TWO-WAY MIRROR

The Life of Elizabeth Barrett Browning

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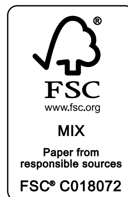

Contents

A note on names ix
Acknowledgements xi
List of illustrations xiii

Frontispiece From within 1

Book 1 How (not) to belong 13
Opening Frame 35

Book 2 How to be ill 38
Second Frame 46

Book 3 How not to love 48
Third Frame 72

Book 4 How to manage change 74
Fourth Frame 97

Book 5 How to lose your way 99
Tain 124

Book 6 How to be dutiful 126
Sixth Frame 149

Book 7 How to desire 151
Seventh Frame 183

Book 8 How to be autonomous 185
Eighth Frame 220

Book 9 How to lose a body 222
Closing Frame 258

Notes 261
Index 305

Frontispiece: From within

understand
That life develops from within.

In my favourite portrait of Elizabeth Barrett Browning she simultaneously turns away and looks back over her shoulder at us. Of course in one sense every historical figure does this: glancing over their shoulder towards the future where we're watching them, even while they face away from us into their own time. But Barrett Browning makes the gesture particularly provocative. Her wide, sensual mouth dips and rises in a curly bracket. Sceptical, even teasing, her gaze has a directness that seems startlingly modern.

Which is an irony, since it's an image that has been constructed by thoroughly old-fashioned means. The frontispiece for the fourth British edition of her bestselling verse novel *Aurora Leigh* is an engraving after an ambrotype taken specifically for this purpose. On the afternoon in September 1858 when a shutter falls on the poet's half smile, in a stuffy studio on Le Havre harbour-front, photography is understood to be neither artistic, nor detailed, enough for portraiture. It will be another half-dozen years before Julia Margaret Cameron starts to produce her famous, markedly Pre-Raphaelite images of friends and family. And so the portrait

that eventually results from this sitting won't be created by the photographer, but by a founder member of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood itself.

Dante Gabriel Rossetti is a friend of 'EBB', as his celebrated subject likes to style herself, and of her husband and fellow poet Robert Browning. He's a poet himself, and from its outset a decade ago the Brotherhood has placed literature, philosophy and the book arts – illustration, fine printing, binding – at the heart of its work. This commitment combined with personal acquaintance surely makes Rossetti the safest of hands for the urgent refashioning of Barrett Browning's public image.

But his are not to be the only hands her image passes through. First it's engraved by a less stellar craftsman, Thomas Oldham Barlow. The artist edits the result:

> The hair brought a little more down more over the forehead, and the parting line not left quite so raw. More tone on the forehead and indeed all over the face. The mouth is considerably in need of correction […] by adding a line of shadow all along the top of the upper lip, thus lessening the curve upward at the corners.

Notes and sketches sprawl over Rossetti's offprint from the engraver's block. It would be easy to jump to the conclusion that this creator of sultry images of his own lovers – dreamy Lizzie Siddal, heavy-lidded Jane Morris – would like to 'correct' the poet's appearance. But far from disparaging her, Rossetti wants his engraver to be more faithful to the 'photograph portrait' they're both working from, for example by removing 'a sort of smile not in the photograph & not characteristic of the original'.

He's had plenty of chances to study this 'original' at the Brownings' home, 'an evening resort where I never feel unhappy'. In the two years since the hugely successful appearance of *Aurora Leigh*, Elizabeth's pioneering, nine-book *Bildungsroman* which is the first to tell the story of a woman becoming a writer, Rossetti has admired her work and become eager to paint her. Initial impressions – 'as unattractive a person as can well be imagined. She looks quite worn out with illness, & speaks in the tone of an invalid' – have turned to admiring protectiveness. Now he replaces the photographer's stock studio furniture with a symbolic writing desk, and instructs Barlow to 'darken' their subject's hair and enlarge her signature dark eyes in order to make her look a little younger

and less ‘worn out with illness’. After all, this portrait’s whole purpose is to ‘extinguish’ what her husband calls ‘certain horrible libels on humanity published as portraits of her in America’: portrayals all too similar to Rossetti’s own first impressions.

