



## Writing as Truth-Seeking, According to Elizabeth Barrett Browning's *Essay on Mind* (1826)

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Whether devoted to family members (*To My Father on His Birth-Day, Verses to My Brother*), poets (Pope, Byron), or patriots and national heroes (Rigas Feraios, Rafael del Riego y Núñez), Elizabeth Barrett Browning's occasional verses, companion poems, elegies, and philosophical reflections in her earliest published collection, *An Essay on Mind, with Other Poems* (1826), represent a versatile dialogue with a past which she perused consistently to claim a voice and identity of her own. She conceptualized time, suggesting that the emergence of selfhood lay across a journey “to the grave” (viz. supplementary analysis of *Book I, An Essay*). This article aims at revealing the ontological range of her writing, according to *An Essay on Mind*. From a hermeneutic perspective, the essay defends the writer's faith in experiential knowledge as a foundation for the creative process while it also explores her interest in learning as a duty and in poetry as truth-seeking and truth-telling.

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In view of the finitude of our historical existence, it would seem that there is something absurd about the whole idea of a unique, correct interpretation. (...) the obvious fact that every interpretation tries to be correct serves only to confirm that the non-differentiation of the mediation (Vermittlung) from the work itself is the actual experience of the work. This accords with the fact that aesthetic consciousness is generally able to make the aesthetic distinction between the work and its mediation only in a critical way – i.e. where the interpretation breaks down. (Gadamer 118)

...what is writ, is writ,  
Would it were worthier! But I am not now  
That which I have been – and my visions flit  
Less palpably before me ...

Byron, *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*, Canto IV: CLXXXV, ll. 5–8

Far from being either a dilettante popular imitator, or a deliberate messenger of received wisdom, in her earliest collection *An Essay on Mind, with Other Poems* (published anonymously on 25 March 1826 and with no subsequent reprints in her own lifetime) Elizabeth Barrett Browning revealed an instinctively

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sensuous, as well as a conscientiously methodical understanding of reading as being in dialogue. The *Essay* itself consists of two *Books*, prefaced by the poetess's own *Analyses* to each, and followed by nearly sixty explanatory notes of her own. It spans a well of topics, authors, and genres across time and space. Being a passport of a young writer's desire to express her own professional ambitions, amend her own character, and claim a place of her own amidst living and imagined human presences, it is a most impressive study of the human Mind and of poetry as truth. The titles of the poems in the whole volume of 1826 – e.g. *To My Father on His Birthday*, *Stanzas on the Death of Lord Byron*, *Memory*, *The Past*, *The Dream etc.* – imply at once actuality (real people) and abstraction (concepts). Barrett Browning's commemorative poetry, which could not be severed from her unceasing enthusiasm for translation (most obviously *Prometheus Bound*, 1833 and 1850) and interpretation at large, could be said to draw the contours of her emerging desire for self-portraiture palpable in all her further work and resulting, notably and most ambiguously, in *Aurora Leigh* (1856). Writing the *Essay*, she was stretching the boundaries, also, of her understanding of “old” versus “new”, recording and re-writing occurrences from her own life, as evidenced by her own *Preface* and *Notes to An Essay on Mind*. The *Essay* reveals a young talent's desire to see poetry as shared ground. Her early work (inclusive of her juvenile cautionary tales, and her essays *My Character* (1818) and *Glimpses into My Own Life and Literary Character* (1820))<sup>1</sup> stands out as an example of an extremely self-conscious, erring, assiduous learner, remembering past yet testing established beliefs, eager to promote some common truth whose increase was to be found in poetry as conversation between individuals as well as between Man and Nature.

The *Preface* to the whole volume which houses *An Essay on Mind* indicates a high degree of inter-dependence between subject and object of poetic composition (a feature not unequivocally acclaimed) held together by the firm conviction that composition is no mere “playing at skittles” (Barrett Browning, *Works, Essay*, 78)<sup>2</sup> but a serious engagement to perceive reality, to understand how life works, and to make sense an attainable item. Hence the moralistic aura around EBB's hermeneutics of verity in the mutual validation between poetic genius and social need: “(...) the subject supports the writer, as much as it is supported by him”; “‘Ethical poetry’, says that immortal writer we have lost [Byron], is the highest of all poetry, as the highest of all earthly objects must be moral truth.”; “Poetry is the enthusiasm of the understanding” (77, 78). Such a take on creativity, if perhaps essentialist, implies transcription of, experimentation with, and debate on, the matter of literary heritage – a thematic orientation EBB fostered throughout her life. The quoted selection hints at the writer's striking volume of responsiveness and obligation, as she soldered physical palpability, intellectual comprehensibility, and a leaning toward the unity between creator and creation. Time stands out as a deeply humanized phenomenon. Reality appears text-bound and a concern with an other's experience: Byron, Bacon, Locke, Pope, Newton, Plato, Alighieri, Shakespeare, Horace, Descartes, Leibnitz, Spinoza, Dryden, Hobbes, St. John the Evangelist, Milton, Racine, Corneille, Thucydides – the list of silent contributors to the poetess' artistic growth appears endless in the *Essay*.

