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Elizabeth Barrett Browning in Italy

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“I love Italy—I love my Florence. I love that ‘hole of a place,’ . . . —with all its dust, its cobwebs, its spiders even, I love it, and with somewhat of the kind of blind, stupid, respectable, obstinate love which people feel when they talk of ‘beloved native lands.’ I feel this for Italy, by mistake for England” wrote EBB in 1858. I thought it would make a good start to a paper about the poet and Italy. It would also make a good ending and thus the shortest paper presented to this learned assembly. I am, however, going to use the nineteen minutes and a half left to me to try and be a little more explicit about this love affair which, unlike many, lasted to the end of EBB’s life and, like most, was not quite all roses.

It is a rather exceptional story for Elizabeth Barrett-Browning is the rare case of a famous English poet spending the last fifteen years of her life in Italy. She is an even rarer case in so far as she wrote some of her most successful poetry – *Casa Guidi Windows* (1851) and above all *Aurora Leigh* (1857) – in Italy. Her feelings for the country followed in fact a double curve, one going from affection and enthusiasm to lassitude or exasperation and back again, the other, deeper down, going from admiration to love to what one could almost call identification. It is on this double and fluctuating relationship that this paper will concentrate. The influence of Italy and the Italians on EBB’s poetry is obvious, but, although the poems will be referred to, it is her personal response to the country which will be our focus, with her letters as a major source of information.¹

¹ . The main source used in this paper is *The Letters of Elizabeth Barrett Browning*, Frederic G. Kenyon ed., 2 vol., London: Smith, Elder & Co. 1898.

Italy as a place where it would be good to winter, given EBB's frail health had been on the cards for a long time. The last missed opportunity occurred in 1845 when her father refused to let her go, despite doctors' advice and her brothers' readiness to accompany her. A situation she alludes to in one of her first letters from Pisa: "For years I had looked forward with a sort of indifferent expectation towards Italy, knowing and feeling that I should escape there the annual relapse, yet, with that *laissez aller* manner which had become a habit to me, unable to form a definite wish about it."² But the decision, once taken, will never be regretted.

First, because her health improves dramatically and almost immediately: "I am wonderfully well ... Robert declares that nobody would know me, I *look* so much better."³ One may suspect that this sudden improvement in health is not entirely due to the balmy Italian climate. Freedom from her father's overpowering presence and sexual fulfilment might have played their part. She confirms the improvement a couple of years later, writing, "... it seems like a dream when I find myself able to climb the hills with Robert and help him lose himself in the forests. I have been growing stronger and stronger, and where it is to stop I can't tell really; I can do as much, or more, now than at any point since I arrived at woman's estate."⁴ However, one cannot fail to notice, that there is occasionally a hint of regret in the letters for some aspects not of the English climate but of the English landscape. One example is a comparison which she makes, one feels, to herself as much as to her correspondent, "The air is as fresh as English air, without English dampness and transition; yes, and we have English lanes with bowery tops of trees, and brambles and blackberries"⁵.

Worth noting in the quote, though, is the mention of "woman's estate", the first hint to confirm our interpretation as to the feeling of liberation brought on by life in Italy. A liberation that is specific to Victorian womanhood and which must have appeared the greater

² . *The Letters* ..., to Mrs Martin, Collegio Ferdinando, Pisa: October 20 (?), 1846, vol. I, p. 290.

³ . *The Letters* ..., to Miss Mitford, Florence: August 20, [1847], p. 341.

⁴ . *The Letters* ..., to Miss Mitford, Bagni di Lucca : July 1849, vol. I, p. 412-3.

