

The Success and Failure of Aurora Leigh's Vision of Poetry

The main character in Elizabeth Barrett Browning's *Aurora Leigh* believes two things about good poetry: (1) good poetry is written by the poet for him/herself; and (2) successful poetry, although cultivated purely for the self, calls for an interaction with the audience. Aurora believes that in order to write good poetry, a writer must write for him/herself, resisting interference from the external world, even from critics. The poet must think freely, and must center his/her conception on the self. "Whosoever writes good poetry," Aurora says,

Looks just to art. He does not write for you
Or me...
He will not suffer the best critic known
To step into his sunshine of free thought
And self-absorbed conception and exact
An inch-long swerving of the holy lines. (V, lines 251-257)

Although Aurora believes the cultivation of a good poem must be solely for the self, she also believes a good poem must be read. It must continually encounter and interact with an audience, and these interactions must be rooted in physicality:

What the poet writes,
He writes, mankind accepts it if it suits,
And that's success: if not, the poem's passed
From hand to hand, and yet from hand to hand,
Until the unborn snatch it, crying out
In pity on their fathers being so dull,
And that's success too. (V, 261-267)

The audience interaction Aurora describes is not necessarily positive. The most important part of the interaction is the audience's physical encounter with the poem: the passing along from hand to hand, or snatching up. As long as there is a bodily interaction between the audience and the poem, it doesn't matter whether the audience's response is positive or negative: even if the unborn "cry out / in pity on their fathers being so dull... that's success too".

Julia Kristeva's distinction between the semiotic and symbolic orders helps to clarify Aurora's idea of a bodily interaction between audience and poem. Kristeva describes the semiotic as "a distinctive mark, trace, index, the premonitory sign, the proof, engraved mark, imprint—in short a distinctiveness admitting of an uncertain and indeterminate articulation because it does not... or no longer refers... to a signified object for a thetic consciousness" (p. 1167). Semiotic operations, such as rhythm and intonation within poetic language, depend on the body's drives, observable for example, through the muscular contractions that accompany vocalization (ibid). The semiotic disposition of significance does not assign meaning or define signification; it is opposed to the symbolic order, which is "this inevitable attribute of meaning, sign, and the signified object for the consciousness of... [the] transcendental ego" (ibid).

The question I pose is: does Aurora's poetry fulfill the requirements she describes for a good poem? Throughout her autobiographical poem, Aurora emphasizes the importance of the semiotic—the earthly and bodily—as the only true means of communication with her audience. In the final scene, Romney's semiotic encounter with Aurora's poem signals the "success" of the poem's interaction with its audience. However, even at the end of the text, Aurora seems stuck in the symbolic order because she is preoccupied with her identity as a female poet. Because of this, Aurora is never able to fully break away from her dependence on audience recognition and approval. Whether she ever writes for herself remains unclear.

Semiotic Verse

Both harmony and closeness with the earth are important in Aurora's poetry because she believes those are the means through which one can realize divine truth. As Joyce Zonana says, Aurora believes the only 'way' to heaven is through a complete valuation of "the despised poor earth, / The heavenly, odorous earth" (IX, 652-53). Aurora does not reject the earthly in her poetry, but, instead, embraces it because she does not see heaven and earth as wholly separate. "Earth is crammed with heaven," Aurora says, "And every common bush afire with God; / But only he who sees, takes off his shoes" (VII, lines 821-823). Aurora wants her audience to shed their shoes and feel the earth of her poems. She envisions a semiotic interaction between the audience and the poem, which allows for a break away from the symbolic world. Like Aurora's closeness to the earth, the audience's bodily closeness to Aurora's poems will lead them to a new kind of insight, beyond the symbolic order: divine truth.

Aurora's poetry is, in a sense, an interaction with something divine. Because of this, her poems and prayers perform in a similar way. Aurora's communication with God relies on her connection with the earth and with the body, not with speech, a representation of the symbolic world. Her closest moment to the earth, her closest moment to God, is a moment in which she breaks from the symbolic order:

Aurora lays on the ground in silence, and prays that God
would stop his ears to what I said,
And only listen to the run and beat
Of this poor, passionate, helpless blood--
And then
I lay, and spoke not, but He heard in heaven. (VII, 1269-1272)

Instead of relying on words, Aurora communicates through the bodily: "the run and beat / of this poor, passionate, helpless blood". This communication, which depends solely on the body, resembles the semiotic communication important to Aurora's poetry, where the sounds and rhythms are "the run and beat" of the poem's blood. Later in the poem, Aurora describes poetic speech as "the burning lava of a song," again highlighting an earthly quality of verse (V, line 215). The harmony of the song, its beat and movement, is as fluid as molten magma. The "burning" of the lava also implies a visceral encounter with the poem, in which the audience feels, instead of seeing or hearing.