Although Barrett Browning held an empirical interest in writing as research of the actually perceivable she was idealistically elevated above the ordinary and the practical, looking for a common spir-

<sup>1</sup> Mastery of language as a human being's most own way of contact with other human beings, journeying beyond the bounds of home to gain knowledge, compassion for the suffering of another man, and adoration of the great ancients and of the Enlightenment – these may be some places of intersection between *An Essay on Mind* and the very few examples (apart from her correspondence in the period 1810 – ca. 1826) of the poetess's juvenile prose-fiction work (her tales of 1814 – 1818 *Sebastian or the Lost Child*, *The Way to Humble Pride*, *Disobedience*, *Julia*, and *Charles de Grandville*). Much of the content of Barrett Browning's two early essays, *My Character* and *Glimpses into...* could be seen as prefiguration of her mental turmoil in her *Essay* of 1826. These early works evidence of the writer's debate with herself, through Locke, – on the innateness of God, on self-chronicling and self-chastising by way of learning from works read, and on a Donne-like metaphysics of belonging to a greater physical and ideal whole: “My days may pass away as the moonbeam from the ocean or as the little particle of sand which now glimmers in the evening ray and now is borne away in the evening breeze!” (Barrett 120–22).

<sup>2</sup> Quotations from Elizabeth Barrett Browning's poetry follow Sandra Donaldson's authoritative five-volume edition – by page or/and line number(s). The widely preferred abbreviation of the poetess's name – EBB – has also been adhered to.

itual origin, which urged her to travel between man and art, across time as the culture of past, as well as to negotiate between actual achievement and imagined end: “while I may have failed in representing, I have never ceased to love Truth” (79).<sup>3</sup> Amidst the genii of the past she made room for herself by way of studying man’s mind and “mental operations” in the conceptual interim between “History, Physics, and Metaphysics” (78) while actually positing Man as a thinking and feeling creature between “physics”, or efficiency, and abstraction, or “final causes” (78). She both revered, and strove to break free from, role models – literary predecessors and her own family. Elizabeth acknowledged the instrumental role of the imagination in human understanding – beyond the confines of shallow aesthetic pleasure. In addition, the imagination grew to be an investigative tool which enhanced self-comprehension by way of examining “historical facts” with regard to “moral inference” (Barrett Browning *Essay, Book I, “Analysis of the First Book”* 83–84).

In Book I of the *Essay*, talking of Robert Southey, the poetess masqueraded as “writer” and “reader of history” at the same time, arguing the advantageousness of “experience to be derived from the errors of others” while arriving at a feasibly hermeneutic conclusion: “it is impossible to have a just idea of PARTS, without acquiring a knowledge of their relative situation in the whole” (84). The danger of knowledge originating “in partial knowledge” (84) could be attributed to a potentially narrowly idealistic perception of the poetic mind as directly revelatory of God’s supreme creative potency found in the complexity and orderliness of interrelated natural forms of structure and content. A hierarchical view she would question further on, retaining, nonetheless, the priority of past in her determination to grasp mortality whose “deep waters span/ The shores of Genius, and the paths of Man!” (Barrett Browning, *Essay, Book I, ll. 67–68*).

The *Essay* demonstrates Barrett Browning’s unquenchable dedication to articulating ways of acquiring knowledge in view of man’s finitude. Insightful references to, quotation from, explanation of, and debate with, various other literary and philosophical works do point at the poetess’ view on creativity as a caring transformative agency in life as appreciation of elseness. An example could be discovered in her interpreting Prometheus’ demiurgic role: “Prometheus of our earth! whose kindling smile / May warm the things of clay a little while...” (Barrett Browning, *Essay, Book I, ll. 121–22*). What is memorable about Prometheus in this case (and in the development of his lyrical persona further on in the *Essay*), is that his creationist significance in breathing life to inanimate forms appears to be one of derivativeness

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<sup>3</sup> EBB’s “straining to emulate those she admired” and with regard to whose work she tailored her own writing ambitions put her in a vice between an internal obligation to recognize the role of her family and the dream of reaching as high as the great ancients, just as well as the great moderns, in what Margaret Forster’s perspicacious study of Elizabeth’s life and work notes as the nobility of “trying to express universal truths” (Forster 27–28, 32, 34). Immoderately self-critical, she would accept rebukes from, yet argue against, two immediate classicists and experts on form in poetry she knew in person: Sir Uvedale Price, and the blind Scholar Hugh Stuart Boyd. Both – in direct communication and in correspondence – deemed it their right to express their honest opinion on her work: Price on her *Essay*, in particular, and Boyd on her poems (and especially on her translations of Aeschylus’s Prometheus). Both trusted her and Elizabeth helped both – Price with discussing his *An Essay on the Modern Pronunciation of the Greek and Latin Languages* (1827), and Boyd with translation from Old Greek during the time of his professional decline. These occupations indicate two important and concurrently developing aspects of EBB’s work: she was at once and until her death “a classicist as well as a poet” – a kind of “bifocalism,” as Fiona Sampson’s most recent biography of the poetess argues, which entails, also, strong will and obedience, fervor and measure, “Dionysian and Apollonian” sparkles (Sampson 52–53). Targeting self-improvement, she apparently drew a thin line between professional worship of, and emotional attraction to, great minds, such as that of Byron (who she also mourned in *Stanzas on the Death of Lord Byron* in 1824, at age 18). In her *Essay*, “Mind” being her focus of research, she was also “flexing intellectual and creative muscle” (55), while aiming at writing as the most serious socially useful and personally satisfying endeavour. Uneasy with people of her own age, living in the bliss of the peaceful seclusion that the family estate Hope End offered, fearing “making a fool of herself”, she would rather have people come to her, than go to them for a conversation (Dally 30–31). Her *Essay*, thus, stands as an early and eloquent attempt to overcome ignorance by way of ex-centric (if I were to allude to Wolfgang Iser) stepping beyond the borderline of self – actually, to return to a more adequate perception of self by way of comprehension of others.

