

POETICAL LESSONS IN SELF-SUBVERSION: ELIZABETH BARRETT BROWNING'S JUVENILIA (CA. 1812–1814)

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Abstract: *This paper aims at establishing the pedagogical dimensions of self-interrogation in the foundation of narrative as human necessity in the earliest works of Elizabeth Barrett Browning (1806–1861): eleven poems dated back to ca. 1812–1814, and unpublished in her own lifetime. Despite the re-awakened in the last decade of the 20th century interest in English Romantic and Victorian juvenile writers, Barrett Browning's first poetical attempts remain feebly explored, especially in terms of the civilizational impulse of self-doubt. As a child writer, Barrett Browning achieved narrative intensity whose roots may be sought in her sensitivity to politics, social matters, emotions, and especially suffering. I argue that the addressivity of the chosen poems could be seen to substantiate her chronic resistance against authorial exceptionalism, motivating narrative as the core of the child poet's empathically proactive imagination which sought an outlet for its agential potency and dialectical performativity.*

Keywords: *Elizabeth Barrett Browning, juvenilia, self-interrogation, narrative, imagination*

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Article history: Received: 12 January 2026; Reviewed: 18 June 2026; Revised: 27 June 2026; Accepted: 29 June 2026; Published: 21 August 2026



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Citation (APA): Rowland, Y. (2026). Poetical lessons in self-subversion: Elizabeth Barrett Browning's juvenilia (ca. 1812–1814). *Studies in Linguistics, Culture, and FLT*, 14(2), 8–29. <https://doi.org/10.46687/BGVZ1168>

The world isn't just the way it is. It is how we understand it, no? And in understanding something, we bring something to it, no? Doesn't that make life a story? (Martel, 2003, p. 302)

Introduction

In nineteenth-century England the child writer – middle class, notably enough – was not a rarity. What children wrote was of pronouncedly cautionary essence, and yet it exhibited rebellious attitudes to the indoctrination of normative behavior. The list may include Jane Austen, Lord Byron, Leigh Hunt, Felicia Hemans, William Blake, William Wordsworth, and Thomas Hood, to name but a few. Marked by empathic intellectualism, self-contemplative responsivity in acting, and depth of faith, the Regency period (ca. 1795–1837) became a hard-to-abandon idyllic realm before the advent of the evolutionist and naturalist leanings of the time to follow (the Victorian age, 1837–1901). Juvenile narratives strove to consecrate life, as well as the uniqueness of a young individual's genius and skills of communication. Elizabeth Barrett Browning (1806–1861) – a Regency infant but a Victorian adult, author of *Sonnets from the Portuguese* (1850), *Aurora Leigh* (1856), a myriad of ballads, political poems, and some impressive translations (not least Aeschylus' *Prometheus Bound*, 1833 and 1850), a fine diarist, essayist, autobiographer, and prolific correspondent alert to injustice, a champion of the spirit of liberty, a dweller of Florence (1846–1861) witnessing the Italian Risorgimento – was one of those gifted children. Her earliest works are eleven poems she penned between the ages of six and eight (ca. 1812–1814).¹ They draw the reader's attention to common throes such as enforced military conscription, poverty, infant mortality, loneliness, and a growing individual's departure from the magnetism of nature's polyglot voice. Said poems vary between self-oriented addresses ('On the Cruelty of Forcement to Man'), indignant exclamatory doubts ('On Early Rising'), exhilarated imperatives ('Ye lovely lilies of the Vale'), unabashed and fragmentary self-addresses ('Ah! Virtue – come my steps to stay'), dramatized moralistic tales based on retrospective experiences ('Upon the boundaries of a lofty wood'), bold conversations with oneself, camouflaged as talks to an imagined interlocutor ('Oh! Thou! Whom Fortune led to stray'), and what could be deemed *prima-facie* descriptive pieces ('Soft as the dew from

1. Unless specified otherwise, references to, and quotations from, the works of Elizabeth Barrett Browning (distinguishing, in addition, the poet's works from editorial notes) adhere to Sandra Donaldson's 2010 five-volume edition. The citation of Elizabeth's letters follows the Wedgstone Press complete edition of *The Brownings' Correspondence* (hereby abbreviated as BC, and obtained from <https://www.browningscorrespondence.com/>), specifying the volume, page(s), letter number, and date. Barrett Browning's, as well as other poets', original spelling, punctuation, and emphases have been preserved. In quoting other original writing, I have preferred the name(s) of editor(s), whenever available. Titles of poems appear in single inverted commas, except for larger dramatic works and whole poetical volumes which I have italicized.

Heaven descends', 'Soft were the murmurs of the gentle rill', 'Its golden plumage glittered on its breast').

Few biographers have taken the time to acknowledge the centrality and long-term phenomenological worth of these juvenile works. Among the most proficient twentieth-century scholars one ought to note the names of Barbara Taylor, Sandra Donaldson, and Melissa Brotton. Pioneering work was done by Charlotte Porter, Helen Clarke, Harriet Preston, and Harry B. Forman: while all noted Elizabeth's early writings (such as 'The Battle of Marathon' (1820) and 'An Essay on Mind' (1826)), her eleven earliest poems remained neglected for a long time. Margaret Forster's pithy analysis praised Elizabeth's childhood experimental epic, her autobiographical verve, her early awareness of international politics (e.g., slavery and the poet's guilt about her own descent from a family of plantation holders), her non-reclusiveness, and her (self)exploratory escapades in the countryside, "bereft of adult company" and in charge of small siblings (Forster, 2004, pp. 5, 11-12, 15-16, 19). Preston revealed the child's "astonishing avidity and aptitude for learning, omnivorous reading, and [yet] no regular training whatsoever" (Preston, 1900, pp. xi-xii). Porter and Clarke traced Elizabeth's "impressional youth", "alert intelligence ... [and] rapidly unfolding independence" (Porter & Clarke, 1900, pp. viii-ix, xiii, xxxvi), relating it to later poems such as 'The Deserted Garden' (1838) and 'The Lost Bower' (1843). Buxton Forman published Elizabeth's earliest works for the first time in 1914, depicting the "little poet" as a person "deadly in earnest", of "quixotic attitude", introspective, yet blessed with a vivid imagination, an "enfant terrible" who stretched the specular dimensions of space and time (Buxton Forman, 1914, pp. xxx, xxxiv-xxxvii). Later and recent research on the range of self-interrogation in Elizabeth's juvenilia follows further in the present paper.