In her poetry, Aurora rejects symbolic ideas of form and language, and instead, roots her verse in the bodily (the spirit's earth). She relies on the embodiment of the spirit in order to reveal divine truth. Aurora believes poetry is "living art" (V, line 221). Because art is a record of true life, it seems to have a beating bosom, and sets the hearts of others beating (V, lines 220-222). The ability of poetry to live, to have this beating heart, is what allows it to speak to others. This is why Aurora resists adopting a predefined form for her poetry. She fears that imposing form will stifle a poem's development because it will imprison the spirit:

What form is best for poems? Let me think
Of forms less, and the external. Trust the spirit,
As sovran nature does, to make the form;
For otherwise we only imprison spirit
And not embody. Inward evermore
To outward—so in life, and so in art
Which still is life. (V, 223-229)

In order to embody the spirit, Aurora believes you must give the poem freedom to make its own form. By bringing the inward outward, Aurora "keep[s] up the fire, / And leave[s] the generous flames to shape themselves" (V, 235-236).

At the start of Book V, Aurora describes a vision of her poetry in which value is placed on achieving a harmony and closeness with the earth and with the bodily. In doing this, Aurora envisions the type of poetry that will allow her audience to reach something divine. She begins speaking about nature:

Shall I hope
To speak my poems in mysterious tune
With man and nature?—with the lava-lymph
That trickles from successive galaxies
Still drop by drop a-down the finger of God
In still new worlds?—with summer-days in this
That scarce dare breathe they are so beautiful?
With Spring's delicious trouble in the ground,
Tormented by the quickened blood of roots,
And softly pricked by golden crocus sheaves
In token of the harvest-time of flowers? (V, lines 1-11).

Aurora values the ways life and beauty are created on earth. She emphasizes the idea of a shared, life-giving blood that comes from the heavens to create new worlds: water. By calling water “the lava-lymph”, Aurora suggests a parallel to her poems’ means of creation: the sound and rhythm that is the “run and beat” of the poem’s blood, and the “burning lava” of its song. The journey of nature’s lava-lymph into Spring soil, up through roots, and pricked by flowers as they bloom mirrors the journey of the poem’s blood—beginning in the poet, and feeding through to the audience and then to God. The bodily is also important to the poem’s transference. Aurora places importance on emotion, human feeling; sexual passion, the union of souls through physical interaction; and mother’s breasts, the living-giving vessels of the human race. Through this focus on the natural and the bodily, Aurora hopes to stir passion and spirit:

With the great escapings of ecstatic souls
Who, in a rush of too long prisoned flame,
Their radiant faces upward, burn away
This dark of the body, issuing on a world
Beyond our mortal?—can I speak my verse
So plainly in tune to these things and the rest,
That men shall feel it catch them on the quick,
As having the same warrant over them
To hold and move them if they will or no,
Alike imperious as the primal rhythm
Of that theurgic nature? (V, lines 20-30)

Through semiotic verse, poetry that is in tune with earth and body, Aurora wants to inspire her audience, to fill them with an understanding of something beyond them.

Romney’s recognition of Aurora’s poetry is a signal that Aurora has fulfilled her intention. Romney’s experience of her book is semiotic. His realization of divine truth signals a successful speaker-audience interaction: “You showed me something separate from yourself, / Beyond you,” Romney says to Aurora, “You have shown me truths” (VIII, 606-608). The semiotic purity of Romney’s experience is heightened by his blindness. Although he cannot see the words, he can feel the book, and even taste it:

The book is in my heart,
Lives in me, wakes in me, and dreams in me:
My daily bread tastes of it. (VIII, lines 265-267)

Romney has been moved by Aurora's book; so much so that it has become part of him; it ignites new hope and dreams. Aurora's poems are real for Romney. As we see in the next quote, the book's waking in Romney is like the start of new life:

This last book o'ercame me like soft rain
Which falls at midnight, when the tightened bark
Breaks out into unhesitating buds
And sudden protestations of the spring. (VIII, 595-598)

Like the lava-lymph trickling down, drop by drop, to create new earth, Aurora's poem has created a new reality for Romney, one bursting with life.

Aurora's poetry does achieve her vision, an interaction with its audience that is rooted in and realized through the semiotic. However, as shown in the next section, it seems Aurora is unable to fully break away from the symbolic world, herself. Because of this, Aurora's relationship to her poetry is unclear.