rather than absolute originality if related the poetess's constant addresses to a greater "Eternal Genius! mystic essence" (l. 127). Thus, Barrett Browning disclosed the metamorphic essence of creativity, denying the possibility of confirming the totality of human experience just as well as the absoluteness of a singular super-consciousness. The poetess adhered to the necessity of perceiving knowledge as an Other's wisdom, learning *from* others, overcoming prejudices, and – at this stage of her poetical development – recognizing the primacy of the senses. Compare: "The gentle Cowley of our native clime, / Lisp'd his first accents in Aöonian rhyme" (ll. 136–137); "Some hear, from Nature's haunts, her whisper'd call; / And Mind hath triumph'd by an apple's fall" (ll. 146–147); "And human reason judges natural things" (l. 313). Unable and unwilling to draw distinction between ideality and materiality, the poetess somehow prefigured Hans-Georg Gadamer's concept of truth as rooted in pre-conditioned, or *prejudiced*, yet experiential, thinking. In discussing the functions of different sciences and of fields of humanitarian research, in her *Essay*, Barrett Browning propounded that perception based on immediate physical contact and direct communication with tactile objects ought to be filtered through a reliable aesthetic consciousness, a meticulous gaze back at past and written sources of knowledge. She thus arrived at writing as ontic exercise nuanced by lofty ideality. Philosophy would "turn the pow'rs of thinking back on thought – / ... / The point, where human mingles with divine"; "The world her lesson, and her teacher Time"; "She [philosophy] lifts off History's faded tapestry, / ... / She rakes cold graves, and chronicles their clay" (ll. 201, 203, 207, 209, 217). "Reason" she exposed as a reliable tool for learning – facts taken in isolation she pronounced "doubtful" and, in view of the historical distance between scholar and object of investigation (which would also have to take into account man's finitude), certainty of knowledge would appear but a chimera.

In her evolving sense of time, the poetess strove to know more and more, and tendrils of ideas learned from other great men of letters, scientists, and philosophers styled her own declamatory tone while she summoned the reader to make an unbiased effort and perceive truth which "appears falsehood to the dazzled sight, / The comment apes the fact, and black seems white" (ll. 334–335). To EBB gaining knowledge came to equal overcoming the trap of ignorance which threatened creativity by way of urging a malignant feeling of self-satisfaction which could stem from the delusion that to know would mean to accept unconditionally without questioning. Knowledge could be a "Procrustian bed" (l. 309) on which interpreter and interpreted could appear indistinguishably and at once augmented and diminished in their interrelatedness, within the contingency of temporal distance between producer and recipient of message, which jeopardized any claim on absolute understanding (Cf. ll. 362–365, 376–379, 394–396, 443, 453). In effect, while Barrett Browning, in her *Essay*, aimed at unity, she took no lesser interest in particularity. Ostensibly contrary, these two approaches dovetailed in the diplomacy between physical experience and intellectual reflection, primary response and spiritual prowess:

'Tis easy, as Experience may aver,  
 To pass from general to particular.  
 But most laborious to direct the soul  
 From studying parts, to reason on the whole:  
 Thoughts, train'd on narrow subjects, to let fall;  
 And learn the unison of each and all. (ll. 545–550)

As noted by Simon Avery, the *Essay* was "mostly written" when the poetess was only eighteen – a demonstration of her early tendency for historical investigation and of her lifetime anxiety about "the instability of 'truth'" (Avery 82). One would have to add the apparentness of Elizabeth's philological critical verve: to evaluate time as literary history and to temporalize her literary contemporaries, many of whom commemorated, also, in her critical essays (certainly Tennyson and Carlyle) for popular miscellanies (Kenyon 163).<sup>4</sup> In her seminal study *Elizabeth Barrett Browning. The Origins of a New Poetry* (1989) Mer-