Earlier, shipping the photograph to *Aurora Leigh*’s American publishers, Robert has assured them just a shade too urgently that, ‘What you receive, is the sun’s simple truth without a hair’s breadth of retouching.’ Well. Up from Italy to spend summer 1858 with Elizabeth’s English family, the Brownings have picked out Le Havre as a halfway meeting point. On the very last day of what turn out to be two unsatisfactory, tiring months at the Normandy port, Robert finds a ‘clever man’ to conduct a photographic session with his camera-shy wife. But the result seems to justify her resistances. Jean Victor Macaire-Warnod and his brother Louis Cyrus Macaire, who share the waterside studio, are renowned technical pioneers. Yet the photographic image that will briefly see commercial distribution in North America, and be so proudly donated to the Authors’ Club of New York by *littérateur* Richard Henry Stoddard, is an oddly unclear and generic image. The poet’s publishers, C. S. Francis & Co, do not use it themselves.

Look closer though and, for all Robert’s insistence that there isn’t ‘a hair’s breadth of retouching’, the picture turns out to have been clumsily overpainted. In fact within two sentences his letter contradicts itself, framing Macaire-Warnod as ‘the Artist’ who’s worked up detail that got lost in making this copy. Yet with its brushstroke hair, torso straight as a ruler and expressionless face, this naïve rendering is hardly the work of a professional. Who apart from Robert – who is a keen amateur artist – could have a motive for intervention so strong that it overrules plain sight and common sense like this?

We can’t be absolutely sure we’ve caught him red-handed. Though great American photographer Mathew Brady seems to have been authorised to sell prints of the image Francis & Co received, for $3 a pop, it’s hard to believe that he would have retouched so clumsily. But what we do know is that, luckily, Robert has kept back an untouched original. It’s this version that Barlow and Rossetti use, and we can see a detail of it in copies taken by British photographers Elliott and Fry. In it, the

unexpurgated Elizabeth Barrett Browning has a dark shadow of tiredness or pain under her left eye, and the greying of her hair is difficult to assess, but she's every bit as characterful as Rossetti's recreation. This real-life woman has dark eyes and arched, dark eyebrows. Her nose is long; so is her upper lip, with its sexy overbite. Her face is asymmetric. Cover the right side and the left seems soulful and focused; cover the left and the right appears amused.

In the twenty-first century we recognise instantly the Brownings' anxiety about this key publicity shot, and their need to control the image of the international celebrity that fifty-two-year-old Elizabeth Barrett Browning has become. As readers we like to feel, with Elizabeth's fictional alter ego Aurora Leigh, that 'This special book [...] stands above my knowledge, draws me up.' Yet we also expect a glossy, artfully posed author photo; it's almost as if we need an ideal appearance to embody the mind we idealise as we read. In our own post-postmodern times, the Romantic cult of the visible and what it can express seems gobbled up by its own children, the visually framed identities that 'are' our social media selves. Elizabeth's struggle with her portrait reminds us that this process is nothing new.

The irony is that, despite being so anxiously aware of the ramifications of image-making, she's destined to become a notorious object lesson in how distorted ideas about famous individuals get established. The Brownings would have been astonished and mortified to see myths about their private life obscure first her work, and eventually even her identity. Let's remind ourselves that Elizabeth Barrett Browning is a pivotal figure, changing the direction of English-language poetry and influencing both her contemporaries and subsequent generations of poets and readers. In her lifetime, acknowledged as Britain's greatest ever woman poet, she receives international critical acclaim and attracts a huge readership. Yet within seventy years of her death, popular culture will have reduced this figure – who when she died was mourned as a public, political heroine in revolutionary Italy – to a swooning poetess in whose little, couch-bound life only a tyrannical father and an ardent poet-lover contribute drama.

The damage will be done above all by Rudolf Besier, author of *The Barretts of Wimpole Street*, a man of whom it's probably safe to say that he

makes no particular study of how women emerge as writers: though he seems happy to incorporate gossip to gee up this drama. In the 1980s Lady Anne Holland-Martin will recall to the Browning scholar Philip Kelley how, at the after-party for its premiere at the Malvern Festival Theatre, 'It was felt [Besier's] play needed a dramatic impact. During the conversation, those who had lived in the community for generations recalled in vivid terms the handed-down memories about Edward Moulton-Barrett … the rest is history.' Three film versions follow Besier's 1931 Broadway hit: a Norma Shearer and Charles Laughton vehicle (1934), 1957's remake with Jennifer Jones and John Gielgud, and the 1982 TV movie with Jane Lapotaire and Joss Ackland. There are also no fewer than seven further remakes for television of Besier's domestic melodrama.

