a seamstress, subsequently becomes his betrothed to the dismay of the upper class. Lady Waldemar (who is romantically interested in Romney merely for financial reasons) wants to break the match and asks Aurora to aid her in that end. With Marian, Aurora immediately finds a kindred spirit. Lady Waldemar, through her plots and schemes, destroys Romney’s engagement to Marian, convincing the latter to flee on the wedding day. The sudden aborted wedding and flight of Marian disturbs Aurora’s piece of mind, who in spite of having remained silent concerning Lady Waldemar’s schemes, never agreed with them.

From that point onwards Aurora devotes a lot of her time and energy to looking for Marian while developing her own poetic voice. Marian, therefore, becomes central in Aurora's mind, in an almost obsessive way, until Aurora encounters her momentarily on the streets of Paris:

What face is that?  
What a face, what a look, what a likeness! Full on mine  
The sudden blow of it came down, till all  
My blood swam, my eyes dazzled. Then I sprang. . .

It was as if a meditative man  
Were dreaming out of a sunny afternoon  
And watching gnats-a-prick upon a pond,  
When something floats up suddenly, out there,  
Turns over . . . a dead face, known once alive. . .  
So old, so new! It would be dreadful now  
To lose the sight and keep the doubt of this:  
He plunges – ha! He has lost it in a splash.

I plunged – I tore the crowd up, either side,  
And rushed on, forward, forward, after her.  
Her? Whom? (VI. 232-44)

The sudden apparition of a familiar face in the middle of a foreign and dense crowd startles Aurora to the point of panic. In spite of having both Romney and Marian in her mind, Aurora's mind freezes, then jumps into an image from another reality: crowds disappear, the city turns into a pond and the speaker becomes a metaphorical *he* completely unguarded. The image elapses, slowing down to the point of absurdity: the visual shock is turned into oneiric symbolism which dissociates Aurora from reality and completely transforms Marian's face. For the face loses its identity and *emerges* from water as the twisted image of a reflected Narcissus. Recognition fails, as it is not her own face reflected, nor a familiar one that emerges, but the countenance of an unknown dead body: water acts like a mirror, reflecting death and decomposition. Beyond shock, Aurora 'awakens', and as if plunging into the pond, pushes herself into the crowds with swimming motion: "I could call now Marian, Marian / With the shriek / Of desperate creatures calling for the Dead" (VI. 255).

Angela Leighton notes this encounter between Marian and Aurora (152) by pointing out Alethea Hayter's observation of a possible connection between Marian's face and the memory of Barrett Browning's dead brother Edward 'Bro' (Hayter 99) (whose death by drowning had a deep impact in the poet), for she considers that the resurfacing from the water of the genderless face obeys Barrett Browning's own imagination rather than Aurora's experience. Leighton claims that the "confusion

between the dead and the living – between as it were, the dead brother and the living sister – shows how far the figure of Marian is still a substitute for the old forsaking muses” (153). In my own interpretation, this episode depicts Aurora’s own imagination, as well as explaining her insight process that leads to a moment of revelation. Similar to the metaphorical appearance of water as a torture device, the pond also becomes a force which horrifies and annihilates the voice of the victim. As noted earlier, Paris in this passage acquires a liquefied quality, transforming the streets and quays into an atmospheric pond. The tranquillity of the imagined landscape, along with the idle attitude of the imagined male character (who takes Aurora’s place) transport the reader back to Aurora’s early days in Leigh Hall: the reassurance of Aurora feeling free and safe in Paris. The sudden shift of peace into nightmare due to the emergence of the dead face through the water, almost as a horrendous apparition, mirrors the shock Aurora feels on finding Marian again, on meeting her eye to eye, rapt by the sudden failure in recognition that corresponds to a dramatic change in Marian, rather than to a mere act of distraught shock on Aurora’s part. Significantly, at this stage in the narrative the reader has no idea of what has happened to Marian after her disappearance. Yet the shock experienced by Aurora somehow anticipates Marian’s story: a dead face emerging from the water signifies possibly a painful death (if death by drowning) but also a resurfacing of the cadaver as having been at full mercy of the water’s current. By resurfacing lifeless, the dead body still *exists* materially. In both cases, the metaphor conforms to Marian’s story as later disclosed to Aurora: unlike Aurora who is earlier navigated through guided by an oarsman, Marian is drowned and driven by the current: she is deceived by people who do her wrong, she is sold, drugged and raped, becomes pregnant and keeps the baby who becomes the core of her existence, even though she feels dead inside after the trauma.

