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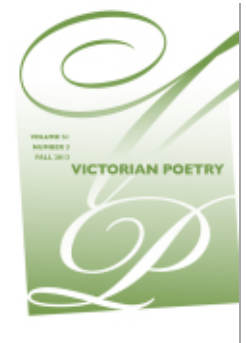
Two Clocks: Aurora Leigh, Poetic Form, and the Politics of Timeliness

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Two Clocks: *Aurora Leigh*, Poetic Form, and the Politics of Timeliness

MARY MULLEN

Elizabeth Barrett Browning's reception history demonstrates the power and the politics of timeliness. Celebrated in her own age for her poetry's formal innovations and political engagements, by the early twentieth century, Virginia Woolf could easily conclude that "fate had not been kind to Mrs. Browning as a writer," as she noted that Barrett Browning's importance "has become merely historical."¹ Indeed, Barrett Browning's poetry was largely ignored until the 1970s—a time of growing interest in women's writing and feminist theory. As Bina Friewald and, more recently, Simon Avery, demonstrate, rehearsing this reception history tells a much larger historical narrative about what historical circumstances must be in place to engage with women's writing on its own terms as it helps us reflect on our own shifting critical practices.² New Criticism ignored Barrett Browning, while feminist criticism—in its many historical iterations—ensured that her writing found its proper place within the literary canon.³

If formalism was not always kind to Barrett Browning's poetry, Caroline Levine's recent article, "Strategic Formalism," suggests that we have at last reached a historical moment in which Barrett Browning can be kind to formalism. Arguing for a new formalist method, Levine reads "The Cry of the Children" to demonstrate how the collision between the poem's literary forms—its irony, inversions, metaphors and rhymes—and its engagement with social forms such as gender and the nation creates the poem's political effects.⁴ Building on Levine's work, I contend that the collision of literary and social forms in *Aurora Leigh* contributes to contemporary debates about the politics of timeliness. The novel-poem merges genres with different temporal valences such as the seemingly anachronistic epic and the modern novel in order to combine poetry's transcendent aesthetic with the novel's plodding narrative time. But the novel-poem also reflects on how social forms express themselves temporally as it depicts how women's education delays their development and participates in Victorian debates about the nature of historical time. I contend that these discrepant forms and temporalities refuse

a monolithic or uniform understanding of historical time and, in the process, resist political arguments grounded in timeliness.

As Catherine Gallagher reminds us, most understandings of literary form actually “contend against time.”⁵ While describing how formalism fails to account for length, Gallagher alludes to one of the most powerful complaints lodged against American New Criticism: that it celebrates the timelessness of the literary text at the cost of political and historical readings.⁶ However, I argue that *Aurora Leigh*'s discrepant temporalities encourage us to question whether timeliness has its own political problems. As Dipesh Chakrabarty demonstrates, political arguments grounded in claims to timeliness “came to non-European peoples in the nineteenth century as somebody’s way of saying ‘not yet’ to somebody else.”⁷ He suggests that linear, historical time excludes non-European people from history by representing them as remnants of the past rather than contemporaries. Similarly, Julia Kristeva’s essay, “Women’s Time” recounts how each successive generation of the women’s movement has had to confront its exclusion from linear, historical time as she argues for the creation of a new signifying space that emphasizes individual difference.⁸ Like Kristeva, *Aurora Leigh* demonstrates how linear, historical time often represents women as belated or untimely. In fact, Barrett Browning turns to poetry to create a more inclusive historicism precisely because it combines timeliness with the timeless and even untimely nature of discrete literary forms. In other words, by representing multiple, overlapping timescapes, *Aurora Leigh* questions the dominance of linear, progressive time.

An attention to *Aurora Leigh*'s varied timescapes has two important implications: first, it highlights how *Aurora Leigh*'s simultaneity—its poetic double vision and apocalyptic imagery that emphasize how poetry embodies historical time even as it transcends it—transforms history’s messy, multiple temporalities into a unity that does not obscure difference. Second, it demonstrates how the marriage plot—that “most vulgar” alteration to the Corinne myth that many contemporary feminist theorists struggle with—provides the most explicit rejection of progressive, linear time.⁹ *Aurora Leigh* unsettles the teleological nature of the novelistic genre by representing Romney and Aurora as clashing temporalities that lack “mutual time.”¹⁰ Not only do they develop at different rates, they have different understandings of temporality: Romney conceives time spatially, while Aurora embraces multiple temporalities. Their marriage—and the establishment of mutual time that it implies—is not the natural result of a developmental trajectory, but rather hinges on the reconfiguration of historical time so that it includes both men and women. Ultimately, Barrett Browning contributes to the development of our own formalist methods by suggesting that form can represent the chaotic, disorder of history—its multiple, overlapping temporalities—rather than a progressive, linear history grounded in successive historical time.