A cultural excursus

The writer's shyness about her own juvenile poems, her merciless self-revisionist ways, and her intense inner life (Donaldson, 2010, vol. 5, pp. xix-xxiii) would have found favor with a time (1800–1830) in English culture particularly sensitive to matters such as the dichotomy individual – society, the educational value of the past, the need to study the heart and memory as prerequisites for the development of identity, the beneficial liaison between the family and the burgeoning school system in raising a healthy mind, and a child's right to a space of their own in a growingly callous utilitarian world.² By the *fin de siècle*, an emphasis had been laid on the significance of the "critical reflexivity on the act of

2. By the 1820s about half of the population of England had been composed of children under the age of nineteen (Langbauer, 2016, p. 1, n. 1). Even though "children were frequently to be found in circulating libraries, ... children's books were not" (Grenby, 2002, pp. 25, 28, 30, 32): the choice of titles was restricted to moralistic stories and fables, resounding with "the little busy bee" (from the hymnic lessons of Isaac Watts), and cautioning against indiscriminate reading, unruly impulses, and sheer amusement.

knowing”, as well as emotional intelligence in a partnership between instructor and instructed (Salvatori, 2003, pp. 8, 18). Sadly, but unsurprisingly, apart from schooling in music and French, Elizabeth, like many other intelligent girls at the time, was almost entirely self-educated, excelling in Ancient Greek, Hebrew, and the classics, backed up by the scarcity and irregularity of help provided by her brothers’ teachers and a blind classicist (Hugh Stuart Boyd). Narrative, in her case, became a means of self-preservation yet self-confrontation, emanating her alertness to the sexual, social, and cultural dimensions of the contingencies of authorship.

Nineteenth-century English pedagogy encouraged, as Theresa Michaels has argued, the promotion of “economic rationality [which] consisted of being unlike a child”, i.e., of an ability to resist material flashiness and worthlessness, yet faith that the child “had to be both seen and heard by their parents” who would do justice to the young individual by promoting “intellectual curiosity or sound judgement” (Michaels, 2008, pp. 34-35). Gradually, juvenile writing gained more confidence so as to beg recognition of the creative act not as subjected but contributive to a sense of history as also one’s own story, one’s own life – a unique experiential entity placed not simply under the aegis of an uncontestable grand precursory history, with a certain truth to be rediscovered; juvenile narratives created individuals and helped overcome the fault of “history ... seen as outside literature” (Watkins, 2002, p. 30).

Gabriel Compayré’s observations on the weakening of the impact of the church, the emerging rapport between the school and the private home in childcare, the attention given to the heart, memory and imagination in the birth of a compound approach to learning comprising empiricism, psychological idealism, and an efficacy-based organicist faith “to have every member of the human family participate in its benefits” (i.e. the benefits of education) critically and self-consciously (Compayré, 1889, pp. 508-509) seem contextually relevant for perceiving Elizabeth’s juvenile poetry as a self-disputing but timely tableaux-vivant chronicle of her growing curiosity about herself and her own place in life, rather than still-life blueprints of an uncontroversial greater external reality. Elizabeth obviously needed a living, uniquely tactile environment in which she could operate self-editorially, making up for the lack of such an officially-sanctioned space of learning. Moralistic narrative – as in ‘Ah! Virtue – come my steps to stay’, ‘On the Cruelty of Forcement to Man’, and ‘Loft, on the Top of that High Hill’ – would provide an allegorical, dichotomous terrain for being and seeing: self-acquisition by way of creating an Other to be actually addressed, instructed, reproached, and hopefully, redeemed. Elizabeth could seethe with indignation over unjust fate, invoking strength of mind to help the victim (first poem mentioned above: “... the poor lad in yonder boat / Forced from his wife, his friends, his home / ... how can you / Look at the misery of this doom!”, ll.1-4, Browning, in Donaldson, 2010, vol. 5, p. 160). She would

pray to avoid the wrong path in life (second poem: "... Or else, I go the other way...", l. 2, p. 161); she would mourn the hapless lot of a child lost alone in the waste (third poem: "But now she's gone! For ever more...", l. 4, p. 162). Her earliest poems tell stories emblemizing yet subverting the status quo of things in life. Generously conversational and conscience-provoking, these poems are also transparently self-oriented. They guard against complacency, sin (such as disrespect of God, or of one's own father), and prodigality, while prototyping innocence, vulnerability, spontaneity and susceptibility to injurious thinking. Suffering through erring, if half-wittedly, is proffered for deliverance. Elizabeth's Christological leanings stress the precedence of pain and guilt en route to salvation – often, a spectrally present, or second, auxiliary voice emerges. Unexceptionally, all poems are also self-addresses: the lyrical speaker blames herself for what occurs.

The Regency-era child, permitted a breathable domain for playing, was to be treated by the Victorians as a "grav[e]" sinner", cast off to become a lonely universe of its own against a hostile social world which nonetheless held infancy in an iconographically respectable and representationally dynamic ideational niche – the home of Jesus Christ (Ariès, 1962, pp. 114-115, 117, 119, 124, 402-403). Such a niche would require a highly performative narrative, one strewn with questions, surprises, enigmatical statements urging action, and addresses to an interlocutor capable of debating hazardous ventures. Elizabeth Barrett Browning's earliest poems emit the young writer's curiosity about, and management of, "social positions" and "personal positions" ("e.g., I as imprisoned, I as an optimist, I as a clown") in an indicatively processual understanding of identity (Hermans & Hermans-Konopka, 2010, p. 75). Christine Alexander has pointed out that the child writer's world could be viewed as a "microcosm" of the adult world – here inclusive of some "strangely cynical early lyrics" on being a passionless onlooker of human misery (Alexander, 2005, pp. 11, 18, 24, 27). The child's cognitive perimeter in these eleven earliest poems includes reticence, commiseration, indignation, humanitarian intervention, and landscape-lyric contemplation of divinely regulated harmony. The poet's habitat of individuation seems pent dichotomously and exegetically: between viewer and viewed; speaker and addressee; self-exiting and self-intruding; a child who sees herself as a child, calling a spade a spade, yet allegorizing, pretending to be older than a child in order to create a distance from which to face herself more amply and objectively. A kind of psychological mimicry, this also looks like a natural means of grasping an other's viewpoint, of putting oneself into someone else's shoes. Such presentational narrative gestures, which I should like to dub symptomatic metamorphic self-telling, enact a realm of animated absence, or a second-order reality, in which the child gets a chance to acquire themselves anew. What we have is pretend playing inductive of a narrative reality, a unique referential world of its own aimed at helping the child become visible and

actualize themselves and their creative potential as adults-to-be. In this reality, a child's senses and perceptual apparatus are not confused – narrative self-comprehension tends to become more “coherent”, “longer”, enhanced through “the pretend content – the experienced emotions, thoughts, perceptions of the characters [as] ... relat[ions] ... to the world and their actions” (Lillard, 2013, pp. 137, 139).