⁵ . *The Letters* ..., to Miss I. Blagden, Siena: September 1850, vol. I, p. 456.

to EBB as she suffered to a greater degree than most. She had lived under the roof of a father whose love cannot be doubted but whose desire to control his children's life was tyrannical not to say pathological. One striking instance of this liberation is the letter in which, under the pretext of describing the heat of Florence in August she actually describes herself "dishevelled hair at full length, and 'sans gown, sans stays, sans shoes, sans everything', except a petticoat and a white dressing wrapper."⁶ It is true that the hardly hidden satisfaction at being free of the English dress code for women, hints at another satisfaction more difficult to express directly for a Victorian woman, but perfectly comprehensible in this letter with the mention that follows of Robert's full approval of such a state of undress. This feeling of freedom and happiness is very regularly expressed as well as the gratitude to Italy for permitting such feelings to blossom: "I never feel at home anywhere else [than in Italy], or to *live* rightly anywhere else at all."⁷ This remark actually indicates that a transfer has been made. Italy has been adopted as the country of the heart. This feeling for Italy as the place which allows a woman to be herself runs through *Aurola Leigh* whose eponymous heroine only finds fulfilment as an artist and as a woman in Italy. The fact that Aurora was born half Italian is probably an indirect expression of the author's regret not to have been so herself. One letter to Ruskin certainly reveals how Italian bliss is superimposed on English anguish grounded in family matters. "If you knew what it is to give up this still dream – life of our Florence ... if you knew what it is to give it all up and be put into the mill of a dingy London lodging and ground very small indeed, you wouldn't be angry with us for being sorry to go north – you would not think it unnatural. As for me, I have all sorts of pain in England – everything is against me, except a few things".⁸ Forbidden her father's house and unable to forget him, deeply attached to her sisters and deprived of their company too, it is no wonder

⁶ . The Letters ..., to Miss Mitford, Florence : August 24, 1848, vol. I, p. 381.

⁷ . The Letters ..., to Ruskin, Rome: January 1, 1859, vol. II, p. 300.

⁸ . The Lettres ..., to Ruskin, Florence: June 2, 1855, vol. II, p. 199.

that when she created Aurora she firmly defined her as dual in nationality and culture, and thus empowered her to turn her back on the harshness of England.

It is easy, if not very original, to affirm, from these first points that Elizabeth Barrett-Browning's attitude to Italy was influenced by her own experience as a grown up Victorian woman who could not face her father's disapproval, as an invalid who found enough strength and energy at 40 to release herself from the corset of English conventions. Her progress is in a way archetypal. But if she can be said to epitomise Victorian contradictions, it is not simply in her being a woman, but also in her being a woman highly if largely self-educated in the classics and an acknowledged poetic voice of her time. These intellectual strengths counteracted her physical and emotional vulnerability, they also gave her the confidence and the power to express, whether in her letters or in her poetry, the complexity of her love for her country of adoption, but also, as will appear, for the Italians and contemporary Italian politics.

Certainly, if the invalid rejoices in the improvement of her health, if the lover enjoys the freedom to love openly at last, the poet immediately falls in love with the country's grace and beauty and is full of admiration for every town she goes to or through: "[Pisa] is a beautiful, solemn city",⁹ "Florence, the most beautiful of the cities devised by man",¹⁰ or "Venice is quite exquisite. It wrapt me round with a spell at first sight and I longed to live and die there – never to go away",¹¹ to quote only a few of her enthusiastic remarks. Her first contact with Renaissance art and architecture sends her into raptures. Her letters are full of exclamation marks. "Wonderful", "striking" and "divine" are recurrent epithets. She mentions being able "sometimes to go over the gallery and *adore* the Raphaels".¹² The reaction is rather predictable; one should, however, note the Englishness of the cultural background. First

⁹ . The Letters ..., to Miss Mitford, Florence: August 20, [1847], vol. I, p. 297.

¹⁰ . The Letters ..., to H. S. Boyd, Florence: May 26, 1847, vol. I, p. 331.

¹¹ . The Letters ..., to John Kenyon, Paris: July 7 1851, vol. II, p. 8.

¹² . The Letters ..., to Mrs Jameson, Florence: Florence, December 1847, p. 355. Our italics.

in the fact that the most heavily recurrent qualification, “beautiful” is very often associated with its Burkean counterpart, “sublime”, in an attempt to establish gradations in admiration as, for example, when she compares the “elaborate grace” of the cathedral in Pisa and the “massive grandeur” of the Duomo. “At Pisa we say, ‘How beautiful!’ here we say nothing; it is enough if we can breathe.¹³” Very English too is the romantic appreciation of a majestic landscape. About her trip to Vallombrosa she exclaims “and the scenery – oh, how magnificent! How we enjoyed that great silent, ink-black pine wood! And do you remember the sea of mountains on the left¹⁴?”