By the 1970s – when Saul Bellow, Philip Roth and John Updike crowd the book charts – the roaring boys of North American literary criticism will go a stage further, maligning Elizabeth Barrett Browning as relevant to the history of literature only through marriage or, worse, as hindering that real writer, her husband. In 1973's *Oxford Anthology of English Literature*, handsome paired volumes designed as an authoritative student resource, Lionel Trilling and Harold Bloom pronounce:

> Miss Barrett became an invalid (for still mysterious reasons) from 1838 to 1846 when […] she eloped with the best poet of the age. Her long poem *Aurora Leigh* (1856) was much admired, even by Ruskin, but is very bad. Quite bad too are the famous *Sonnets from the Portuguese* […] Though the Brownings' married life was reasonably happy, Mrs Browning's enthusiasms […] gave her husband much grief.

But perhaps the tendentiousness of this is unsurprising. The *Anthology*'s editors print just one minor poem by Elizabeth Barrett Browning; but then the only other writing by women to feature in its more than four and a half thousand pages comprises one minor poem each by Edith Sitwell and Stevie Smith, two by Emily Brontë, and passages from Dorothy Wordsworth's private journals: in total, fewer than two dozen pages, or around 0.5 per cent of their 'canon'. Literary revisionism on this scale is strenuous stuff. Excluding all of the Brontë novels, Jane Austen, Mary Shelley, George Eliot and Virginia Woolf can be neither innocent nor accidental; and it illustrates vividly how literary canons are not born, but made.

Within the continual process of reputation-making and remaking that is literary history, Elizabeth Barrett Browning remains a bellwether for the rising and sinking stock of women writers. It's probably no coincidence that the melodramatic exploitation of her life story comes to an end in the 1980s as women's writing becomes more widely read, rediscovered, taught. Half a century earlier, when *The Barretts of Wimpole Street* was already a cultural phenomenon, Virginia Woolf (who went to see Besier's play) summed up the poet's then standing:

> Passionate lovers, in curls and side-whiskers, oppressed, defiant, eloping—in this guise thousands of people must know and love the Brownings who have never read a line of their poetry. [...] But fate has not been kind to Mrs. Browning as a writer. Nobody reads her, nobody discusses her, nobody troubles to put her in her place.

Yet Woolf was herself complicit. Her comments date from the year she published *Flush: A Biography*, her own version of the famous costume drama – written from the point of view of Elizabeth's pet spaniel.

Today, we can't ignore how central the construction of identity is to Elizabeth Barrett Browning's story; and how this holds as true for her life itself as for the myth-making that surrounds it. Hers is a story about how a writer *becomes* – and that's what this book tries to mirror. Elizabeth dramatises the two-way creation of every writing self, from without and from within. That the life of the body both enables and limits the life of the mind is the paradox of the thinking self. John Keats's early death, or the seventeen-year-old poet-suicide in Henry Wallis's 'The Death of Chatterton', are moving because they remind us that a dead poet falls silent. But life imposes its own limits on the writer. For every Lord Byron or Malcolm Lowry, seizing the day in ways that their work celebrates, there is a John Clare or a Primo Levi trying to write experience away.

Writers' bodies create resistances, forcing interplay between self and world. Elizabeth Barrett Browning turned twelve in 1818, the year that Frankenstein's creature first found out how deeply the wearer of a body can be changed by what happens to it. And perhaps it's no accident that he is the creation of another woman writer. There are so many reasons why women may find that their bodies define their lives to a greater extent than do men's that it's surely no surprise if they chose to write about embodiment.

It used to be a feminist truism that René Descartes had it wrong, and there is no separation between mind and body. Yet bodies *do* disguise, shield, and isolate minds. A woman being whistled at by scaffolders may be mulling her dystopian novel, the mother in the labour suite may have done pioneering work on biodiversity, that figure wearing the Marigolds may be a leading human rights lawyer. More: to spend any time with someone whose body is failing is to understand that recognising the unimpaired selfhood 'within' it is both human and humane. So are we ghosts in a curvaceous machine, to borrow from the twentieth-century British language philosopher Gilbert Ryle's formulation? Or do we inhabit the body in ways that are inseparable from how we think and feel? Or, again, do many Western philosophy courses start with the thought experiment that goes, *How do you know you're not a brain being stimulated in a vat?* because, in a way, that's what we dream of? A virtual life, in which we experience ourselves as pure will, without the resistances of the concrete world?