Elizabeth's “surprising” political awareness and mature take on life manifested themselves in “the pathos of the individual's distress” in her juvenile poem ‘On the Cruelty of Forcement...’ (Taylor, 2005, pp. 138, 140). Her creative teenagehood was marked by a growing length of narrative, and depth of self-analysis, seen also in the bulging range of her lyrical speakers' assumed family and communal roles. With time, narrating, she achieved greater factual precision and intimacy of self-revelation. Her self-doubt grew alongside her expanding interest in history. What she wrote in 1814 reflects her sincere devotion to her parents, siblings, and to momentous events – it is a chronicle of her fermenting awareness of life and of the world around her. Examples could be found in: ‘To My Dearest Papa 27th April 1814’; ‘Sent to Mama on 1st May 1814’ (‘Twas dark – the tempest blew aloud’); ‘To Baby’ (‘Dear suffering angel Arabella go’), and its counterpart ‘Addressed to Dearest Papa on His Birthday upon the Recovery of Little Arabella, from a Dangerous Illness’; ‘An Epistle to Dearest Papa in London’, ‘First French Lines’; ‘On Hearing Catalini Sing at Newcastle, and Being Told Her Story, ‘Hannibal's Passage of the Alps’ (Donaldson et al, 2010, vol. 5, pp. 165-192). Questioning her own capacities of thinking and acting, she struggled to accept tragedy: for instance, the sight of a helpless mother's plight and inability to rescue her own children from the grip of poverty, disease, and death (as in the sonnet ‘To Mama...’, based on the actual demise of Elizabeth's baby sister Mary, who died in the spring of 1814, p. 167, n. 1). Through anaphoric repetitions (“No houses...”, “No mortal lived...”, “No man can pass”) working towards the fatal denouement of the mother's suicidal repose in the waters of a “chilling tempest” (ll. 8-14), helplessness and powerlessness build up – the poet could only partially make amends through her poem as a social act, one of remembrance. Illness proved at once an unsettling and a restorative experience, unlocking the poet's self-questioning and self-belittlement (as in ‘An Epistle to Henrietta’, where, next to her ill sister, the poet defined herself as “a chatting parrot”, ll. 1-5, 13-16). Elizabeth contemplated the smallness of a human being's presence against the infinitude of divine grace: her poem ‘First French Lines’, consisting of a mere couple of lines, is an address to God: “Dieu! Je te remercie des biens que tu donnes à moi / Quelle recompense, puis Je offrir à Toi?”. On the other hand, as Beverly Taylor has noted, it was in “loss and faith” (in combination) that the young poet tended to “discover [...] freedom” (Taylor, 2005, p. 151). Which required aporetic, sinuous narrative routes, between a

sense of time as a grand historical body, and the tactile memory of a common mortal (as in ‘Hannibal’s Passage of the Alps’).

“How To Do Things with Words”

Confessed “naughtiness” hides the hope of being forgiven. Elizabeth’s juvenile self-interrogator would seek deliverance by way of carving out images of her own imperfection, placed, like an offering, in the hands of others. Aged eight, she apologized to her maternal grandmother for delaying thanking her for “a beautiful workbox” – she also praised herself as her grandmother’s “very pretty” namesake (BC 1, 1984, pp. 9-10, # 10, 3 Mar, 1814). In an eight-line ode to her paternal uncle she came out as an intrepid fatalist (Browning. In Donaldson, 2010, vol. 5, p. 175; emphasis added):

Dear Sam, accept my humble lay,
How dear to me, I need not say,
And when from Carlton I am gone,
I’ll never cease, thy love to mourn.
At childhood’s age, these faults forgive,
When I am older, if I live,
I’ll offer better verse to thee,
Who’s been so very kind to me:

Like many other poems on reflection bent, the conditional mood of this one suggests the existence of a plot: the anxiety about whether, how, and where the child poet would live. Grammar- and punctuation-wise, there is no overt question. Still, the address seems an inquiry into the way life is, would be, and has been, between a child and an adult. This mini-plot utilizes a popular mechanism of constructing events tutorially: prolepsis. The child poet anticipates things to come, based on recollective actualization of the way things have been so far. If she says she shall be a better writer, she also says she has so far already been one. A palpable temporal line emerges as narrative: self-examination, self-improvement, growth, appreciation of an Other.

Young Elizabeth Barrett held tension inside.³ It is almost certain that “her father was never a man to respect the feelings of others or disguise his own from

3. Despite their father’s dominant nature and “years of arbitrary treatment”, it seems unlikely that the Barrett children of Hope End (the family estate they were to lose in 1832, posterior to the Emancipation Act and their failing business of sugar-cane trading) were ever punished physically (Hewlett, 1953, p. 5). Fond of their father, they respected him, and he served as an exemplarily dutiful person, kindling Elizabeth’s “strongly humanitarian poems” which called for action in an intelligent, inquisitive and un-militant way: one of those was ‘On the Cruelty of Forcement to Man’ (pp. 11-12). Gardner Taplin singled out Elizabeth’s