<sup>4</sup> While for many motivated women writers translation, editing, reviewing, and "other hack work" might have been ways of "signing their professional aspirations" for the sake of surviving a masculine professional literary London (Peterson 125, 138), Elizabeth's career – until the late summer of 1832 (the sale of the family estate of Hope End) – was one of moderate seclusion and provincial peace. Under the protection-dictatorship of her father,

min draws our attention to the fact that Barrett Browning occupied – from beginning to end – a threshold position, “casting anxious glances behind her, eager yet fearful to cross”, as she was “racked with conflict about being a poet at all,” tormented – as the rest of poems in this volume hint – by “a nostalgia for early childhood and a fear of growing up” (Mermin 33, 35). This feature could also be sensed in the introductory self-questioning (self-artisan, more properly) temptations in EBB’s *Diary* (4 Jun 1831 – 23 Apr 1832, edited by Philip Kelley and Ronald Hudson and published first in 1969) – a matter which lies beyond the scope of the current research. Mermin’s well-grounded observations on the impact of the poetess’s personal life on her writing, a life overshadowed by early loss (that of her dear mother in 1828, followed by that of “Bro”, her beloved brother and friend, in 1840 – two most tormenting experiences), foreground the pivotal role of mourning and reverence for past. They throw light on the writer’s position of “self-contradiction and impasse” (Mermin 63). A broader, hermeneutic perspective on the young artist’s respect for past could enhance our perusal of the circularity of acquisition and maintenance of knowledge as productive social necessity, unity, and personal achievement. Barrett Browning’s poems could never be truly detached from concrete lifetime occasions – be those actual occurrences (in her daily routine) or instances of contact with a given literary or philosophical work. Dialogue and dramatization of the thought process symptomatize her self-perception as one marked by non-fixity, complexity, and fragmentariness, and explain her recognition that Self is “the product of a particular set of socio-cultural conditions” (Byron, “Rethinking” 84). Such an attitude pertained to an era when the development of professional literary authorship got more and more intimately related to the development of academic research of professional literary authorship, and of historical and religious research (it would suffice to mark the names of Thomas Carlyle, Matthew Arnold, and John Henry Newman, for instance).

The 19<sup>th</sup> century saw translation become more and more a philosophy of self-authentication. Barrett Browning, developing her interests in Old Greek, would become convinced, gradually, in the relational nature of explicating meaning – in time, between two minds, two individuals, two languages (at bottom), and between the various stages of her own existence as writer and woman. The impetus to translate and explore past in cultivating self-awareness permeates EBB’s early oeuvre, just as well as some of her most mature poetical meditations and debates (for instance, *Casa Guidi Windows*, 1851, and *Poems before Congress*, 1860). In 1826 she came out with the *Essay*, in 1842 she would come out with translations of hymns by Gregory Nazianzen which would lead to her impressive theoretical contribution titled *Some Account of the Greek Christian Poets* (1842), followed by *The Book of Poets. Scott, Webster and Geary*, also 1842. Some truly remarkable achievements in terms of literary history, in which the poetess praised Chaucer, Shakespeare, Milton, and Burns (also in 1842, written for the *Athenaeum*, there would emerge her worthwhile study of Wordsworth and his tragedy *The Borderers*). Three years later, in 1845, upon John Kenyon’s request, Elizabeth would produce a bouquet of paraphrases, most notably on Theocritus, Apuleius, Nonnus, Euripides, Homer, Anacreon, and Heine. She provided those fairly free translations (paraphrases) to illustrate visual images for the album of a Ms. Anne Thomson<sup>5</sup>, to the effect of the text becoming an immediate response to a picture in the same edition. Without digressing too much from the focus of the current research, it might be worth noting the mutually embellishing, ekphrastic, graphics of image and logos in the inevitability of interpretation of past as literary past as at once representation and presentation. This hermeneutical coil could also be elucidated by Richard Cronin’s view on the dynamics of Victorian poetics which relied much on intertextuality and on translation as “not a single text but rather a relationship between texts” (Cronin 115). The greater context, however, was one of conversation beyond the narrowly textual – one which included and emotional relationship with Nature, God, and Man. A context where Poetry featured as the medium of the understanding (viz. Barrett Browning, *Works, The Book of the Poets*, 474). In her

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she was allowed the time and space to evolve as a practically unlimited reader and scholar of classical languages (Greek, primarily) before she embarked conscientiously on a writing career to eventually depart from home for Italy with her husband, the other great Victorian poet, Robert Browning.

<sup>5</sup> The annotated texts of these paraphrases could be found in volume 5 (pp. 116 – 57) of Sandra Donaldson’s edition of the works of Elizabeth Barrett Browning referenced hereby.

striving to demonstrate the humanizing role of poetry Elizabeth would inhabit a kind of a metaphorical amoeba in perceiving time as at once linear chronology (say, Homer to Wordsworth) and circular re-transcription and enlargement of sense in placing together, variously, her immediate contemporaries and the great Ancients.

