



THE PROBLEMATICS OF LANGUAGE IN A TEXT: AN AUTHORIAL CONSTERNATION OF THE WOMAN WRITER AND ELIZABETH BARRETT BROWNING'S *AURORA LEIGH*

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If only you do not try to utter what is unutterable then nothing gets lost. But the unutterable will be – utterably – contained in what has been uttered. (1)

The way in which literary language functions has constituted the central concern of philosophical thinking. Ezra Pound's terse explanation is nonetheless reminiscent here: 'Great literature is simply language charged with meaning.' Philosophical endeavour has seldom ceased to make inquiries into the way in which language carries out its semantic functions and the mode in which it is structured. The leading schools of thought, like positivism, structuralism, phenomenology, and analytic philosophy, puzzle over the same problems. Hence, a community of linguistic interest has been gradually, but very firmly, established in recent times, since philosophers have worked on problems of meaning with increasing subtlety and sophistication. With such efforts on the rise, linguistic structures have also come to create new literary worlds and novel kinds of experiences. We cannot but name here a few such contemporary French literary critics and historians such as Jacques Derrida (*De la grammatologie*), Phillippe Sollers (*Logiques*), Pierre Macherey (*Pour une théorie de la production littéraire*) etc. It is primarily because of this reason

that there is seldom any room to escape the fact that philosophy and literature would exhibit common methods and shared conclusions.

In order to further the question of language, its function and its literariness, it is not merely pertinent, but also logically and contextually necessary to mention Ludwig Wittgenstein's *Tractatus Logicus-Philosophicus* (in German, *Logisch-philosophische Abhandlung*), which was itself a philosophical event of a unique kind primarily because it asks – ‘What is a text?’ – an issue which has importance to both philosophers and literary writers. Etymologically, the text is a cloth and ‘textus’ is the form from which ‘text’ is derived and it means ‘woven’. Wittgenstein was compulsively concerned with the fact that his thoughts be printed exactly as written. It is in this sense that a text is a document faithfully reproduced from an original. To Wittgenstein, the text is an adequate representation of itself, a finished work which goes into the world with the assurance of conformation to the intention of the creator. There is evidence that his method of composition was ‘zettelistic’, a compilation of pieces or scraps of paper upon which propositions were inscribed. These propositions are all part of a logical system of the text and are related to one another, though the subjects dealt with are contrapuntally developed in the text as a whole. Wittgenstein, we find, really experiments with textual order and comes to establish that any order is a possible order where a text is concerned and, therefore, whatever order is established can stand by itself for any order. Depending upon the deployment of linguistic forms by the writer, the logical textual order he intends realizes as ‘performance’ on the one hand, which, in its turn, helps establish an ‘argument’, on the other. He believed in textual self-sufficiency and the power of language. Contextual perhaps to the text as being self-sufficient is Jacques Derrida's notion that there is nothing outside the text. The beauty of Wittgenstein is what Richard Kuhns expresses through the following:

The language of the text – that is, the language which *is* the text – is a language about itself because it explores how and in what way what it offers may be meaningful. (2)

Hence, it can be perceivably maintained that it is language which either shapes up a text or makes it amorphous or even obfuscates it on the one hand, and it is the text which is to provide evidence for its own meaningfulness through language, on the other.

In another book called *Philosophical Investigations* published posthumously, Wittgenstein was more self-conscious in his notes. The book can also be seen as a text about texts and how to interpret a text.

(3) He says:

In fact, all the propositions of our everyday language, just as they stand, are in perfect logical order.
– That utterly simple thing, which we have to formulate here, is not an image of the truth, but the truth itself in its entirety. (4)

It is this search for an adequate language in poetry that is important. Paul Valéry notes that for Mallarmé, poetry was a kind of algebra, and for himself a kind of arithmetic. But these are poetic metaphors. The search for an adequate language in philosophy also went on in the same manner. A concrete body of thought is the key towards framing a linguistic structure, but that corpus of thought should be devoid of all cloudiness, obscurity, and uncertainty. ‘Thought’ perhaps can barely be defined in more concrete and comprehensible terms than what Wittgenstein has said in *Tractatus*:

Thought is surrounded by a halo. – Its essence, logic, presents an order, in fact the *a priori* order of the world: that is, the order of *possibilities*, world and thought. But this order, it seems, must be *utterly simple*. It is *prior* to all experience, must run through all experience; no empirical cloudiness or uncertainty can be allowed to affect it. It must rather be of the purest crystal. But this crystal does not appear as an abstraction; but as something concrete, indeed, as the most concrete, as it were the hardest thing there is. (5)