I. "(ask Carlyle)": Allusion and Conflicting Conceptions of Historical Time

As Herbert Tucker's study of the nineteenth-century epic suggests, Victorians often viewed the epic as a "literary anachronism 'in an age so modern.'"¹¹ Twentieth-century literary history certainly emphasizes how the epic becomes obsolete in the face of the seemingly inevitable rise of the novel. Both Georg Lukács and M. M. Bakhtin contrast the 'primitive' epic with the modern novel.¹² In *Aurora Leigh*, though, Barrett Browning combines the epic and the novel and insists that both are necessary to represent modern life. In her meta-reflection on poetry in book five, she writes, "The critics say that epics have died out / With Agamemnon and the goat-nursed gods; / I'll not believe it" (5.191-141). Consequently, although she criticizes the poet who "trundles back his soul five hundred years, / Past moat and drawbridge, into a castle court" (5.191-192), she also acknowledges the continued relevance of old poetic forms. Barrett Browning seems to model what Wai Chee Dimock calls deep time because she acknowledges the temporal valence of the epic even as she argues that it helps represent the contemporary age. As Dimock suggests, genre is a way to recognize the multiple temporalities at work in a single moment, writing: "Rather than seeing the epic as an archaic genre, completely behind us and pronounceable as dead, I would like to see it as an archaic genre that has threaded into the present."¹³ By deliberately using multiple literary forms such as the epic and the novel to draw attention to the multiplicity of historical time, Barrett Browning actively participates in the threading process.

Allusion is central to this threading process because it situates *Aurora Leigh*'s poetics within a broader literary tradition even as it emphasizes the novel-poem's engagement with the contemporary historical moment. For Margaret Reynolds, Barrett Browning's implicit and explicit allusions to other writers—George Sand, Charlotte Brontë, Charles Kingsley, Germaine De Stael, William Wordsworth, Thomas Carlyle, among others—demonstrates the "literariness of the work" as it expresses female exclusion from a patriarchal literary tradition ("Critical Introduction," p. 49). I want to extend Reynolds's claim by considering how Barrett Browning's allusion to Thomas Carlyle and John Stuart Mill demonstrates the historicity of the novel-poem. This historicity emerges not only from its "topicalities" or direct allusion to contemporary thinkers like Carlyle and Mill that emphasize the poem's timeliness, but also from the implicit suggestion that *Aurora* must activate an ongoing debate about the nature of historical time in order to define her poetics.¹⁴ If the novel-poem tends to favor Carlyle's transcendentalism over Mill's progressive temporality as I demonstrate in what follows, it nevertheless highlights the contradictions

inherent in the historical moment—even contradicting definitions of the historical moment—in order to create a sense of the age that retains a notion of difference and multiplicity.

Before turning to Barrett Browning's specific allusions to Carlyle and Mill, it is important to discuss what I mean by topicalities. Richard Altick coined the term to account for the novel's "time-specific details"—or the allusions to people, events, and places that would have been present in people's minds during the novel's moment of production (p. 3). Although Altick focuses on the novel, he claims that *Aurora Leigh's* oft-cited line that poet's "sole work is to represent the age" demonstrates poetry's own attempts to be timely.¹⁵ Yet, the surprising feature of *Aurora Leigh's* topicalities—especially her allusions to Carlyle and Mill—is that even as they are "time-specific," they reconfigure the nature of historical time. Although these allusions open up important questions about the historical relationship between Barrett Browning, Carlyle, and Mill—questions that scholars such as Brent Kinser, Marjorie Stone, Margaret Morlier, among others have pursued—they also question the value of timeliness by questioning whether time, itself, produces meaning.¹⁶

When Elizabeth Barrett Browning alludes to Carlyle and Mill, both function as topicalities, but only Mill is timely. She writes:

Ay, but every age
Appears to souls who live in't (ask Carlyle)
Most unheroic. Ours, for instance, ours:
The thinkers scout it, and the poets abound
Who scorn to touch it with a finger-tip:
A pewter age, —mixed metal, silver-washed
An age of patches for old gaberdines,
An age of mere transition, meaning nought
Except that what succeeds must shame it quite
If God please. That's wrong thinking, to my mind,
And wrong thoughts make poor poems (5.155-166).

The phrase "an age of mere transition" alludes to Mill's 1831 essay, "The Spirit of the Age," an essay that describes the contemporary age as "an age of change" and "an age of transition."¹⁷ Tellingly, this allusion occurs directly after Barrett Browning's repetitive use of the pronoun, "ours," implying that Mill's conception of the age is the dominant perspective. By contrast, the strange discursive and parenthetical form—"(ask Carlyle)"—seems to separate Carlyle from the "thinkers" and "poets" that define "our" age. He also contributes to an understanding of the age, but does so by drawing attention to what occurs in "every age" rather than the particularities of "ours." The specific suggestion to

“ask Carlyle” encourages readers to “ask” a man who unsettles historical time and the bounded historical periods it suggests.¹⁸

As Jerome Buckley suggests, the nineteenth century began to conceive historical time as “the medium of organic growth and fundamental change, rather than simply additive succession.”¹⁹ What this means, of course, is that the nineteenth century began to believe that time, itself, brings change and should require political action. Mill’s “The Spirit of the Age” models this new understanding of historical time as it argues for the timeliness of political reform (p. 6). Describing the new dominance of historical time, Mill writes: “The idea of comparing one’s own age with former ages, or with our notion of those which are yet to come, had occurred to philosophers; but it never before was itself the dominant idea of any age” (p. 1). His argument assumes that historical time moves in one direction—towards the future—and coheres into distinct spatial locations or ages. In Mill’s account, the age functions as a tool for mapping one’s location within history by demarcating the space of the past and present. Implicit in his argument is a sense that time, itself, requires that people embrace political reform and new political institutions.