his children” – his literary daughter parried this feature of his, accumulating internal “resentment, guilt”, becoming “confused” and “increasingly at war with herself” (Dally, 1989, pp. 17-18, 20), which could be one reason behind the vehemently dramatized questioning of the ways of the world, and the expressed need to share by way of narrating. Her innately subversive, auto-didactic narratorial skills could have been propelled also by a longing to compensate for “the gaps in her education” she was well aware of (Dennis, 1996, p. 31): a young tragedian, she would poetically carnivalize her life as that of an outcast, she would tell of the woes of becoming a woman. Yet, soberly enough, “despite her fairytale setting[s]”, Barrett was enviably well-informed of “current events on the world stage” – she frequently employed “innocent children in the tradition of Wordsworthian Romanticism to contrast their spontaneous freshness and wonderment with the grief and loss of experience,” in “service” of “social reform” (Taylor, 2008, pp. 410, 414). She would deal harshly with young shrews, building counterpoints to reveal character contrast, thinking how she could act in their stead. So signals the initial exclamation of one of her earliest poems: “How foolish to slumber away from the light, / And slumber away from the time” (‘On Early Rising’, ll. 1-2). In this unfinished poetical allegory, the idleness of the girl “Slothful” is counteracted by the energy of the girl “Health”. A fragmentary six-line cautionary narrative, this is also a compliment to its young author’s boldness of self-trial whereby she admits the duality of her own nature and the dichotomous essence of intellectual labor set between two extremes. It is the latter that motivates the element of choice as a plot engine which extends the responsibility for initiating this story and for its self-evident (though unuttered) finale to the speaker herself. A self-disquieting voice instructs against irrational flights in ‘Near to a shady wood where fir trees grew:’ a young “niece” sneaks away from her uncle who rescues her. Disobedience and self-recovery conjoin in laying the foundations of self-authorization.

J. L. Austin believed that “the uttering of the word is, indeed, usually, or even the, leading incident in the performance of the act, ... which is also the object of the utterance;” the illocutionary element (e.g. a promise made, or indignation verbally presented) presupposes an addressee, respondent, or a reaction to the perpetrator’s intention (meant and voiced as a question), sometimes disguised as an emotional plea to oneself, but one containing, in fact, a stimulus to respond

wildly enthusiastic faith and her “forthright manner of expression” fostered on the grown-up provocative reading she had done by her teens: Tom Paine, Voltaire, Hume, Mary Wollstonecraft, Homer, Plato, Horace, Dante, Ovid, Shakespeare, Byron, etc. (Taplin, 1957, pp. 9-10, 21-22). Rosalie Mander insisted on Elizabeth’s early tomboyishness and tantrum-prone character, insinuating that the origin of her early creative impulse could be related to her father’s disciplinarian supervision of her composition and translation practice; an auto-didactic frame of mind would propel further the performative reservoir of words and of writing which became a duty, standard, and routine aimed at improving the young writer’s own self by way of noting and instructing others (Mander, 1980, pp. 1-3, 8). Hence the discursive genre diversity of Elizabeth’s juvenilia: odes, epistles, essayistic self-revelations, etc.

and insinuating a perlocutionary effect – “a non-conventional ‘physical’ action” – issuing out of a mere “constative utterance” (Austin, 1962, pp. 8, 22, 98-99, 109-110). Elizabeth’s first poem ever (?1812), recorded in her own hand, a lament over the unjust impressment of men to serve in the military conflict between England and the United States at the time of England’s war with France (of which she might have known through family discussions on published news in the spring of 1812; Donaldson, 2010, vol. 5, p. 159), is a terse illocutionary act which narrativizes an intelligent and responsible young citizen’s dilemma. Addressing herself, just this dilemma-reality the young poet turns into a matter in need of solution – a four-line offensive against ignorance:

Ah! The poor lad in yonder boat,
Forced from his wife, his friends, his home,
Now gentle Maiden how can you
Look at the misery of this doom!

Highly performative, this exclamatory provocation is an act of self-indictment – that she has remained complacent and owes an explanation to an Other employed to hear and react. An Other who springs from a self-exodic frame of mind tied to utterances as direct contact with a reality spun out of perceivable thoughts, rather than just of recollections of pieces of news, or facts read about in newspaper reports on politics. Verbally, the poet seems to increase reality by enacting self-reproach (a feature of her mental activity manifested as self-transportation across spaces and times) aimed at improving an Other’s suffering. Which calls for Hans-Georg Gadamer’s hermeneutical understanding of writing as an indispensable presentational augmentation of being:

Every ... presentation is an ontological event and occupies the same ontological level as what is represented. By being presented it experiences, as it were, an increase in being. The content of the picture itself is ontologically defined as an emanation of the original. ... The ideality of the word is what raises everything linguistic beyond the finitude and transience that characterize other remnants of past existence. (Gadamer, 2006, pp. 135).

The poignant narrative intensity (ll. 1 & 2) introducing a poor young man forcibly drawn to military service, leaving behind his family, friends, and his hearth, unfolds also an arresting self-image: how could she sit and watch, impartial, this misery! Complicit in a tragedy through inaction, she winds up the poem’s eventful coil which consumes and implicates her as a perpetrator and rescuer. As she interrogates herself about her own passivity, she narrativizes herself, so that we could get to know her. If she had been ideal, victorious, and unguilty, she would have remained invisible and inaudible. Her faultiness is what births her. Her uttering an appeal liberates the rendition of facts from constative

simplicity, adorns them with the privilege of a special motion in the transition from illocution to perlocution, drives the narrative out of its literariness, and launches it into the experiential vitality of an action of its own: protest.

Narrative is a means of subversive self-recognition. It is born out of, and aims at, the differentiation between two involved in communication as exchange. Personhood, as Paul Ricoeur argued, rests on “identifying reference”, which enhances “self-designation that makes the person not merely a unique type of thing but a self” (Ricoeur, 1994, pp. 27, 32, 39). The interpretable grain of sense in the shortish poem discussed above is the “reciprocity ... between someone who is me and another who is you” (p. 39). The Other is the soldier lad; the addressive “you” refers to a maiden, watching, helpless, the lad’s predicament. Such a dual charge is a clever, over-intuitive, solution to the problem Ricoeur discerned in the communicativeness of narrative per se: “how the “I-you” of interlocution can be externalized in a “him” or a “her” without losing its capacity to designate itself, and further, how the “he/she” of identifying reference can be internalized in a speaking subject designating themselves as an I” (p. 41). Illocution succeeds allocution: “the utterance ... is ... a bipolar phenomenon: it implies simultaneously an “I” that speaks and a “you” to whom the former addresses itself” (p. 43). If “the gentle Maiden” scandalized thus is a self-reference, her vehement narrational emotionalism is no less an act of inciting action – it rests on dialogizing the need to hold someone responsible for the way things are. Yet in the long run, the dedication is to the lad, despite the fact that it may look like an act of self-messaging. The danger rests in the temptation to see “this other” as perhaps “an alter ego”, “a reduplication of myself” (Ricoeur, 1994, pp. 181-182). It seems, however, that this instance could be grasped as part of an “ethics” of doing, such as friendship (rather than just a manifestation of “a psychology of feelings of affection and attachment to others”) – a true “virtue – an excellence – at work in deliberative choices and capable of being elevated to the rank of *habitus*”. Elizabeth’s earliest poem reveals a bi-directional structure through the “reversibility” of roles (“speaker and listener”) in interrogation: the lad and the maiden are two sides of the same coin and could both be recognized as the Other, as “not only the counterpart of the Same but ... the intimate constitution of its sense” (p. 329). The lad who the maiden is not is also the one who she cannot be, or see herself, without. Or, as Ricoeur would wonder: “If another were not counting on me, would I be capable of keeping my word, or maintaining myself?” (p. 341).