Today, the screen world seems to offer us this ideal existence. And if we turn back two centuries, we find Elizabeth Barrett Browning, too, used the written word in 'virtual' ways to take part in the wider world while remaining bodily at home on her daybed. For she does see herself as a ghost in a machine; her strong-willed thinking self as set within an often frustrating body. It isn't only that illness and contemporary ideas of femininity exclude her from much that she longs to do and be. Living in the shadow of mortality from young womanhood onward, she wants urgently to continue to exist after bodily death, and for her loved ones to continue to exist too; as both Nonconformist Christianity and the spiritualism she explores assure her they will. This separation of mind – whether as 'soul' or 'ghost' – from body is unfashionable in the twenty-first-century West, but to dismiss it is to fail to understand how Elizabeth and her contemporaries experience embodiment. In the event, the thinking self who speaks in Elizabeth Barrett Browning's work *has* triumphantly outlived her bodily existence. But how telling it is that the fictionalised character of 'Elizabeth' that's replaced her in the popular imagination – someone passive and poorly, bullied and rescued, barely even a poet – is almost entirely bodily, scarcely a mind at all.

Yet there's another turn in the story. This often triumphant life is also the mirror and beneficiary of its brutal times. Jamaican and Madeiran ancestry make Elizabeth question her own ethnicity. A sensibility that will change the course of literary history is built on a shifting, uncertain self-image. But if we think that the shadowy self she imagines in the mirror is truly black, or that she's haunted by the figure of another self denied the leisure and literacy that have made her a poet, we should think again. Elizabeth Barrett Browning is the daughter and granddaughter of slavers: it's their prodigious sugar fortunes that have allowed her extraordinary talents to develop. Even her elopement is financed by this money, despite the fact that by the time she runs away both she and her husband are abolitionists.

The self jars against circumstance. When Elizabeth emerges from this mercantile and firmly unliterary background as a child prodigy, and declares not only that she will be a poet, but that she already is one, it should be a reach too far. In 1806, the year of her birth, women can neither vote nor, in England at least, own property once married. Even the wealthiest receive relatively little formal education and are barred from all but the oldest 'profession'. On marriage, they pass from their father's control to their husband's without becoming citizens in their own right. So it's not surprising that, at the start of the nineteenth century, women writers tend to emerge in the company of literary men who have brought them along too; whether by accident or design. The exceptional talents of Maria Edgeworth (1768–1849), Mary Shelley (1797–1851) and the Brontë sisters (born between 1816 and 1820) were all first recognised by educated, intellectual fathers.

Elizabeth's father, though no *littérateur*, also encourages his young daughter; perhaps she owes her remarkable confidence to him. 'Literature was the star which in prospect illuminated my future days [;] it was the spur which prompted me .. the aim .. the very soul of my being', she asserts at fourteen. Born nine years after Mary Shelley and ten before Charlotte Brontë, she starts writing as a child of six, by her own reckoning, and doesn't stop until five weeks before she dies. Her first surviving poem, 'On the Cruelty of Forcement to Man', is written in the Herefordshire country house of her childhood; her last, 'The North and

the South', almost four decades later in Rome in May 1861, the month before her death.

The eponymous narrator of *Aurora Leigh*, the masterpiece Elizabeth publishes at fifty, is transfixed by a similar passion:

I may love my art.
You'll grant that even a woman may love art,
Seeing that to waste true love on anything
Is womanly, past question.

The rhetoric sounds like an own goal. In fact it's strategic. Lacking both social agency and an education in the classical arts of logic and rhetoric that father, brothers, husband have received, a woman born at the start of the nineteenth century is unlikely to win arguments by *reasoning* about who or what she is. She must learn instead to be stubborn; irrational. To claim that she too is a poet, she must arm herself with her own weakness, which is to say her enthusiasm:

I lived, those days,
And wrote because I lived—unlicensed else;
My heart beat in my brain.