In the *Essay*, the speaker-narrator is a double man – an interpreter of one’s own literary endeavour just as well as a commentator of the literary past. The initial lines of *Book II* destabilize an unquestionable original before and idealize private judgment and the liberty of the imagination: “*But now to higher themes! No more confin’d / To copy Nature, Mind returns to Mind. / ... / ... to things unseen; ... / Soul questions soul, and thought revolves on thought*” (II. 601–02, 605–06, emphasis mine). The *Essay*, dramatizing its writer’s intellectual and spiritual tribulations, reads like a lengthy dramatic monologue – a genre where interpretation of visible reality is always intermingled with self-interpretation within the speaker’s penitential impulse for self-expression. What we have is an optic through which the reader, too, could gaze at the world and at the same time focus on the poem as an object of desire, as Richard Cronin suggests drawing comparison between EBB and the pre-Raphaelites (Cronin 28, 35). In this dramatic monologue, Elizabeth’s *Essay*, sense is constructed as a shared and historically contingent abode secured by transformativity: birthing reality (as locked outside, in the physical world, in the works of other writers, as well as inside, in the poet’s mind) as the truth of presentation as self-presentation. Elizabeth meant self-presentation to be a gesture of acknowledgement of the presence of an Other, a good listener, and one in need of instruction. Solemn appeals to an implied recipient (as in the line emphasized and quoted above) may be taken to anticipate Gadamer’s opinion on the destabilization of “the ideality of the player” in the work of art for the sake of play “for someone” whereby the player, or author, revokes “continuity with [oneself]” wishing to reveal a grand possible otherwise hidden or withdrawn (Gadamer 108, 110, 111–112). The transformative streak in Barrett Browning’s poetics of exchange between overt and covert, ideal model and private judgment, soul and body, could be detected in her habit of self-interrogation, dialectic comparison, and temporal travelling – against the monologism of writing as self-pleasure: “Some hold by words, who cannot hold by sense; / ... / Mind is imprisoned in a lonesome tower. / Sensation is its window” (*Essay, Book II*, ll. 640, 739–740). A thought exhibiting EBB’s preference of feeling over reason.

Ostensibly indirectly, the above ways could actually be related to the poetess’s syncretic view on the nature of wisdom as an act of handing down from one to another, in time – figuratively as well as literally. That is, writer to writer, reader to reader – within text as tactile compendium of authored presences in the world, and to an implied student. To EBB past lived physically in the memoranda of the written legacy of dead writers who thus reached their living heirs. Interpretation, she advocated, ought to “produce [rather than reproduce] and achieve the sheer presence of the past” which would thus be transformed miraculously into “total contemporaneity and familiarity” (Gadamer 156, 158). The writer’s own voice grew empirically, out of the senses, but gained shape in tracing actions and motivations for communal existence “upwards”, to a common, ideal source (*Essay, Book II*, l. 770). Thus, in her own fashion and at a time still pregnant with the genii of Tennyson, Browning, and Christina Rossetti, Elizabeth Barrett facilitated a continuity of faith, balancing between empiricism and idealism in conceptualizing poetic genius. “Fascinated by the mysteries of consciousness and the power of the mind in meditation”, as maintains Marjorie Stone, the poetess would still (contrary, I believe, to Stone’s reading of her early oeuvre), be cautious about pronouncing “audacity of authorship” (Stone 10), foregrounding some uneasiness about drawing demarcation lines between unique and inherited, own and foreign, singularity and multiplicity, singleness and communality in revealing a dialectics of poetry as phenomenon yet occurrence.

In Barrett Browning’s *Essay*, two points on the contextual referential spectrum worth mentioning could be John Locke’s *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1689) and Alexander Pope’s *An Essay on Man* (173–34). Like Pope, she, too, endorsed the experiential ingredient in learning, the overlapping of various philosophical beliefs leading to a common origin and destination, the interrelatedness

between Nature and man in terms of a hierarchical coherence and maintenance of life, and most significantly, the chance the scholar stood in terms of grasping sense as part of a revolving whole. Here is Pope:

What can we reason but from what we know?

...

See worlds on worlds compose one universe,  
Observe how system into system runs

...

'Tis but a part we see, and not the whole

...

The general ORDER, since the whole began,  
Is kept in Nature, and is kept in man;

...

All are but parts of one stupendous whole,  
Whose body Nature is, and God the soul.

(Pope, "The Rape", *Essay on Man, Epistle I*, ll. 24–25, 60, 171–72, 267–68)

Pope emphasizes the particular which may only be visible in a human being's grasp. Yet it is particularity that leads to the organics of life whereby Nature (God, too) is placed in Man, rather than otherwise. Regularity and repetition secure historicity while the presence of an invisible demiurge hems human self-perception. Just as did Pope, inter-textually, in his *Essay*, EBB pays tribute to knowledge as resulting from learning from others, which both destabilizes and solidifies the boundaries of her own contribution to writing as temporally verified acquisition of a common lore. Discussing Nature in terms of private will, accepting that ill may only be part of an ultimately uniting "universal good" (Epistle III, ll. 112–16), Pope became one of EBB's tutors: he saw that "to be wise" meant "to know how little can be known" (ll. 259–61). True believer, faithful Christian, Elizabeth proved herself indeed an honest Cartesian, also at once a minimalist and a generalist, inductionist and deductionist. Thus, truth to EBB was a crucial linking device between contemplative spells of acceptance of divine revelation and formidable private initiative, funded by physical experience and reverence for language.