Such an impasse – a speaker questioning the order of things in a self-accusatory manner, as if assuming responsibility for all and everyone, which would also indicate the authority deposited in the speaker’s self-perception, erected on the notion of self-sacrifice – is found also in other poems written in 1814. They distill the lyrical narrator’s sentient sight, interrogating her descent, intensifying chthonian imagery which betrays her visions of existential journeys in which

vessels get lost from sight and hope, destitute loners survive on water and herbs, and whole communities beg rescuing in time of natural cataclysms ('In Imitation of Pity the Sorrows of a Poor Old Man', ll. 2-3; 'The Hermit', ll. 2-4, 7-8; 'On an Eruption of Mount Etna!', ll. 3, 5-6, 8, 11-12; Browning in Donaldson et al, 2010, vol. 5, pp. 166-169). The young poet's dedication to alleviating existential ills through narratorial self-subversion, which implicates the sayer as the doer of the action, could also be interpreted as a tutorial auto-constructionist practice founded on image as "an illustration of thought" (rather than some immediately available physical reality in proximity) in spells of self-provocative reduction of the graspable, instances of "epoché", or movement "among appearances", working toward "a philosophy of perception" which actually aims at "transcendence of the perceived", thus becoming a candidate for "the thing itself", in Ricoeur's understanding (Taylor et al, 2024, pp. 153-156). In her further juvenile works, ailing individuals in need of assistance would form a compound "temporal object" (pp. 157-161) delivered out of the poet's first-hand experience of reading, seeing, recollecting, as well as anticipating tragedies, and allowing the progression of her sameness through "impressional content" (in her 1814 poem 'To the Fishing Net...', ll. 3-4', she excoriates murder in a speech defending the life of fish). Elizabeth's first eleven poems are united by their "same referent" through "two modes of givenness" – images of suffering the child-writer would receive through actual encounters with affliction (e.g. a man in need, or a local calamity), and perceptions of suffering the child-writer might want to expose as a reduction of her own temporally defined self (as in 'On a Ship Being Lost at Tynemouth', Browning in Donaldson 2010, vol. 5, pp. 178-179). In her daily routine, very much dependent on adults, young Elizabeth created images of suffering that could inconvenience an unengaged mind. Sometimes, she would draw attention to events allegedly missing from her direct physical involvement with the world. In Ricoeur's terms, she "ma[de] present what [was] absent," "giving ... mental equivalent[s] of the absent" which grew the more noticeable the more she developed her poetical language (Taylor et al, 2024, p. 5). Images of suffering began to function as "traces of ... previous perceptions" of suffering (pp. 7-8), acquiring "residual" viability, "transfer[ring]" what she "derived" as "content of reality" into a new realm, that of "absence" (pp. 7-8, 275). An absence which threatened a placid reality with visions of pain a young intellectual found herself unable to cure, but an intellectual who, at the same time, augmented reality by redirecting it to a referential realm amassed through poetic language, which would permit substantiation of a willingness to act by at least holding oneself responsible to begin with.

Similar self-interrogatory phenomenological reductions of a responsively narratorial caliber would appear to tell apart the mind also of other sensitive early nineteenth-century juvenile English writers. Fourteen-year-old Felicia Hemans (1793–1835), in 'England and Spain: or, Valour and Patriotism' (1807),

raged against the tyranny reigning over Europe at the time of Napoleon's march. The narrative is founded on rhetorical questions, actually self-addressed and indicative of the young poet's own inability to change things and alleviate the destiny of the suffering: "How long shall despots and usurpers reign? / Is honour's lofty soul for ever fled! / Is virtue lost? Is martial ardour dead? / Is there no heart where worth and valour dwell..." (Hemans, 1875, p. 4, ll. 34-37). This informed poetical creative instance maps the life of a "temporal object": suffering as testimony of the receptive apparatus and reactionary potential of the young poet's own, unfolding an agential portfolio of emotions verbally conveyed. Another promising young mind, a heart greater than its feeble age, Scottish juvenile writer Marjory Fleming (1803 – 1811), prematurely taken away by death at a time of an epidemic, in her poems and journals broadcast her measureless love for her family, her gratitude to her patron, cousin Isabella, and her growing awareness of life and the world. Unveiling the Devil in her (McLean, 1999, pp. 25-26), making her own naughtiness a point of narratorial self-reflection (i.e., self-temporalization), Fleming boldly declared her involvement in history. Rather than reverentially describe the life of a monarch, she durst indicate – in a first-person singular form – what she would have done, had she been in royal shoes, also her unhappiness over her own ignorance. The result: a highly self-objectifying interrogative discourse aiming to solve political enigmas and parade fermenting curiosity and an embryonic literary talent: "I cannot think without a sigh ... / The King was killed I'm sorry to say... / ... / I have not got a rhyme for that ..." ('The Life of Mary Queen of Scots', McLean, 1999, pp. 59, 62); "I would have don't if I was he / ... I'd be frightened for a conspiracy" ('The Life of the King James', pp. 66, 68). The *what-if-I-were-him* element implies self-subversion, justifying narrative as a dialogue between two participants: *Self* and *Other*, or *I* and *You*. Barrett Browning's 'On the Cruelty of Forcement...' is a dialogue of this kind: it is an attempt to totalize time by way of an artistic focus on an event of major social significance and of an ethical order, one questioning the young writer's own comfort zone of social standing and mental balance. In her attempt to articulate a past experience – including cultural memory as an indirect, though no less active, involvement in social tragedies – her own sense of time captured an event remote enough from her yet one which helped form a gestalt of the world to suit her own socially proactive imagination. In this gestalt, incompleteness (seen also in the fragmentary nature of her first poem ever) proved a productive *modus vivendi*. Fictively, the juvenile poet would extend an *in-actu* event, making a new inroad into reality which would begin, further in her juvenile works of social value, to acquire a more complete referential substantiality in need of linguistic expression. Reinhart Koselleck's reflections on the (counter)sequential interrelationship between becoming and saying, as well as on the benefit of interior, quasi-totalizing, selective, experiences of time, may provide food for thought on juvenile writers' historical consciousness:

