

# “THOUGHTS, THAT BREATHE, AND WORDS, THAT BURN,” OR THE GROWTH OF A WRITER’S MIND: ELIZABETH BARRETT BROWNING’S DIARY

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**Abstract:** *Published first in 1969, Diary by E. B. B. (1831–1832) has been an intersection of scholarly debates on nineteenth-century English literature, femininity, diurnal narrative, and aesthetic experience. A confessional document of the last two years of Elizabeth’s life at the family estate of Hope End, the diary throws her unique self-creationist and self-revisionary impulses into relief. It is an outstanding prose-fiction piece of evidence of her overall penchant for self-acclaim by way of self-denial. This paper aims at tracing the development of the woman writer in view of the immediacy and ontological priority of an implied Other found at the core of self-writing, as Elizabeth’s diary signals. A modicum of contextual references to some of E. B. Browning’s poetical works brings out her self-reflexive leanings. Finally, it could be argued that self-questioning distinguishes Elizabeth Barrett Browning as a polemicist whose private diary identifies the concept of time as the kernel of her perception of identity as responsibility.*

**Keywords:** *Elizabeth Barrett Browning, diary, aesthetic experience, memory, Self, time, responsibility*

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*Life! I know not what thou art,  
But know that thou and I must part;*

...

*Where'er they lay these limbs, this head,  
No clod so valueless shall be,  
As all that then remains of me.*

...

*And in this strange divorce,  
Ah tell where I must seek this compound I?*

Anna Laetitia Barbauld,

*Life*, 1812, ll. 1-12

## Introduction

A crossroads between self-revelation and self-concealment, a writer's diary is an instance of autobiographical writing; it is an emblem of the writer's struggle to compose Self simultaneously from within and from without. This struggle seems to be definitive for identity-building in EBB's works. Defined by the classical scholar Hugh Stuart Boyd – also her role model – as a “funny girl”, Elizabeth Barrett cherishes reading literature in anthropological terms: it provides her with that living medium which embosses her acculturation by way of developing her talent of interpretation as the hybridizing immediacy of perceiving actual people and abstract concepts together, in acts of keen self-observation and intense self-questioning. If, in reading Lamartine, she recalls Thomas Gray's *Odes* (in which “bright-eyed Fancy ... / Scatters ... / Thoughts, that breathe, and words, that burn;” *DEBB*, 23 Sept 1831, p. 137, n. 3)<sup>1</sup>, which predate her diary by more than a century, she does so strategically: She defines the elusive yet concrete inter-textual premise of her imagination, just as well as the cross-citational range of her own memory in noetic, rather than noematic terms. Barrett's diary narrative works against the possibility of attaining stability of form, against the hope of working out a product empirically detachable from the current workings of her consciousness (an issue that borders on research of her juvenile autobiographical essays, which I have carried out elsewhere, and in tribute of the writer's awareness of John Locke). It is my intention to dwell on the processual essence of EBB's diary, as I hope to explore her peculiar

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1. Quotations from Diary by E. B. B. (hereby abbreviated as DEBB) and from Elizabeth Barrett Browning's other works adhere to her authentic spelling and punctuation based on the authoritative editions of her works referenced accordingly for the purposes of the current research. BC refers to the Brownings' Correspondence, cited by volume, date, & page number(s). The abbreviation EBB has been employed to denote the poetess's full maiden name (as opposed to her married one, from 1846 on: Elizabeth Barrett Browning).

perception of time and space as all too human constructs. This could throw light on why she treats narrative as response and responsibility.

In *Time and Narrative* III, tracing, gradually, the inter-personal nature of the literary work and the process of literary composition, Ricoeur argues the re-inscription of “the time of narrative into the time of the world” whereby “lived time” gets “cosmologized” and “cosmic time” gets humanized (Ricoeur, 1990, pp. 108-109) through story seen as extension beyond Self, manifested in the utterance as a need for a future (protention) and a trace of the past (retention):

On the one hand, every instant is a possible candidate for the role of axial moment. On the other hand, nothing about any particular calendar day, taken by itself, says whether it is past, present, or future. The same date may designate a future event, as in the clauses of a treaty, or a past event, as in a chronicle. To have a present, [...] one must speak. The present is then indicated by the coincidence between an event and the discourse that states it. To rejoin lived time starting from chronicle time, therefore, we have to pass through linguistic time, which refers to discourse. This is why any date, however complete or explicit, cannot be said to be future or past if we do not know the date of the utterance that pronounces it.

Ricoeur suggests the impossibility of totalizing the diversity of “fictive temporal experiences” as he perceives the counter-absolutist possibilities they introduce to the story of a single man (autobiographer, in this instance) (*ibid.*, p. 128). Yet he also admits that despite the suitability, in terms of individuation, of human beings’ “tales about time” – which is what I believe a diary could be defined as, a tale about time – one remains for oneself “in the projection of [one’s] ownmost possibility” (*ibid.*, p. 141). A projection that does not seem to be blest with the promise of fulfillment in one’s own lifetime, and that may only be partially compensated for by representations of othernesses to oneself which one abides by – “mental images” which make it possible, also, for traces “left by the past” to stand for the past, as we contemplate those traces and get caught in consciousness (*ibid.*, 143). In a diary, this delusional effect of satiety yet incompleteness is doubly relevant, as that who writes is one’s own reader, and that which gets produced, gets immediately sanctioned, curtailed, caviled against and escaped, for it never provides an all-encompassing adequate perception of space and time, which, as Ricoeur notes, necessitates the recognition of an implied, preliminary, envisaged Other as justification of discourse. This is one of my considerations in this paper.

Diary emblemizes the hardships of articulation, or representation of the I as the common concourse of selfhood (aloneness, separateness, or *ipse*) and sameness (coincidence with oneself in time, repetition, or *idem*). Focusing on the significance of representation as part of understanding, Emmanuel Levinas articulates his disbelief in the singularity and self-sufficiency of writing:

When the I is identified with reason, taken as the power of thematization and objectification, it loses its very ipseity. To represent to oneself is to empty oneself of one's subjective substance and to insensibilize enjoyment. [...] Every moment of life [...] is in relation with an *other* than that moment itself. [...] every perception is a perception of the perceived, every idea an idea of the ideate, every desire a desire of a desired, every emotion an emotion of something moving ...; but every obscure thought of our being is also oriented toward *something*. Every present in its temporal nudity tends toward the future and returns upon the past or resumes that past – is prospection and retrospection. (Levinas, 1979, pp. 119, 122)

Refusing to sever experience as a process from evidence as a product, imagining from imagined, remembering from remembered, in *Totality and Infinity* Levinas perceives the impossibility of verifying language – and I would argue, by extension, narrative (including diary narrative) – as “enacted within a consciousness” but insists on it coming from “the Other” (further defined as “the Face”) who questions “my” consciousness and with whom it “reverberates” (ibid., p. 204). Levinas describes this phenomenon as anti-egology, or anti-idealism, and relates it to a “surplus of signification” over representation (ibid., p. 206). In the case of diary such thinking would lead towards attesting the implied necessity of an intentional Other to whom self-writing would respond subconsciously by way of desiring to comprehend, in a story of one's own, and thus reveal, this Other, yet acknowledge the creationist impulse this Other possesses for the autobiographer. An interesting example of the same ilk surfaces at the beginning of Barrett Browning's later hybrid creation: Her novel-poem *Aurora Leigh* (1856), a fictional autobiography which employs a reflexive attitude in the treatment of writing Self as writing Other: “[...] I who have written much in prose and verse / For others' uses, will write now for mine, – / Will write my story for my better self, / As when you paint your portrait for a friend, / Who keeps it in a drawer and looks at it / Long after he has ceased to love you, just / To hold together what he was and is” (I, 1–8).

The ontological value of the act of writing and the dialogic nature of narrative, articulated thus by Ricoeur and Levinas, and based on Barrett Browning's overall self-undermining attitudes, as well as her ineradicable sense of self-doubt, provide me with food for thought to see diary as a project against self-attainment or self-completion, a project which lends written discourse a contractual significance – mutual relativization yet solidification of Self and Other.