Paying homage to eminent scientific and philosophical research, she developed her own *Analysis of the Second Book* (termed "*Metaphysics*") of her *Essay* to argue the nebulousness of private reflection in containing reality, as well as the corruption lurking behind the pragmatic application of language as mere clothing of ideas: "Address to Metaphysicians – The most considerable portion of their errors conceived to arise from difficulties attending the use of words – **That on the one hand, thoughts become obscure without the assistance of language, while on the other, language from its material analogy deteriorates from spiritual meaning** – Allusion to a more probable mode of communication between spirits after death" (Barrett Browning, *Essay, Book II*, "*Analysis of the Second Book*" 97, emphasis added). Further, she would recapitulate: "For thoughts uncloth'd by language are, at best, / Obscure; while grossness injures those exprest – / Through words" (*Essay, Book II*, ll. 631–633). Compare Locke on this matter: "the greatest part of the questions and controversies that perplex mankind depending on the doubtful and uncertain use of words, or (which is the same) indetermined ideas, which they are made to stand for" (Locke lvi). While further in his essay Locke insists on acquisition of language competence as part of the human being's evolving Self he does not promise immunity against error even in cases of one's impressive linguistic versatility. Elizabeth demonstrates an advanced, dialectical understanding, by implying that both the ideality of the existence of language (as a universal tool for conceptualizing human being) and the pragmatics of the usage of words (as a mirror of individual perception) betray man. Poetic selfhood – just as well as selfhood outside the bounds of art – implies sitting on a fence, and gazing both ways at the same time – at tradition and at immediate experience.

Though she insisted on the significance of an individual's mind in one's perceiving reality ("Poetry exists not in the object contemplated, but is created by the contemplating mind" – Barrett Browning, *Essay, Book II*, "*Analysis of the Second Book*" 98), the poetess also warned of the dangers of the soul's

internal imprisonment and encourages consideration of writing as a vividly social need and practice, rather than merely emanation of an ideal. She encouraged at once recognition of the eidetic premise of poetic selfhood – with a cult towards the past and the dead, both contained in the written text – and of the defining role of knowledge gained through the senses and via varied immediate contact with the outside world which would endorse, by way of pluralizing experience per se, the singularity of poetic genius.<sup>6</sup> Equally, internalization (housing a universal truth) and externalization (extension of self by way of overcoming extreme privacy), fortify Barrett Browning’s philosophy of composition. *Book II* of the *Essay* contains an impressive list of scholars interested in the subject matter of the human being’s acquisition of knowledge. In juxtaposing Berkeley and Condillac, for instance, Barrett Browning revealed her dialectical understanding of the link between independent judgment (pivotal for “immaterialism”, or “subjective idealism”) and universal matter (with knowledge actually resulting from the senses prior to the formation of ideas).<sup>7</sup> Standing by the necessity of recognizing the human being’s proclivity for seeking first “th’ efficient, then the final cause” (*Essay, Book II*, l. 746), she would still hesitate to pin poetry down to the senses. She urged the discovery of “essence unseen in objects seen”, beyond one’s immediate grasp, based on prolonged, unavoidable, and productive contact with the outside world (Cf. *Essay, Book II*, ll. 765–766).

In a letter to Hugh Stuart Boyd (Dec 29, 1841), the poetess emphasized the acquisition of books as a source of education both ideal (in view of the inevitability of historical distance as part of the written tradition of preserving sense) and immediate (noting the physicality of the printed text as a functional domain for one’s mental efforts): “My own time goes to the best music when I read or write; and whatever money I can spend upon my own pleasures flows away in books” (Barrett Browning, *Letters* 94). The tactility of time, and so of past, as a cultural and physical concept, as lived and living experience enabling self-perception, could also be discovered in especial gifts from people the poetess cherished in her own lifetime. Among those we could not but help mentioning an Aeolian harp her father gave her in 1842 (Barrett Browning, *Letters* 105), and her beloved dog, Flush – a present from her close friend Mary Russell Mitford. Reciprocally, Barrett Browning dedicated poems to those who ensured a unique, culturally ameliorative contact with life – in, and away from, England – and on whose presence her creative self-awareness much depended (e.g. *To Flush, My Dog*, 1843; *To Mary Russell Mitford, In Her Garden*, 1838; three sonnets to Hugh Stuart Boyd, published in 1850, and a couple of poems to George Sand, first published in 1844, etc.).