In contrast, what John Rosenberg calls Carlyle’s “drive to escape the prison-house of time” manifests itself in the form of his writing: he repeatedly moves between past and present, appeals to universals, and reveals the inability of narrative time to represent history.²⁰ In his own contribution to the ongoing conversation about the spirit of the age, his 1829 essay “Signs of the Times,” Carlyle demonstrates how his emphasis on the transcendent and the eternal unsettles an understanding of progressive historical time. In his words:

The present is an important time; as all present time necessarily is. The poorest Day that passes over us is the conflux of two Eternities; it is made up of currents that issue from the remotest Past, and flow onwards to the remotest Future. (“Signs of the Times,” p. 5)

Carlyle’s sense of the present hardly yields itself to a political argument based on timeliness. Instead, he reconfigures historical time as the merging of “currents,” uniting past and present rather than using them to demarcate distinct positions on a timeline.²¹ Importantly, when historical time is “the conflux of two Eternities” rather than a linear progression, timelines have little meaning. Carlyle does not seek to “locate” or “distinguish” the age, but instead attempts “to characterize this age of ours” suggesting that it is “the Mechanical Age . . . the Age of Machinery” (“Signs of the Times,” p. 6). Even as Carlyle acknowledges how a reliance on mechanism differentiates this age from the ages that precede it, he also emphasizes the continuities over time, asserting that “faith in Mechanism . . . is in every age” (p. 22).

Carlyle's concept of the dynamical, in particular, distinguishes his understanding of the age, for it necessarily implies the eternal or the infinite—forms that cannot be represented through historical time.²² He insists that in order to understand the age we must first *see* it properly: we must recognize its relationship to the whole, to “infinite Space” and “infinite Time,” as we consider both the inward and the outward, the dynamical and the mechanical (p. 24). While the mechanical suggests the outward form and even progressive historical time, the dynamical is

a science which treats of, and practically addresses, the primary, unmodified forces and energies of man, the mysterious springs of Love, and Fear, and Wonder, of Enthusiasm, Poetry, Religion, all which have a truly vital and *infinite* character (p. 13)

Barrett Browning's essay on Thomas Carlyle for Richard Hengist Horne's 1844 collection, *A New Spirit of the Age* celebrates Carlyle for his ability to bring a poetic perspective to history. In her words, “Carlyle recognizes, in a manner that no mere historian ever does, but as the true poet always will do, - the same human nature through every cycle of individual and social existence.”²³ Not bound to a linear timeline, Carlyle's understanding of history depends upon seeing, characterizing, and recognizing the eternal and the infinite. Tellingly, Barrett Browning characterizes this specifically as “poetic.”

Importantly, though, history necessarily exceeds representation in Carlyle's conception. Exposing the limits of historical writing, he famously writes: “Narrative is *linear*, Action is *solid*.”²⁴ This formulation again points towards the dynamical—while narrative is finite, action is infinite—as it argues that time is precisely what limits our representation of history. As Carlyle writes, “Narrative is, by its nature, of only one dimension; only travels forward towards one, or towards successive points” (“On History,” p. 29). In contrast, the actual events of history are “*simultaneous*,” building upon “prior or contemporaneous” events and giving birth to “an ever-living, ever-working Chaos of Being, wherein shape after shape bodies itself forth from innumerable elements” (p. 29). Here, Carlyle further emphasizes his differences from Mill, because for Mill, the time of narrative and the time of history align—both “travel forward . . . towards successive points.” According to Carlyle, though, no narrative form can capture the constant shape-shifting of history because narrative time converts the simultaneous into the successive.

Of course, the very form of poetry necessitates playing with narrative time. Although Coventry Patmore indicates that meter suggests duration and creates standard intervals of time in his 1857 *Essay on English Metrical Law*, poetic time

hardly produces the linear progression associated with narrative.²⁵ Instead, as Herbert Tucker argues, poems create shapes, or unique “built structures” that achieve meaning through spacetime, merging spatial forms such as rhyme, meter, and lineation with the temporal experience of reading and repetition.²⁶ While Tucker shows how specific built structures participate in historical understandings of space and time, he also demonstrates how poetry’s spacetime “opens out into eternity” as a transcendent aesthetic form, “a moment’s monument.”²⁷ Barrett Browning seems to privilege the latter element of poetic spacetime by opposing “relative, comparative / And temporal truths” with “essential truth” (1.860—862). Aurora expresses her initial enthusiasm for poetry by praising the poet’s ability to achieve “fellowship” with the eternal:

The poet, speaker, he expands with joy;
 The palpitating angel in his flesh
 Thrills inly with consenting fellowship
 To those innumerable spirits who sun themselves
 Outside of time (1.911–915).

For Barrett Browning, then, although poets’ “sole work is to represent the age” (5.202), poetic form necessarily exceeds the poet’s specific, historical location by adopting the transcendent temporality of the aesthetic. This description of poetry comes close to modeling a formalism that contends against time, but tellingly, poetry, itself, is not “outside of time” but rather, results from “fellowship” with those “spirits” outside of time. In other words, instead of embracing poetry for its timelessness, Barrett Browning promotes poetry because it emphasizes the poet’s bodily presence within a specific historical moment at the same time that it allows for the poet’s transcendence of this moment. In short, poetry’s drive towards “essential truth” depends upon simultaneity, a merging of the temporal and the eternal, rather than succession.