My heart beat in my brain: it sounds like fury or madness. But the pulse is metrical, not manic. Elizabeth's success will be indubitable, the kind poets dream of and rarely achieve. *Aurora Leigh*, with which she crowns that success, will be an instant bestseller, its first edition selling out within a fortnight, and it will go on to be one of the best-read literary works of the second half of the nineteenth century. This verse *Künstlerroman* – the story specifically of a maker's development, or *Bildungsroman* – will influence generations of poets and writers. Among the many women for whom it is immediately formative are George Eliot, Charlotte Mew, the writing duo who make up 'Michael Field', and Emily Dickinson – who hangs the Rossetti portrait of Elizabeth in her room. But its success isn't limited by gender. Leading male writers, among them Rudyard Kipling, John Ruskin, Algernon Swinburne and Oscar Wilde, will celebrate the work for decades to come.

Aurora Leigh is a work of fiction, not memoir. Its nine books map only indirectly onto the nine 'books' of its author's own life. If it is any kind of

'How to' *vade mecum*, it's less a guide to practical professional steps than to thinking of oneself *as* a woman writer. Elizabeth's own life story works in similar ways, that is, not so much guide as inspiration. But in portraying the development of a woman poet, *Aurora Leigh* does give us clues as to how its author herself managed to emerge.

On her twentieth birthday the verse novel's protagonist, orphaned Aurora, refuses a marriage both loving and advantageous in order to dedicate herself to writing. Just before she does so, she crowns herself with a poet's wreath:

> What, therefore, if I crown myself to-day
> In sport, not pride, to learn the feel of it.

Not pride, but *to learn the feel of it*: there's a crucial distinction. If she delayed until she, or the world, felt confident that she deserved poetic laurels, how long would Aurora, or Elizabeth, wait?

In fact, laurel wreaths will crown Barrett Browning's coffin: what use are they to her by then? But practising, *learning the feel* of the 'the tender pricking' of literary laurels, of how to 'tie … rhymes', is a way of *doing* without having to look at what you're daring to do. Modest and incremental, it's like the domestic arts Aurora Leigh already knows. This is how the young woman slips past the gatekeepers of the feminine self and starts to write.

> Then I sate and teased
> The patient needle till it split the thread,
> Which oozed off from it in meandering lace
> From hour to hour.

I like that oozing thread, which just doesn't want to lie down. As it slips out of the needle, between the fingers that try to knot it tight, it's a little metaphor for creative disobedience.

Practice makes perfect, as many a sampler instructed the girl who was embroidering it. But Elizabeth hasn't always been patient. At thirteen, in the Preface to her first printed work, *The Battle of Marathon*, she's all innocent insouciance:

> Happily it is not now, as it was in the days of POPE […]. Now, even

> the female may drive her Pegasus through the realms of Parnassus, without being saluted with the most equivocal of all appellations, a learned lady; without being celebrated by her friends as a SAPPHO, or traduced by her enemies as a pedant; without being abused in the Review, or criticised in society.

Unfortunately, the reception of her adult work will show that this isn't always true. And two centuries later, we need to catch on if we find ourselves thinking, 'Happily it is not now, as it was in the days of ELIZABETH BARRETT BROWNING.' For while Elizabeth is very much a creature of her own times, she also fits our own: as a woman working on the problem of how to be herself. And despite the years of practice to come, this early teenager has her eye on the prize. Already she 'never can be satisfied with [...] the comparative respect / Which means the absolute scorn'. What matters to her isn't producing tolerable verse but being a true poet, judged by the highest standards. *Her heart beats in her brain.*

Still, the question remains hanging: what if women *can't* produce real art?

> Among our female authors we make room
> For this fair writer, and congratulate
> The country that produces in these times
> Such women, competent to ... spell.

In this biting parody of a kind of reviewing she has actually experienced, the poet comes close to revealing herself. But Elizabeth Barrett Browning is not 'Aurora Leigh'. Real life differs from fiction, partly because the verse novel's author has 'money and a room of her own', in the famous phrase Virginia Woolf will coin seventy years from now, in *A Room of One's Own*.

