**Comments from Reviewer 1 (Robert Freeman, University of Oxford):**

Gregor Bauer’s ‘How does a Poem Mean?’ explores the ways in which meaning is generated in Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s *Sonnets from the Portuguese,* arguing that the collection makes meaning through ‘an inherent semiotic potential specific to poetry which transcends Saussurian structuralism’. Browning’s language creates ‘absence, fissuring and uncertainty’, which extends into the semiotic makeup of her poems. The ‘diagetic world’ of the text ‘fuses materially with its medium’, and the form of the poem contributes to the ambiguities Bauer identifies in Brown’s poetic voice. The form of the text at times points to a lack of sound, ‘creating a purified articulation of absence’. At other times, the formatting, syntax and punctuation of the text makes meaning indexically or through its manipulation of verse; sometimes to reinforce the semantic content of a passage, and sometimes to undermine it. Bauer finds the same countervailing meanings in the acrostics that populate ‘a fifth’ of the poems in *Sonnets from the Portuguese.* He concludes on this basis that ‘Literariness’ can be seen to ‘render… the syntactical chain a multidimensional network of signification: the word is not merely a signifier of the signified, but a semiotic node facilitating adhesion of its material textual representation, framework of poetic form, and syntactical logic.’ The form of the poem in this way has a ‘semiotic potential’ which allows a text to mean.

Bauer’s article is detailed and creative, providing compelling evidence for centring form in defining ‘how’ Barrett’s poetry ‘means’. While perhaps benefitting from some of the suggestions below, it is of publishable standard.

It is never clear in Bauer’s piece how the ‘literary’ is conceptualised. He is right to concede in his closing paragraph that the devices he analysis are ‘specifically poetic’. Much of the writing that resists linking form to meaning has drawn on prose (for instance in Fish and De Man who Bauer cites) – and some critics detect a similar trepidation in some ‘prose’ writing itself – notably Finnegan’s Wake. It may be beneficial for Bauer to justify his extrapolating from the poetic to the literary.

Secondly, Bauer’s idea of the literary remains vague. He might benefit by developing his conception through counterposing it to other definitions of literature, for example in the work of Derek Artridge or Christopher Ricks. At present, the article seems to view literariness as in some sense bound up with form – and this needs justifying or at least clear articulation.

Bauer’s article may also benefit from further attention to the new formalism populating literary studies. While he briefly mentions both Caroline Levin and Angela Leighton, he does not engage with their distinct notions of form, which challenge the narrow conception of formatting, syntax, punctuation etc to which Bauer seems to ascribe. He may in addition benefit from considering Anna Kornbluh’s *The Order of Forms*, which develops the political formalism already evident in Levine, and perhaps useful for discussing the gender politics to which Bauer alludes.

Finally, the shift from sections 1 to 2 in particular is abrupt – while the first section fulfils the useful purpose of introducing some of the key themes of the collection, how this connects to the closer discussion of form in the following sections is not clear. The piece would also benefit from more time spent on explaining, in clear terms, why Bauer’s approach is a move away from Jakobsen, etc. Any declaring of the end of the primacy of the sign asks for careful elaboration, and the final section moves through its conclusions a little too rapidly.

On the whole, a thoughtful and interesting piece.

***Reviewer 2 has elected to restrict viewing of their comments to the author and the editors.***

**Comments from Reviewer 3 (Heather Bozant Witcher, Auburn University at Montgomery, USA):**

[In-line suggestions given on specified portions of the draft reviewed not replicated here.]

Recommendation: Publish with revisions.

On the whole, this is an interesting and complex argument that identifies a gap in EBB studies. I recommend the author review the recent work by Clara Dawson, *Victorian Poetry and the Culture of Evaluation* (OUP, 2020) for parallels between the author’s interest in formalist approaches to EBB.

In addition to the in-line comments above, a few recommendations remain:

* Clarify the cohesion between sections, using the sections to build upon one another and gain momentum
* The strongest aspects of the argument occur with section 6, in which semiotics and formalism are used in service to *Sonnets from the Portuguese*—that is, the author reveals a new way of reading EBB’s complex metrics. In the earliest sections, revision is recommended to clearly identify not only the specific literary techniques in play, but how reading for literariness generates a deeper understanding of EBB’s usage of voice, agency, and personhood.