For Barrett Browning, as for Carlyle, neither the past nor the future is the proper space for history because time, itself, does not produce historical meaning. Instead, one’s ability to adopt a poetic “double vision” that moves between distance and immediacy, and between past and present, allows a person to engage with and represent the age (5.184). As Holly Laird argues, “Whether the age is great or not depends on whether or not its poets can see from two perspectives at once, see the world small and see it large” (Laird, p. 280). While Laird emphasizes the “two perspectives” implied by double vision, its simultaneity—the “at once”—distinguishes Barrett Browning’s unique conception of the age. After inviting her readers to “ask Carlyle,” she writes:

But poets should
 Exert a double vision; should have eyes
 To see near things as comprehensively
 As if afar they took their point of sight,
 And distant things as intimately deep
 As if they touched them. Let us strive for this.
 I do distrust the poet who discerns
 No character or glory in his times (5.183–190).

Replacing the linear sequences of history with mobile, poetic spacetime, double vision necessarily replaces the successive logic of a “transition” with the simultaneous vision of past, present, and future. Time coheres as space—the poet “sees” the past and present—and yet double vision collapses the temporal distance between these two spaces. Without this simultaneity, Barrett Browning suggests that poetry only represents death, for “death inherits death” (5.199). By contrast, double vision represents “this live, throbbing age” precisely because it merges the past and present, the historical moment with its transcendence (5.203).

II. *Aurora Leigh*'s Multiple Temporalities

Understanding *Aurora Leigh*'s reflections on the nature of historical time helps us re-examine another site of merging social and literary forms: the marriage plot. Scholars and reviewers have long questioned Romney and Aurora's projected union that closes the novel-poem. While Victorian reviewers criticized Aurora's decision to marry—calling her “incongruous and contradictory both in her sentiments and in her actions”²⁸—and mocked Romney's weakness as a character, contemporary scholars often interrogate their union because it brings unsatisfying political and narrative closure to the novel-poem.²⁹ Yet, through the marriage plot and its clashing temporalities, Barrett Browning rejects linear, historical time in favor of the “multiform” (3.9).

The marriage plot merges the novel's emphasis on development over time with poetry's transcendence of time.³⁰ This is not always a seamless merger and, at first glance, it contributes to our mistrust of the marriage resolution. As Frances Ferguson suggests, although the novelistic marriage plot “can accommodate a great deal of to-and-fro within its framework,” it functions as a “large-scale narrative unit.”³¹ She claims that marriage-plot novels share a structure that emphasizes the beginning and ending and, importantly, share the unifying resolution of marriage. However, *Aurora Leigh* undermines the unity of the marriage plot by highlighting how the passage of time frequently causes Aurora to contradict herself, creating several beginnings as well as several, ultimately false, endings.

For instance, although Aurora declares that she did not love Romney “nor then, nor since, / Nor ever” in the second book (II.713–714), in the ninth book she tells Romney “I love you, loved you . . . loved you first and last, / And love you on for ever. Now I know / I loved you always, Romney” (9.683–685). Both of these statements appeal to a sense of eternity (“nor ever” and “for ever”) as they directly contradict one another in meaning. Thus, while the marriage plot traditionally brings closure to narrative time, Aurora and Romney’s union emphasizes the instability of narrative time by pointing backwards to the other seemingly stable resolutions within the text. The shift between the novel’s slow development and poetry’s appeal to eternals encourages us to question stability over time, even the stability of a single temporal frame, and consequently undermines the teleological temporality of the marriage plot in *Aurora Leigh* where marriage brings narrative unity and closure.

Rather than producing a teleology, the marriage plot is a search for simultaneity, or what Barrett Browning calls “mutual time” that attempts to create a sense of the whole from discrepant temporalities and genres (4.425). Romney and Aurora represent clashing temporalities throughout the novel-poem and are unable to marry in part because they are unable to produce a shared sense of time. Gender expresses itself temporally, for as Aurora suggests, women and men age at different rates because of their different experiences and education. As she tells Romney:

I have not stood long on the strand of life,
 And these salt waters have had scarcely time
 To creep so high up as to wet my feet:
 I cannot judge these tides – I shall, perhaps.
 A woman’s always younger than a man
 At equal years, because she is disallowed
 Maturing by the outdoor sun and air (2.325–331).

“Equal years” do not necessarily produce a sense of shared time precisely because women and men have different experiences of space. Aurora’s confining domestic education at her aunt’s house proves her point, for Aurora describes how domestic space impedes women’s development by calling her aunt’s life “A sort of cage-bird life” (1.305). In this instance, narrative succession is a problem because, although both men and women develop over time, women are always belated in relation to men who can mature “by the outdoor sun and air.”³²

Aurora and Romney’s different conceptions of time also produce clashing temporalities. While Romney desires to step outside of time in order to see the world spatially through statistics, Aurora has a dual relationship to time: she

both immerses herself in the disparate temporalities of the age and attempts to transcend it. For Romney, space triumphs over time as he declares that the historical moment is a crisis that “we’re come to late” (2.263). He argues that the only way to do justice to the age is to recognize its position outside of time in part because of our own profound belatedness. In his words:

Here’s an age
That makes its own vocation! here we have stepped
Across the bounds of time! here’s nought to see,
But just the rich man and just Lazarus,
And both in torments, with a mediate gulph,
Though not a hint of Abraham’s bosom. (2.274–279)

Like John Stuart Mill, Romney sees time as creating boundaries, distinguishing between before and after and constructing a place within history—‘here’ rather than ‘now.’ Yet, his suggestion that “we have stepped across the bounds of time” does more than merely introduce a notion of spatialized time—it also suggests that time, itself, no longer matters. Not surprisingly, then, Romney suggests that the problems of the age are “coherent in statistical despairs” (2.313) —captured entirely through spatial representation. Like the formalists who Gallagher criticizes for obscuring length by favoring, “a *form* that can be made apprehensible all at once, in a picture or a fractal,” Romney suggests that the age is visible as a picture detached from time (p. 230). Romney’s emphasis on political timeliness makes him ignore the discrepant temporalities at work within the age—privileging “formal universals” in their stead (3.747).

