Heroic in Proportion

The Contours of Art
How do Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s Ideas about the Function of Art compare to those of Writers Who Precede Her?
Art’s Function

a brief history
“In like manner the poet with his words and phrases may be said to lay on the colours of the several arts, himself understanding their nature only enough to imitate them; and other people, who are as ignorant as he is, and judge only from his words, imagine that if he speaks of cobbling, or of military tactics, or of anything else, in metre and harmony and rhythm, he speaks very well --such is the sweet influence which melody and rhythm by nature have. And I think that you must have observed again and again what a poor appearance the tales of poets make when stripped of the colours which music puts upon them, and recited in simple prose.”
“I conclude, therefore, that he [the poet] excelleth history, not only in furnishing the mind with knowledge, but in setting it forward to that which deserveth to be called and accounted good: which settings forward, and moving to well-doing, indeed setteth the laurel crown upon the poet as victorious, not only of the historian, but over the philosopher; howsoever, in teaching it may be questionable. For suppose it be granted — that which I suppose with great reason may be denied — that the philosopher, in respect of his methodical proceeding, teach more perfectly than the poet, yet do I think that no man is so much philophilosophos as to compare the philosopher in moving with the poet. And that moving [of the reader’s emotions] is of a higher degree than teaching, it may by this appear, that it is well nigh both the cause and the effect of teaching. For who will be taught, if he be not moved with desire to be taught?”
“The principal object, then, proposed in these Poems was to choose incidents and situations from common life, and to relate or describe them, throughout, as far as was possible in a selection of language really used by men, and, at the same time, to throw over them a certain colouring of imagination, whereby ordinary things should be presented to the mind in an unusual aspect; and, further, and above all, to make these incidents and situations interesting by tracing in them, truly though not ostentatiously, the primary laws of our nature: chiefly, as far as regards the manner in which we associate ideas in a state of excitement.”
“I have said that poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings: it takes its origin from emotion recollected in tranquility: the emotion is contemplated till, by a species of reaction, the tranquility gradually disappears, and an emotion, kindred to that which was before the subject of contemplation, is gradually produced, and does itself actually exist in the mind. In this mood successful composition generally begins, and in a mood similar to this it is carried on; but the emotion, of whatever kind, and in whatever degree, from various causes, is qualified by various pleasures, so that in describing any passions whatsoever, which are voluntarily described, the mind will, upon the whole, be in a state of enjoyment.”
"As to the poetical Character itself (I mean that sort of which, if I am any thing, I am a Member; that sort distinguished from the wordsworthian or egotistical sublime; which is a thing per se and stands alone) it is not itself - it has no self - it is every thing and nothing - It has no character - it enjoys light and shade; it lives in gusto, be it foul or fair, high or low, rich or poor, mean or elevated - It has as much delight in conceiving an Iago as an Imogen. What shocks the virtuous philosopher, delights the camelion Poet. It does no harm from its relish of the dark side of things any more than from its taste for the bright one; because they both end in speculation. A Poet is the most unpoetical of any thing in existence; because he has no Identity - he is continually in for - and filling some other Body - The Sun, the Moon, the Sea and Men and Women who are creatures of impulse are poetical and have about them an unchangeable attribute - the poet has none; no identity."
“The whole objection, however, of the immorality of poetry rests upon a misconception of the manner in which poetry acts to produce the moral improvement of man. Ethical science arranges the elements which poetry has created, and propounds schemes and proposes examples of civil and domestic life: nor is it for want of admirable doctrines that men hate, and despise, and censure, and deceive, and subjugate one another. But poetry acts in another and diviner manner. It awakens and enlarges the mind itself by rendering it the receptacle of a thousand unapprehended combinations of thought. Poetry lifts the veil from the hidden beauty of the world, and makes familiar objects be as if they were not familiar; it reproduces all that it represents, and the impersonations clothed in its Elysian light stand thenceforward in the minds of those who have once contemplated them, as memorials of that gentle and exalted content which extends itself over all thoughts and actions with which it coexists.”
"The great secret of morals is love; or a going out of our nature, and an identification of ourselves with the beautiful which exists in thought, action, or person, not our own. A man, to be greatly good, must imagine intensely and comprehensively; he must put himself in the place of another and of many others; the pains and pleasure of his species must become his own. The great instrument of moral good is the imagination; and poetry administers to the effect by acting upon the cause. Poetry enlarges the circumference of the imagination by replenishing it with thoughts of ever new delight, which have the power of attracting and assimilating to their own nature all other thoughts, and which form new intervals and interstices whose void forever craves fresh food. Poetry strengthens the faculty which is the organ of the moral nature of man, in the same manner as exercise strengthens a limb. A poet therefore would do ill to embody his own conceptions of right and wrong, which are usually those of his place and time, in his poetical creations, which participate in neither."
“My object in writing the following pages, was not simply to amuse the Reader, neither was it to gratify my own taste, nor yet to ingratiate myself with the Press and the Public: I wished to tell the truth, for truth always conveys its own moral to those who are able to receive it. . . . the case is an extreme one, as I trusted none would fail to perceive; but I know that such characters do exist, and if I have warned one rash youth from following in their steps, or prevented one thoughtless girl from falling into the very natural error of my heroine, the book has not been written in vain.”
“To recapitulate, then:—I would define, in brief, the Poetry of words as *The Rhythmical Creation of Beauty*. Its sole arbiter is Taste. With the Intellect or with the Conscience, it has only collateral relations. Unless incidentally, it has no concern whatever with Duty or with Truth. . . . It by no means follows however, that the incitements of Passion, or the precepts of Duty, or even the Lessons of Truth, may not be introduced into a poem, and with advantage; for they may subserve, incidentally, in various ways, the general purposes of the work:—but the true artist will always contrive to tone them down in proper subjection to that *Beauty* which is the atmosphere and the real essence of the poem.”
“She does not write books to confound philosophers, perhaps because she is able to write books that delight them. In conversation she is the least formidable of women, because she understands you, without wanting to make you aware that you can’t understand her. She does not give you information, which is the raw material of culture, -- she gives you sympathy, which is its subtlest essence.”
Where does Aurora’s perspective on the purpose of Art correspond or deviate from that of these predecessors?
Points of Comparison