A detailed inventory of the writers and literary works quoted and considered by EBB in this diary, with exhaustive explanations about inter-textual references, is provided by Philip Kelley and Ronald Hudson in their scholarly annotation of the earliest (1969) edition of *Diary by E. B. B.*, discovered first in 1961 and barely stretching over an incomplete calendar year (4<sup>th</sup> June 1831 – 23<sup>rd</sup> April

1832). Prior to Kelley and Hudson, the existence of EBB's diary had only been alluded to in other literary compositions by the writer. The *Diary* brings to light the writer's growing faith in narrative as the cusp between truth and fiction. A figuration of the non-finalizability of Self and of the impossibility of totalizing existence, EBB's diary articulates her hope for fulfillment yet her fear of being swept away by a daunting volume of male writing and home rules. The implied presence of an immanent before, to which the autobiographer feels compelled to report in self-writing, checks her solipsistic urges yet enshrines, by way of mourning the feebleness of, the woman poet's voice.

### Interpretation as a Need

Abstaining from literalism in quoting exactly from sources, EBB appears to dodge the hazards of derivativeness. Yet her diary seems visibly scaffolded against a volume of literary works whose inter-textual value points at her poignant search for a spiritual centre inside, just as well as outside, her own mind. Stranded in an ekphrastic struggle to define her own thought, she describes herself as suffering from "deficiency in historical information. This I really must correct" – to overcome this defect, she develops an argument on accuracy, profundity and stylistic perfection by way of stringing together Lamartine (*Le Tombeau d'une Mère*, DEBB, 23 – 24 Sept 1831, n. 1, pp. 137-38), Gray, Goldsmith, Shelley, and, somewhat earlier, Milton. In Gray's *Ode I*, III, 3 ('Oh! Lyre divine, what daring Spirit / Wakes thee now?...', ll. 6-7) poetic self-justification grows out of the acceptance of a higher spirit which breathes life into the poet as a mediator between eternal truth and common mortals – a task Barrett, as a writer, warily assumes. She catalogues some of her role models: Goethe's *Werther*, Euripidis's *Tragedies*, and Leonardo Da Vinci's *A Treatise on Painting*, to name but a few (DEBB, 13-14 Jul 1831, pp. 54-55). Thus emerges EBB's self-apophatic aura: she meditates on life's brevity and fleetingness – especially in view of her growing sense of smallness against the inextricable dominance of three formidable patriarchs in her life: God, her own father, and H. S. Boyd (the blind scholar and neighbor she assisted in translating from Old Greek). Her own fear for herself – of oozing through life unnoticed and unappreciated – she stealthily but genuinely declares in her mourning the demise of her Uncle Sam's wife, Mary. Her sense of the proximity of death she betrays, simultaneously, in a disquisition on family loss and on Lamartine's *Méditations Poétiques* (1820) and *Harmonies Poétiques et Religieuses* (1830) (Cf. DEBB, 23 Sept 1831, 23 Jul 1831, p. 64; 21 Sept 1831, p. 136). That occasional writing creates a special form of diurnal routine for EBB becomes clear in her earliest juvenile dedicatory verses – odes on the birthdays of members of her own family: *Sent to Mama on 1<sup>st</sup> May 1814* ("Twas dark – the tempest blew aloud" (1814); *An Epistle to Henrietta* ("Thy gentle smile displays thy virtues sweet" (1814); *To Her Uncle Sam, with Her Poetry* ("Dear Sam, accept my humble

lay' (1814); *On Papa's Birthday* ('Hail dear Papa! I hail thy natal day' (1815); *To My Dearest Brother Edward* ('Hail! Brother dear! And hail this cherished day' (1816)); *To My Dearest Mama* ('From the Wide Heavens Aurora bends her flight' (1817), etc. One of EBB's early autobiographical essays, *My Own Character* (1818), expresses a genuine yet somewhat disturbing urge to know life as a performative intrusion into Other: "I have endeavoured to insinuate myself into the windings of other souls, of other characters – ... to seek truth with an ardent eye, a sincere heart – ... I have never, even in imagination looked into my own heart – How few indeed know themselves" (Barrett, 1974, p. 119)! The diary itself emerges as a reservoir of similar instances of parrhesia where the diarist's resolutions to study herself, to cherish and obey truth as God's word, and to care for her dearest people, form the skeleton of aesthetic self-vindication. The cited excerpt hints, also, at a peculiar blend of essentialism and nominalism: Self-cognition, albeit always partially achievable, looks like a post-facto exercise appended to recognition of observable exterior sources of knowledge which draw the contours of an individual's existence by facilitating a unique permeability between own and foreign – a trade which negotiates the image one gets of oneself by way of comprehending others.

Memory is a key factor for faithfully documenting, as well as a guarantee for fictionalizing, the writer's own life which may not be severed from the life of her family and her own reading and writing. She works out an ideal Other she needs for the sake of executing her intention to preserve and transfer time, as she perceives interpretation as a beyond-Self ontological necessity. Meticulously, Elizabeth draws a list of her rich collection of books. She translates from Old Greek, with her exacting yet caring father overseeing her comings and goings; she is mercilessly self-critical about her deficiency of intellect which she cures by hard work (DEBB, 8-11 Mar 1832, pp. 223-224):

I forgot to say yesterday that I finished early in the morning, [...] I do wish I had translated from Blomfield.<sup>2</sup>

Getting on with my notes — for the sake of killing time & some thoughts I believe. [...] I give myself unto prayer — & why should I fear? [...]

[...] Notes again. Out walking. I don't feel quite well, — & no wonder — for my spirits are quite worn threadbare. [...]

I was not at church, [...]. A letter from M<sup>r</sup>. Boyd brief enough, but to ask me to ask Papa to allow me to go to [...]

I asked Papa in the evening. He will not allow it. *He says that I am turning into a shadow, & looking worse & worse* [...] (emphasis added)

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2. She means an edition of Aeschylus's plays (DEBB, 8 Mar 1832, n. 1, p. 223).



If, as Daniel Karlin argues, autobiography aims at “conveying to posterity the sense of ‘how it was’”, then in her diary EBB attests the verity of the past by way of unfolding it as a peculiar instance of self-exclusion, self-denial, self-devaluation, and self-denigration (as seen above), which leads to a self-imposed accusation voiced out as a kind of unfaithfulness to an ideal (she may be viewed as a traitor-interpreter of the masculine logos in terms of her work on translating *Prometheus Bound*, which is mentioned in her diary, and which her father did not on the whole approve of) (Karlin, 1987, pp. 226, 238). She turns her writing into a “display of suffering and endurance”, which throws into relief the artist’s unbearable distress about “living up to her own image” – yet an image created, at that stage, very much by her own father (*ibid.*, p. 257). Simultaneous erection and collapse of boundaries, spatial and moral sanctions and occupations (proper and improper for woman, daughter, writer and worshipper) disclose the diarist’s hardships of making room for herself.