An interesting point here is that in EBB’s eyes even Italian cities partake of that romantic quality. Her descriptions, amongst others, of Ancona, “a striking sea city, holding up against the brown rocks and elbowing out the purple tides, beautiful to look on”,¹⁵ or of Florence in the evening, “Such a view! Florence dissolving in the purple of the hills; and the stars looking on”,¹⁶ are two examples of this romanticising of Italian towns. It is an interesting instance of the exchange going on between visitor and the visited place. It shows the way in which, arriving in a strange place, we first measure it by our native aesthetic rules, and then the way in which that place can work on us, changing some elements, altering others, adding others still to what was our initial philosophy of beauty. The end of this process will be found once again in *Aurora Leigh*, at the same time an urban, contemporary and very English narrative poem and a poem steeped in the atmosphere of a golden age Italy.

The reference to a golden age may be necessary if one is to believe EBB as to the state of the arts and in particular of literature in nineteenth-century Italy. Enthusiasm gives place, then, to frustration. And that from the start, with the disappointment of the University library in Pisa: “The catalogue of the library ... offers a most melancholy insight into the actual

¹³ . The Letters ..., to H. S. Boyd, Florence: May 6, 1847, vol. I, p. 331.

¹⁴ . The Letters ..., to Mrs Martin, Florence: August 7, 1847, vol. I, p. 337.

¹⁵ . The Letters ..., to Miss Mitford, Florence: August 24, 1848, vol. I, p. 381.

¹⁶ . The Letters ..., to Miss I. Blagden, Bagni di Lucca : July 26, [1853], vol. II, p. 125.

literature of Italy. Translations, translations, translations from third and fourth rate French and English writers, chiefly French. The roots of thought, here in Italy, seem dead in the ground. It is well that they have great memories – nothing else lives.¹⁷” This aspect will remain for her “the worst of Italy”,¹⁸ even if later she becomes able to speak about it with humorous resignation: “We are going through some of Sachetti’s novelets now: characteristic work for Florence, if somewhat dull elsewhere. Boccacios can’t be expected to spring up with the vines in rows, even in this climate.¹⁹”

This feeling of deprivation as far as the written word is concerned explains, in part at least, the importance of the Anglo Americans in her Italian life – indeed, the vast majority of the acquaintances and friends referred to are English or American. She certainly never makes friends with Italians: she only mentions Professor Ferucci in Pisa, “M. Villari, an accomplished Sicilian”²⁰ and, occasionally, the Italian spouse of some American or Briton. But she reports the fact that Florence is “full of great people”,²¹ i.e., Tennyson, Dickens and Thackeray, and later She also mentions the presence of the Trollopes, Mr Lewes and Miss Evans, although she does not mention meeting any of them. This probably betrays a hidden hankering for the company of her literary peers. But this is not the only reason for her social life to be so typical of the British expatriate wherever s/he is. Another is to be found in a rare but telling remark lost among repeated affirmations that they enjoy their solitude *à deux* and want nothing better, “As to Italian society, one may as well take to longing for the evening star for it seems quite as inaccessible.²²” She sometimes reads as if she was doing her best in a doubly unsatisfactory situation. The awareness of the difficulty of being accepted into the real life of a country when one is a foreigner is slightly tinged with bitterness at not being

¹⁷ . The Letters ..., to Mrs Jameson, Pisa : November 1846, vol. I, p. 309.

¹⁸ . The Letters ..., to Mr Westwood, Florence: December 12, 1850, vol. I, p. 469.

¹⁹ . The Letters ..., to Mrs Jameson, Florence: December, 1850, vol. I, p. 355.

²⁰ . The Letters ..., to Miss I. Blagden, Casa Tolomei, Alla Villa, Bagni di Lucca: July 26, [1853], p. 125.