Writing for the self

Many critics view Aurora Leigh as an account of successful poetic development. Joyce Zonana claims Aurora is able to free herself from the myths of patriarchy, coming to a full acceptance of herself as woman and artist, and maintaining her own authority as both poet and muse throughout the poem. Helen Cooper believes Aurora is able to reconcile her sense of self—being both woman and artist—through her relationship with Marian. She sees Romney a positive muse for Aurora, claiming that his blindness eliminates his inhibiting gaze. Barbara Gelpi also looks at the poem as “a bildungsroman as well as a novel/poem of social concern” (p. 36). She pinpoints, however, a central problem in the development of Aurora's female identity, Aurora's internalized antifeminine biases, and argues that Aurora must see herself as masculine to consider herself a poet. My concern with Aurora's writing stems from a similar idea: Aurora's anxiety about her gender prevents her from realizing her poetic value; it imprisons her in the symbolic world. Because of this, Aurora's troublesome vision of her poetic self is never fully reconciled.

Throughout her poetic career, Aurora has written with an agenda: to prove her worth as a poet, despite her gender. Preoccupied with a desire for recognition, particularly from Romney, she takes for granted the importance of writing for the self. Aurora has internalized pressure from the masculine gaze, particularly from Romney's denial of her worth as a female poet:

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, lines 220-225)

Perhaps stemming from Romney's doubt (or from broader societal standards), Aurora doubts her own poetic ability, and consequently, struggles with the idea of communicating with her audience. In her expression of self-doubt, what becomes obvious is that she is only worried about communicating harmoniously with her audience (as explored previously), and not about her focus or fulfillment as a poet:

I go hence
To London, to the gathering-place of souls,
To live mine straight out, vocally, in books;

Harmoniously for others, if indeed
A woman's soul, like man's, be wide enough
To carry the whole octave (that's to prove)
Or, if I fail, still purely for myself. (I, lines 1181-1187)

Aurora assumes that if she does not succeed in communicating with others, in revealing truth to her audience, she will at least be writing for herself. However, she never questions her motives for writing, and doesn't pay attention to her own interaction with and realization of her poems. It seems Aurora is overwhelmed by her agenda. She is preoccupied with proving she can do what others say she can't, and this limits what she is able to achieve. Aurora is cognizant of women's unsuccessful attempts to prove their worth, and sees the danger in prating one's worth and ability:

A woman cannot do the thing she ought,
Which means whatever perfect thing she can,
In life, in art, in science, but she fears
To let the perfect action take her part,
And rest there: she must prove what she can do
Before she does it. (VIII, lines 814-819)

Although Aurora recognizes the danger of claiming she can do something before she really does it, she feels an urgency to prove herself as a poet before she actually sees herself as a poet. This urgency limits Aurora's doing because it distracts her from her duty to herself.

Unlike Aurora, Marian, a lower class female character, is able to escape the male gaze and redefine herself. After being raped and impregnated, Marian becomes a despised object of society. However, she is able to escape the symbolic order when she refuses Romney's offer of marriage. At this moment, Marian removes herself from systematic female oppression by declaring independence, a death of her previous self. If she had married Romney, she would have always been labeled, "a married harlot" (IX, line 241). As part of the social institution of marriage, Marian wouldn't have been able to escape society's negative gaze, and would have pulled Romney and her child into it, as well. On her own, however, Marian is able to assert a new vision of self as "a human soul," who, regardless of being despised or honored by society, is a vessel of God, "still good enough to pray in" (IX, lines 329; 333). She removes herself from the symbolic order (the sphere of society) by marking the death of her previous self. She chooses a new calling, to love only the child: "Once killed, this ghost of Marian loves no more, / No more... except the child (IX, lines 389-390).

When Marian makes her speech of independence, Aurora recognizes an authority in Marian's voice, one that she has not yet recognized in her own. This highlights Aurora's lack of confidence, and her confinement in the male gaze. Aurora's vision of Marian's speech is much like Romney's vision of Aurora's; she envisions Marian's words coming from something beyond her:

The thrilling solemn voice, so passionless
Sustained, yet low, without a rise or fall,
As one who had authority to speak,
And not as Marian. (IX, 248-251)

Marian's voice demands attention. She knows what she is going to say, and says it with confidence. Aurora, in contrast, does not recognize this confidence or authority in her own poetic voice. She calls her latest book "foolish, feeble, and afraid," unworthy of Romney's high compliments (VIII, line 273). The book has not been satisfying for her, although it has satisfied her audience.