Yet critical reception *is* a kind of mirror, even a distorting one, in which writers check their progress however much they intend not to. Reading is another. Everyone needs a companion in their sentimental education. And for a writer developing in provincial isolation, books take the place of a peer group. As a young woman, Elizabeth has plenty of accounts of the writer's struggle to keep her company. Influential, form-expanding Romantic biographies and memoirs like Jean-Jacques

Rousseau's *Confessions* (1782) and William Godwin's *Memoirs of the Author of a Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1798) have long been in print. In the year she turns eighteen, '*Lives of the Poets*, Boswell's *Life of Johnson*, Southey's *Life of Nelson*, Lockhart's *Life of Burns*, Moore's *Life of Sheridan*, Moore's *Life of Byron*, Wolfe's *Remains*', can be read even in remote Yorkshire vicarages – as we learn when Charlotte Brontë recommends them to a friend. They are certainly available to a wealthy family like the Barretts.

Of course, these are all books by men. What would the sentimental education of a woman look like? It is Elizabeth herself who will, eventually, provide an answer. *Aurora Leigh* is fiction, not biography. But literary biography is always a *Bildungsroman*, the story of how a thinking, feeling self emerges. And in this, intimate respect, the story Elizabeth Barrett Browning tells in *Aurora Leigh* is also the one her life story tells us, for:

> poets [...] understand
> That life develops from within.

Book One: How (not) to belong

And ankle-deep in English grass I leaped
And clapped my hands, and called all very fair.

Sun beats down on a shoulder of parkland, parched grass crackles underfoot, blowflies and mosquitoes hover among odours of meadowsweet and wild hop. The steep hillside is covered with drying hay that catches the ankles, but at the crest you feel on top of the world. Turn north and almost at your feet is a steep cut running east towards the Malvern Hills. Turn south and a dramatic natural amphitheatre commands the Hereford plain. Two strikingly different worlds fit together here along a single geological seam. In one direction stylish villas, a sign of Malvern's emerging fashionability, dot the wooded slopes of Colwall. In the other, a rural hinterland reaches south and west to the border of Wales.

What are the very first things we remember? Bursts of light and colour perhaps, with the luminous quality of glass. Moments that remain as images, if not complete stories. For a four-year-old called Ba, this is her first summer in the dazzlingly fertile Herefordshire countryside; her previous homes, in County Durham and then near London, can already be little more than trace impressions. Here everything is hyperreal. Footpaths disappear into thickets; nettles taller than a man spill across fields.

Even the hot, stormy weather is exceptional. Later this summer a 'very remarkable water-spout', with 'two branches bent nearly, or perfectly, at right angles to each other' will be observed off the Kent coast at Ramsgate; one of the largest tornadoes ever recorded in Britain will flatten a trail at Fernhill Heath, just the other side of the Malverns.

It's even headier down in the closed-off valleys known locally as Hopes. Ba's family have recently settled in one of these 'ripples of land', where the outside world disappears. But from Oyster Hill, this high point of their estate, 'Commanding the romantic scenery of the Malvern and the adjoining hills, with views [. . .] highly interesting and of great extent', everything in the vicinity can be surveyed – just as it is designed to be. In 1810 British wealth still broadly correlates with landowning. If anything, landed gentry have tightened hold on their estates in recent decades, as the paralegal process of enclosure abolishes the common land on which tenants used to support themselves. The old subsistence farming strips are being replaced by money made visible as ornamental parks and newly managed fields 'tied up fast with hedges, nosegay-like': the Agricultural Revolution has transformed land, for those who own it, from a reliable but rather unexciting asset into a fashionable, and briskly profitable, gentleman's hobby.

Unlanded money finds itself in something of a hurry to join the action, and Ba's father is no exception. His wealth is prodigious, but it's been generated by international trade and is held largely offshore. The precisely calibrated English class system will be only too happy to point this out to him as an inferiority. What's more, he was born abroad, in Jamaica. So this Herefordshire estate called Hope End is the first British property he's owned. It came on the market last autumn and, tucked away in the heartlands of rural Britain, seems to us now a surprising choice for a merchant with an eye on the rest of the world. But after some prevarication – and hard bargaining – Ba's father has bought nearly 500 acres, with a Big House, farm buildings and cottages, 'to make yourself, Brother & Sister & dear Mamma happy', as he tells her. It sounds like a fairy tale, and in a way it is; though as in any fairy tale not everything's quite as it appears. The debt of happiness 'dear Puss' must repay her father will eventually come to seem outsized, even grotesque.

