

EBB's Social Reform & Religious Views

Excerpt from EBB to John Kenyon (Letter 3534)

Florence

mid-March 1855 (dated according to EBB's progress on *AL*)

...As you are so impertinent about my poem I take a cruel vengeance by insisting on your reading a poem of Penini's written last January—^[4] He sang it to my dictation (Robert has noted down the original air) & then he copied it back again with his own small fingers. The curious thing to me, is, that the child never heard an old ballad in his life— We dont give him [them] in poems with his pap—it's not our way at all—and yet the old ballad movement of the whole is obvious— There's a mystical touch too about it which charms me, & which perhaps he was unconscious of himself— 'Really,' said I, "it's rather like Heine." "And *Tiney*," said Robert— Think— Written before the child was six years old.

My own poem seems flat & unprofitable^[5] afterwards. If you all like it ever so much (and you wont) what can it be to me beside Penini's? Yet there's work in it, & will be more. Between five & six thousand lines written, & more still to write— Blank verse—. Why not?— An autobiography of a poetess—(not me) .. opposing the practical & the ideal life, & showing how the practical & real (so called) is but the external evolution of the ideal & spiritual—that it is *from inner to outer*, .. whether in life, morals, or art. A good deal, in this relation, upon the social question, & against the socialists— A good deal, in fact, about everything in the world & beyond ... taken from the times, "hot and hot."^[6] I rather took fright at "Hard Times,"^[7] as Robert told me from a review (we neither of us have seen the book) that it treated of an opposition of the Real & Ideal— But upon consideration I took breath & courage— because it's impossible^[8] that Dickens & I could walk precisely the same ground. If we did, there would be still, "badger's foot" and "ourangoutang's,"—distinct enough. "The Devil," you say. *Dont*— I believe my book will be clear enough,—alive enough, even if the story may be wanting in "rapidity"— There are characters—talks. Well— Never blame me again for being secret with you, seeing that now I have told you more than I have told to Robert .. much less to any human soul else. If I talk of anything I'm going to do, I cant do it—it takes the spirit out of me. That's my peculiarity...

⁴ "The Poem of Lucy Lee." Kenyon may have given the poem to Arabella. A manuscript copy of it in Pen's hand, dated January 1855, is in the Moulton-Barrett Papers at the Berg (see *Reconstruction*, L55).

⁵ Cf. *Hamlet*, I, 2, 133.

⁶ Alfred Tennyson, "Will Waterproof's Lyrical Monologue" (1842), line 228.

⁷ Dickens's *Hard Times* had been published in August 1854. A review in *The Athenaeum* of 12 August 1854, noted that "The case of Fancy *versus* Fact is here stated in prose, but without the fairness which belongs to a prose argument" (no. 1398, p. 992).

⁸ Underscored three times.

Excerpt from EBB to Fanny Dowglass (Letter 2698)

Palazzo Guidi

Sept. 6 1847

...and the *Te Deum* in the Duomo, which Robert went to hear yesterday, was a fine thing, he said— Nothing, however, disappoints me more than the *poetical effect* (if I may use the expression) than the *impressiveness* of the R Catholic ceremonies— There seems a want of reality & earnestness—there is something little & *mesquin* .. where I expected to be shaken & prostrated, I sit calmly & coldly still. We agree sometimes that there is more *poetry* in the best sense, in the poorest wildest methodist congregation, where the people lift up with their hearts the rugged rhymes of the old psalm, than in what we see & hear in Italy. **But God looks through tinsel as through rags—the One finds the Unity where we count the divisions, we with our bisecting eyes!...**

Discussion Questions:

1. Does EBB's own description of *AL* change the way you think about the book? Do you see similarities between *AL* and *Hard Times* as she feared? What do we do with her assertion that this is not *her* autobiography? Where do we see this idea of "inner to outer" playing out in *AL*?
2. EBB seems to prize unity among Christians, despising the animosity between divisions. How do we see this (if at all) coming through in *AL*?