The Lime Trees of *Aurora Leigh*: Romanticism’s Psychotic Future

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Abstract:

This essay examines Aurora Leighʼs reactions to an encroaching lime tree in Book I of Elizabeth

Barrett Browningʼs 1856 novel in verse, *Aurora Leigh*. I suggest that Aurora's psychotic response to the tree, from the vantage of her domestic prison, can be considered part of Barrett Browningʼs complex reaction to Samuel Taylor Coleridgeʼs poetry and the legacy of male-authored Romantic poetry generally. Drawing on the psychoanalytic concept of “ordinary psychosis” and the work on that topic by Jacques Lacan, I suggest that Barrett Browning develops, through the account of Aurora's paranoid delusion, a feminist poetics capable of situating itself in the future.

In Book I of Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s 1856 novel in verse *Aurora Leigh*, the eponymous protagonist is sent, upon the death of her father, to England to live with her aunt at Leigh Hall, which she experiences as a prison.[[1]](#endnote-1) Trapped by the ancestral house and the expectations of its residents, Aurora finds pleasure only in the library and its books of English poetry. The literary experience, though, does not stop her from being wary of the nearby lime tree, visible from the window of her study:

First, the lime

(I had enough, there, of the lime, to be sure,–

My morning-dream was often hummed away

By the bees in it;). (bk. 1, lines 578–80)

The allusion is to Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s conversation poem “This Lime-Tree Bower My Prison,” written a half-century prior (1797, published 1800/1817). Like Barrett Browning, Coleridge had used a lime tree and garden bower as figures for domestic entrapment. Barrett Browning had long admired Coleridge’s verse. In the 1840s, she had declared Coleridge “so much the greater” poet than Robert Southey or William Wordsworth and the “grander” and “intenser genius” than the latter; when corresponding with Sara Coleridge, she gushed with “reverence for the illustrious name you bear, which presented one of the earliest shrines of my hero worship” (Browning and Browning 5: 333, 7: 123, 10: 129; Inboden 147). Coleridge’s stated pleasure in how “a deep radiance lay / Full on the ancient ivy” may be one of the reasons why Aurora chooses ivy, instead of bay or myrtle, for her self-made poetic crown (Coleridge, *Lime-Tree* 54–55; Barrett Browning 2.40–52).

Yet Barrett Browning’s lime-tree bower seems a world away from Coleridge’s. In “This Lime-Tree Bower My Prison,” as soon as the speaker notices how “the solitary humble-bee / Sings in the bean-flower!” he discovers that being “bereft of promis’d good . . . may lift the soul” (60–61, 67–68). The bees in *Aurora Leigh*, not solitary,are capable only of humming away Aurora’s “morning-dream.” The tree is at the edge of Aurora’s consciousness, not the center: Aurora’s aunt encourages her to sit

in just the chair she placed,

With back against the window, to exclude

The sight of the great lime-tree on the lawn,

Which seemed to have come on purpose from the woods

To bring the house a message. (1.484–88)

The content of that message is never shared with the reader, and possibly not even with Aurora, but the mood is portentous. If Coleridge advises us that “no sound is dissonant which tells of Life” (78), Barrett Browning, appropriating his imagery from a different vantage point and turning it into a paranoid delusion, gives voice to dissonance itself. Because the chair is turned away from the window, Barrett Browning also captures the anxiety that comes with the willful disregard of that dissonance.

Generally, critics agree that Barrett Browning venerated Coleridge and was aligning herself with his poetic project. Robin Inboden has most thoroughly tracked Elizabeth Barrett’s debts to Coleridge and has discussed the relative dearth of critical commentary on those debts; Inboden discusses only the poet’s earlier work under the name Elizabeth Barrett and so does not mention *Aurora Leigh* or its lime-tree bower (129). Critics who have noted the echoes of “This Lime-Tree Bower” in *Aurora Leigh* specifically have presented Barrett Browning as a relatively uncritical admirer of Coleridge’s poem. For Maureen Thum, the allusion to Coleridge’s poem begins the “mental process of Aurora’s awakening,” helping her find “a new alternative view of female identity” (89). In Thum’s reading, *Aurora Leigh* effectively replicates the trajectory of Coleridge’s lime-tree fantasy, attuning us to “the implicit call of the natural world beyond the conventions of the house and the narrowness even of the attached garden” (88). For Delores DeLuise and Michael Timko, Coleridge helps Aurora see that her domestic prison is not so bad, and the presence of the lime tree in the poem ensures that “it is clear that she has not given up the belief in the male poet as genius” (92, 99). Such readings have been part of a broader effort to examine *Aurora Leigh*’s debts to British Romanticism (Louis; Kobayashi).

I want to challenge the supposition that Barrett Browning, in Book I of *Aurora Leigh*, was paying homage to her Romantic predecessor, for I believe that the subtle differences in tone, divergent strategies of figuration, and striking disruptions in meter mark Barrett Browning’s distance from Coleridge. As I see it, Barrett Browning, far from assenting to Coleridge’s conclusions, seems to be repurposing his imagery to enact a psychotic poetics. Though many elements in the two poems are the same—blank verse, lime tree, woods, prisonlike house, daydreaming, bees, a “sort of friend,” and an emphasis on affect—Barrett Browning is rearranging these elements into new figures to open up unusual modes of enjoyment and difficult temporalities. Barrett Browning, read in relation to Coleridge, can be seen as a belated example of a discursive phenomenon known as “fellow Romantics” or “Romantic interactions,” in which male and female poets share discursive common ground and productively challenge and repeat one another (Lau; Wolfson). The gender politics being negotiated here are complex: even before Barrett Browning arrives on the scene, the lime-tree bower is already displaying Coleridge’s willingness to appropriate traditionally feminine poetic spaces (Labbe 96; Murray 57). Barrett Browning might be wresting back this space for the women’s side; yet in doing so, she is developing a complex response to the immediacy of Coleridge’s verse. Although Barrett Browning repeatedly alludes to Coleridge’s lime-tree bower in Book I of her text, she does so to flatten Coleridge’s poetic world and detach the Coleridgean conversational “I” from its sources of comfort. To put the difference in psychoanalytic terms: if Coleridge’s poem proclaims the neurosis of the entrapped male poet, who resents being left behind as his friends go walking, then Barrett Browning’s poem can be said to be approaching that persona psychotically.