²¹ . The Letters ..., to Miss I. Blagden, Casa Guidi: October 1853, vol. II, p. 145.

²² . The Letters ... to Mrs Jameson, Palazzo Guidi : July 15 [1848], p. 377.

welcomed as the Italian one wishes to be. But the declaration of independence from English speaking society which comes just before also reveals the frustration at being cut off from the intellectual and literary circles to which one belongs by right and talent.

But if Italian society does not easily forego its rules to accommodate foreign lovers of the country, one can say that, in a parallel way, EBB does not shed her middle-class Englishwoman-abroad attitude very readily. She looks at the Italians as she looks at landscapes, from a distance, as in *Casa Guidi Windows*. But it is from the Letters that I will quote: "... what helps to charm here is the innocent gaiety of the people, who for ever, at feast day and holiday celebrations, come and go along the streets, the women in elegant dresses and with glittering fans, shining away every thought of northern cares and taxes, such as make people grave in England ... and the rich fraternise with the poor as we are unaccustomed to see them, listening to the same music and walking in the same gardens and looking at the same Raphaels even!²³" This is one of many such quotes and this is where EBB comes close to the other Victorians in Italy and to Dickens in particular, finding in Italian life the grace and joy that seems to have fled from industrialised and urbanised England. The way the classes mix, the ability to enjoy the moment and the capacity to move in a crowd without feeling threatened is something which both describe and admire. One should note, however, that EBB remains at her window, while Dickens walks the streets. There is no mention, least of all description of the everyday life of ordinary Italians in her letters (or her poems). She does not seem to see the poverty and the dirt which impress Dickens just as much as the grace of the people. She wouldn't, it is true, because of her sex and because of her state of health, be able to roam the streets. But she did move about and must have seen some of the less glamorous side of Italian life. It is probable that she simply does not want to mention it. Perhaps because she was a self-exiled woman who had chosen to leave England for a neqw

²³ . The Letters ..., to Mr Westwood, Florence : Septembre 1847, vol. I, p. 343.

and free life. The professed perfection of everything Italian can be seen either as a vindication of the rightness of her choice or as a sort of self-defence.

Despite the carefully maintained distance, the idealised vision of a sort of Paradise on earth is soon checked. It is easy, for example, to see the feeling of superiority over other people, so typical of the British stance at that time. The Italians, like the working class or women in England, are seen as overgrown children, happy in their position of providers of services and pleasure to their superiors. “Give me the smiling face of the attendant, man or woman; the courteous manner; the amiable desire to please and to be pleased; the light hearted, pleasant, simple air ... and I am theirs again tomorrow!²⁴” writes Dickens, in an enthusiastic moment. “I love the Italians ... and none the less that something of the triviality and innocent vanity of children abound in them”,²⁵ writes EBB tenderly, both authors betraying themselves as members of the ruling nation of the time.

This impression of a miraculously surviving Arcadia does not stand the test of time and of politics, either. Italy is going through the long and complex and difficult struggle for independence and unification. After the disappointment of 1848, she cannot help exclaiming, “Ah, poor Italy! I am mortified as an Italian ought to be. They have only the rhetoric of patriots and soldiers, I fear!²⁶” A sentiment which is repeated several times in the second half of 1848, most strongly in a letter to Mrs Martin: “It has rained once or twice, which is always enough here to moderate the most revolutionary when they wear their best surtout ... What they comprehend best in the ‘Italian League’ is probably a league to wear silk velvet and each a feather in his hat, to carry flags and cry *vivas*, and keep a grand fiesta day in the piazzas.²⁷” It is of course the other side of the childishness that was at first found so charming. These quotes are interesting in at least two ways. First in so far as they reveal EBB’s perception of

²⁴ . Charles Dickens, *Pictures from Italy* (1846), London : The Gresham Publishing Company limited, no date, p. 310.

²⁵ . The Letters ..., to Miss Mitford, Florence: December 8, 1847, vol. I, p. 351.

²⁶ . The Letters ..., to Miss Mitford, Florence : August 24, 1848, vol. I, p. 383.