What has happened, and has happened beyond my own experience, is something that I can experience merely by way of speech or writing. Even if language may – in part – have been only a secondary factor in the enactment of doings and sufferings, as soon as an event has become past, language becomes the primary factor without which no recollection and no scientific transposition of this recollection is possible. The anthropological primacy of language for the representation of past history thus gains an epistemological status, for it must be decided in language what in past history was necessitated by language and what was not. In anthropological terms, any “history” constitutes itself through oral and written communication between generations that live together and convey their own respective experiences to one another. Only when, with the passing of older generations, the orally conveyed space of recollection melts away, does writing become the primary carrier of historical imparting (Koselleck, 2002, p. 27).

Language creates, as well as dismantles, truth and fiction. The dramatic mode of individuation, of which self-questioning through making “a moral statement” is an expression, had appealed to women writers since the late eighteenth century – it gradually became part of a pedagogy of learning through fiction (Ruwe, 2014, pp. 19, 32-33, 37). One variety of instructive fiction was the “dramatic-lecture monologue” where the lesson was contrived by an adult, “or a good child”, who scolded the disobedient; there were also narrative “papillonades” (pp. 41-42) encouraging transformative self-reflection based on love and cognition of Nature (as in Elizabeth’s poem “To the Fishing Net...”). Dialogic narration burgeoned, assuming a gentle Lockean model of honesty, insisting on the rearing of a healthy spirit in a child entitled to grow up enlightened, virtuous, moderate, not “dejected” but willing to strive for verity as internal necessity and inspiration (Locke, 1779, pp. 49-50, 201). The motivational element of this philosophy could be perceived in one’s ability to critique unjustness, and fight pain and social ills caused by ignorance and insensitivity. In her early poetry, Elizabeth took a self-demanding stance to adhere to duty and empathy, while also developing narrative as the pleasure of self-acquaintance in a wide world of social interaction. The expansive plots of her juvenile lyrical dramas (marked by elliptical sentences, impulsive punctuation, and catastrophically accumulating tension in descriptions of woe) invite the reader to abstain from, as prominent educationalist Maria Edgeworth would put it, “precipitately suspect[ing] [the child]... of falsehood” (Edgeworth, 1855, p. 151) – they encourage recognition of linguistic dexterity and a sense of integrity based on careful research of an Other as part of self-knowledge.

Empathic Ex-Centric Self-Migration

Self-doubting narrative arising out of a faithful devotion to an Other and a hope to grow into a better and more intelligent person matured in Elizabeth's two autobiographical essays, *My Own Character* (1818), and *Glimpses into My own Life and Literary Character* (1820). Both display a fear of self-revelation, yet respect for the primacy of her own internal voice: "I proceed to the investigation of myself with no small anxiety. ... I have endeavored to insinuate myself into the windings of other souls, ... but I have never, even in imagination looked into my own heart – How few indeed know themselves!" (Barrett, 1974, p. 119, emphasis added). The first essay narrativizes the young writer's yearning to discover an innate principle of life in herself, exposing, simultaneously, idealism and empiricism. Naming Locke her role-model, she is driven by a "desire of improvement, ... of reaching the truth," so that she "may be forgiven" the sin of ignorance. The second chronicles events between the ages of three and fourteen: becoming "Poet Laureat of Hope End" (dubbed so by her own father); writing a major epic, 'The Battle of Marathon' (1820); anxieties about self-governance and obstinacy of mind; her legacy bequeathed to other ambitious young intellectuals imperiled by impulses of self-writing, "never ... write your own life!" (pp. 122-123, 125, 127-128, 131, 133). Elizabeth's earliest poems, discussed in this paper, were precursory lessons. They underpin her juvenile prose-fiction tales which would exercise further her instructive capacities: 'Sebastian or the Lost Child', 'The Way to Humble Pride', Disobedience' (all 1814), 'Julia or Virtue. A Novel.' (1815), 'Charles de Grandville' (1818). Commonly enough, events got narrated in juxtapositional order, contrastively, in the examination of the self, of virtue and vice, with a prosopopoeic supply of faces a young writer, equally dreading recognition and de-personalization, would autodidactically require. In one of Elizabeth's earliest poems, 'On Early Rising', the dialectics of self-formation was narratively developed through the exposure of the habits of two girls, 'Health' and 'Slothful'. In 'Ah! Virtue – come my steps to stay', "Vice" and "Virtue" emerge contrapuntally, with two roads for a young mind to choose between. The poem 'Oh! Thou! Whom Fortune led to stray' seems like a didactic agenda: self-immunization against swerving from the right path (allegorically, a "poor Man" is invited to abandon the road of perdition and return to righteousness). Interconnected in their instructive worth, these poems showcase the ontological reach of the young writer's imagination through a circuitous model: a departure from a source and a return to it, the young heroine illuminated.