It may seem iniquitous to speak of *Aurora Leigh* in terms of psychosis. I am not eager to associate one of the most important feminist poems of the nineteenth century with abnormal conditions of the mind and mental illness, given how readily the nineteenth century wielded psychiatric discourses against women. The association may seem especially unfortunate, given the remarkable clarity of Barrett Browning’s writing and thought, which is apparent everywhere in the poem, and Barrett Browning’s carefully reasoned arguments, through the voice of Aurora Leigh, about gender-based oppression. The poem chronicles, in a detailed and persuasive way, Aurora’s purposefulness in the face of conventionality. There does not appear to be anything particularly psychotic about Aurora’s quest to become an artist or transcend the limitations placed upon her—although Daniel Paul Schreber, too, was “clear thinking and sober” in pursuit of what he called “cool intellectual criticism” (69)—and I am not trying to suggest that the character Aurora Leigh, or that the author Barrett Browning, is especially psychotic. Instead, I will explore the category of “ordinary psychosis”—a psychosis often indistinguishable from ordinarily neurotic states of mind, except insofar as it relates to language and signification (Vanheule). It is psychosis as a method of resisting and refusing patriarchal law—and, as Todd McGowan reminds us, “The fundamental law is that of the signifier itself” (48). So, my use of *psychosis* in this essay merely indicates that *Aurora Leigh* understands figuration and meaning quite differently from Coleridge and that those differences, taken as a whole, substantially shift the poetic function of Leigh Hall’s menacing lime tree into a different register of experience. As figural and syntactic differences emerge between Barrett Browning and Coleridge, they become part of Barrett Browning’s agenda of feminist resistance. Unwilling to recognize an Other, the poem struggles to situate its protagonist in time. Mary Mullen has shown how, “by representing multiple, overlapping timescapes, *Aurora Leigh* questions the dominance of linear, progressive time” (64). The strange temporality of *Aurora Leigh*’s Book I in particular, which arises from its interactions with Coleridge’s text at the level of figuration, proves confining for Aurora but enables Barrett Browning to build on a tradition of counter-temporal women’s writing inherited from Romantic-era women writers like Catherine Macaulay, Mary Wollstonecraft, Charlotte Smith, and Mary Shelley. Psychosis, in my reading of the poem, is less a medical or psychiatric diagnosis than a way of relating to language, male-authored poetry, and time.

Aurora dreads that the lime tree, and perhaps by extension the English poetic tradition, may want something from her, and she hesitates to contemplate the tree or turn her chair towards it.In what could easily be described as a paranoid delusion, she maintains that the tree has come from the woods to the house and seems to be stalking her and attempting to communicate: it is here “to bring the house a message.” For Coleridge, the situation is exactly the opposite: the lime-tree bower, at first frustrating, becomes an emissary from the house to the woods, so that the injured poet can convey his feelings to his distant friends and his aspirations for their happiness. Coleridge’s lime tree is frustratingly immobile, while Barrett Browning’s seems to have made like a tree and left the woods behind; its seeming mobility is what provokes Aurora’s anxiety. The tree marks the outside world intruding into Leigh Hall and into the core of the subject: its “message” is traumatic and meaningless in itself and yet indicates “a thing / Beyond it” (1.484−5). The message becomes part of Aurora’s contemplation of “the inner life,” something that she likens to regression: Aurora maintains “relations in the Unseen . . . as a babe sucks surely in the dark. / I kept the life, thrust on me, on the outside / Of the inner life” (1.473–78). She goes on to suppose that:

And so, as froward babes, we hide our eyes

And think all ended.—Then, Life calls to us . . . Above us, or below us, or around:

Perhaps we name it Nature’s voice, or Love’s,

Tricking ourselves. (1.672–76)

The second quoted example indicates that “Love”—a signifier to which we will shortly return—constitutes an untrustworthy “voice” generated and named by our own psyche but which imposes itself on us from outside. The distinction between inside and outside collapses, and so the voice may come from “above us, or below us, or around,” indifferently, or all at once. In both examples, Aurora styles herself as an infant only at the level of figuration, as the vehicle of a simile: she regresses by placing herself at the mercy of literary language as a way of skirting the Law, in an effort to refuse to relinquish early childhood enjoyments.

But her inner life seems to have been installed there from an alien source. The movement of the tree between Aurora’s “outer life” and “inner life,” which ultimately becomes a way for Aurora to better figure herself as a suckling infant, suggests that the psychic mechanism of foreclosure may be at work. The effect is a flattening out of meaning as “the incoherencies of change and death” become folded into what Aurora calls the “smooth fair mystery of perpetual Life” (1.171–73). Foreclosure, a concept coined by Jacques Lacan in 1956 in the final session of his Seminar on psychosis, is the process by which the subject loses access to a primordial signifier, known playfully in Lacanian parlance as the Name (or No) of the Father (*Seminar III* 321). The subject forecloses the signifier of the law in a bid to retain access to primordial enjoyment. Yet, even while the paternal signifier remains foreclosed from the psychotic subject, it can return in unexpected ways: “what is foreclosed does not simply disappear altogether but may return, albeit in a different guise, from outside the subject,” explains Russell Grigg (50). The arrival of the lime tree, and thus by extension Coleridge’s entire psychodrama of reconstituting “Friends, whom I never more may meet again” as a permanent presence that can “keep the heart / Awake,” seems to function in *Aurora Leigh* as an index of permanent filial attachment (Coleridge 6, 65–66). But because these affective bonds have been foreclosed in *Aurora Leigh*, the dynamics of loss and memory play out as “relations in the Unseen.”