Assuming the duty of serving truth, Barrett Browning called poesy “elevation of the reasoning mind” (*Essay, Book II*, ll. 945). However, she abstained from unharnessed idealism by suggesting that, ultimately, the senses did spark poetic activeness, particularly so in an urban environment of social misery (“Shun not the haunts of crowded cities then”, l. 980) – a stage for dramatization, interaction, polyphonic inter-mingling of voices, where a poet was urged not to forget “to study men”, or to “hear the music of a human voice” and “interchange (...) thought with thought” (ll. 981, 985, 987). And then a counterpoint: poetry “is beauty, but exprest/ In inward essence, not in outward vest” (ll. 992-993), “poetry is formed by Mind, and not / By scenic grace of one peculiar spot” (ll. 1020-1021), “(...) Fancy teacheth Memory’s hand to trace / Nature’s ideal form in Nature’s place” (ll. 1044-1045). The ending

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<sup>6</sup> To further this matter, I would argue that there could be no irresolvable tension between experiential education and abstract learning. Book reading did the job compactly for Elizabeth: she approached books as tactile, embodied past and voted for “headlong reading”, as Sheila Corder summarizes in her insightful study of female education in 19<sup>th</sup>-century Britain on the basis of tracing the physiological range of image- and concept-formation in Aurora Leigh (Corder 50–51, 54). The practice of “headlong reading” would require that the recipient (reader) be closely emotionally and physically immersed in the text, or in observed reality as text. EBB adhered to privacy in generating sense, eventually recovering, nonetheless, stable and potentially increasing common, older, lore, shielded by “poetry’s physiological aspects” (46), which would enhance the actuality of seeing past as an attainable immediacy of responding to, and modifying, existence. In the Second Book of her *Essay* Barrett Browning defended measure, rhyme, sound and feeling as poetry’s most own material tools for revealing the “magic” of spiritual purity (Cf. *Essay*, ll. 916–29), trusting that feeling would kindle the imagination as the in-depth basis of knowledge which would be inevitably maintained and developed through language.

<sup>7</sup> Avery 127, explanatory notes 105 and 106.



of the *Essay* could be taken as a partial resolution of the conflict between objective and subjective: the reader is encouraged to remember one of England's bards, who too, like Elizabeth did (leaving her heart to, and in, Italy), chose to invest his potential in a far off, foreign, just, cause – away, “in wild and fitful gust from England's shore” (l. 1187). She meant Byron, who “died for thee [i.e. England], / Oh land of Memory! Loving thee no less / Than parent – ...!” (ll. 1191–1193). Expectedly, through an excursion to foreign and “past” literary role models, the poetess thus arrived yet again in England – through paying tribute to one of her teachers – Byron – and through him – to Greece, whose culture, language, and poetic forms, she adopted early enough through translation, making, cautiously, initial steps in studying past.

Referring to both Byron and Greece, the poetess feigned a departure from her native England. “Græcia” became her “other country – country of my soul” (ll. 1144, 1147):

For so, to me, thou art! My lips have sung  
Of thee with childhood's lisp, and harp unstrung!  
In thee, my Fancy's pleasant walks have been,  
Telling her tales, while Memory wept between!  
And now for thee I joy, with heart beguiled,  
As if a dying friend looked up, and smiled. (ll. 1148–1153)

Thus, *An Essay on Mind* commemorated both a poet (Byron, in this section) and a place (Greece, as a layer of England's cultural history). This was one of EBB's interfaces between physical and cultural time, noting a real person (Byron had been nearly two years dead by the time of the emergence of the *Essay*) and – through him – an instance of humanitarian crossover between England and Greece, between the actual and the eternal, in a very much Romantic way. The poetess ripened, pursuing awareness of art as expansion and overcoming of boundaries through knowledge as dialogue between individuals and in time. This would lead to a perception of art within the cultural topography of journeying to the Continent (first Greece, then, in her later years, chiefly Italy, and in between, France). Eventually, there would be EBB's geographical knowledge of the routes of European civilization as sophisticated, generic, metonymic leaps inter-validating place and person.<sup>8</sup>

Unsurprisingly, Barrett Browning's Congregationalist orientation laid stress on the word as a crossroads between cultures, humanitarian views, temporal layers, political attitudes, living individuals, and members of one and the same family. The word – whether in EBB's heterodoxical poetical revelations (which castigated fallacy of worship of ideals as received and unquestionable truth), between her exegetical *The Seraphim, And Other Poems* (1838) and her Miltonic *A Drama of Exile, and Other Poems* (1844) – required “a continuous enactment [and] formation” which her deeply yet unconventionally religious imaginary and responsive frame of mind sustained (Dieleman 25, 31). Together with her husband, Robert Browning, and in her socializing, the poetess is known to have attended a variety of churches, recognizing a diversity of Christian forms of faith, valuing the most the quality of the sermon and the essence of the message, rather than demonstrative physical ritualism. Her democratic views were particularly distinctive with regard to the complexity of the thematic interrelationship between infancy, growing up, abandonment, and fallenness – an interrelationship which precluded absolutism of judgment and downright condemnation of strangeness but revealed, in Barrett Browning's work, a tendency for inclusion and a departure from sanctimonious social rigour. Overall, this tendency could be articulated