Marian’s likely change in countenance and expression, emotions possibly expressed with her eyes, also shocks Aurora beyond the ordinary, as she had always lived a sheltered life, foreign to life’s true horrors. Up to this point, Aurora had encountered death due to natural causes, and while grief had been part of the natural process, those losses seemed wrapped in a poetical aura. Moreover the ephemeral and sudden encounter with Marian exposes the horrors of human existence, forcing Aurora to look them in the face. Reacting with shock and despair, Aurora *plunges* back into the crowd, *swimming* desperate against its current: “I plunged – I tore the crowd up, either side, / And rushed on, forward, forward, after her. / Her? Whom?” (VI. 242-44). The placid pond turns into a tide which Aurora struggles against and Paris, the city which had been so far kind and embracing, becomes for a moment hostile and turbulent. The shock produced by the realization of life’s hardship and horrors as actual physical realities rather than internal poetic tropes is what disturbs Aurora’s reality. Until that encounter, Aurora’s grief had been mostly centred upon her own experiences, exacerbated by her own fantasy. Marian Erle, in Aurora’s poetic imagination, had remained pure and innocent, harmless, in spite of having vanished from her life leaving no trace behind her. This unsettling encounter by contrast acts like a mirror in

which Aurora realises for the first time that there are *actual real-life* problems which escape good will, and which of course, are meant to be addressed.

After Aurora returns to her lodgings, the vision of Marian's face haunts her in the same mirror-like fashion. The evocation is an image less violent, and its evident link to the past emphasizes the Marian that has ceased to exist. Expressed in detail, the image makes Marian's face distinctive, her hair and eyes, the latter having changed in their expression. The almost obsessive previous train of thought gives way to a calmer and still image, able to communicate within Aurora's mind through diverse meanings:

The small fair face between the darks of hair,  
I used to liken, when I saw her first,  
To a point of moonlit water down a well:  
[...]  
Those eyes to-day, – how overlarge they seemed  
As if some patient passionate despair  
(Like a coal dropt and forgot on tapestry,  
Which slowly burns a widening circle out)  
Had burnt them larger, larger. (VI. 313-15, 321-25)

The likeness in her mind, imitating a reflection on the water of the well, is coloured with a melancholic, nocturnal tint ("moonlit") striking the reader with its stillness. This same stillness allows Aurora to recover from shock, providing space to explore within her own mind what she acknowledges as mutual recognition, while brooding upon the change in Marian. The over-largeness of the girl's eyes might simply express the "patient passionate despair" of what Marian has gone through, yet their expression may also mirror Aurora's own feelings. This mirroring experience is expressed entirely through the eyes, real or imaginary, while any hint of the voice is made mute and absent. On this occasion, the encounter becomes passive, for the subject (Marian) is no longer present and the evocation centres rather upon Aurora's own memories, shifting the whole significance towards herself.

At this point in the narrative Aurora had lived in London and but is in Paris that she roams on her own around the city, musing, observing the landscape, and paying attention to the light and its reflections upon the fountains. The city is portrayed as liquefied and buoyant: "The city swims in verdure, beautiful / As Venice on the waters, the sea-swan" (VI. 89-90). After Aurora finally finds Marian and manages to convince her to have a long conversation about Romney, a reversal of roles, noted by Margaret Reynolds, occurs between them as they walk together on their way to Marian's: "[Marian] turned round and followed closely where I went, / As if led by a narrow plank / Across devouring waters, step by step" (VI. 481-83), reversing to "Then she led / The way, and I, as by a narrow plank / Across devouring waters, followed her, / Stepping by her footsteps" (VI. 500-502). Once the characters are together, after being able to communicate through words and engaged in a silent walk,

the landscape changes and the metaphorical water that had previously appeared surrounding Aurora and Marian in the shape of a pond, shifts into an ocean, presenting itself as a threat: the unknown streets of Paris transform into an ocean into which a false step could plunge Aurora and Marian into a certain death.