Psychosis arises not out of the daughter’s relationship to either mother or father but to the child’s relationship to the mother’s relationship to the father—that is, it stems from a person’s relationship with their mother’s desire (Lacan, *Écrits* 464; Grigg 64). Aurora explains, “I felt a mother-want about the world, / And still went seeking, like a bleating lamb” (1.40). Embodying her mother’s desire, and refusing to think of either parent as permanently lost, there can be no anchoring point for language or meaning for her. We get a sense of this through the jumbled syntax and jagged line breaks as Aurora gazes at a portrait of her mother “half in terror, half / In adoration”: “Therefore very strange / The effect was” (1.134–37). Much like her manipulations of Coleridge’s poem in the library of Leigh Hall, Aurora here seems to be constructing her own arrangements out of the linguistic ingredients available. Consider the remarkable extent to which Aurora experiences her father as an effect of language. Arriving as an orphan in England, she “heard [her] father’s language first / From alien lips,” a defamiliarization (or unmooring) of language that provokes a reaction in her others find alarming: “some one near me said the child was mad / Through much sea-sickness” (1.254–59). The poem, finding an “apocalyptic” relation to language in a sustained effort not to deal with the traumatic loss of the mother and father (1.674), begins to articulate something “very strange” that strikes those around her as madness. We can see the arrival of the lime tree in this light: “A feeling of being intruded upon,” Lacan explains, often playing out in “shared delusions,” such as the “delusion of being watched,” which especially arise in cases of psychosis connected to “the mother/daughter couple” (*Écrits* 447).

Psychosis can ensue when the father appears to be undeserving or inadequate in the face of the mother’s desire and in the face of the symbolic Law. As Grigg explains:

For Lacan, what is foreclosed is not the possibility of an event’s coming to pass, but the very signifier, or signifiers, that makes the expression of impossibility possible in the first place. Thus, “foreclosure” refers not to the fact that a speaker makes a statement which declares something impossible—a process closer to disavowal—but to the fact that the speaker lacks the very linguistic means for making the statement at all. This is where the difference between repression and foreclosure lies. (49)

An impossible event, such as a tree’s seeming “arrival” from the woods to Leigh Hall, might at first seem like a fanciful way to describe the return of the repressed. But it is not at all the case that Coleridge’s poetry, or his lime-tree imagery, have been “repressed” in Aurora’s world: there is a library full of English books, and the lime tree is visible just through the window—yes, the reading chair has been turned away, but the world outside that window is hardly repressed material. Therefore, I would encourage us to think of that tree not as the embodiment of the repressed but rather as the arboreal embodiment of the father’s signifier (“Love,” to which Aurora feels she has no access) and the world of literary language more broadly. In this sense, it is a symbol of how the work of poetic figuration is kept “outside” of Aurora’s view, even when she is immersed in reading. The psychic movement from inner to outer—as a way of pretending that one can maintain oneself as separate from the expectations that surround one—is crucial to understanding the ethos of *Aurora Leigh* and its relationship to Romanticism, as Emily Kobayashi has argued (823). It is also crucial to psychosis in the psychoanalytic tradition. For instance, Schreber even begins his *Memoir* with the claim that “the total mental life of a human being rests on their excitability by external impressions” (19). The lime tree, ominously approaching Leigh Hall, exemplifies this phenomenon.

“Love” is a special signifier in this text, as it was the father’s emphatic last word to his now-orphaned daughter: “His last word was, ‘Love—’ / ‘Love, my child, love, love!” (1.211–12). For Aurora, “love” is not the name for an ethical relation nor a sentiment but a signifier of her father’s lack: in her memory, her father is the man “Whom love had unmade from a common man / But not completed to an uncommon man” (1.183–84). Such an association is not unusual in cases of psychosis: Lacan explains that “words of love” are “always a rupture in the system of language” and are thus often pivotal in psychosis (*Seminar III* 55). Orphaned at thirteen, Aurora is alarmed to find her father not only dead but also rendered incomplete and “unmade” by the signifier of his paternity, which had once been the signifier of her mother’s desire. Hence, when arriving in England, Aurora is alarmed by the extent to which the landscape—recently enclosed—seems to disclose her father’s lack through the cut of its property lines: clearly, she reckons, it was not “my father’s England” because of how the “ground seemed cut up from the fellowship / Of verdure”—with even the line break marking the violence of the cut—and because of the loss of the commons reinscribed in the “delicate lines” of her Aunt’s face (1.259–61, 278). Such delineation is, for Aurora, the mark of castration in and through her “father’s language” (1.254): it is the signifier of the father’s lack. But the primordial word “love,” to which Aurora is traumatically attached, is foreclosed in the experience, and so Aurora moves through the world “with ears too full / Of [her] father’s silence” (1.227–28). To render this silence in poetry—with one’s own “lines” and the emphatic line breaks of the poem’s aggressive enjambment—is Aurora’s attempt to link this cut to the father, to turn the dead father’s love into just another signifier, instead of accepting it as the Name of the Father. Hence the signifier “love” resounds through the poetry found in her aunt’s library, turning the Name of the Father into just another signifier as the lime tree keeps watch: “From many a volume, Love re-emphasised / Upon the self-same pages” (1.710–11).