A brief excursus into Wolfgang Iser’s take on translation as transposition may help one perceive an opportunity of approaching EBB’s toil over reading, writing, and communicating with others as the creation of a liminal domain for herself – between subject matter (life) and perceptual register (diary). Diurnal narrative channels the space it produces: By way of reflecting on life, it urges a new form of life, to the effect that verifiable occurrences get intermingled with imaginary forms of self-expression which phantomize yet reinforce the intentional component in writing as self-modelling. The latter is visible even in the writer’s reflexive attitude to her own father’s persona and his opinion on her physical frailty (which threatens, also, to steal the potency and uniqueness of her own writing). As in *Sonnets from the Portuguese* (1850), a perennial but feebly defined need for equality and reciprocity disguises the position of muteness that the female speaker assumes: “What can I give thee back, O liberal / And princely giver, [...]” (Sonnet VIII, ll. 1-2); “Nay, let the silence of my womanhood / Commend my woman-love to thy belief” (Sonnet XIII, ll. 9-10). Interrogation of the purpose of one’s creativity leads to a form of double coding, or facticity-fiction, whereby the diary unfolds as a record of the life of the family of the Barretts, as well as the life of literature, both primarily dependent on the writer’s consciousness. Or, a kind of bidirectional exchange: a “two-way traffic ... due to the fact that the register does not represent a transcendental consciousness from which the subject matter is to be judged” (Iser, 2000, p. 6) – the diarist’s faculties may be limited, but they do define recollection (retrospection) just as well as prediction (prospension) in diary narrative as a record of the (in) felicities of the imagination. If interpretation is bound to the recognition of the importance and specifics of genre, and genre, such as the genre of diary, intervenes in interpretation as self-reflection (*ibid.*, p. 7), which is bound to what is being understood as well as to the perceiver’s mind, a real problem arises from the recognition of the existence of “untranslatable”, elusive phenomena

which predetermine and delimit Self: Life, God, literature. For such phenomena a register such as a diary is a space at once narrow and proper. In her diary, while EBB aims at interpreting, i.e. translating, “incommensurabilities such as God, the world, and humankind”, she finds out that the genre she has chosen fails to offer an adequate exegetical proportion to that which she feels exceeds the human grasp but does need explaining (ibid., pp. 7-8). The writer’s philosophy of recognizing part in whole, Self in Other, private life in communal life, one’s own writing in a literary past, the hidden in the revealed, exposes also her self-condescending attitude: She could never make the open-ended graspable (ibid., p. 8). Further, it could be said that a “residual “non-understanding”” (as Iser rephrases Schleiermacher, ibid., p. 47) – her own word against, yet in unison with, the word of others – is the provisionality of her status as a woman writer, which her diary illustrates.

### **Micro-chronology: Family, Friends, Time, Space – All Too Human...**

Papa’s health was of major importance to Elizabeth – as was the study of scriptural texts. Both fortified her trust in the benevolence of an original discourse, formidably masculine and threatening to eclipse the power and sincerity of her own talent which she casually and self-consciously calls the “rascally poet” (DEBB, 26 Dec 1831, p. 195). Peace at home, depth and regularity in biblical scholarship, respect for Nature, and internal equilibrium – these are all tied to EBB’s view of a deserved, rather than intentionally engineered, existence. Any slight breach of the family routine, of comings and goings, of the current of correspondence that chronicles daily routines, any occasional and unexpected episode could provoke her father’s antagonism and could have a traumatizing effect on her. The diarist’s records get interspersed, more and more persistently, with admissions about her spiritual duties: There emerges the impression of secondariness and of others’ expectations she needs to fit in through the sanction she hopes to be granted – at Hope End (lost by the family in the late summer of 1832) just as well as outside home. The more she hopes, the more she gets fixated on her own quaintness: “Now I am going down to prayers? <bell> ringing! — Read nothing but the Bible today” (DEBB, 12 Jun 1831, p. 13); “The gnats kept Arabel & me & half the house besides up half the night: witness my swelled finger — witness this eccentric writing” (13 Jul 1831, p. 14); “How I ought to love [Papa]! — ought! — how I do! ...” (21 Jun 1831, p. 27). She fluctuates between the priority of her own mind and an unconditional regard for the patriarch, between spontaneity and compulsion, will and demand. Day by day she reads, “as usual”, and writes letters to Papa (23 Jun 1831, p. 29) – composition is directly calibrated to the maintenance of an affinity with father who promotes her talent and has already orchestrated the publication of her juvenile imitative epic poem *The Battle of Marathon* (1820).



Other fears add themselves to the diarist's anxiety about family wholeness: a proleptic dream about losing Bro to the sea (he was to drown in early 1840 and she could never overcome her guilt in having asked him to stay longer, for her own sake, at Torquay) as she reads Euripides' *Alcestis* on 16 July; over-fatigue in playing the guitar for dearest people while longing to go to Malvern (and to Boyd) in early September 1831; taming her squirrel and hoping she could keep it for herself (out of Annie, Boyd's daughter – Elizabeth's rival for Boyd's attention; 24 Oct 1831); sadness over the unknown a new year could bring to her (31 Dec 1831); the fate of her own writings (13 Jan 1832); the haste to become enlightened through the Gospel (Luke's, on a particular occasion) by way of reading in the original and practicing her own Ancient Greek, away from the company of a seemingly polite intruder such as Eliza Cliffe (who was to paint her portrait and thus immure her as a piece of art; 20 – 22 Apr 1832). She admits to her "love of solitude growing with [her] growth", wary to return, together with her sister Arabella (Bummy), to the garden (11 Oct, 14 Oct 1831) – a place associated with her mother (who died 1828) and fictionalized, later, as a lost world of blissful infancy and spiritual satiety in poems such as *The Deserted Garden*, *Hector in the Garden*, and *The Lost Bower*. Cautiously, on 26 August 1831 (p. 103, emphasis added) she diagnoses herself:

*<Let me consider> circumstances, while I am calm, in a degree. I may have to leave this place where I have walked and talked & dreamt in much joy; & where I have heard most beloved voices which I can no more hear, & clasped beloved hands which I <can> no more clasp: where I have smiled with the living & wept above the dead <&> where I have read immortal books, & written pleasant thoughts, ... But let me think of it calmly. I can take with me the dear members of my own family, — & my recollections which, in some cases, were all that was left to me here: I <can> take with me my books and my studious tastes, — and above all, the knowledge that "all things" whether sorrowful or joyous, "work together for good to those who love God". And my dear Papa's mind, — (should he not be dearest to me?) will be more tranquil perhaps when he is away from a place so productive of anxieties. (emphasis added)*

The home at Hope End is the writer's earliest and steadiest topographic manifestation of her physical self-fulfillment and verbal self-acculturation through reading and writing. EBB's diary is her "life ... [as] the life history of others – ... parents, ... friends, ... companions in work" (Ricoeur, 1994, p. 161) – a compendium over which she could only declare co-authorship, literature being an account of time as togetherness as well as the understanding of this togetherness. The diary is also EBB's most complete prose-fiction exilic narrative which makes of her home a place of memory to be yearned for – the more sincerely now (i.e. as she was writing the diary) that her mother was no more.

An ostensibly marginal, but actually crucial component of her temporal self-topicalization could be found in the presence of rain in her diary. The entry she makes on 5 Sept 1831 (p. 117) betrays EBB's jocular attitude to the smallness of men's passions and to a single human being's lifetime by way of alluding to the clown's song in the final section of Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night*: "The rain <it> rainēd all the way" (compare: Shakespeare, 1995, p. 349, *Twelfth Night*, V, ll. 401-405, 409, 412-13, 413, 416-417). The pace of the rain gets attuned to her documenting her own reading (e.g. the Greek testament and Bunyan on 18 March 1832, p. 225), being prevented from going to Malvern to see Boyd (16 Apr 1832, p. 235-236), being riveted at home, in prayer, perusing "Gregory's ode to his soul" and despairing over the unbalance between her own sincerity of mind and honesty of devotion to others and the indifference of those on whom she depends (23 Apr 1832, pp. 240-41). The last entry, elliptical and unpunctuated, signals EBB's confusion and alienation: 'Went away in the pouring rain. Left' (ibid.).