Walking the plank evokes the practice by which pirates punished their prisoners, making them fall into the sea to drown. The characters then experience a sense of doom, an uncertain future and perdition, their lives engulfed in the unknown *devouring waters*. In spite of that, Aurora is led by Marian in blind faith, completely unaware of the perils that she, as a Victorian young woman, could be exposed to by joining Marian (entirely on their own) through the slums of Paris. The reference to pirates reverberates through the dangers within the urban space at the hands of truants and lawless men to whom both women could be easy prey. The social space in Paris thus seems the reversal of that presented within Lord Howe's party. For while the London scene had been safe and known, the city of Paris is presented as foreign, wild and perilous. Water has thereby also changed its source, providing a unique atmosphere and spatial notion. While, at the party, Aurora lets herself be *navigated* by Lord Howe through the tide, in Paris, she initially makes Marian follow her through a familiar route, though with caution "step by step". As they progress into the city, more into unfamiliar and probably unsafe places, the roles are reversed: Aurora submits to Marian's control, following her unquestionably. The shift in power places both characters on equal terms, blurring the previously existent barrier of social class. In this final journey across the water, Aurora finds her spiritual sister: part of her poetic quest or part of her own conciliation with womanhood, she clearly embraces Marian as an equal by subduing herself to her power. The plank metaphor, moreover, provides the visual image of both women *walking on water*, bringing forward once again the biblical reference to Christ walking on the water, wrapping both characters with a spiritual aura of faith and spiritual purity. This Christ-like spiritual state corresponds to the equilibrium both characters will face after joining their fates, whilst in Aurora's case it also refers to her spiritual growth as a poet-prophet by embracing Marian's cause. It is no coincidence, therefore, that this 'walking the plank' is the last setting in *Aurora Leigh* in which Aurora is metaphorically either journeying through or crossing the water.

The arrival in Florence, Aurora's final destination, places the characters in a state of rest, with Aurora changing her roaming habits in Paris to a quiet and static existence, after visiting the places where she had spent her childhood. Back in Italy, likely helping to raise Marian's child (and clearly loved by him) with a caring, devoted and quiet woman to share her home, Aurora falls into emotional and creative stasis, and "sweet and Holy Marian" (VI. 782) is slowly replaced by a silent and devoted mother, a wife-like figure blending within the background as the Angel in the House, and fulfilling the role so despised and denied by Aurora. It is interesting how, after the reversal of roles and symbolical levelling in hierarchy, Marian, in Aurora's eyes loses

some of her holy and sacred aura as she is relegated to a domestic and invisible sphere while Aurora, in a stagnated creative process, is also unclothed from her poetic veil.

In spite of not presenting any kind of journey through water for Aurora, Florence, through a similar atmosphere to that of Paris, is also depicted with a liquefied quality, with twilight colours transforming the aerial landscape into a maritime one. An engulfing tide, with buoyant hypnotic waves, Turner-esque in motion and colour, drowns the city: “The purple and transparent shadows slow / Had filled up the whole valley to the brim, / And flooded all the city, which you saw / As some drowned city in some enchanted sea” (VIII. 34-37). The sky becomes the sea, the air becomes the tide and within almost psychedelic imagery, “gaslights tremble” (VIII. 8) in ethereal patterns. Aurora’s longing for the king of the sea transforms reality into fancy: “methinks I have plunged, I see it all so clear...” (VIII. 58) as she simply surrenders. Romney, in this scene, becomes the metaphorical sea-king – “there he stood, my king! / I felt him, rather than beheld him” (VIII. 61-62) – who arrives to meet up with Aurora, after having failed in all of his social welfare enterprises. He is blind, yet able to see within himself to face and understand his love for Aurora and what her poetry means to him; this time, it is he who has travelled from the depths of the ocean, emerging. Initially, for Aurora, the sea-king has no name, appearing depicted through certain physical traits, a “voice of waves, treacherous soft eyes, and slippery locks” (VIII. 41-43), echoing a personification of the sea.

While it is Romney who will eventually symbolize the sea-king, it is interesting to notice the similarities between this character’s rising from the ocean and Aurora’s early interpretation of the image of her mother rising in the portrait, with her supernatural force and *against* the forces of Nature. Both the lover and the mother represent figures of fulfilment. Both images are present while Aurora is in Italy, her place of origin, creating a tidal circular motion of return. Both appear with ‘supernatural’ and majestic force: the mother thanks to her swan-like life and her almost iconographic representation, and the sea-king due to the mythological weight of his Kingship, both emerging from the sea. As noted, the portrait of the mother, as described by Aurora, grows with diverse meanings which develop as the child grows, reads and lives, without losing her original face. Gradually, the absent mother becomes an ever-changing mirror in which Aurora can trace the meanings of her own development as an artist and as a woman<sup>1</sup>. In a sense, this creation represents the part of her heritage that gave her her spiritual identity.