Without the stabilizing presence of a master signifier, Aurora is “left prey to . . . the mother’s unregulated desire”:“I am like, / They tell me, my dear father,” she observes (Grigg 55; Barrett Browning 1.198–99). It is a flattening out and undoing of the Oedipal triangle. Again, she refuses to separate the “I” of narration from the “they” who intercedes, syntactically speaking, between her and her father. Put in Lacanian terms, she has refused to transfer her enjoyment to the big Other—an imagined repository of signifiers normally held as a tribute to the dead father’s enjoyment, and his ongoing dominance, as per Freud’s totem myth. Aurora’s refusal of this Other, I am suggesting, is a consequence of foreclosure: hence her boast that the lime tree’s “message,” once “thrust on me,” can be kept “on the outside / Of the inner life.” Lacan says, in “On a Question Prior to Any Possible Treatment of Psychosis,” that when we arrive “at the point at which the Name-of-the-Father is summoned—and we shall see how—a pure and simple hole may thus answer in the Other” (*Écrits* 465). This hole is the outcome of foreclosure. That hole begins to answer in *Aurora Leigh* as Aurora begins to “hear the silence open like a flower” (1.683). Although she can sense the delivery of that absent message internally, as if emitted from inside of her head, its blankness is firmly kept on the “outside.” Grigg warns us against such a dynamic in his account of psychotic foreclosure: “Yet what is foreclosed from the symbolic is not purely and simply abolished. It returns, but, unlike the return of the repressed, it returns from outside the subject, as emanating from the real” (56). As it returns in *Aurora Leigh*, we observe a collapse of levels in these lime-tree bower passages: the tree arrives as the externalized embodiment of the father’s signifier, and so the poetry renders impossible any distinction between inside, outside, and beyond.

Celeste Langan has done important work in thinking about Coleridge’s theories of poetic language—in particular through *Christabel* and the *Biographia Literaria*—in light of Schreber’s *Memoir.* For Langan, Schreber’s psychotic “nerve-language” can be read as “a ‘pathological’ instance of Coleridge’s poetic theory.” As she explains, “there is an underexamined equivalency between poetry and what can be described as forms of speech pathology. Poetry, as it is practiced by Coleridge and Schreber, is the very opposite of ‘free’ speech,” given their shared “conditions of constraint” (120–21). In Coleridge’s “Lime-Tree Bower” poem, something external impresses itself upon the speaker’s body, restructuring his affect. The transformation is conveyed by a jarring line break: “A delight / Comes sudden on my heart” (45–46). Aurora’s strategy, of keeping “the life, thrust on me, on the outside / Of the inner life,” is quite different, though it communicates by similar means. In aspiring to maintain a distinction between “outside” and “inner” lives, the very rigor of her attempt ensures the collapse of that distinction: hence the rhetoric of unwanted penetration (“thrust on me”) and the syntactical way that “on me” is enfolded, as a subordinate clause, within the play of “outside” and “inner,” as if “I” were always internal to the play that defines one’s own boundaries. In effect, the speaker of *Aurora Leigh* is treating the Real as the Symbolic: she is building a symbolic distinction out of the violent rupture of repressed material, flattening the levels out onto a single plane of signification. Coleridge’s epiphany is now asked to take on a subjectivity of its own such that it no longer functions as an epiphany. It becomes, over the course of Book I, an engine of “rupture” and “break” instead of the “deep radiance” of a “straight path”: “Then, something moved me,” Aurora explains, adding, “here’s a cause / For rupture;—herein we must break with Life, / Or be ourselves unworthy” (Coleridge 54, 71; Barrett Browning 1.661–70).

Although such contrasts between the two poems, culled from a close reading of just a few small words and their rhetorical function, may seem too subtle to warrant the invocation of something as extreme as “psychosis” in Aurora Leigh’s case, it is only in such subtleties that ordinary psychosis manifests itself. That is why Lacan urges his students to focus on the order of words, rather than the words themselves (that is, to prioritize the analysis of syntax over diction), in the writings of psychotic patients: “a metaphor is above all sustained by positional articulation,” he explains, and so we have to study the relationship of signifier to signifier without much consideration of any signified (*Seminar III* 226). Because “the mainspring of the metaphor isn’t the meaning, which is supposed to be transposed” from tenor to vehicle, Lacan explains, “the transference of the signified [from vehicle to tenor] is possible only by virtue of the structure of language” (*Seminar III* 225).

The window is the most obvious perspectival difference between the two poems: Barrett Browning emphasizes how the architecture and interior design direct her gaze; they limit her capacity, and everyone’s capacity, to hear the “message” of the tree. Coleridge’s speaker is directly “in this bower, / This little lime-tree bower,” while Aurora shuffles “demurely,” for now, around the “carpeted low rooms” of Leigh Hall, occasionally craning her neck toward the window (Coleridge 47–48; Barrett Browning 1.489). Does the fact of looking at the lime tree through a window influence the affect it provokes and the temporality of the “message” it might impose? It is not enough to see the presence of a lime tree as “a vestigial remnant of male genius,” as DeLuise and Timko would have it, because *how* and *through what intermediary* we see the lime tree is as least as important as its status *as* a lime tree (99). There is a disquieting aura surrounding the Barrett Browning lime tree, which becomes, as the tree comes back again and again throughout Book I, thoroughly uncanny.