EBB's wish to chronicle jointly family occasions and relationships and reflections on her progress with reading betrays a measure of vanity yet it seems propped against a fear of being forgotten and of forgetting. Of this controversy she warns in the initial sentences of her early essay *Glimpses into My Own Life and Literary Character* (1820) where she recognizes self-conceit and instinct to be at the heart of writing one's own life. EBB's early essays and her diary illustrate her confusion and worry over her developing awareness of her inability to complete the story of herself, a story whose beginning and end could never be her own achievement. The matter could be approached through Ricoeur's view on narrative as "anamnēsis", or a pill against forgetting through a persistently implied dialogue with an Other who the diarist addresses in various ways, seeking to justify her own worth as a human being. EBB's diary functions as "a temporal experience (Erfahrung)" which reveals also the "object-oriented side" of "memory" (Ricoeur, 2006, pp. 27, 31). One such object is the clock the family owned (and eventually took away with them upon leaving the estate) – a device measuring time, ticking in assonance with father Barrett's health and internal predisposition, a servant of the family life which the patriarch managed as he regulated his daughter's expectations and imagination (DEBB, entry of 16 Jun 1831, p. 18). God's ways, Papa's mind, brother Edward's health, Bummy's garden walks, the pet squirrel, Annie Boyd's behavior, Boyd's whims, rain – these and many more EBB observed zealously, steadfastly, willingly. The writer thus observes, also, her own mind and the process of ideation: how she produces images of, and thus consecrates, her parents. In this cohesive process, one might note the fruitful role of doubt which promotes one's resolve for communication through self-writing. Consider, for the sake of comparison, the well-known beginning of *David Copperfield*: "Whether I shall turn out to be the hero of my own life, or whether that station will be held by anybody else,

these pages must show” (Dickens 1996, p. 9). Observation, which Elizabeth also declares to be a vital faculty for writing, inevitably merges remembrances with unforeseen impressions, to the effect of ruining the possibility for clear-cut boundaries between actuality and fictionality, so that self-narrative becomes the eerie image of one’s own mind: “What else do I remember? Let me see. There comes out of the cloud, our house, not new to me, but quite familiar, in its earliest remembrance” (Dickens, 1996, p. 19). A shift occurs and is sustained: “from the perception of the duration of something to a study of the duration of perception as such” – a process which modifies the present and transforms “the phenomenology of memory to that of the consciousness of internal time” (Ricoeur, 2006, p. 32). Such a trade gradually dissolves the limits of perceived object and perceiving subject, binding them in the writer’s temporal being. A peculiar early example of this is Barrett’s initial diary entry which insinuates creative self-arson. For fear of having to look into her own soul through looking on her own work and becoming ashamed of it, she could almost “burn this sheet of paper <like> most others...” or at least cover it – as did Adam who “made fig leaves necessary for the mind, as well for the body” (4 Jun 1831, p. 1). Self-disclosure requires objectification of authorial intention – sheets of paper. These testify to her physical existence, also contrived as a figuration of her intentional contact with reality. Identifying with Adam, EBB recognizes a demiurgic potency (the incentive to cover that which has been produced through comprehension) and offers a narrative of her own: her diary. Reciprocally, the diary “contribute[s] to the narrativization of” her own character” in a way which Ricoeur, in *Oneself as Another*, terms “the apprenticeship of dying” (Ricoeur, 1994, pp. 159, 162), in the sense that literature possesses the ability to grasp the provisional ends of human experience.<sup>3</sup>

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3. The said fragment concerning Adam warns also of a danger phrased by Paul De Man thus: “[...] what is at stake here is not only the distance that shelters the author of autobiography from his experience but the possible convergence of aesthetics and of history” (De Man, 1979, p. 919). Consider Adam as a fictive Other, part of Elizabeth’s private self-reflection, and Adam as an illustration of her purposeful research of Biblical history. As a character from a specifically chosen literary past, Adam precedes her and results in this self-expository episode in her diary which contains a human before. Yet as a character in a piece of writing someone else will access in the future (when she herself no longer is), Adam is promised to succeed her and become part of a human after. The question that arises is whether, as De Man asks, if diary is a mode of self-figuration, it is the case that the referent determines the figure, or the other way round (ibid., p. 920). EBB’s diary offers various examples of the life-sustaining value of self-portraiture as fictitiousness in what De Man perceives not so much as “a genre or a mode, but a figure of reading or of understanding” based on “a substitutive exchange that constitutes the subject” (ibid., pp. 921). As a diarist, EBB is an external and time-distanced evaluator of her life, she is someone else yet she is the subject of her own understanding and her own creator, she is her very own self. Diary is an instance of prosopopoeia which “demonstrates in a striking way the impossibility of closure and of totalization [...] of [a textual system] made up of tropological substitu-

## Self-Diagnostics

In the period 1831 – 1832, despite Wordsworth’s by now undeniably visible literary presence, EBB could hardly have guessed the reverberations of *The Prelude* over the range of the epical, confessional, and life-writing streaks of the later, post-1850s poetical English 19<sup>th</sup>-century. But like the patriarch Romantic poet, she wished to stress the importance of the external and of Nature in the formation of an artist’s mind. In Book I of *The Prelude* (ll. 33-38), Wordsworth admits to an overwhelming need for self-expression derived from divine inspiration: “For I, methought, while the sweet breath of heaven/ Was blowing on my body, felt within/ A correspondent breeze, that gently moved/ With quickening virtue, but is now become/ A tempest, a redundant energy, / Vexing its own creation.” Elizabeth, “sola cum sola”, alluding to Cicero’s “never less lonely than when alone” (DEBB, 9 Jun 1831, n. 4, p. 8), oscillates between embarrassment over her growing need to claim her own place in the world through writing, and her sense of redundancy over her disillusionment with, as she thinks, the compromising quality of her actual work. She assumes that people’s esteem of her could only ever be deserved through sincerity of mind: She must compose in service of an externally inspired Other which could sanction her talent as truth-telling for the sake of the wellbeing of humankind (ibid., p. 3). As a reader, she declares a love of Aeschylus’ *Prometheus*, which she initially reads to Boyd (who therefore gradually learns it by heart). She then translates the work twice (first translation accomplished in 1833, second version published in 1850), showcasing her desire for poetic self-liberation yet her obligation to a censorious literary before. *Prometheus* (and Aeschylus), which she mentions the more the further she writes in her diary (e.g. pp. 91, 219, 229), ignites her imagination. This impulse, clad in a Neoplatonic–Christological attire, is postulated in the Preface to her first translation (Browning, 2010, vol. 4, p. 179-80):

... we may recognize the dead, together with much of the living letter; a literal version, together with a transfusion of poetical spirit; – why should we, on that account, consider ourselves charmed away from *attempting another translation?* ... *We make [green hills and waving forests] subjects of contemplation, in order to abstract from them those ideas of beauty, afterwards embodied in our own productions; and above all, in order to consider their and our Creator under every manifestation of his goodness and his power.* All beauties, whether in nature or art, whether in physics or morals, whether in composition or abstract reasoning, *are multiplied reflections, visible in different distances* and under positions, *of one archetypal beauty.* (emphasis added)

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tions” (ibid., p. 922) in writing as the perpetuity of self-grasp.

Barrett coyly disguises her borderline position as recipient yet producer of sense, heir yet contestant of a male logos, student yet master. The “different distances” limn experience anthropologically: a dynamic of thought and sense – in time and space as human variables. Yet a dynamic predominated by a male originary power looming over femininity so that woman is compelled to dig up a space for herself through a discontent with, yet acceptance of, a position of silence, repression and self-restriction (Blodgett, 1989, pp. 59, 63), which codifies diary as the antagonism between self-disclosure and self-concealment.

EBB comes to terms with her own strangeness, her vehement unwillingness to give up on her favourite occupation (reading and interpreting), and her imprisonment by her own family who crown her “our dear invalid”. She wishes for a companion soul which would rescue her from delusional self-sufficiency: “I am of an intolerably exclusive disposition; & yet I wish some other people were like me” (p. 162). Having laid “an oath in Heaven’ to be altogether sincere in <this. Journal of mine”, she cavils about her own ‘narrow, narrow heart’ (ibid.). She seems afraid of her own body and mind, of unrealistic prospects of marriage (DEBB, 1 Sept, pp. 111-112). Her emotional stability wavers; she occasionally misses making an entry in her diary (24 Feb 1831). Torn between allegiance to family and allegiance to the liberty that thought and art provide, she sees herself gambled, spent: “another Leila” – a phrase which indicates a stylized image of her own self, of her own song of the same title (produced in 1822). Her fear of selfishness is largely self-engendered (3 Oct 1831, p. 149). Her perception of her own fallibility is a source of misery self-inflicted and potentially appeased by intellectual and physical chastisement through hard work (6 Jan 1832). “Hystericky” (as she addressed her own bizarre nature), she loses her voice through perpetual colds which debar her from visiting Malvern and Boyd – she makes up for such an incapacity by reading Alcibiades (5-15 Nov 1831). Dizziness and exhaustion through fasting (21 Mar 1832) could hardly be cured through reading sacred literature (4 Apr 1832). As in her later self-evocation, *Aurora Leigh* (1856), in her diary she narrativizes her own self-repercussions, aspirations, yet her anxiety about being aware of the external sources of creative inspiration in her life as woman and writer. Elizabeth is a Miltonic daughter who, Sarah Annes Brown argues, wishes to achieve independence (Brown, 1997, p. 729-730, 734): She acts modestly yet self-assertively. Departing from a prelapsarian garden, subsidized by a well of wisdom found in man-authored books, dreading disintegration of bodily and cultural autonomy (e.g. her dream about her teeth tumbling out; DEBB, 1-3 Jul 1831, pp. 39-41), she lives as she writes.