When ‘thought’ has already come into question, can our concern with ‘the poetic universe’ be far behind? The concept of text has found a room of its own, but if we talk about such text as being a poetic text, the thought or the idea behind it is undeniable. The relationship between the two can perhaps be best brought out through the one comment, and that is:

The greatest thing a human soul ever does in this world is to *see* something and tell what it *saw* in a plain way. Hundreds of people can talk for one who can think, but thousands can think of one who can see. To see clearly is poetry, prophecy, and religion, - all in one. (6)

In this context, the metaphorical wisdom of Emily Dickinson, as expressed in one of her poems, is also reminiscent: 'To see the Summer Sky / Is poetry, though never in a Book it lie – / True Poems flee –' (7)

The question of language in such poetry, thus, has been problematic, on the one hand, since it has always seemed to be elusive, and sometimes even inadequate to the writer, and indispensable, on the other, since it satisfies the cognitive demand of the consciousness that develops with perceiving a poetic text. It is language that constructs reality and constitutes the social and discursive matrix, and it is this function that makes it undeniably important in literary expression. It helps the woman poet speak her heart out leading to a much-desired and comforting purgation of emotions that constituted her hitherto secret, repressed, and hidden experience, by daring to utter what is misconceived and misconstrued as unutterable. The language of the 'heart' lies at the centre of women's writing of the nineteenth century. There emerged a noticeable and palpable shift from weak sentimentality, what might be stigmatized as the heavily perfumed language of marketed sensibility, to the terseness of proto-Modernism.

Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar raise an extremely important question, 'What does it mean to be a woman writer in a culture whose fundamental definitions of literary authority are, as we have seen, both overtly and covertly patriarchal?' (Sandra M. Gilbert & Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth Century Literary Imagination*, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1979, pp. 45-6) They were in fact trying to build up a poetics as against the canonical formation of patriarchal poetics and its attendant anxieties which underlie the chief cultural literary movements. Such a formation, besides being powerfully patriarchal, attempt to enclose the woman author in definitions of her person and her potential which, by reducing her to extreme stereotypes (angel, monster) drastically conflict with her own sense of herself – that is, of her subjectivity, her autonomy, her creativity.

The anxiety of influence experienced by the male poet is felt by a female poet as an even more primary 'anxiety of authorship' – a radical fear that she cannot create, that she can never become a 'precursor' and that the act of writing will isolate or destroy her. The loneliness of the female artist, her feelings of alienation from male predecessors coupled with her need for sisterly precursors and successors, her urgent sense of her need for a female audience together with the fear of the antagonism of male readers,

her culturally conditioned timidity about self-dramatization, her anxiety about the impropriety of female invention – all these phenomena of ‘inferiorization’ mark the woman writer’s struggle for artistic self-definition and differentiate her efforts at self-creation from those of her male counterparts. The woman writer feels herself to be literally or figuratively crippled by the debilitating alternatives her culture offers her.

There is to be noticed a disavowal of the matrilineal line of descent in *Aurora Leigh*, Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s ambitious nine-book epic poem, Aurora having been separated from and, thus, induced to ‘forget’ her motherland of Italy – the strength of matrilineal heritage being denied her very early when she was only thirteen. Nineteenth-century literature by women primarily consisted of a story of the woman writer’s quest for her own story, in other words, of the woman’s quest for her own story; it is the story, in other words, of the woman’s quest for self-definition. Inevitably, then, since they were trapped in so many ways in the architecture – both the houses and the institutions – of patriarchy, women expressed their anxiety of authorship by comparing their ‘presumptuous’ literary ambitions with the domestic accomplishments that have been prescribed for them. Undeniably too, they expressed their claustrophobic rage by enacting rebellious escapes – a struggle to a claustrophobic sensibility which emerges from a painful and anxious confinement within texts of patriarchal poetics into the open spaces of their own authority.