This act of mirroring is also present through the encounter between Aurora and the figure of the idealized sea-king, who differs dramatically from the actual – almost helpless – blind man: ““Will you sit?” I asked, / And motioned to a chair; but down he sat, / A little slowly, as a man in doubt, / Upon the couch beside me, – couch and

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<sup>1</sup> “All which images, / Concentrated on the picture, glassed themselves / Before my meditative childhood, as / The incoherencies of change and death / Are represented fully, mixed and merged, / In the smooth fair mystery of perpetual Life.” (I. 168-73)

chair / Being wheeled upon the terrace” (VIII. 80-84). The young and somewhat arrogant man who once proposed marriage to Aurora has here been replaced by a frail man whose blindness has gifted him with a Miltonic aura. His appearance as a metaphorical sea-king signifies his journey through the outer and inner life: in spite of having failed in the material sense, to the point of having lost his property through arson, burnt down along with his dreams of social reform, Romney has achieved wisdom and spiritual knowledge, reaching illumination and therefore, succeeding through the sea of life. Just as Aurora was able to find herself by a process of mirroring in Marian, Romney, also finds revelation by a process of mirroring himself in Aurora’s poetry, as he explains to her:

In all your other books, I saw but you:  
A man may see the moon so, in a pond,  
And not be nearer therefore to the moon,  
Nor use the sight . . . except to drown himself: (VIII. 599-602)

The image is almost identical to that used to describe Aurora’s evocation of Marian’s face on their first meeting. In both cases, the subject becomes passive to contemplation, detached and unreachable through its moonlit and water qualities. A narcissistic tone is also present, creating a self-centred atmosphere. While during the encounter in Paris, the pond became a source of apparition through the form of the deceased, in Romney’s case it represents the act of being mesmerized by his own image. Romney, through his blindness, evokes Aurora’s poetry through this mirroring experience and brings it forward engraining it as part of his own self. After initially having significantly undermined Aurora’s skills and vocation as a poet during their early youth, Romney finally acknowledges the artist’s vision and true worth, embracing her message. Willing to fully understand it, he desires to plunge into his own reflection to seek self-knowledge. His act of acceptance of Aurora’s mission as a poet also acts like a mirror for Aurora, in which she finds reassurance of her self-worth and her place as poet sage.

Throughout *Aurora Leigh*, Romney’s thoughts and emotions are concealed to the reader for a long part of the narrative, mostly because of his absence and third-party letters to Aurora which are not always the most reliable source of information about him. Therefore, the mirroring episodes discussed are highly important in offering glimpses into Romney’s inner self, in which in a couple of lines, Barrett Browning summarizes and narrates Romney’s process as a reader of Aurora’s poetry, while depicting the emotional undertone. Part of the plot of Aurora’s and Romney’s love story is constructed on the lack of information Aurora has about him, and the series of misunderstandings subsequently emerging from Aurora’s imagination and reinterpretation of half-truths, such as Romney being married to Lady Waldemar, which becomes a fixed and tormenting thought for Aurora and for which she has no certainty. It is after Aurora reveals her assumption of that marriage that:



He sprang to his feet,  
And threw his noble head back toward the moon  
As one who swims against a stormy sea,  
Then laughed with such a helpless, hopeless, scorn,  
I stood and trembled. (VIII. 1205-09)

Romney, once the Sea King, transforms into a helpless creature, a victim, trying with his life to swim against the stormy current, and throwing back his head in a motion similar too to that of a howling animal. His body language petrifies Aurora, his laughter: stormy, shattered, hopeless. Romney becomes vulnerable, momentarily losing his magnificence – and perhaps his sanity – in Aurora’s eyes. Following their meeting, framed by the sound of the waves, a quiet atmosphere surrounds them, created by the blend of open space, height, twilight and tide. Marian, in this scene, seems to lose all embodiment and is metaphorically transformed into a soul in spiritual ascension until she simply disappears from the scene. The only apparently solid and living human beings are Romney and Aurora, and in this final section of the poem, time stretches through Books VIII and IX.