Recently, Rachel Isom, has noted EBB’s lesser (than her Romantic female predecessors’), more regulated, not so openly fatalistic, fear of spiritual perdition, her self-control, self-sustained faith, and frank religiosity yet unabashed intellectualism – authentic yet “more acceptable, [...] Victorian”

(Isom, 2019, pp. 178-179, 183). EBB transfers her attention from reading novels (in her juvenile period) to poetry, and theological and philosophical scholarship (in her adult life, beginning with the anonymous publication in 1826 of her volume *An Essay on Mind, with Other Poems*). The latter has its origin in her early interest in “learned languages” (Barrett, 1974, p. 124), which accounts also for a developing Hellenism of her own and a conviction in the educational worth of studying the ancient Past. But, as Charles LaPorte maintains, Barrett’s faith in the past, in the word of God, and in precursory literary authority must not be taken as passivity: It is an evolutionary conversation between minds in time, especially over the matter of subordinated, or domesticated, femininity as opposed to a more independent, albeit more staunchly adhering to religious belief, feminine thought (LaPorte, 2013, pp. 278-280).

*Diary by E. B. B.* diagnoses the hardships of the survival of a peculiar mongrel: Literary daughter, spinster, and woman with a will of her own – a “controversial creature who women poets by and large avoided depicting at all” (Hickok, 1981, p. 120). EBB reflects the status-conscious middle-class female experience (*ibid.*, p. 130) – between absolute devotion to others and self-sufficiency in solitude – a dialectic sanctioned by father Barrett. The result is a sense of internal exile whereby the writer is made doubly prominent in a way which solders singularity and plurality, focus and periphery, genre and gender, and reading and writing (Benstock, 1999, p. 4). Related to this dialectic is the entity body–mind as an entity defining woman as a writer. One epitome of this is Elizabeth’s ultra-sensitivity to the issue of illness. The poetess is known to have suffered from a number of not untypical for women conditions: “Continual fainting and insomnia” yet overwrought self-consciousness or ascetic indifference to pain (Hayter, 1962, p. 59); hard-to-diagnose teenage ailments (cf. Dennis, 1996, pp. 40-41); embryonic hypochondria (cf. Forster, 2004, pp. 21-23). These symptoms tend to get outlined in her sense of guilt over being physically deficient, her anxiety about marital status (and, as can be assumed, infertility), and her perception of specifically threatened organs and systems of her body (e.g. her teeth). Her sensitivity about her irregular internal constitution (physique and psyche) can also be seen as an instance of the writer’s accepting response to the nineteenth century’s developing interest in woman as a medical case-study (Carpenter, 2010, pp. 157-159).

### **Verbal Osmosis: Holy Word – Own Word**

It would be a herculean task to try and summarize Elizabeth’s prowess of biblical scholarship. One way to do this would be to dwell, briefly, on her humanitarian-hermeneutical perception of faith as theory and practice, especially with regard to the following aspects: Sin, predestination, charity, communication between body and soul, reason, and hard work. In her diary, Elizabeth mentions Gregory



of Nazianzus more than a dozen times. Gregory functions as a fictitious mediator of the intellectual rapport she aims to achieve between Hugh Stuart Boyd and herself. The Greek Christian father might have attracted Elizabeth with his love of simple, direct, insightful communication, his stylistic clarity, allegorical verve, and sincerity of mind, his wish to labor for the salvation of the souls of men in need of enlightenment and comfort, but also his desire to attain a symbiosis between “faith and philosophical reflection”, not inconsistent with a possibility to “penetrate deeper the Christian narrative of creation and salvation and to search for a new synthesis of faith and philosophical reflection” consistent with a “Platonic understanding of reality” (Daley in: Gregory, 2006, pp. 6-7). “Mortification of the body”, and “solitude and silence” are also, to a large extent, a shared spiritual domain between Elizabeth and this Greek Christian father (Gregory, 2006, *Oration 14: On Love of the Poor*, p. 77). While a self-punitive attitude to body may not be the only distinctive feature of Elizabeth’s literary and religious enthusiasm, the value of private faith could be seen to require firmness of character, the exposure of which could for instance be found in a self-propelled sense of boundary in terms of physical space. Seclusion was also an affordable middle-class privilege: in Elizabeth’s case it was motivated by her yearning for a peace of mind to write and to be accepted on equal terms in the literary profession.

EBB shares Gregory’s conviction that reason and wisdom – two crucial qualities for a writer, in EBB’s perception – are inspired, being attributes of heavenly grace and a foundation for accepting Christ – “God’s word” – building in man an “image” of “heaven’s transcendent brilliance” (Gregory, 2006, *Evening Hymn*, p. 167). Wisdom functions as an intersectional realm – a time-space both divine and mortal, as the relative cohesion between a remembered, greater before, an inevitable priority, and a created, personal after, a logical posterity – yet another way of attesting the genre of diary as one which prevents its craftsman to declare absolute agency over a beginning or an end. Diary unleashes alternatives for secular axial moments, in the sense I offered Ricoeur’s reflections on chronology earlier. An inexhaustive proof of the latter could be found in EBB’s regular discussions with Boyd on matters such as the necessity of spiritual enlightenment, steady mental exercise, and conscientious cultivation of patience of mind. Such frequent talks, largely initiated by the diarist herself, export the narrative I out of a state of self-certainty and physical concreteness into a dialogic dynamicity between remembering and imagining as part of a continuity of migrating between two equally unique places and chronologies: her own home at Hope End and Boyd’s Ruby Cottage. Both places relate to pivotal patriarchal presences. To this should perhaps be added a persistent communication between student and teacher (EBB – Boyd), nurse and patient (EBB – Boyd), subsequent interpreter and former interpreter of Gregory’s word as the word of God (EBB – Boyd). A communication whose

range attracts a diversity of literary material (from Princess Scheherezade to Byron) discovered, recorded, learned, discussed, imagined, and expected with each forthcoming meeting between EBB and Boyd as a kind of being in a parallel world. This world could be viewed as an interim between Elizabeth's feeling at the right place in her home with her dear father and the solitude she experienced at her home dominated by an exacting patriarch – her father (DEBB, 9 Sep 1831 – 22 Oct 1831, pp. 122-164). The attitude Elizabeth assumes to Papa, Boyd, Chrysostom and Gregory could also be argued to reflect a trait of nineteenth-century mentality, as Linda Anderson maintains: “a gradual alignment of autobiography with the value accorded to authorship,” whereby an anxiety about revealing “the private self” shares ground with the establishment of “literary genius” through external intervention (Anderson, 2001, p. 7). The ostensible self-shielding, secrecy and independence of diary narrative in terms of the control that the author exerts in “the ‘intentional’ meaning or truth of the text”, however, could also be seen as a trope: “prosopopoeia, [...], the giving of a face, or personification” (ibid., pp. 3, 12-13), whereby self-telling “produce[s] fictions or figures in place of the self-knowledge [it] seek[s]”. In other words, the autobiographer inscribes herself within her work as she strives to produce a “face”, in which act she conceals “[her] own fictionalization or displacement by writing” (ibid.). This, Anderson concludes (reiterating Paul de Man), is an “epitaphic” act. Autobiography is a journey toward the attainment of an end: Its target is self-fulfillment, which implies also a sense of limit, yet it defies completion for it shows the author’s chronic inability to eye-witness their own birth.