But today's four-year-old is too young to understand emotional blackmail – and too busy being excited about a forthcoming trip to the seaside. 'My dear Grandmama, I love you very much', she writes in mid-July. 'We are going to the sea on Monday week, we are all very sorry you are gone away, you had better come with us to the sea, we all send you kisses.' Impetuous and loving, this note is about as far from a duty letter as any small child could get. Its delighted recipient responds:

> This Morning post brought me a Letter very prettily written indeed for a little Girl of four Years old, so pleas'd am I, that I cou'd not let the day pass without writing a few lines, to thank my Beloved Child [...] I am so proud of my Letter that it shall be put in a very careful place, till my Darling pet grows up.

And Papa's mother continues: 'Ask Bro when I am to have a Letter from him, I hope he is a good Boy, & attends to his Book—He will never be a Man till he does—.'

Which is striving, ambitious stuff, since Ba's little brother is only three; but also a form of affection. This is a self-made family, its style noticeably modern, and nicknames are intimate currency. Three-year-old Edward, who as eldest son confusingly bears what is also his father's and indeed his great-grandfather's name, will be 'Bro' for the rest of his life. 'Ba' was christened Elizabeth after Grandmama, whose own nickname is 'Bessey'. The children's baby sister Henrietta is 'Addles', and the nine siblings yet to be born will include 'Stormie' (Charles, who was born in a storm) and 'Daisy', real name Alfred (perhaps from 'Oops a daisy'?). In their parents' generation, Papa's sister Sarah, dead at twelve, remains forever 'Pinkie', while on their mother's side unmarried Aunt Arabella is 'Bummy'.

It's all mortar for the life being built at Hope End. We get a first glimpse of Ba's new home in a letter her father sends her:

> This Morng we again went to Hope-End and compleated our tour of it, besides looking thro' the center of the Estate and examining the Cottages; We shall go tomorrow to inspect the Timber &c—The more I see of the Property the more I like it [...] There is no fruit whatever this year in the Garden, but should we be fortunate enough to be here next year no doubt we shall have abundance.

Since at this point his little daughter is just three, of course he's really addressing Mamma, who'll be reading the letter aloud. Behind the rather sweet, fatherly gesture we catch sight of something else; something evasive, even controlling. Papa is not actually consulting his wife over this life-changing move.

In fact, the splendidly if repetitively named Edward Barrett Moulton-Barrett knows perfectly well that – after almost a year first in west London and then with her mother-in-law in Surrey – his wife would prefer to go back 'to the dear North', where she grew up and where the couple first settled. Ba's Mamma was born Mary Graham-Clarke in Newcastle upon Tyne in 1781, and raised, partly in the city centre and partly a couple of miles away at stately Kenton Lodge in Gosforth, the eldest child of a wealthy industrialist: John Graham-Clarke's town house at 14 Pilgrim Street, and his many mercantile concerns including breweries, sugar refineries and a small fleet of ocean-going ships, have become city landmarks. He may share the civic pride that created the elegant Grainger Town terraces and mighty warehouses of eighteenth-century Newcastle, but his money is newer still. He has other local businesses too, including a flax mill, a colliery and a glassworks, but his international trade is built on the daily luxuries, beer and sugar, that entrepreneurs like him are now establishing at the heart of British life.

However, on the July afternoon when Ba surveys her new home, Graham-Clarke is already seventy-three. Closer to his homesick daughter's centre of emotional gravity are her six surviving siblings and her mother Arabella, a lively woman with artistic leanings who is two decades her husband's junior. Besides, Graham-Clarke has little leisure for playing the family man; his hands are full becoming an industrialist. Yet he's not entirely self-made. Part of his wealth comes from his wife's dowry and inheritance, and in his twenties he made an equally advantageous first marriage. Only recently arrived in the city, he married a wealthy widow called Elizabeth Rutter, at a stroke acquiring her late husband's highly successful brewing business and effectively 'marrying-in' to her in-laws, highly respected in Newcastle for decades. And perhaps the key legacy is one he received a quarter century ago when, at the age of fifty, plain John Graham found himself able, by dint of taking the double-barrel