By contrast, Aurora questions what she calls “social figments, feints, and formalisms” because they cannot account for multiplicity (3.18). These formalisms do not recognize the multiple meanings embedded within a single form, and problematically think that form dissolves time. Aurora contrasts these social formalisms with a literary formalism that recognizes form’s multiple meanings across discrepant temporalities. Citing the Book of John, Aurora reminds us how language and literary form transcends time by remaining relevant, while also highlighting how historical specificity necessarily changes how we understand form:

If He spoke
To Peter then, He speaks to us the same:
The word suits many different martyrdoms,
And signifies a multiform of death (3.6-9).³³

Aurora suggests that “He speaks to us the same” at the same time that she acknowledges historical differences by suggesting that the word “signifies a

multiform of death.” By acknowledging the continued relevance of old forms she challenges Romney’s sense that statistics allows us to see “as God sees,” suggesting, instead, that seeing the age requires a consideration of how forms from other ages continue to circulate within the present (2.316). Like Romney, Aurora attempts to understand the age as a totality, but while Romney privileges a “formal universal,” a sense of the universal that emerges from form itself, Aurora prioritizes a sense of the universal that recognizes the “multiform.”

Unlike Romney’s arguments about political timeliness, then, Aurora embraces a literary formalism that is deliberately untimely. She mocks her critics who suggest that the age should determine poetic form, especially the critic Jobson who suggests that “a cheerful genius suites the times” (3.85). Moreover, she claims the epic as a modern form, telling poets:

Never flinch,
But still, unscrupulously epic, catch
Upon the burning lava of a song
The full-veined, heaving, double-breasted Age (5.213–216).

The specific form of the age matters—it is epic and takes the shape of a woman’s body—and yet, the form does not result from a distinct position within time. Rather, both forms work against conventional, historical time. The epic is anachronistic—for “the critics say that epics have died out / With Agamemnon and the goat-nursed gods” (5.139–140)—and women are belated, “always younger than a man at equal years.” These untimely forms force the poet to create simultaneity out of difference, to merge past, present, and future by using forms that have distinctly different temporal valences. Unlike Romney’s social formalism that synthesizes through spatial representation, Aurora’s literary formalism synthesizes through simultaneity, all the while acknowledging the multiple, proliferating forms necessary to create such simultaneity.

In addition to refusing to allow the age to determine literary form, Aurora resists form’s regulation of time and space. Questioning the conventions of drama in book five, she asks, “exact / the literal unities of time and place, When ’tis the essence of passion to ignore / Both time and place? Absurd” (5.232–235). The enjambment emphasizes her own resistance to form’s regulation of time. For Barrett Browning, as for Carlyle, art produces “an Idea of the Whole” (“On History,” p. 30). However, it does so by pointing outward and acknowledging the aspects of life and history that cannot be contained by form.³⁴ In “On History” Carlyle talks about an “increased division of labour” that expands history beyond the realm of the political historian, considering history from multiple perspectives in order “to secure for us some oversight of the Whole” (p. 35).

Carlyle praises this expansion of history, hoping only that the division of labour that allows history to move “in manifold directions and intersections” does not also “aggravate our already strong Mechanical tendencies” (p. 35). Similarly, Barrett Browning’s understanding of literary form seeks to represent an “Idea of the Whole” by refusing to allow a single form to regulate time and space. To this end, no single genre establishes the novel-poem’s temporal frame. Instead, Barrett Browning moves between the epic and the novel, replacing “literal unities” with multiple forms.

Romney and Aurora’s opposing approaches to form and temporality are so important to the novel-poem that I contend that the conflict driving the marriage plot is how to create simultaneity out of temporal and formal difference. Aurora herself describes her relationship with Romney as one of clashing temporalities. As they walk from Marian’s house in the fourth book, Romney and Aurora converse about current events. The pacing of the conversation is itself meaningful, for the haste with which they move between “topicalities”—modern books, the climate, the economy, the Irish potato famine—reveals Aurora and Romney’s personal discomfort with one another at the same time it suggests the overwhelming proliferation of problems facing Victorian society. Aurora translates this unnatural haste for the reader, explaining their inability to foster “mutual time”:

I cannot tell you why it was. 'Tis plain
 We had not loved nor hated: wherefore dread
 To spill gunpowder on ground safe from fire?
 Perhaps we had lived too closely, to diverge
 So absolutely: Leave two clocks, they say,
 Wound up to different hours, upon one shelf,
 And slowly, through the interior wheels of each,
 The blind mechanic motion sets itself
 A-throb to feel out for the mutual time.
 It was not so with us, indeed: while he
 Struck midnight, I kept striking six at dawn,
 While he marked judgment, I, redemption-day (4.417–428).

The “two clocks” that lack “mutual time” suggest that, despite their shared spatial experience, they have not found a way to share an experience of time. In turn, the specific times that they represent (“midnight” and “six at dawn”) allude to Aurora and Romney’s distinct perspectives on their society: while Romney belatedly diagnoses problems, Aurora looks for redeeming aspects within society. Of course, the association of Aurora with “six at dawn” is already implied by Aurora’s name.