Aurora meets her Sea-King and in self-fulfilment commits to starting a new life together with him in which Poetry, Charity and Love will go hand in hand. In a motion similar to that of oceanic tides, both characters are gently drawn to each other, after a long struggle against the currents of their own mutual Fate. Florence remains as an “enchanted sea” (VIII. 38), suggesting a dreamy state of stasis in which Aurora is immersed. The sea (metaphor of existence and social flux) previously signifying to Aurora turbulence and hostility, as has been discussed, has transformed into welcoming, warm, “enchanted”, almost surreal, after Aurora was able to walk on it. “Enchanted” indicates not just an atmospheric magical quality, but also a state of being related to delight, charm and happiness, which, ultimately, is the pinnacle of the spiritual state Aurora finally reaches after her final reunion with Romney. Aurora reaches a state of maturity in which she is able to achieve a symbolic status similar to the one symbolized in her mother’s posthumous portrait, in which she appears with “the swan-like supernatural white life / Just sailing forward from the red stiff silk” (I. 139-40), fitting her role in society as a poet sage: through the several acts of mirroring in other characters, Aurora is able to reconcile herself with her own troubled emotions, find her own voice as an a poet and engage with the real world outside of her poetic vision. The metaphoric mirrors (through water imagery) through their liquefied state instead of a solid, fixed nature, reflect the social flux, and the natural flow of emotions, thought, time and existence. Those mirrors reflect Aurora’s own evolution from her insecure incipient poetic womanhood to the maturity, revelation and grasping of her whole poetic/spiritual vision. In the end, while Romney’s and Aurora’s metaphorical New Jerusalem is constructed, what is left behind are storms and turbulent waters, giving way to a quiet, placid, gentle and transparent sea.

Barrett Browning uses water metaphors as part of Aurora's emotional and mental landscape, rather than presenting water in its different shapes as an external actant ingrained within the landscape, able to modify the character's course of action. As explored, most often, water imagery not only does not correspond to the setting in which Aurora is acting, but is completely foreign to it. This device deployed by Barrett Browning produces two distinctive traits in Aurora Leigh, thus making her different from other contemporary literary heroines, such as Jane Eyre or Gaskell's Ruth. For instance, Aurora does not seem to be affected by the weather in any of the settings where the narrative occurs, except for a minute detail when she is in Italy which is rather a complaint (VII. 661-62). But overall, her engagement with the changes in the weather as an external circumstance affecting her physical well-being or her emotions is totally absent. This enhances a feeling of detachment between Aurora and her body, and highlights Aurora's deep engagement with her own mental process and her perception, concentrating upon her thoughts and emotions most exclusively. By presenting the character almost immune to weather changes and their disruptions, Barrett Browning gives Aurora Leigh an almost superhuman aura with an effect of detachment from everyday matters. Consequently, her mood is never affected by the weather or any other external factor in the natural world which escapes her control. Furthermore, Aurora's intellectual process, inherent to her artistic nature, is enhanced through the lack of her own physical engagement with the outside world: she does not solely write poetry, or chooses to write her own story in verse, but also *thinks, lives and feels* as a poet, with her inner monologue constantly constructed through metaphor and other tropes.

As explored in this article, Aurora's connection with water metaphors develops from childhood, after a significant encounter while staring at her deceased mother's portrait. Water metaphors from then on will be used to describe her struggles, her turmoil, her life journey with all its challenges. Triggered by Aurora's imagination as a child, the blending of images, emotions and meanings will grow in her to become her way of understanding and coping with her own feelings. This associative process will become Aurora's way of constructing her poetic vision of the world, hand in hand with her coming-of-age process. Inherent to her poetic nature, Aurora's way of engaging with water metaphors and imagery also reflects her own artistic nature which creates her whole comprehension of life and the world, not merely acting in the artistic sphere. Some readers, most certainly, might find Aurora's train of thought difficult to engage with, as expressed by Virginia Woolf: "We laugh, we protest, we complain – it is absurd, it is impossible, we cannot tolerate this exaggeration a moment longer – but, nevertheless, we read to the end enthralled" (Woolf 218): tormented, exaggerated, over dramatic at some points, with a mind that tends to run in circles, Aurora Leigh embodies a certain type of poet, daughter of Romanticism, one who decided to embrace water and its metaphors to explain her own existence and narrate her own *Künstlerroman* and *Bildungsroman* in her own poetic terms.

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