In his Seminar on anxiety, Lacan explains that “the magisterial German *Unheimliche*, presents itself through little windows. The field of anxiety is situated as something framed. . . . Anxiety is the appearance, within this framing, of what was already there, at much closer quarters, at home” (*Seminar X* 74–75). To illustrate this, Lacan examines two drawings of trees made by psychoanalytic patients: the first and more famous, by the Wolf Man, depicting five wolves sitting in the branches of a tree, gazing as if to bring the house a message, and the second, by an Italian woman with schizophrenia he calls Isabella, depicting a tree with three large humanoid eyes positioned vertically along its trunk and cursive foliage that spells out “*Io sono sempre vista*,” or, rendered into English, “I am always in view.” Lacan is interested in how Isabella’s drawing parallels the Wolf Man’s, and yet the wolves have been replaced with signifiers. Lacan stresses the ambiguity of “*Io sono sempre vista*,” as it has “two meanings, subjective and objective” in the French translation: we cannot know whether the tree is wary of being the object of our gaze or if Isabella might be concerned about her visibility to the tree (*Seminar X* 73). It is this syntactical ambiguity—never knowing whether you are the watcher or the watched—which becomes a wellspring of Isabella’s psychotic anxiety. These are striking images, both extremely unsettling, and yet Lacan strategically disregards the content of these images in his discussion, focusing instead on how their uncanny effects are mediated by a windowpane. Although one cannot see the windowpane in either case, Lacan stresses that in both images “the fantasy is beheld on the other side of a windowpane, and through a window that opens. The fantasy is framed” (*Seminar X* 73).[[2]](#endnote-2) It is the window, connecting but separating the tree to and from the house, which fills the artist with dread: an uncanny and terrifying “countryside view” and a tree who has come to the house to deliver an ambiguous message (*Seminar X* 74).

As the figural language of the poem begins to be flattened out—by which I mean the levels of vehicle and tenor become indistinguishable—the window to Aurora’s bedroom begins to be metaphorized as a bower: “the folds / Hung green about the window, which let in / The out-door world with all its greenery” (1.572−4). Once Aurora’s window becomes a metaphorical bower, we are forced to notice that the mediating fact of the window is what separates Leigh Hall’s lime tree from Coleridge’s. Coleridge is sitting outside in his garden bower, a space seminatural and semidomestic. For Aurora to liken the windowpane to a garden bower is to imagine herself in her own future, already outside the house. Yet the windowpane always frames Aurora’s experience of the tree. In a reversal of Coleridge, criminological language is associated with the house, not the bower: Romney Leigh, Aurora’s cousin and eventual suitor, is ever “agonising with a ghastly sense / Of universal hideous want and wrong / To incriminate possession” of Leigh Hall (1.519−21). That is, the house “incriminates” its socially-conscious master in a way that inverts Coleridge’s carceral metaphor. For Coleridge, the bower is effectively a prison, whereas for cousin Romney, the bower—in its function as one of the estate’s “seasonable delights” (1.518)—is the very crime. In *Aurora Leigh*, to enjoy is to be guilty; yet one is then condemned to enjoy, and one enjoys precisely by being “sentenced,” that is, at the lexical and syntactical levels. Barrett Browning, introducing Romney, twists Coleridge’s imagery to depict him as a reverse version of Coleridge’s encomium to Charles Lamb from the lime-tree bower: Romney is not “gentle-hearted” but only “tender when he thought of it”; he is not “my friend” but rather “a sort of friend”; a “delight” does not “come sudden upon [his] heart,” except through his “repressing all its seasonable delights”; the lesson for Aurora is not that “Nature ne’er deserts the wise and pure” but that “’Twas natural to like to get away” (Coleridge 29–62; Barrett Browning 1.506–14). Barrett Browning reorganizes the elements found in Coleridge’s poem, twisting the function of Coleridge’s words and images to give them uncanny moods.

Like Isabella, Aurora cannot determine if she is looking at the tree, or if the tree is beholding her—if it is she, or the tree, that is “always in view.” Coleridge’s tree is “always in view” as well, but it’s clearer that the speaker is exercising a gaze upon it: in extraordinarily visual diction, the speaker “mark’d,” “watch’d,” and “lov’d to see” the lime tree (48–51). Aurora’s experience is not like that. It finds a closer corollary in another moment from Coleridge, this one from “Frost at Midnight,” in which the speaker discovers his inner self in an external if “companionable form” (19). That is, the lime tree gives substance to Aurora’s fantasy, and its enigmatic “message” is Coleridge’s message for the future being returned to him in a new contemporary moment, in inverted form (Lacan, *Écrits* 30). This uncertainty is something that she must “await”: in Lacanian terms, it is not a feeling but a premonition and “pre-feeling,” as we await the cause of our desire, a confrontation with “that which deceives not” (*Seminar X* 76). That happens because Barrett Browning’s allusion functions both spatially and temporally: it separates inside from outside, as “Frost at Midnight” does in its own figurations of domestic space, but also styles Aurora as a baby (as we saw above) and thus as little Hartley Coleridge. Aurora is someone of the following generation, a figure from the future of Romanticism to whom Coleridge had been sending aspirational wishes. This temporal movement, positioning Aurora’s present as Coleridge’s future—and thus living out one’s life as someone else’s future projection from the past—is how, despite her claims to the contrary, Aurora’s “inner life” can return, through the companionable tree, “on the outside.” Aurora has located her inner experience outside of herself, in an effect that Lacanian analyst Stijn Vanheule has called “bodily externality” (86). The body never becomes a narcissistically cathected object, so there is no “ego” here, and the subject does not register properly in time. Aurora begins to embody what Anne C. McCarthy has called, with reference to “Frost at Midnight,” the “future just beyond the poem’s frame that may or may not take place” in response to that poem’s “doubly suspended” “slow, dilated time” (29).