Purportedly, the three poems of ca. 1812–1814 analyzed above generate Ricoeurian "meanings without a referent" (Taylor et al, p. 162), aiming at no one specifically, coming from no one particularly. On the other hand, they develop the author's own signature through implied self-reformation. Such "objective inexistence[s]", or "modalities of belief" (in the train of thought of Husserl, which Ricoeur followed), sabotage the young poet's self-certainty, showing meaning

to be outwardly bound but inwardly propelled by “the consciousness of the ‘picture’” as “an existential experience”, rather than as a “perceptual reality” (p. 165). To become known, such a reality needs time – it unfolds as a narrative subverting the author’s beliefs and experiential competence. The picturing of a poor man’s downfall creates an ideational time-space for a growing author’s desire for self-fulfillment and self-display. Contrapuntally, it provides “a window, whose frame is very important, since the act of imagination is itself framed by it” (p. 166). Elizabeth’s juvenile poems evidence of her wish to sustain an ontology of her own by way of proleptic narratorial (self)questioning. “[A] performative speech act, ... prolepsis ... insists on ... simultaneity” – of the meaningful picture which narrative unfolds as, whereby creative act-moments of saying, or uttering (writing), as Laurie Langbauer expounds, are induced by the young writer’s “presupposed prematurity requir[ing] that they actively engage with questions of identity and meaning-making and ruthlessly interrogate preconceptions of causality and development” (Langbauer, 2016, pp. 6-8). Barrett Browning’s early poems are acts of “complicating [her] ... moment in time” (pp. 6-8): poetical speech acts (i.e., “What if...”, “Would I myself...”, etc.) responding to, rather than just inciting, meaning as commenced or required by an Other.

Self-interrogatory disquisitions on private conscience, communal faith, and time as the eternity of the presence of the divine form the architecture of Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s juvenile poetry. These are anti-utilitarian excursions amidst Wordsworthian wise Nature whose many-tongues the young writer taught herself to speak, as in ‘Soft as the dew from Heaven descends’, ‘Soft were the murmurs of the gentle rill, and ‘Its golden plumage glittered on its breast’ – all united by a first-personal-singular narrative stance through “quasi-miraculous fusion[s] between the event recounted and the narrating instance, ... both late (final) and “omnitemporal” in their moral spark (Genette, 1983, p. 70). Elizabeth’s early nature poems paint pictures of serenity and order, pregnant, nonetheless, with tension and grief over a world ruled by irredeemable fleetingness. “Early risers on their way” (‘Soft as...’, l. 9) – a self-image of the poet’s own – witness the “panting snowdrop[’s] drooping head” (‘Soft were...’, ll. 2-5). Conundrums arise: why is one soul spared death, while another is not? Such dilemmas may erode, narratively, the consistency of an onlooker’s own place and framework of mind, transforming a poetical texture woven out of statements into a palpable under-tier of rhetorical questions. If the singularity of an utterance were taken as a post-facto phenomenon ensuing from an event regretted, but resuscitated, once, by the act of writing, and by implication, further, by an act of reading by another, these poetical tales would look like belatedness. However, the simple lessons they convey could only be grasped as an anticipated event-content to unfold at the outset of the act of reading. Each such cautionary poetical interrogatory auto-narrative is therefore “final” yet “inaugural” (Genette, 1983, p. 72). Such perceptual duality, or complementarity, that Elizabeth’s early poetical narratives cleverly maintain (see

also ‘Ye lovely lilies of the vale’, ll. 1-2, 4) arises simultaneously out of two senses: beginning and ending. It may also relate to a greater, cosmic time (and natural phenomena) the young poet sought to connect individual life to, in her heartfelt resistance against a mechanical view on life that the advent of the “new scientific pedagogy” promised in confining physical and mental spaces to “increasing [...] schematiz[ation]” and indoor learning (Gargano, 2008, pp. 12, 14-15).

Resulting from “the interplay between likeness and negation”, recollection and anticipation, a young writer’s mental agility seems founded on an embedded anxiety about adulthood as a venerable and exemplary position to speak back from. Imagining what one could be, as Ricoeur argued, they the young writer would reveal “fictions ... [as] components or stages in some strategy of discourse, thought, or action that [would] provide a framework for the mimetic function,” such as “writing a poem” within which “the poet [would] provide images” (Taylor et al., 2024, p. 221). The work of imagination could not be severed from “the work of discourse”, and discourse rests on constant reconfirmation, through interrogation, of its own current, which could be captured, for instance, in Elizabeth’s desire to become an other-worded being, such as a flower, or a bird, whereby she would thrive “parasitically” on what she was not. A tangential proof of this is the prefatory autobiographical note attached to the poem ‘Its golden plumage...’ (Browning in Donaldson et al., 2010, vol. 5, p. 163), in which Elizabeth inserted her impressions of a bird’s fledgling’s infancy, insinuating her own volatile and temporary position as a child, and perhaps as a mother-to be. That the poet occupied a middle ground between likeness and negation, as discussed above, could also be seen in further poems written in 1814. Discursively (sometimes with the help of a direct *You* address, or even naming the lyrical narrator as ‘Ba’ – a short family name for Elizabeth), self-questioningly, based on statement-like strings of sentences, these poems emboss a young person’s power of agitating the kingdom of nature to seek justification for her own existence: ‘On the Return of the Fine Season’, Occasioned by a Fall of Snow’, ‘To Flora’, ‘Upon the Rose Blowing after the Lilly’, ‘On Visiting Matlock, Derbyshire’, ‘On First Seeing the Sea at Tynemouth’, ‘Ah! Now, stern winter’s chilling blast returns’, ‘After a Shower of Rain’, and ‘The Seasons. Spring’. A “gentle Maiden” willing to satiate her zest for learning, Elizabeth camouflaged herself as a sufferer, pauper, lost, fearing uninvolvedness, expected to discover the true meaning of vice and virtue while protecting the life of an Other (e.g. the conscripted “poor lad in yonder boat”). She thus became a Ricoeurian “objective inexistence”: a reality of the imagination, developing at once the having-occurred and the about-to-occur in further poems of 1814 governed by young cavillers and questioners: ‘Mine’s the sweet home in yonder cell’, ‘Oh virtues gone, sweet virtue flies’, ‘A Song’ (‘Peter Quarry...’), ‘By a large and spacious plain’, ‘By the side of a hill hollow’, ‘As I wandered along thro’ a wood’, ‘Down in a Vale a cottage rose’, ‘In a Vale a lilly droops’.