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<sup>8</sup> *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* certainly provided EBB with a prototype for a lyrical hero, abounding in cross-cultural references to other writers – English and otherwise – and to their work, toponymically: Tasso as Venice/Italy; Laura as Petrarch as Italy; Shakespeare, Otway, Radcliffe, and Schiller as Venice; Dante as “Italia” etc. (see *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*, esp. canto IV: XVII, XVIII, XXX, XXXV). Barrett Browning's epigraph to the Preface to *The Essay on Mind* is an eloquent manifestation of her knowledge of, and identification with, both her teachers and past as a common cultural territory: “Brama assai, poco spera, e nulla chiede.” Or: “Loved much, hoped little and desired nothing”, as she, self-consciously, looked up to *Gerusalemme Liberata* (1580) (Donaldson 2010: 79), establishing, simultaneously, layered, literary-historical recollection of, and connection between, Tasso and Byron.

through Kirstie Blair's insightful observation on EBB's frequent placing a young, inexperienced, speaker in her poems, outside a compactly, safely "and seemingly Anglican" cultural abode of obedience (Cf. Blair 126, 137) and within a vaster, beyond-English realm of intellectual and spiritual self-evaluation. A stance which would open further possibilities for female self-expression and a debate on Victorian patriarchal normativity regarding gender conduct. Still, the poetess's search for verity through a filial attachment to a masculine literary past, and an undying duty to share knowledge and feeling with others, inform her *Essay*. Considering the vastness and choice of sources of reference visible in this work of hers, she could be said to have aimed at an audience expected to respond. And just as she commemorated one of her role models, Byron, she implied the necessity of encompassing life as a chance given to "surviving man" "some useful truth" to learn by way of embracing the eternal law of coming after, of walking in the steps of, an eternal, superior mind (Barrett Browning, *Works, Essay, Book II*, ll. 1248, 1256, 1262). Further on, Elizabeth would opt for a richer discursiveness – narrative poems and a more vivid "dialogue with a community", away from "subjective idealism" and permitting "joint", counter-singular, interpretation of events (Dieleman 62). Some such mature examples include: *Aurora Leigh*, *Bertha in the Lane*, *Casa Guidi Windows*, *The Cry of the Children*, and *The Runaway Slave at Pilgrim's Point*.

Reading and writing was for Elizabeth enlargement and enrichment of reality which helped her against utter privation and seclusion (upon her mother's death, and being bent under her father's exacting character). Thus, she got fulfilled through a sense of time which she gave shape, meaning, and presence in her writing. Literature liberated and sculpted her person by nurturing a historical understanding of self as interaction by way of learning – from the past and in textual contact with other minds. Time became to her a game, or play (in Gadamer's terms), of active and incessant filling of the present with content in interpreting the works of writers, Nature, God, and her own family. In this game of the present of learning through writing as "filling with reality," "the content of experience," as Dilthey phrased it, "constantly changes" (Dilthey 149). Remarking that both art and historical understanding liberated the reality of life, Dilthey stressed the role of language as the truest "exhaustive expression" which "the life of the mind" might ever hope for (161). In one of her own notes to her *Essay*, the poetess described the revelatory and life-inspiring agency of a voice heard by Descartes, his "imagination heated to excess" and his "brain exhausted by meditation" (Barrett Browning, *Works, Essay, Notes to Book I*, note I, 114–15). A voice which "called him to pursue the search for Truth:" a vision the philosopher never doubted, just as she would never doubt the palpability and significance of lessons attained through language, voiced out multiply, as she read and attained a sense of time intelligibly, if textually.

Elizabeth Barrett Browning's life was one of vehement philological research, textual labour, and abundant correspondence calling for self-expression through writing. She treated text as factual evidence of another individual who summoned an interpreter to exercise understanding as a survival skill in existing amid words – written, spoken, remembered, resuscitated, transferred (Cf. Dilthey 162). Genres and themes – initially inherited from male literary predecessors – metamorphosed into a unique poetics of creative contact with what she held as both external, other, past, distancedly tangible, and internal, own, unspeakably present, imaginable. EBB's poetics could be described as recognition of the formative, albeit non-exhaustive, role of exteriority which triggered creativity and her interiority. Truthful to Locke, arguing first efficiency then final causes (*Essay, Book II*, ll. 746–749), she nonetheless wished to be regarded as a moderate universalist (*Essay, Book II*, ll. 777–780). Historicity nestled at the heart of her artistic selfhood. In *An Essay on Mind* a dialogical revival of ideas as familiar lessons could be found in the abundant quotes from other poets, philosophers and scientists. A fact which discloses the hermeneutic potency of her work where presentation would act as animation of a truth temporally validated within the experiential nature of text. Alternatively articulated, "(...) it is precisely continuity that every understanding of time has to achieve even when it is a question of the temporality of a work of art" (Gadamer 120). Prefiguring Gadamer, Elizabeth was able to perceive the creatively authenticating role of the "repetition of the same." *An Essay on Mind* shows the inevitable possibility of bringing together memory, present, and expectation in the writer-interpreter's being as enactment of aesthetic experience as the presence of at least two non-coincidental consciousnesses in the birth of poetry as truth.

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