The poem dramatizes Romney and Aurora's repeated failures to establish a shared sense of time by refusing to allow any sense of "meanwhile" to emerge within the poem. Aurora thinks about what Romney is doing elsewhere at various moments of the text, but she is almost always mistaken in these moments. For instance, when Marian tells her story of leaving England, Aurora hears it "double" as she attempts to move between Marian's tale of exploitation and violence and Romney's present moment (6.1100). Aurora believes that at the very moment that Marian tells her how Lady Waldemar encouraged her not to marry Romney, Lady Waldemar and Romney are getting married in England. Aurora interrupts Marian's story to ask herself, "Is it time / For church now?" (6.1102–03) and thinks "Perhaps he's sliding now the ring / Upon that woman's finger" (6.1119–20). The repetition of the word "now" heightens the contrast between Marian and Lady Waldemar, for Lady Waldemar appears to be directly profiting from Marian's ruin. Aurora continues the conceit, and when Marian concludes her story, Aurora describes Romney's marriage in the past tense by suggesting that Romney was "sold away to Lamia" (7.147). The end of Marian's story also signals the end of Romney's representation through the present tense.

We soon learn, of course, that Aurora's been mistaken and Romney and Lady Waldemar have never wed, and yet, this process of moving between her present moment and Romney's imagined present helps her realize her love for him. She mourns his marriage not only because its past tense consigns him to a life where he can never repay his debts, but also because it consigns her to the past tense. In Italy she begins to think of her own past, declaring, "O land of all men's past! For me alone, / It would not mix its tenses. I was past" (7.1157–58). This acknowledgement of her inability to move between times—to see the mixed tenses that Italy offers to others—is a subtle acknowledgement of her love for Romney. Until this moment in the novel-poem, Aurora's strength as a poet and a woman results from her ability to move between temporalities, to adopt the poetic double vision that she promotes in book five. She moves between the different temporalities of genre, writing for the fleeting "cyclopaedias, magazines, / And weekly papers" (3.310–311) as well as more lasting poetry; between the different temporalities of gender—she compares her actions with Romney's throughout the novel-poem; and the different temporalities of nations—England's measured time and Italy's mixed tenses. However, in Italy Aurora wanders "like a restless ghost" (7.1161) and "did not write, nor read, nor even think" (7.1306). Because she is not even immersed in her own present, she cannot adopt the simultaneity necessary for poetic double vision.

What distinguishes this marriage plot from novelistic ones is that Romney and Aurora's eventual union does not merely require the passage of time, it also

requires a reconfiguration of time. Romney and Aurora are only able to foster a sense of mutual time by rejecting progressive, linear historical time in favor of an apocalyptic temporality. To share time, they must also transcend it. As Herbert Tucker suggests, the poem's closure occurs "from a vantage beyond the precincts of domestic fiction" by invoking apocalyptic imagery, the logical implication of a union between Romney's "judgment day" and Aurora's "redemption-day."³⁵ This imagery allows Barrett Browning to close the poem with a chronological sequence at odds with the historical timelines in which Mill and Romney try to locate the age. This sequence from the Book of Revelations, "'Jasper first' I said, / 'And second, sapphire; third, chalcedony; / The rest in order, – last, an amethyst'" does not map onto historical ages, but instead expresses the "infinite character" at work within history (9.962–964). The end of the narrative actually works against narrative time by replacing a sense of linear progression with a structure of prophecy and fulfillment. In the process, narrative succession ultimately gives way to another form of simultaneity.

Returning to the question of the historical time, then, poetry's ability to achieve simultaneity, to embody historical time and transcend it, is important to Barrett Browning not only because it allows people to grasp the "infinite character" of the age, but also because it draws attention to the people and forms excluded by a linear history. Here Kristeva's characterization of the first wave of feminism as aspiring "to gain a place in linear time as the time of project and history" is once again useful (p. 354). The very fact that women had to argue for inclusion suggests that historical time can obscure alternative temporalities within the particular historical moment. Similarly, Chakrabarty argues that in order to detach historicism from an imperialist logic, people need "to learn to think the present—the 'now' that we inhabit as we speak—as irreducibly not-one" (p. 249). He suggests that historians should legitimate our "lived relationships" with multiple temporalities (p. 243). This is what Romney learns at the end of the novel-poem when he renounces his social formalism and resolves to "subsist no rules of life outside of life" (9.870). What this means, of course, is that Romney acknowledges that he must immerse himself within the age and experience its multiple temporalities rather than synthesizing them through "formal universals." Ultimately, an emphasis on simultaneity affirms life and life experience, producing "living art" that challenges a politics of timeliness simply by being alive (5.221). Thus, like Carlyle, Barrett Browning refuses to allow abstract temporality to organize history. Yet, she does not simply denounce historical and narrative time, she re-conceives it as simultaneously embodied and transcended through poetry.

In place of timeliness, *Aurora Leigh* celebrates the simultaneity that literary form produces: the merging of the transcendent with embodied, historical

time. This simultaneity suggests that form is not the autonomous, coherent, unity associated with American New Criticism. Rather than producing a single, temporal form, literature's temporality depends upon the combination of multiple social, literary, and historical temporalities. Literature requires untimely forms, whether seemingly anachronistic forms like the epic or gender's untimely temporalities, because it works against a progressive, linear temporality as it promotes an inherently multiple historical time. As scholars like Marjorie Garber and Joseph Luzzi argue, this untimeliness has political value, because it restores "the polyvalent integrity of literary discourse."³⁶ Although at first this approach to literature may seem to reify the boundary between history and literature, it actually reminds us that the characteristics of the literary—its polyvalence and multiple meanings—are also true of history. Carlyle is useful, here, because he insists that both history and art have the same results: they produce "an idea of the whole." By implication, neither history nor art is the whole. The simultaneity produced through poetry, then, reminds us that the age necessarily exceeds representation. It can be captured through art, but only an art that recognizes the limits of the totality it constructs.