In so doing, Barrett Browning undoes the central conceit of Coleridge’s two poems and reverses their aspirations for the future. *Aurora Leigh* resists the law laid down by Coleridge’s use of trope, and we can feel the ripples of this difference temporally. “This Lime-Tree Bower My Prison,” like “Frost at Midnight,” converts metonymy into metaphor: the lime-tree bower metonymizes the house at which the injured poet is stuck, only for that metonym to become the tenor of a carceral metaphor: “this lime-tree bower my prison” (2). In Freudian terms (as processed through Lacan’s discussion of metonymy and metaphor), Coleridge’s figural language works first by displacement, “as I myself were there!” (47), only to begin the work of condensation, as if Charles and the speaker were the same person, so they can “contemplate / With lively joy the joys we cannot share” (68–69). This gives a dreamlike quality to Coleridge’s text, which has been seen as a source of its unusual temporality. As Francis O’Gorman notes, Coleridge is imagining and situating himself within a present as a way of expressing trepidation for the future. He meanwhile treats the present as his past: “So my friend / Struck with deep joy may stand, as I have stood” (38–39). The figural trajectory of Aurora’s lime tree is quite different: the tree appears as an allusion to Coleridge but then becomes a symbol of a world outside the house. The lime tree never becomes a metonym for the house and never a metaphor for a prison; rather, the window from which Aurora watches the tree stands in metonymic relation to the house, and then the window becomes allegorized as the bars of her prison cell. The symbolic tree is viewed through that mediating frame.

McGowan explains what is at stake in this difference:

The psychotic is capable of registering metonymy and thus can function within the symbolic structure. But the psychotic foreclosure of the signifier of law marks a refusal of metaphor, which is what condemns the psychotic to a profound unfreedom. In this way, the psychotic is the most dangerous psychic structure . . . because its appearance of the ultimate freedom obscures the conformity that characterizes it. (63–64)

Thus, the window itself becomes an index of Aurora’s incarceration. We can feel the effects of this difference in the temporality of the scene. Coleridge notes, in the present tense and in all immediacy, how “A delight / Comes sudden on my heart” (“Lime-Tree” 45–46), while Barrett Browning goes out of her way to place the experience ambiguously in the past. In a section of *Aurora Leigh* with otherwise perfect iambic pentameter, one line alone has an extra syllable: “which seemed to have come on purpose from the woods” (1.484). The syntax serves as what Lacan would call a “positional link” in the sentence and so “reappears at all levels and sets up the synchronic coexistence of terms” (*Seminar III* 225). That is, it compresses the temporality of the scene to mark the disjuncture of time in Barrett Browning’s lime-tree prison. The line highlights its deliberate construction: the words “on purpose,” forming a spondee, are very emphatic but not necessary to the line’s meaning; removing them, the line becomes surprisingly anapestic (“which seem to have come from the woods”). The sonic excess of the extra syllable—an extra bit that cannot be folded into the meter or the sense of the line—lends a hint of anxiety to the scene. Although “had come” or “seemed to come” would have made more sense syntactically and would have better satisfied the metrical requirements, Barrett Browning has gone out of her way to say “seemed to have come” instead. She lets the past perfect of *it had come* encounter the simple past of *it seemed*, creating a temporal division between the perspectives of the tree and speaker. From out of this gap, the tree’s purpose is given in the infinitive (“to bring the house a message”), as if a message were coming from the future into Aurora’s contemporary moment despite our being able to recollect its past actions (and our own, in the time of Aurora’s narration). The poem is opening up two asynchronous temporalities—Aurora’s, belonging to Coleridge, in which a poetic past is repeated as the present, and the tree’s, in which the past situates us within its peculiarly deciduous prophecy—and fuses them into one asynchronous perspective. This effectively turns Coleridge’s poem inside-out, given how “This Lime-Tree Bower My Prison” was in O’Gorman’s estimation one of Coleridge’s boldest attempts “to try, however illusorily, to control the direction of the future through the assertion of a flawed individual will” and the culmination of his “efforts . . . somehow to know or to anticipate what was to come” (233).

Aurora experiences that Coleridgean project of directing the future, ultimately, as a source of comfort—but it is comforting only insofar as it offers her a way to imagine herself in service to an omnipotent Other, here called Nature, who demands her enjoyment:

It came in softly, while the angels made

A place for it beside me. The moon came,

And swept my chamber clean of foolish thoughts.

The sun came, saying, “Shall I lift this light

Against the lime-tree, and you will not look?

I make the birds sing—listen! but, for you,

God never hears your voice, excepting when

You lie upon the bed at nights and weep.” (1.653–60)

The beams of light, the all-seeing sun and moon, which control the birds, the terror of being inaudible to God except under certain conditions: the poem seizes on the lime tree to articulate a remarkably Schreberian vision. The tree becomes the focal point of a paranoid structure. The confusion about who is speaking that arises when poetry encloses itself in quotation marks, as happens here, is a particularly Coleridgean inheritance and a signal of its alliance with Schreber’s psychotic discourse, as Langan indicates in her reading of *Christabel* (147–48). I want to highlight, here, the sun’s use of the word “shall,” which, as Grigg reminds us, epitomizes psychotic discourse: in the face of the utterance “shall,” the subject is asked to commit to the plan of the other (61). In making this point, Grigg draws on Lacan’s discussion of the word “shall” in Schreber’s hallucinatory conversations with God. Lacan sees language as an “endurance test” for Schreber, who receives “interrupted messages, by means of which a relationship is sustained between the subject and his divine interlocutor” (*Écrits* 451). God tests Schreber with incomplete phrases like “Now I shall . . .” and “I shall . . . ,” to which Schreber must fill in what remains of the sentence in a way that “indicate[s] the subject’s position on the basis of the message itself” (452). The sun’s “shall I” in *Aurora Leigh* functions quite similarly. As Aurora quotes her hallucination of the sun, it addresses a “you” that, at one level, interpellates Aurora but at another level, because Aurora is quoting the sun’s voice, forces Aurora to imagine herself as outside of herself, as seen by the omnipotent sun and its angels. The double interpellation is especially disquieting because Aurora’s name, meaning “dawn,” indicates her readiness to “lift this light / Against the lime-tree.” She is forced to experience herself as the divine agent of her own manipulation; swept clear of her thoughts, she is being placed “beside me” by her remade relation to the lime tree. Michele C. Martinez emphasizes how the first lime-tree passage in *Aurora Leigh* signals “an important change of register in the text” as the poem then begins to apostrophize a “You,” seemingly the reader, standing outside of Leigh Hall (40). The figural work of that apostrophe certainly continues in this passage. For Lacan, the work of such a “you” marks the border between psychotic and nonpsychotic discourse: “The *you* is the hooking of the other in the waters of meaning,” he explains, as he seeks a way, within psychotic language, “to elevate this *you* to subjectivity” (*Seminar III* 299). The “you” of this passage, however, is “me,” who is subjected to an omnipotent sun who asks “shall,” as if it had been subjected, at dawn, to a yet more powerful “you”: the gap between the ego and Other has been foreclosed in this passage.