Occasionally, Aurora does recognize the advantages of working for oneself and escaping the external eye. These moments are short lived, however, because Aurora is too doubtful and afraid of her abilities. Even though Aurora values a sexless view of the poet, she is haunted by the curse of her gender. When Aurora moves to Italy, she feels relieved to escape the external eye, not only because she can define herself freely, but also because she can be her own inspiration:

I could pass them by
Indifferently not fearing to be known.
...
I'm happy. It's sublime,
This perfect solitude of foreign lands!
To be, as if you had not been till then,
And were then, simply what you chose to be. (VII, lines 1187-1189; 1193-1196)

When Aurora is removed from external pressure, she recognizes the value of solitude. Not only is she happy being alone, but also she seems to more readily experience the sublime. Aurora's independence from England's oppressive society is promising. It has the potential to allow her to write for herself and capture the sublime in a way that is fulfilling for the poet (in addition to the audience). But Aurora's self doubt prevents her from doing so. When Aurora feels closest to God, she finds she cannot write:

I feared to jingle bells upon my robe
Before the four-faced silent cherubim:
With God so near me, could I sing of God?
I did not write, nor read, nor even think. (VII, lines 1303-1306)

Aurora fears singing of God when he's near because she's never expressed herself in such a personal and self-fulfilling way before. Her self-doubt is rooted in her larger insecurity about the ability of women to express themselves in the same true way as men. Here, Aurora's doubt keeps her from forming the independent poetics she desires.

In the final scene, Aurora's creative dependence becomes obvious. Romney's realization of divine truth, upon reading Aurora's book, leads them both to a vision of a new world at the end of text. However, Aurora's dependence on Romney in this scene suggests that she is not pursuing a poetic vision of her own. This is where Joyce Zonana's argument comes into question. She claims Aurora reaches an ultimate freedom from her oppressed status as a female poet by the end of the poem, emphasizing the importance of Aurora's sole vision of a New Jerusalem to show this (p. 244). Yet, Zonana overlooks Aurora's dependence on her male counterpart. Although Aurora is the only one that can actually see the New Jerusalem at the end of the poem, her vision is inspired and enabled by Romney:

My Romney!—Lifting up my hand in his,
As wheeled by Seeing spirits toward the east,
He turned instinctively, where, faint and far,
...
Were laid in jasper-stone as clear as glass
The first foundations of that new, near Day. (IX, 950-953; 956-957)

Romney facilitates Aurora's vision by taking her hand and leading her. He moves "instinctively," while Aurora follows. The emphasis on a new kind of vision also highlights dependence. "Seeing" is no longer literal, but is a figurative, higher sense, connected to the spiritual:

He stood a moment with erected brows
In silence, as a creature might who gazed—

Stood calm, and fed his blind, majestic eyes
Upon the thought of high noon. (IX, lines 958-961)

Although blind, Romney seems to partake in the higher vision of the soul, relying on insight and imagination, rather than literal sight. His is the kind of poetic gaze Aurora values. In this final scene, the audience sees Aurora consumed by this gaze for the first time. However, because her gaze is still linked to Romney, even in her final poetic vision, Aurora is unable to escape her dependence on male approval. As a result, Aurora's revolutionary vision of Jerusalem, her first poetic speech after the union of souls, is realized through Romney's soul, not her own: "and when / I saw his soul saw—'Jasper first, '..." (IX, lines 961-962).

In the opening lines of the poem, in which Aurora introduces the work as a reflection of her life, are, perhaps, the most problematic: they seem to root Aurora and her audience in the symbolic order. Although Aurora suggests she is finally ready to write the kind of poetry she aspires to, the poem she describes does not match the description of good poetry confirmed throughout her text:

I who have written much in prose and verse
For others' uses, will write now for mine--
Will write my story for my better self
As when you paint your portrait for a friend,
Who keeps it in a drawer and looks at it
Long after he has ceased to love you, just
To hold together what he was and is. (I, lines 2-8)

Aurora compares writing her story for "her better self" to painting a portrait for a friend, which seems to be Romney. The idea of painting a picture for Romney is troublesome for two reasons: 1) it highlights Aurora's focus on writing for someone else at the very pinnacle of her poetic career; and 2) it roots Aurora's poem in the symbolic order. The poem-as-portrait works to identify meaning through the symbolic function, giving specific significance to the object portrayed. Furthermore, instead of freeing the audience from the symbolic order, it is created "to hold together what he was and is", confining the audience to their place and identity as related to the object in the poem.

Aurora's vision of poetry asks for the poet to create for him/herself, yet in doing so, to also create something that engages its audience in a way that breaks through the symbolic order. Aurora attempts to do this, and, with Romney's vision of a reality rooted in the bodily, she is, at least, partially successful. However, Aurora's motives for writing and her fulfillment as a poet remain unclear. It is ironic that Aurora's poetry is able to function in the semiotic, that Marian and Romney are able to free themselves from the symbolic order, while Aurora seems trapped by anxieties about her gender. Perhaps, what is most disappointing is Aurora's description of her autobiographical poem, where, at the pinnacle of her poetic career, she seems to have lost sight of her vision of good poetry. Let us remember Aurora's vision that asks poets to create works that move their audiences and show truth beyond usual signification, but to do so through writing that is self-motivated and self-fulfilling. It is a vision that not only frees the audience from a world of systematic oppression, but frees the poet as well.

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