Recognizing *Aurora Leigh's* resistance to linear, historical time, then, challenges us to think of new forms for our own historicist scholarship. While our historicism tends to reproduce Mill's emphasis on the timely—as Russell Berman suggests we tend to assume that literary texts' "contemporaneity is itself of defining importance to their understanding"³⁷—*Aurora Leigh's* suggestion to "ask Carlyle" reminds us that the untimely, as well as the timeless, are just as important to understanding literature's engagement with the age. An untimely historicism requires an attention to the ways in which forms with different temporal valences are threaded together, as Dimock's concept of deep time suggests, but also requires as much attention to historical contradictions as historical consensus. *Aurora Leigh's* topicalities, its multiple, overlapping literary forms, and its reflection on the relationship between temporality and politics suggests that literature, as a site of the multiform, engages with the age not as a historical totality but rather as a source of historical multiplicity.

Notes

I would like to thank Susan Bernstein, Emma Francis, Ereck Jarvis, and Caroline Levine.

- 1 Virginia Woolf, "Aurora Leigh," *The Second Common Reader*, ed. Andrew McNeillie (London: Harcourt Inc., 1986), p. 202.
- 2 Bina Freiwald, "'the praise which men give women': Elizabeth Barrett Browning's *Aurora Leigh* and the Critics," *Dalhousie Review* 66, no. 3 (Fall 1986): 311–336. Simon

- Avery, "Introduction: A Poet Lost and Regained," in Simon Avery and Rebecca Stott, *Elizabeth Barrett Browning* (London: Person Education Limited, 2003), pp. 1-22.
- 3 As Avery suggests, "She had no presence in the criticism emerging from movements such as New Criticism or Structuralism" (p. 13).
 - 4 Caroline Levine, "Strategic Formalism: Toward a New Method in Cultural Studies," *Victorian Studies* 48, no. 4 (Summer 2006): 640.
 - 5 Catherine Gallagher, "Formalism and Time," *Modern Language Quarterly* 61, no. 1 (March 2000): 231.
 - 6 For an example of how formalists tend to obscure history see René Wellek and Austin Warren, *Theory of Literature* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1949), p. 265. Susan J. Wolfson repeats the general criticism of American New Criticism when she says that it "is often derided as a myopic and insular criticism" (*Formal Charges: The Shaping of Poetry in British Romanticism* [Stanford: Stanford Univ. Press, 1997], p. 2). Marjorie Levinson also rehearses this criticism in "What is New Formalism," *PMLA* 122, no. 2 (March 2007): 558-569.
 - 7 Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 2000), p. 8.
 - 8 Julia Kristeva, "Women's Time," *The Portable Kristeva*, ed. Kelly Oliver (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1997), pp. 349-368.
 - 9 Cora Kaplan famously questions the ending by calling it a "most vulgar" alteration to the Corinne myth in "Introduction [from *Elizabeth Barrett Browning: Aurora Leigh and Other Poems*]," *Critical Essays on Elizabeth Barrett Browning*, ed. Sandra Donaldson (New York: G. K. Hall, 1999), p. 84; hereafter cited as *Critical Essays on EBB*.
 - 10 Elizabeth Barrett Browning, *Aurora Leigh*, ed. Margaret Reynolds (New York: W. W. Norton, 1996), 4.425. Hereafter parenthetically cited in the text.
 - 11 Herbert F. Tucker, *Epic: Britain's Heroic Muse 1790-1910* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2008), p. 3.
 - 12 Georg Lukács, *The Theory of the Novel*, trans. Anna Bostock (Cambridge: M.I.T. Press, 1971). M. M. Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, ed. Michael Holquist (Austin: Univ. of Texas Press, 1981). Simon Dentith has a more extended discussion of these two theories of the novel and its relation to the epic in *Epic and Empire in Nineteenth-Century Britain* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2006). See Peggy Dunn Bailey for a discussion of how gender affects the literary history of the epic ("'Hear the Voice of the [Female] Bard': *Aurora Leigh* as a Female Romantic Epic," *Approaches to the Anglo and American Female Epic, 1621-1982*, ed. Bernard Schweizer [Burlington, Vermont: Ashgate, 2006], pp. 117-137).
 - 13 Wai Chee Dimock, *Through Other Continents: American Literature Across Deep Time* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 2006), p. 86.
 - 14 Richard D. Altick, *The Presence of the Present: Topics of the Day in the Victorian Novel* (Columbus: Ohio State Univ. Press, 1991), p. 2.