If psychotic subjects have foreclosed the Name of the Father, it does not mean that they have no recourse to language: as the psychotic patient Mr. Primeau tells Lacan, “I create worlds through my poetry, through my poetic speech” (Lacan, “A Lacanian Psychosis” 34). The missing signifier makes it impossible, though, for the psychotic subject to resolve herself into the Law: psychosis is a failure of language systems to produce meaning and a confrontation with the absence of meaning rather than an abstention from language itself (Grigg 56). In the words of Mr. Primeau: “I am a little disjointed in regard to language. . . . Language could present strata and substrata” (“A Lacanian Psychosis” 19–20). That is why Lacan understands psychosis as “a question of the subject’s access to a signifier as such and of the impossibility of that access,” in the face of which we find “the separate deployment and the bringing into play of the entire signifying apparatus, . . . laden with non-meaningfulness, [and] the decomposition of internal discourse, which marks the entire structure of psychosis.” Psychosis, in short—as Lacan sees it—is “the encounter, the collision, with the inassimilable signifier,” which then “has to be reconstituted” (*Seminar III* 321).

In reading *Aurora Leigh* as the psychotic decomposition of Romantic discourse, I am trying to situate the poem within recent debates about the clinical approach to psychosis within Lacanian psychoanalysis and specifically what is called “ordinary psychosis.” In cases of “ordinary psychosis,” explains Vanheule, one must consider not an array of dramatic symptoms but only “how speech structures the subject” (78). This is part of a movement, now ongoing with Lacanian psychoanalysis, to define psychosis not by means of a “hegemonic authoritarian psychiatry” but “as a conceptual framework or philosophical perspective supported by descriptive narrative and symptomatic phenomenology that challenges preconceived notions of what we typically consider psychosis to entail,” according to Jon Mills (2). As Mills suggests, “contemporary Lacanian’s [*sic*] are in hot debate over what constitutes psychosis, including defining the ordinary from pathological variants that have historically defined that phenomena as a mental illness” (1–2). For Vanheule, this is what makes Lacan’s approach to psychosis better suited for this historical moment of ours: it is poised to make headway in cases of “ordinary psychosis” because it begins from the premise of the subject’s relation to language (78). McGowan, echoing Vanheule, prizes Lacan’s approach to psychosis for the way that it stresses a “fundamental kinship” between the purportedly normal subject and the psychotic—much as Freud has done for neurosis (50). We are seeing such a kinship play out in Book I of *Aurora Leigh* as Barrett Browning reckons with Coleridge’s legacy. In her interactions with Coleridge’s text, we can see her closely listening to a partner’s voice, to parse its “interrupted messages” (Lacan, *Écrits* 451). This, as Lacan explains, is the crux of psychosis, even in the absence of noticeable symptoms.

Roland Barthes suggests that symbol is “analogical and inadequate” to its referent and thus takes an inexact relation to signification (38). It is for this reason, perhaps, that symbolization becomes the limit point of psychosis. To be psychotic is to refuse the cut of the signifier and thus to be rendered unable to demarcate the realm of symbolic meaning from other levels of apprehension. In this context, we might find new ways of understanding Aurora’s offhand admonition that, “By the way, / The works of women are symbolical” (1.455–56): the statement might not refer to the tendency for women artists to use symbolism or to produce, through their domestic craftworks, tokens of their own marginal status but rather might suggest that women’s works directly *are* symbolical, with the “are” doing the work of a metaphor. That is, women’s texts begin to function as a replacement for the symbolic register itself. By “works,” Barrett Browning means quasi-artistic productions that will be used by men in the domestic space—the mending of a husband’s slippers, the construction of a stool, or “at best, a cushion” (1.458–61). Note how these “works” are not “symbolical” in the sense that they function symbolically: Barrett Browning seems to mean that they function metonymically, as slivers of evidence of women’s subordination. They attest to a sexual nonrelation by leaving material traces of women’s domestic labor around the house. These traces are “symbolical” to the extent that they reveal a truth about everyday life—a hidden resentment of women and devaluation of their work—in an assemblage of seemingly minor examples. Now, to make such a sweeping statement about “the works of women” tout court is an outrageous generalization, as Barrett Browning clearly knew well—and this in a poem, itself very ambitious in scope, which valorizes the dignity of women’s artistic ambitions. The point is not, though, that women artists have an innate special relation to symbol; it may rather be that Aurora Leigh—the fraught “I” of the “novel in verse”—cannot comfortably differentiate her own ego from the category “woman” in general. She is, through her foreclosed redeployment of symbolic language, becoming-woman in Schreber’s sense and finding new arrangements for enjoyment that do not depend upon the cut of castration (Schreber 18n1). Just as, in Paul de Man’s assessment, “the symbol is always part of the totality that it represents,” and thus functions as a species of synecdoche, so too in Lacan’s exposition of psychosis does the subject, becoming “the mouthpiece of a discourse that is not his own,” find that “he cannot speak without hearing himself” (de Man 190–91; *Écrits* 447). Barrett Browning, as she inhabits and speaks Coleridge’s symbolic discourse, finds that Aurora cannot detach herself from her own poetic utterances.