- Plato: poems are inexact
- Spenser: poets move others
- Wordsworth: poets color the ordinary, & induce pleasure
- Keats: chameleon poets explore both dark & light
- Shelley: poets reveal beauty in mundane; spark sympathy
- A. Brontë: liter. can warn by delivering hard truths
- Poe: beauty more important than truth, though can cohabitant
- G. Eliot: fiction writers should nurture sympathy in the reader
E. E. Browning’s *Aurora Leigh* (1856)
the Epic Poem

“The critics say that epics have died out / With Agamemnon and the goat-nursed gods; / I’ll not believe it. I could never deem / As Payne Knight did, (the mythic mountaineer / Who travelled higher than he was born to live, / And showed sometimes the goiter in his throat / Discoursing of an image seen through fog,) / That Homer’s heroes measured twelve feet high. / They were but men: - his Helen’s hair turned grey / Like any plain Miss Smith’s who wears a front; / And Hector’s infant whimpered at a plume / As yours last Friday at a turkey-cock. / All actual heroes are essential men, / And all men possible heroes: every age, / Heroic in proportions, double-faced, / Looks backward and before, expects a morn / And claims an epos” (5.139-155).
“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, / And trundles back his soul five hundred years, / Past moat and drawbridge, into a castle-court, / To sing […] Nay, if there’s room for poets in this world / A little overgrown, (I think there is) / Their sole work is to represent the age, / Their age, not Charlemagne’s, this live, throbbing age […]” (5.183-92, 200-203).
“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” […] Five acts to make a play. / And why not fifteen? why not ten? or seven? / What matter for the number of the leaves, / Supposing the tree lives and grows? exact / The literal unities of time and place, / When ’tis the essence of passion to ignore / Both time and place? Absurd” (5.223-27, 229-235).
"While Art / Sets action on the top of suffering: / The artist’s part is both to be and do, / Transfixing with a special, central power / The flat experience of the common man, / And turning outward, with a sudden wrench, / Half agony, half ecstasy, the thing / He feels the inmost, - never felt the less / Because he sings it. Does a torch less burn / For burning next reflectors of blue steel, / That he should be the colder for his place / ‘Twixt two incessant fires, - his personal life’s, / And that intense refraction which burns back / Perpetually against him from the round / Of crystal conscience he was born into / If artist-born? O sorrowful great gift / Conferred on poets, of a twofold life, / When one life has been found enough for pain!” (5.365-380).
“O my God, my god, / O supreme Artist, who as sole return / For all the cosmic wonder of Thy work, / Demandest of us just a word . . a name, / ‘My Father!’ thou has knowledge, only thou, / How dreary ’tis for women to sit still / On winter nights by solitary fires / And hear the nations praising them far off, / Too far! ay, praising our quick sense of love, / Our very heart of passionate womanhood, / Which could not beat so in the verse without / Being present also in the unkind lips / And eyes undried because there’s none to ask / The reason they grew moist. To sit alone [. . .]” (5.434-47).
“Art’s here too artful, - conscious as a maid / Who leans to mark her shadow on the wall / Until she lose a ‘vantage in her step, / Yet Art walks forward, and knows where to walk; / The artists also are idealists, / Too absolute for nature, logical / To austerity in the application of / The special theory – not a soul content / To paint a crooked pollard and an ass, / As the English will because they find it so / And like it somehow” (6.100-110).
“Humanity is great; / And, if I would not rather pore upon / An ounce of common, ugly, human dust, / An artisan’s palm or a peasant’s brow, / Unsmooth, ignoble, save to me and God, / Than track old Nilus to his silver roots / Or wait on all the changes of the moon / Among the mountain-peaks of Thessaly / (Until her magic crystal round itself / For many a witch to see in) - set it down / As weakness, - strength by no means” (6.161-71).
How is this / That men of science, osteologists / And surgeons, beat some poets in respect / For nature, - count nought common or unclean, / Spend raptures upon perfect specimens / Of indurated veins, distorted joints, / Or beautiful new cases of curved spine, / While we, are shocked at nature’s falling off, / We dare to shrink back from her warts and blains, / We will not, when she sneezes, look at her, / Not even to say ‘God bless her’? That’s our wrong; / For that, she will not trust us often with / Her larger sense of beauty and desire, / But tethers us to a lily or a rose / And bids us diet on the dew inside, / Left ignorant that the hungry beggar-boy [. . .] Bears yet a breastful of a fellow-world / To this world, undisparaged, undespoiled [. . .] Contains himself both flowers and firmaments / And surging seas and aspectable stars / And all that we would push him out of sight / In order to see nearer. Let us pray / God’s grace to keep God’s image in repute [. . .]” (6.171-198)