A juvenile author is a Janus-like creature – learner and tutor, infant and grown-up, carrying, and carried by, discourse, in a flow between the contingent moment of the occurrence of events (recollected or anticipated) in the story and the narrative currency of speaking (or reading). Elizabeth's earliest poems are fragmentary spells of contemplative self-othering: a martyrology of human stoicism, a demonstration of fanning out identity into a panoply of endless possibilities of spiritual self-reconstruction through striving for beyond-human goodness. Which may invite Martin Buber's reflections on "the development of the soul in the child ... inextricably bound up with that of the longing for the Thou, with the satisfaction and the disappointment of this longing, with the game of is experiments and the tragic seriousness of his perplexity" (Buber, 1937, p. 28). The Thou being a divinely-pitched Self's moral imperative, a devout criterion of justice obtained through dialogue. As a child poet, Elizabeth defined the child as the Other prone to commit errors. She clung to a restorative purity of mind and soul in a world of sightless insensitivity where "the meeting of self with other" would be "the test of their humanity", but also a kind of "self-enclosure that" would further "elicit the adult's longing and fear" of the thought that "the child mark[ed] the beginning and the end of desire" (McGillis, 2012, 103, 113-114). The performative element of her earliest poems could be discerned in the creation of aesthetic distance: the lyrical speaker would meet, and talk to (if indirectly), another child (a sufferer, an interlocutor), which would help the juvenile poet demarcate and deepen her understanding of herself. Such reflexivity would prove self-subversive: the poet would have to recognize the face of misery and injustice in a poor child-Other, which is how she would question her own mind and soul. Self-disquieting communication would become narrative as a wish to inhabit a shared time and space.

Toward the Interior

A recipient, in her eleven earliest poetical tales (ca. 1812–1814), of the life of other children, an observer of the woes and toil of lonely waiters on providence, and of maidens abandoned, or themselves having prodigally abandoned home, the juvenile poet yielded a boon of self-catechetical reflections. In more recent times, Laura Rotunno has contextualized Elizabeth Barrett Browning's self-questioning narratorial voice as a woman "artist's acknowledgement of ... her own unique nature and subsequent ability to understand and interact with others", which resulted, further, in larger-scale hybrid-genre "texts of social significance", such as *Aurora Leigh* (Rotunno, 2008, pp. 58-60). In her earliest poems, the narrative stance, from a linguistic perspective, consists predominantly of statements recovering some past, and yet the dramatization of self-questioning is no less apparent, if only because of the insistence on the defining presence of a child–adult pair of participants in a dialogue of mutually educational merit. So it is in 'Near to a shady wood where Fir trees

grew' (the lyrical narrator warns of the detrimental effects of disobedience as she introduces, but leaves unfinished, the tale of a niece who abandons her uncle and their pious little home cottage), 'Loft, on the top of that high hill' (the "lonely cottage" stands alone, lamenting Ellen's "hapless fate"), and 'Upon the boundaries of a lofty wood' (little Ellen of the little cottage loses her father – her sole friend – but gains the eternal blessing of the Divine, or "Fortune love"). Death looks like an objectless reality that curtails yet amasses experience, to the effect of creating a Ricoeurian "impressional content" – an entity lasting as story time as well as the time of the narrative, and supplying an eventfulness short of which the young poet simply could not be. From a biopsychological perspective, death, for a young writer, could be related to a self-antagonistic, yet magnetically compelling, atavistic fear of the unfamiliar, the inexpressible, the morally confounding (Cf. Darwin, 1877, pp. 288, 291). Which would result in quests for a way out of the darkest recesses of one's own mind through life-sustaining verbal activeness. Remembered or anticipated, pictures of another being's demise would work cathartically, presaging the limits of the poet's own life. Self-interrogation would legitimize a living individual's place and worth in life, particularly in poetical I-narratives, where Other and Self would form an osmotic construct permitting the flip-flopping of roles in staging also the limits of language.

Perceiving herself as a sinner, the child writer Elizabeth Barrett would end up in a kind of suspension, or restriction, of life through which she could throw her own image into relief. She would construct an identity through self-denial, incompleteness, nothingness, and mortality. Thus, the array of roles she could be captured performing in her very early poetry could function as what Ricoeur defined as "stages" in the process of self-recognition, if recognition – i.e., telling apart something knowable in time and space, such as the self's own manifestations – be taken as a sequence of "short event[s] of thought" flowing, generically, into poems of occasional, confessional, or devotional nature (Taylor et al., 2024, p. 223). "Thinking as" and "seeing as" would then correlate, as the poet would attest her presence by way of questioning her right to be. Defending justice (as in her very first poem ever), expressing her unconditional love for her family and for God, she thought as a common mortal and saw as a common mortal. Both ways, she was the underdog. But she was also an attention-seeker. Imperfect and sinful, she proved the same (*idem*) as before, and other (*ipse*) than an imagined better counterpart who she strove to emulate – an expression of an ultimate (Ricoeurian) connection between "likeness and negation" that the "intellectual process" of composition perforce feeds on and itself generates by suspending time as sense (pp. 241-242). Hence Elizabeth's narratorial self-fictionalization as self-disagreement.

Conclusions

Elizabeth Barrett Browning's earliest eleven poems (ca. 1812–1814) are united in their focus on family virtues, respect for the Other, care for wild nature, and yet defense of individual freedom. Moreover, they dramatize an advanced child's desire to perceive herself critically, maintain her memory in good repair, and exercise her language skills for producing and preserving images of the world, life, and time. The current investigation has shown that the young poet would fend off childhood amnesia, relishing the consecration of experiences through the development of discourse, giving "[an] account of childhood while [she] ... lived in it" (Laing, 2024, pp. 71-72, 76, 78). She cherished her own experiential capacities, piling up recollections and images of bravery, metonymizing herself narratively as a "gentle Maiden", "Ellen" of the wood, an "early riser", "a long-loved niece", and rural flowers which spoke the language of youth. Such imaginative being could perhaps also be addressed as what Paul L. Harris has termed "ontological lulling": a kind of "availability heuristic" (Harris, 2013, pp. 34, 38), that is, when a child (aged five to seven, as Elizabeth was at the time) recognizes an event as unrealistic in terms of an actual occurrence, and yet possible as part of the phenomenology of narrating self-conflict for the sake of individual transformation. The research has emblemized a highly self-conscious frame of mind as authorial being. Lingering between what she was (a child) and what she was not (an adult), but was probably expected to behave like, overly sensitive, Elizabeth might have been bemused by, yet satisfied with, such an ambivalent place to occupy – between the known and the knowable; at peace with, but also in a war against, herself. Narrative was her rite of passage – narrating, she questioned her right to be.

Declaration of Generative AI and AI-assisted technologies in the writing process

No AI tools have been used in preparation of this paper. The text is a faithful reflection of the author's own research and all bibliographic sources have been dutifully referenced.

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