To Elizabeth, John Chrysostom proves another pivotal source of wisdom: the balance and connection between body and spirit, part and whole, one man and another. Brooding and demanding in his manner of self-expression, Chrysostom is likely to have served as a stylistic role model for EBB. In his *Homilies on the Acts of the Apostles* and the *Epistle to the Romans*, John Chrysostom suggests that learning could be compared to curing physical infirmities and overcoming intellectual deficits whereby more acute cases demand “more advanced subjects of instruction” (Chrysostom, 1889b, *Homily XLIX on Acts xxiii. 6-8*, p. 545). If God’s holy soul “comprised the whole world” (houses, wives, children, events, cities, nations etc.; ibid., p. 546), then a conscientious perusal of his holy word would be a perusal of items constitutive of the wholeness of man’s life. EBB would have been attracted by such holistic, relational hermeneutics: The co-dependence between one man and another, producer and recipient of meaning, God and his apostles, past and present, a core language of utterance and an interpretative register (e.g. the holy word – Chrysostom’s commentary on the Acts of the Apostles, and then – EBB’s own diary). Her self-reflective turn seems to be of religious descent. It could be assumed that Elizabeth shared a view of suffering as a steadier and more efficient means of experiential maturation and

appreciation of identity, even beyond the promise of actual recognition from others (Chrysostom, 1889a, *Homily VIII: Ephesians IV*: 1, 2, 162-163), and a belief in the laboriousness of accumulating knowledge through assuming the guilt of others upon oneself, through amassment of sadness on one's journey toward wisdom in communion with others, of whom one partakes and who partake of one's life on earth. Chrystom's directness and determination of argument, his individualized, self-respecting, yet self-interrogating style must have been contagious: In her diary, Elizabeth identifies herself through suffering. Chrysostom says: "I deem it more desirable to suffer evil for Christ's sake, than to receive honor at Christ's hands" (p. 163, emphasis added). Like Chrysostom (*ibid.*, pp. 187-88), cautiously, Elizabeth works out a dual recognition of ostensibly disparate elements (body and spirit, one man and another, divine and human) of a discursive whole ("all things are common, and one has nothing more than another"), arguing emotional and intellectual interconnection between Self and Other to be the core of being.

In *Glimpses into My Own Life and Literary Character* (1820) a fourteen-year-old Elizabeth admits: "I worshipped God, heart and soul [,] but I forgot that my prayers should be pure & simple as the Father I adored" (Barrett, 1974, p. 126). Insincerity and illiteracy are amongst her worst fears, as her diary also reveals. John's Gospel and St. John Chrysostom's commentaries, which she herself interprets in her diary, grow to be Elizabeth's particular interest to the extent that she develops a penchant for two doctrines: "Election & perseverance" (26 Sept 1831, p. 140). EBB's worries are, ultimately and even at moments of excruciating grief for her mother, those of a follower of a paternally originating divine word. She might protest against Chrysostom's "monotony & lengthiness" in his commentary on Ephesians, yet as she plods through the Greek Christian Poets' writings a sense of subalternity emerges – she interprets under the auspices of Boyd who sets a standard for her to pursue (5 Jun, 20 Jun, 11 Sept, 27 Aug 1831, pp. 4, 24, 125). Undoubtedly, a trouble on her mind seems to be the doctrine of redemption, one aspect of which could be redemption through death. She records an episode with a woman (a Mrs. Best) who believes "that all may be saved; but that the blood of Christ was shed only for those who are saved" (12 Sept 1831, p. 125). The closing sentence of the very same day's record, however, indicates that Elizabeth may have been haunted by a sense of insufficiency and self-dissatisfaction, finding herself confined to a rigid space that Biblical studies would provide her with: "The Greek testament was all the Greek which I read today" (*ibid.*). Chrysostom accompanies her to Ruby Cottage, where Boyd resides: "Chrysostom Ann [sic] & I set off at about half past eight"; later that day, she explores "Holiness & Temperance" in view of Chrysostom's "heterodoxy about original sin" and the lot of the ill-fated ('δυσμορος'), as she apparently also considers the actuality of her developing infatuation with Boyd (15 Sept 1831, p. 128). When with Boyd, she seems intrigued by his reaction to Biblical

texts – sometimes more than by actual interpretation of the Bible she herself might be involved in. Such an attitude can be said to help fictionalize both holy words and Boyd as characters in a private perception of time her diary exhibits as part of the greater cosmology of natural time that her own household is also part of (21 Jun 1831, p. 26). It would define the space of a unique participant, set her apart from all the members of her own family yet make her an especially cherished team-worker in a greater, beyond the *I*, narrative that would have commenced prior to her birth, inclusive of characters such as Chrysostom or Gregory Nazianzen. She could not be happier as when sharing the experience of immersing herself into the Fathers with another person: “I do like & admire Gregory’s prose!! — & I enjoy reading a beautiful style so much the more, when I can read it with one who enjoys it too — when I < can > read it with M<sup>r</sup>. Boyd” (19 Sept 1831, p. 132). Disclaiming Gregory as “not a great poet, scarcely a real poet” (27 Aug 1831, p. 105), she nonetheless clings to Gregory because he seems to be a preferred by Boyd source of study, Boyd being the one to sanction – certainly in the period 1828 –1832 – Elizabeth’s progress with Ancient Greek and with literature.

EBB’s curiosity about the ‘temporal movement’ (‘χρονικου κωημα’) is hemmed with a deeper motivation to discover the connecting tissue between herself and her tutor (Boyd), between part and whole, original text and translation, actual (written) word and imagined (oral) speech, self and non-self. She wishes to unravel, to analyze literature as an all-encompassing, life-sustaining phenomenon (DEBB, 26 Jan 1832, pp. 210 – 11):

Began to read over Gregory’s oration, — & even to translate it: not with the intention of showing my translation to M<sup>r</sup>. Boyd or any body else, not with the wish of competing with him; but *that by translating the whole I might have clearer idea of parts, & might save him the trouble of «thinking» on some points which appeared to both of us, obscure*. I shall not even tell him of my having translated it. (emphasis added)

Afraid of her imperfections as a translator, she postulates translation as a medium of communication not only between Present and Past but between two living individuals who use the same mother tongue. Thus, she articulates her perception of the interpreter’s being as the cusp between visible and invisible discourse, as well as between temporality and a-temporality: a form, also, of trans-substantive trade between written text as masculine fact (tangibility, pastness) and interpretation as feminine fiction (intangibility, futurity). EBB’s correspondence with Boyd in the period 1829 – 1832 evidences of her fascination with etymology as an intellectual pastime: discovering the connection between word and idea. Tracing origins, she encompasses literature as a dialogue in, and with, time and space (BC, 3, 1985, Jul 1832, pp. 29-32):

I have read Hebrew regularly every day since I told you of my beginning Genesis, — and I am now more than half thro' Genesis, & began to relax a little from the lexicon. From its being a primitive language it is very interesting in a philosophical point of view. *I like to find the roots of words & ideas at the same time.* (emphasis added)

In the same letter she proceeds with a disquisition on Lord Byron's death, declaring that "the poet & his poetry are quite identified, and you could not at any time, read one, without thinking of the other" (ibid.). Others' words burn her soul indeed. EBB's literary exploits double up "the referential world" in the "act of boundary-crossing" between the experienced and the possible, the real and the fictive, Self and Other (Iser, 1993, p. xiv). This would also explain the kind of life-sustaining co-habitation between self-reflection and commentary on literary works written by various other writers in EBB's diary. In effect, and as Levinas argues in *Totality and Infinity*, "discourse is not simply a modification of intuition (or of thought), but an original relation with exterior being' whose absolute 'alterity', or 'transcendence' in respect of the viewer/writer declares a possibility, or condition of speech and discourse as such – in 'a drama that has begun outside of [interlocutors]'" (Levinas, 1979, pp. 66, 194, 202, 209). Loss of such alterity would destabilize the writer's props of being. An alterity that has been domesticated as the autobiographer's innermost givenness, or foundation of being, which creates a sense of "genus" by "calling for one another by [way of ...] exclusion" (ibid., p. 194).