- 15 Altick, p. 30. Altick claims that there are fewer attempts to engage with the age and use topicalities within poetry in late nineteenth-century poetry.
- 16 See Brent E. Kinser, "A Very Beautiful Tempest in a Teapot: Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Thomas Carlyle, and the Annotation of *Aurora Leigh*," *Browning Society Notes* 33 (April 2008): 21–39; Margaret Morlier "The Hero and the Sage: Elizabeth Barrett's Sonnets 'To George Sand' in Victorian Context," *VP* 41, no. 3 (Fall 2003): 323; Elizabeth Woodworth, "Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Coventry Patmore, and Alfred Tennyson on Napoleon III: The Hero-Poet and Carlylean Heroics," *VP* 44, no. 4 (Winter 2006): 543–560; Holly A. Laird "Aurora Leigh: An Epical *Ars Poetica*," *Critical Essays on EBB*, pp. 276–278. Marjorie Stone, *Elizabeth Barrett Browning* (London: Macmillan, 1995), pp. 138–149.
- 17 John Stuart Mill, *The Spirit of the Age*, introductory essay by Frederick A. von Hayek (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1942), pp. 1, 6.
- 18 Thomas Carlyle, "Signs of the Times," *A Carlyle Reader*, ed. G. B. Tennyson (Acton, Massachusetts: Copley Publishing Group, 1999), p. 24.
- 19 Jerome Hamilton Buckley, *The Triumph of Time: A Study of the Victorian Concepts of Time, History, Progress, and Decadence* (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 1966), p. 5. For a more recent discussion of Victorian conceptions of time, see Martin Hewitt, "Why the Notion of Victorian Britain *Does* Make Sense," *Victorian Studies* (Spring 2006): 395–438; and A. Dwight Culler, *The Victorian Mirror of History* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1985), esp. pp. 5–7.
- 20 John D. Rosenberg, *Carlyle and the Burden of History* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985), p. 19. Elliot Gilbert also discusses how Carlyle resists linear historical time in his article "'Wonderous Contiguity': Anachronism in Carlyle's Prophecy and Art," *PMLA* 87, no. 3 (May 1972): 432–442.
- 21 For a more extensive reading of how Carlyle uses water imagery to disrupt progressive, historical time see Rebecca Stott's "Thomas Carlyle and the Crowd: Revolution, Geology, and the Convulsive Nature of Time," *Journal of Victorian Culture* 4, no. 1 (Spring 1999): 1–24. Stott argues that Carlyle uses contemporary developments in the field of geology to construct a form of history that depends upon convulsion and revolutions.
- 22 For a more extended discussion, see Ann Rigney, "The Untenanted Places of the Past: Thomas Carlyle and the Varieties of Historical Ignorance," *History and Theory* 35, no. 3 (October 1996): 338–357.
- 23 *A New Spirit of the Age*, ed. R. H. Horne (London, 1844), p. 269.
- 24 "On History," *A Carlyle Reader*, ed. G. B. Tennyson (Acton, Massachusetts: Copley Publishing Group, 1999), p. 29.
- 25 "Essay on English Metrical Law," ed. Mary Augustine Roth (Washington: Catholic Univ. of America Press, 1961).
- 26 Herbert Tucker, "Of Monuments and Moments: Spacetime in Nineteenth-Century Poetry," *Modern Language Quarterly* 58, no. 3 (September 1997): 278.
- 27 "Of Monuments and Moments," p. 294. "A moment's monument" —part of the title of Tucker's article—is from the first line of a D. G. Rossetti sonnet.

- 28 W. E. Aytoun, from *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*, in *Aurora Leigh*, ed. Margaret Reynolds, p. 415.
- 29 See Cora Kaplan, and also Deirdre David, "Art's a Service': Social Wound, Sexual Politics and *Aurora Leigh*," *Browning Institute Studies* 13 (1985): 130–135.
- 30 For a more extended discussion of how the novel and poetry have disparate temporal conventions, see Monique L. Morgan, "Narrative Means to Lyric Ends in Wordsworth's *Prelude*," *Narrative* 16, no. 3 (Oct. 2008): 298–330.
- 31 Frances Ferguson "Jane Austen, *Emma*, and the Impact of Form" *Modern Language Quarterly* 61, no. 1 (March 2000): 165.
- 32 See Christina Crosby for a more extended discussion of how women were relegated outside of history in nineteenth-century writing (*The Ends of History: Victorians and 'The Woman Question'* [New York: Routledge, 1991]). Also see Julia Kristeva, "Women's Time." pp. 201–216.
- 33 For a more extended discussion of Barrett Browning's use of typology, see Cynthia Scheinberg, "Elizabeth Barrett Browning's Hebraic Conversions: Feminism and Christian Typology in *Aurora Leigh*," *Critical Essays on EBB*, pp. 306–323.
- 34 Susan Wolfson suggests that German Romanticism—hugely influential within Carlyle's work—was resistant to form, celebrating "a poetics of 'chaos,' 'the infinite' and 'the unformed'" (p. 21).
- 35 Herbert F. Tucker, "*Aurora Leigh*: Epic Solutions to Novel Ends," in *Famous Last Words: Changes in Gender and Narrative Closure*, ed. Alison Booth (Charlottesville: Univ. Press of Virginia, 1993), p. 79. Also see Jude Nixon "[S]He Shall Make All New: *Aurora Leigh* and Elizabeth Barrett Browning's Re-Gendering the Apocalypse," *Studies in Browning and His Circle* 26 (2005): 73–94.
- 36 Joseph Luzzi, "The Rhetoric of Anachronism," *Comparative Literature* 61, no. 1 (2009): 70; Marjorie Garber, *A Manifesto for Literary Studies* (Seattle: Univ. of Washington Press, 2003).
- 37 "Politics: Divide and Rule," *Modern Language Quarterly* 62, no. 4 (December, 2001): 320.