²⁷ . The Letters ..., to Miss Martin, Florence : December 13, 1848, vol. I, p. 388-9.

nineteenth-century Italians as still a Renaissance people, a little as if they had come down from their paintings in their silk velvet surtouts and paraded, more, one almost feels, for the foreign spectator's pleasure than for their own. Despite the fact she lived there for so long, the country and its inhabitants seem to have somehow remained creatures of the imagination. Then the remark that she felt as an Italian ought to is one of the first in which she gives herself out as a real Italian. But somehow, it does more than this, it places her on the level of Italian patriots, which can be interpreted in two ways. It might imply that she, the weak English poetess is more a man than most Italians. But it may also be defining Italy as a feminine entity, bullied by aggressive and invasive masculine powers and in need of defenders. The two interpretations are not exclusive. They also indicate identification with the country, identification which would account for the fire with which EBB will feel and speak for Italian independence and unity. Unconsciously the fate of Italy is felt to be similar to her own: the impossible unity is a mirror of the impossible wholeness of her situation before her marriage when she was allowed to be a daughter, a poetess and an invalid but not a woman. It may also reflect her torn feelings between English and Italian cultures which she finds so hard to reconcile. Following this line of thought, the Italians may be seen as representative of the plight of women in general, vanquished by their own qualities. Certainly, if their lack of commitment to action occasionally irritates EBB, she goes on thinking "the people ... gentle, courteous, refined and tender-hearted".²⁸ The feminine connotations of the epithets should not be misinterpreted. EBB was a firm believer in the power of feminine virtues; again *Aurora Leigh*, with its final conversion of the virile English social reformer to the feminine poetic principle upheld by Aurora is proof of it.

Certainly, this is where the curve to identification with Italy appears most clearly. Of course it can be seen as a transfer, a visible way of affirming that inner conflicts are solved,

²⁸ . The Letters ..., to Miss Mitford, Bagni di Lucca, October 2, 1849, vol. I, p. 424.

that wounds of a deep and very private nature, solved and healed by siding completely with Italy. If she needed the English language and the English publishing system to go on as a writer, she seems rather quickly to have come to a point when not only she did not need the English, but she didn't even want them. She rejoices in 1848 to see Florence "tolerably *clean* of the English".²⁹ And in 1853 she states that she is "much tired of the self-deification of the English nation at the expense of all others."³⁰

But this comes to a climax over Napoleon III's action in Italy. She very firmly sides with him and against the English position: "I class England among the most immoral nations in respect to her foreign policies. And her 'National Defence' cry fills me with disgust."³¹ But this unflinching support of the French emperor, which puzzled and embarrassed all her friends, can be seen as partaking of that complex rewriting of her own life in terms of that of her adopted country. It is publicly renouncing England by siding with her enemy or at least political rival, France. But it is also possible that the pain at the loss of the beloved though unforgiving father led her to give too much credit to Napoleon III's paternalistic pose. To her he was, or she wished him to be a father figure who instead of judging and constraining, generously comes to the rescue of a daughter trapped by her own weakness as much as by her enemies. In neither case does she want to see nor can she see the predatory side of the father.

Except that our neat conclusion is again upset by what comes immediately after the sentence just quoted: "But this by no means proves that I have adopted another country – no, indeed!"³²

And so the reader of EBB's letters is left, like the reader of *Aurora Leigh*, with the feeling of a real love for Italy, but also of an impossible quest, which more than a wish to be united with the beloved probably reveals the wish to be reunited with the mother. For to the

²⁹ . The Letters ..., To Mrs Jameson, Florence: July 15, 1848, vol. I, p. 377. Italics in the text.

³⁰ . The Letters ..., to Mrs Jameson, Florence: April 12, 1853, Vol. II, p. 113.

³¹ . The Letters ..., to Mrs Martin, Rome: December 29 [1859], vol. II, p. 359.

³² . Ibid.

absolute loss of the English mother of the poetess, *Aurora Leigh* the poem responds with an Italian mother who survives after her death in mother Italy, creating a generation line between women and country, but this the topic of the next piece of research.