### **An Overcrowded House, or One amidst Others**

In her diary EBB leaves provocative traces of her diverse, unflagging, and meticulous reading: Homer, Aeschylus, Sophocles, Euripides, Pindar, Anacreon, Sappho, Virgil, Marie de France, Boiardo, Shakespeare, Camões, Milton, La Bruyère, E. Burke, Cowper, Goldsmith, Richardson, Molière, Goethe, A. Radcliffe, R. Burns, all the major Romantics (Mary Shelley especially), J. Baillie, Letitia Landon, John Wesley and the Greek Christian Fathers. Conscious of her ambitions, EBB nonetheless tries to bridle a sense of superiority over other women of the neighbourhood which her diary describes. She narrates of some fairly frequent yet not so pleasant encounters whereby she feels like an intellectual giant amidst dwarves<sup>4</sup> yet she demonstrates a sense of decorum.

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4. Germaine de Staël's *Corinne* (1807), which EBB mentions (in a letter to Boyd of 9 June 1832) to have read three times, must have fascinated the young writer with the heroine's conversationalism, power of intellect yet nostalgia over unfulfilled love (DEBB, p. 220, n. 6; BC, 3, pp. 24-27). In Book XIV, chapter I, *Corinne* sees herself as a Gulliver "chained" by the Lilliputians. *Corinne's* stepmother's pernicious and superficial ways threaten her studious nature to the effect of wasting four years of the young poetess's life, which creates an unbridgeable existential chasm in her (De Staël, 1833, p. 240). Here is *Corinne's* own ex-

This duality of self-portraiture – a state of negotiation between excess of intellect yet insufficiency of self-respect – calls for the ghost of a literary role model which her diary documents: John Milton. EBB could be perceived as “Fancy’s child/ ... married to immortal verse/ ... Untwisting all the chains that tie/ The hidden soul of harmony” (Milton, *L’Allegro*, l. 132-133, 137, 143-144) with a mind unquiet, capable of making “a Heaven of Hell, a Hell of Heaven” (Milton, *Paradise Lost*, B. I, ll. 255).<sup>5</sup>

Guilt, self-mourning, and fixation on physical failure, just as well as the expectation of some apocalyptic resolution of human imperfection, hover over EBB’s diary. At the same time, diary permits a path for a woman’s resolve to pursue spiritual integrity. From “exercise[s] in crying” through E. Young’s *Night Thoughts* over past time as irrevocable loss (DEBB, 15 Jun 1831, p. 17), to a self-lacerating wish to “erase every line” of her own “heart & mind” and annihilate “the feelings, <together> with the descriptions of them” (16 Jun, 1831, p. 19), toiling over Prometheus in translating for herself and for Boyd (6 Feb 1832, p. 214), condemning her own “weak moral sense” as a “worshipper of M<sup>rs</sup>. Radcliffe” (9 Jul 1831, p. 51), lamenting Keats’ unhappy and unappreciated lot (18 Aug 1831, p. 93), contemplating Mary Brunton’s novel *Self-Control* and Richardson’s *Clarissa* while “comparing scripture with scripture” (14 Sept 1831, p. 127), Elizabeth seems to be considering, if indirectly, putting a full stop to her own story – by way of referring to Sappho’s supposed fatal “leap of forgetfulness”, for instance (27 Sept 1831, p. 142). The diarist strives to prolong yet complete, to engender yet sum up, to promote yet delimit Self. Diary may be viewed as struggle for, and against, Self – in narratorial as well as even just in physical terms. What we have is the tactility of story contained in a book-body against the limitlessness of form and content of self-expression in real-life. An Other looms over Elizabeth’s self-writing. This Other is part of the diplomacy between the accurately documented and the fictionalized. George Gusdorf indicates that diary emblemizes “the presence of spirit of a world forever gone” (Gusdorf, 1980, pp. 38-40): The diarist strives to capture that which might have been and give it continuity by way of interpreting their own place amidst the presences of others. The written text becomes an opportunity for re-assemblage of oneself “in [one’s] own likeness at a certain moment of

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posture of her loneliness and severe self-ostracizing dissatisfaction with her own weakness of mind (a sense which prevails over EBB’s diary also): “My mind grew dull, and, in spite of me, was filled by trifles. Where no interest is taken in science, literature, and liberal pursuits, mere facts and insignificant criticisms necessarily become the themes of discourse; [...]. There was no enjoyment near me save in a certain methodical regularity, whose desire was that of reducing all things to its own level; [...]. The ill will I innocently excited, joined with my sense of the void all round me, seemed to check even my breath” (ibid.).

5. See also diary entry of 19 Sept 1831, DEBB, pp. 133-34.



[one's] history" – an ontological addition of oneself to oneself as one sketches one's own 'being in time' (ibid. 43, 45).<sup>6</sup>

Scholars on female self-life-writing and Victorian poetry by women have stressed the female diarist's borderline position: Between mind and soul, body and spirit, external and internal world, secular discourse and devotional preaching, passivity and agency over Self, recollected and recollecting.<sup>7</sup> In her seminal study *The Second Sex*, Simone de Beauvoir points at woman wishing to run away from herself "in a state of distraction and mental vacancy" (Beauvoir, 1956, pp. 439, 509, 587), striving to showcase herself through speech, at the same time suppressing her own will. The interstice between self-escape and self-acceptance is where EBB's diary resides. Elizabeth is prone to mourning her own invisibility and anonymity in the patriarchal domain of Hope End: "As if I were both soulless & boneless" (DEBB, 12 Aug 1831, p. 87). The same feature could be seen as part of the author's agenda of self-promotion. She seems to be most productive when most unwell.<sup>8</sup> Antithetical definition of Self is a distinctive trait of female life-writing.

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6. Philippe Lejeune describes diary as "the author's own search for a seductive and convincing form to express the truth of a self and a history" (Lejeune, 2009, p. 216). The possibility and legitimacy of verifying the past, with a greater or lesser dose of truthfulness or mendacity, not least in terms of the chronicle of time that diary sustains, is inextricably bound to the past history of the autobiographical text's author, but because writing itself (as process and product) is part of the diary's own genesis (ibid., pp. 214), diary promotes a peculiar form of concrete literary precedence that predates yet parallels the text itself. By Lejeune's definition, such literary precedence could be termed "avant-texte" and while fiction and poetry naturally welcome precedents (i.e. an older, prefiguring text), diaries would normally not have one (ibid.). However, EBB's diary's beginning (Adam's awareness of, and shame for, his own nakedness) clearly indicates a desire to reciprocate to an avant-texte (Genesis, 3: 7-12) as well as to her already established nihilistic self-regard preceded by a textual before (i.e. the implied burning of her other papers). The deixis of EBB's beginning ("this sheet of paper", "most others", "in the same way"; "the thoughts of my heart as well as of my head"; "And such a mind as I have"; (DEBB, 4 Jun 1831, p. 1), emphasis added) is at once introspective, escapist, and responsive. So is the ending: It is about Mr. Boyd (who asks her to spend time with him but advises her to seek Papa's permission for that), about Elizabeth's disbelief in her obtaining permission and about her leaving in the pouring rain (with an unpunctuated last "Left"). While she struggles against time, "pinning down the present" as the memory of someone else always, she "yields to time," "atomizing" it in moments which retrieve the invaluable in and from her own experience: Writing her own life, she practices a mnemonic skill which promises no absolute accuracy, as what she herself could remember properly and write about uniquely would always be something else for another reader of her diary further in time (Lejeune, 2009, p. 170).

7. See, for instance: Eakin, 1992, pp. 181, 183, 200-201; Lewis, 2005, pp. 7-8, 10; Blake, 1986, pp. 387-388, 391; Ryan, 2008, pp. 254, 269.