Romanticism, in de Man’s view, was the movement away from allegory and toward symbol; he found in the dialectical interplay of these tropes forms of repetition that could organize images in time. In symbol, says de Man, “time is merely a matter of contingency,” whereas in allegory, which functions through repetition instead of synthesis, “time is the originary constitutive category” (207). Symbol functions spatially, by simultaneity: it refuses the repetitions that characterize allegory, undoing “an authentically temporal destiny,” yet as it collides with allegory it creates its own temporalities. Coleridge is of course de Man’s primary case in point (de Man 206). Barrett Browning is undoing that figural work, recasting Coleridge’s metonymy as symbol and then sequestering the symbol from any allegorical processes to create something asynchronous and not totalizing, although its mood is often stifling. Where there is repetition in *Aurora Leigh*’s allusions to Coleridge, it does not stem from the negation of Romantic totalities; rather, repetition is there from the start, built into the poem through the allusion to Coleridge—and so Barrett Browning can sidestep the signature dialectics of Romantic figuration. The poem’s strategic and deliberate lime-tree symbolism becomes an important part of its feminist poetics.

Such is the atemporal “message” that the lime tree brings to the house in *Aurora Leigh*: the poem’s report of the tree’s arrival *is* the “message,” so further elaboration would be impossible. Barrett Browning, or perhaps Aurora, reconstitutes Romantic language in such a way as to create subtle ruptures in time. This is consistent with Lacan’s account of psychosis as a “turning away” from the diachronic aspects of discourse. Schreber himself remains uncertain if certain phases of his life were taking place over “a few earthly months only and not of centuries” (69). It is far from clear, in *Aurora Leigh*, that “Times followed one another” (2.1), and the poem in general is “deliberately untimely” (Mullen 73). If, under typical Saussurean conditions, “there is no discourse without a certain temporal order,” then in psychosis we witness language becoming “a set of several lines, a stave,” according to which “certain elements become isolated, laden, take on a value, a particular force of inertia, become charged with meaning, with a meaning and nothing more” (Lacan, *Seminar III* 54). Along these lines (as it were), one can place *Aurora Leigh* within a tradition of Romantic-era women’s writing that, through its manipulations of figurative language and the materiality of the signifier, began to think about time asynchronously. Such a tradition, which does not always or usually avail itself of psychotic structures to create alternative temporalities, would include works such as Mary Wollstonecraft’s “The Cave of Fancy,” Helen Maria Williams’s *Paul and Virginia*, Charlotte Smith’s *Beachy Head*, and Mary Shelley’s “The Mortal Immortal.” Because Barrett Browning’s contribution to this tradition exploits the elements of psychotic language and the reconstitution of existing signifying structures, we have needed to examine Barrett Browning’s lime tree in relation to Coleridge’s, with careful attention to the rhetoric of temporality of both poets, to show how this flattened temporality emerges in *Aurora Leigh*. What had been, for Coleridge, a series of interlocking tropes designed to create intimacy with nature and one’s friends has been rewritten to stress the anxiety attendant upon that scene once the different levels that support it collapse.

Aurora Leigh imagines herself as a “wild bird” trapped within her Aunt’s “cage-bird life” (1.310, 305). At one level, the contrast in the text would seem to be between a bird captured from the wild and a bird raised in captivity, given as two models of Victorian womanhood. Yet the image also reveals a doubleness of experience, the feeling of being wild and caged simultaneously. Mr. Primeau expresses his experience of psychosis in just such terms, much to Lacan’s evident frustration: “The fact of speaking of these solitary circles and of living without boundaries; there is no contradiction. In my mind I do not see a contradiction. How can I explain that? I am in a solitary circle because I am broken off from reality” (“A Lacanian Psychosis” 33–34). That is, psychosis can confer the experience of freedom upon those living within severe confinements. “In relation to the solitary circle, I live without boundaries,” Primeau explains to Lacan, adding, “But in relation to the real, I live *with* boundaries” (34). Like Mr. Primeau, Aurora Leigh finds in poetic language—in the figural work of allusion and symbol and in the disruptions of meter, syntax, and lineation—a way to create unbounded confinement in the absence of a master signifier.

Coleridge’s work resonates through Book I of *Aurora Leigh*, but Barrett Browning, by shifting the tropes and by framing the experience through a window, undoes the imaginative work of “This Lime-Tree Bower” as part of its innovative feminist poetics. This might be termed an “impasse of the feminine” that “is central to psychosis in women,” according to Willy Apollon, Danielle Bergeron, and Lucie Canton: Aurora’s unwriting of “the social link, the requirement of the cultural construction of the feminine, removes the possibility [for her] to address a reliable Other for an essential dimension of [her life]” (132). Such an impasse arises, in its temporal dimension, once symbol and meter escape their boundaries and overflow the signifying processes of Coleridge’s text. Instead of choosing to adopt a Coleridgean hopefulness or to pledge generosity toward an absent friend, Barrett Browning creates an anxious and uncanny encounter with the cause of the friend’s desire—one that has repetition built into its very premise and premises, so that it does not need to wait for repetition to be generated out of the work of metonymy and symbol. In so doing, Barrett Browning registers Romantic poetry as a discourse both alien to the subject and internal to it, an ambiguity that registers in Aurora as an unnamable site of anxiety. The ambiguity leaves Romanticism vulnerable to its future, which here never stops being written.

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2. I am here indebted to Celiese Lypka, who, in our work together, has helped me to understand this passage of *Seminar X*. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)