Elizabeth Barrett Browning repudiates the habit of nostalgia which tempts the Victorian poet with the glamour of the past, and from this new sense of the present she develops a crusadingly female poetics. Women’s writing, from then on, has emerged to become contemporary, combative, and self-sufficient. *Aurora Leigh* exhibits a fierce and exuberant commitment to the present and succeeds in being ‘a poem of a new class’. The poem shows the real everyday lives of women, in all its domestic details. Besides being the story of the development of a women writer, it does depict the centrality of female experience. Aurora herself is a poet, who writes the story of her life and literary success, one general cause of women’s emancipation and independence. The narrative reflects a passionate indictment of patriarchy that speaks the resentment of the Victorian poet through a language of eroticized female imagery. According to Deirdre

David, female imagery is employed to show that ‘art’ of the women poet performs a ‘service’ for a patriarchal vision of the apocalypse. Woman art is the servitor of a male ideal. *Aurora Leigh* remains unequivocal in its feminist stand in its refusal to remain silent about sexuality. Through this unique art-novel, a revolutionary and a hitherto suppressed women’s language echoes the ideas of French feminist writers, particularly those of H el ene Cixous.

Aurora, Marian, and Lady Waldemar form the triptych through which Barrett Browning speaks her views on the woman question. The right to write is asserted so much so that the expression ‘I write’ is used by Barrett Browning four times in the first two stanzas of *Aurora Leigh*, referring to the act of woman’s speech, the expression of woman’s feelings and thoughts, and the legitimate professional exercise of that expression. The extraordinarily long poem exhibits the highest convictions on Life and Art. Gender differences, class warfare, sexual rivalry, the relation of art to politics, utopian politics, rape, urban misery and strangeness, and the contradiction of the moral law – legitimization of motherhood in a ‘church- ring’, the church law of marriage, legalization of poverty by an accepted system and the common law of oppression – are the intersecting issues in the poem, female sexuality and women’s struggle for professional recognition being the key themes. Cora Kaplan correctly remarks about the ‘novel poem’ in the way she does in the comment that I am going to quote now. Kaplan says:

In spite of its conventional happy ending, it is possible to see it as contributing to a feminist theory of art which argues that women’s language, precisely because it has been suppressed by patriarchal societies, re-enters discourse with a shattering revolutionary force, speaking all that is repressed and forbidden in human experience.

In the success of *Aurora Leigh* and in her own career, Barrett Browning defies the ugly implication that the intellectual lives of women must be marred by biological destiny. No other poetic expression could perhaps have been more befitting to bring out the artist’s will to self-definition than what Aurora says in Book I of *Aurora Leigh*:

And 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. (Book I, p. 374)

To be sure, the bold vitality of Barrett Browning's language and imagery in *Aurora Leigh* is undeniable, the governing ideology of the poem being, indeed, revolutionary. However, 'revolutionary' does not necessarily mean 'feminist' in Barrett Browning's sexual politics; her novel-poem is an integrated expression of essentialist and ultimately non-feminist views of sex and gender, despite sharp attacks on sexual hypocrisy and a devastating satire on women's education. The poem exhibits how the woman becomes the speaker-poet, thereby becoming certainly confrontational both in expression and in all its semantic possibilities. The first person of this dramatic monologue secures her identity, not in opposition to, but in association with, the other women whose speech becomes closely allied to her own. It is this shared, confrontational and emancipatory right to language, which marks Barrett Browning's sense of herself, at the height of her powers, as a woman poet, and as a poet speaking for women. The antagonist, however, is more an embodiment of middle-class materialism, which conveniently allies with Victorian patriarchal formations than with patriarchy itself. In a bid to transcend this materialist ideology, *Aurora Leigh* exuberantly assumes a 'presumptuous' role within the complex social web dictated by a dominant male culture.

The right to write was closely connected with every audacious choice that women might wish to make. In an age characterized by the importance of the popular press as the place of ideological production and the spread of female literacy, it was of prime importance to warn women off from questioning traditional sexual morality. Public writing and public speech, closely allied, were both real and symbolic acts of self-determination for women. Writing is a skilled task learned at the expense of 'Long green days / Worn bare of grass and sunshine, – long calm nights / From which the silken sleeps were fretted out ... with no amateur's / Irreverent haste and busy idleness / I set myself to art!' *Aurora Leigh*, thus, enters tentatively into debates on all subjects forbidden. Through the first-person epic voice of a major woman poet, it breaks a very specific silence, almost in a manner of questioning the authorial dominance of the arbiters of high culture of Victorian England, thereby giving vent to her consternation as an identifiable and convincing 'subject' of art, her unprecedented struggle to define her creativity and her attempt to speak patriarchal discourse with utmost boldness and passion.

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