8. By comparison, in their autobiographical writing, both Katherine Mansfield and Virginia Woolf display high awareness of physical and psychic disorder (headaches, toothache, heartaches, blurred vision, life-jeopardizing abstractions and day-dreaming). Dysfunction-

One prefiguration of this can be perceived in Fanny Burney's *Journals* (1768 – 1840) – a hybrid of her letters to family and friends. From the start Burney makes of her own shyness an identity card stamped uniquely by the clever invention of an imaginary interlocutor to whom she appeals: “To Nobody, then, will I write my Journal! Since to Nobody can I be wholly unreserved [...]. From Nobody I have nothing to fear, [...]” (Burney, 2002, p. 53). The double negation in the last sentence kindles a positive affirmation: Self-displacement throws the author's identity into relief. Burney is well known to have allowed time between events and epistolary re-narrative in her journal which shows a particular sensitivity for writing as therapeutic re-experiencing of physical pain, or illness – a feature known as pathography. One peculiar instance of the latter is Burney's memoiristic account of the mastectomy she underwent in Paris on 30 September 1811 – an occasion threatening to compromise a woman's integrity of body and mind. The story emerges half a year later (*ibid.*, pp. 298-305), thus affording a reserve of temporal distance between the primordially experienced and the aesthetically recollected. One result of this is a peak of emotionalism in the re-experienced by way of narration that works like a plot engine in a life conscientiously composed of written messages to addressees expected to confirm and preserve the author's escapist, at times self-annihilating intimations of a sense of imprisonment and despair. For instance, the incident at Kew Gardens, when Burney is pursued by an ill King George III (1 – 9 February 1789, *ibid.*, pp. 251-254), or the episode of her considering the possibility of burning her papers (20 April 1838, *ibid.*, p. 360).

Leafing through *Journal of Katherine Mansfield* (1928), which her husband, John Middleton Murry collated out of a myriad of notebooks (many of which barely written in) he edited, one stumbles over a curious occasion of the discrepancy between the volume of intention and the volume of achievement in terms of self-life-writing. An instance of self-narrative dependent on the sanction of the autobiographer's husband is *A Writer's Diary* (1953) – the diary of Virginia Woolf, compiled by Leonard Woolf. These two modernist autobiographical documents – Mansfield and Woolf's journals – deserve their own research, but perhaps just one or two incidental fragments could serve to contextualize Barrett's steady split between two states equally potent in defining woman's self-writing as a buffer zone between dread of finitude (counterbalanced by a sense of writing as duty) and dread of perpetuity (counterbalanced by the perishability of personal memory). The two types of dread justify self-parade while they also vindicate the priority of an axial Other. Mansfield writes: “I ought to work at [my story] all day, – all day and into the night if necessary. [...]

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ality itemizes female Self: It opens a niche for the author to emerge as an amorphous entity in need of shaping/curing by an exterior (male) artisan to whom the narrative seems to cling instinctively. In addition, head problems and infertility feature in Woolf and create a multi-faceted metaphor or writing as regeneration (e.g. Woolf, 1959, 2 Oct 1934, p. 226; 5 Jun 1938, p. 295).

But my anxious heart is eating up my body, eating up my nerves, eating up my brain;" (2 Jan 1915, 21 Jan 1915); "I am (December 15, 1919) a dead woman, and I don't care" (15 Dec 1919) (Mansfield, 1928, pp. 19, 134). She aims at self-improvement yet her writing seems inchoate: "Everything in life that we really accept undergoes a change. So suffering must become Love. This is the mystery. This is what I must do. I must pass from personal love to greater love. I must give to the whole of life what I gave to one" (1920); "[...] what I am doing has no form" (Sept 1921) (ibid., pp. 167, 193). Similarly, dread of vanity and of inaction resides in Woolf: "Why is life so tragic; so like a strip of pavement over an abyss. I look down; I feel giddy; I wonder how I am ever to walk to the end. [...] Melancholy diminishes as I write. Why then don't I write it down oftener? Well, one's vanity forbids. [...] It's having no children, living away from friends, failing to write well, [...]. I think too much of whys and wheretofores; too much of myself. I don't like time to flap round me" (Woolf, 1959, 25 Oct 1920, p. 29). The writer hesitates to proclaim her exact place amidst others; she fears others might consume the room of her own she has made for herself through her diary: "The only difficulty is to hold myself back from writing others" (17 Oct 1924, p. 68); "How I interest myself! Quite set up and perky today with a mind brimming because I was so damnably depressed and smacked on the cheek by Edwin Muir in the *Listener*" (2 Apr 1937, p. 280).

As an autobiographer, EBB subjects herself to merciless religious self-contemplation through biblical studies and reading in the original from Ancient Greek and Hebrew, implying guilt almost as a condition for writing as self-expiation, disallowing herself the comfort of an ample sense of achievement, tormented, Macbeth-like, by an "Amen" stuck in her throat upon "the death of each day's life, sore labour's bath" (*Macbeth*, II, ii, ll. 33-34, 39; DEBB, 4 Jun 1831, p. 2). Sinful without a sin committed, she epitomizes the Victorian woman artist – sanctioned by prototypical masculinity at the family estate where she finds loopholes to release her genius through laborious interpretative endeavours (such as translation of classical works). She is exacerbated by the whimsical ways of H. S. Boyd who stimulates yet rebuffs her as his agent and literary amanuensis, praising her yet denying her a rightful place as translator and writer (e.g. DEBB, 4 Jun 1831, pp. 1-2).

## Conclusive Reflections

Like the sonneteer Charlotte Smith, Elizabeth seems to have been guided by her own "partial Muse" who smiled "on the rugged path" she took as a writer. Nineteenth-century women poets were to taste the "delusive art" of literary composition which first "decked the head with many a rose" but reserved "the thorn" for later (*Sonnet I, The Partial Muse*, Charlotte Smith, 1782, ll. 1-2, 5-8). To achieve liberty of spirit and true poetic recognition, Elizabeth was to leave

home – never to win back, after her secret marriage to Robert Browning on 12 Sept 1846 and her immediate subsequent departure for Italy, her father's respect.

EBB's diary appears to be what Ricoeur would address as a sanctuary for "shared events of knowledge" where literary memory and memory of the actually experienced participate in a unique trade which blurs the boundaries between fact and fiction, as well as between oneself and another – a kind of humanitarian inter-referentiality between viewer and viewed, recollected and produced afresh via the reassemblage-genesis of Self and Other (Ricoeur, 2006, pp. 38, 165). In her later poetical works, crediting the word of others, the poet begins to feel anonymous; her sense of wholeness crumbles down (despite her confirmed by that time professional recognition). Of her own name she predicts: "Though I write books it will be read / Upon the leaves of none, / And afterward, when I am dead, / Will ne'er be graved for sight or tread, / Across my funeral-stone" (*The Pet-Name*, 1838, p. ll. 11-15). Fatalistic strokes nuance her mature poetry, from around *The Seraphim and Other Poems* (1838) onwards. Perceiving herself as a student of Theocritus, travelling across time and space on the wings of poesy, her hair getting pulled by 'a mystic Shape' (to materialize as Love, in *Sonnets from the Portuguese*, I, ll. 1, 9-14), Elizabeth was never to find peace, always conscious of the call to respond to a preliminary Other contained in authorial intention. Emmanuel Levinas describes this phenomenon as "the radical impossibility of seeing oneself from the outside and of speaking in the same sense of oneself and of the others, and consequently the impossibility of totalization," whereby memory of lived experience, including the experience of reading, would invert historical time and give birth to interiority as the time of "truth sought in the other" (Levinas, 1979, pp. 53, 56, 62): Other people, other literary voices, other species of artistic self-expression (poetic as well as prose-fiction). A hermeneutic exchange, based on the "asymmetry" between Self and Other, in favour of Other as the core of the literary act, as Levinas propounds in *Totality and Infinity*. EBB strives for an identity of her own: In her diary, narrative emerges as a negotiation between her self-affirmative will to survive and her self-negating resolve to suffer for the sake of a higher ideal. The story of her mind is the story of her being "both for death and [of still having] time, [...] against death" (ibid., p. 235). A struggle against, and for, oneself through writing.

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