

SELF AS MALADY IN *DIARY BY E. B. B.*

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The diary of Elizabeth Barrett Browning (first published in 1961), reveals the poetess's polemical treatment of Self as duty to Other. Spread over less than a year of actual time, the content of the narrative is overwhelming. *Diary by E. B. B.* is an undisguised autobiographical articulation of the writer's sense of her physical weakness, her doubts about her own sanity, her worship of God, her fear of redundancy, her disturbing interest in reading, and her fixation on death. This thematic range provides a foundation for a hermeneutic (and varied by feminism) examination of identity as incompleteness. A kind of incompleteness partially fulfilled through diary narrative as dialogue.

Key words: Elizabeth Barrett Barrett (Browning), diary, Self, Other, memory, narrative

On 23 July 1831, in her own diary (4th June 1831 – 23rd April 1832), twenty-five-year-old Elizabeth cited Lamartine's *Méditations Poétiques* (*DEBB*¹, p. 64):

Compagnons de l'exil, quoi! Vous pleurez ma mort!
Vous pleurez! et déjà dans la coupe sacrée
J'ai bu l'oubli des maux, et mon âme enivrée
Entre au céleste port.

Inter-textually, just as well as perhaps actually, EBB was imagining her own death. Lonely and unfulfilled, she tried to compensate for a deeply-rooted feeling of redundancy by way of composing. The healing effect of writing, however, was numbed by an almost permanent aggravating internal pain.

¹ Throughout this paper, *DEBB* stands for *Diary by E. B. B.* – the diary of Elizabeth Barrett Barrett (Browning). Quotations from the diary are in conformity with the writer's own spelling and punctuation – as presented in the edition of her diary referenced hereby. *BC* denotes the *Brownings' Correspondence*. “EBB” has been employed as an abbreviation for the poetess's full name.

Malady as an issue of ontological importance may not be immediately visible in what has become known as “the unpublished” – in her lifetime – diary of Elizabeth Barrett Barrett. A diary pivots on the development of authorial identity – the degrees of praise and condemnation of oneself may vary between writers, times and cultures. But not all diurnal narratives agonize equally over Self as abnormality. From a medical point of view, malady is a disease, or illness, or sickness: a bodily dysfunction, “the fact of being unwell,” a state of temporary indisposition (Collin 2007: 111, 191, 377). Interpreted in broader humanitarian and aesthetic terms, malady could be viewed hereby as EBB’s struggle to attain authorial identity – a lifetime project indeed. Her diary is a particularly telling exhibition of the contingency of time and space as cultural constructs. Self-writing in *Diary by E. B. B.* rests on the writer’s close observation of daily occurrences, her chronic and ambivalent registration of her own domestic imprisonment, and her record of a metastatic fear of failure through selfishness. Terse illustrations of the “rascally poet” (*DEBB*, 26 Dec 1831, p. 195), as EBB dubbed herself, call for response within the ailing privacy of this self-fracturing yet fascinating story of the dissolution of subject and object of observation which inheres in a devotional self-exegesis (emphasis added):

*I wonder if I shall burn this sheet of paper «like» most others I have «begun» in the same way. ... how could I write a diary without throwing upon «...» paper my thoughts, all my thoughts – the thoughts of my heart as well as of my head? – & «then» how could I bear to look on them after they were written? Adam made fig leaves necessary for the mind, as well as for the body. And such a mind as I have ! – So very exacting & exclusive & eager & head long – & – strong – & so very often wrong ! Well ! but I will write: I must write – & the oftener wrong I «know» myself to be, the less wrong I shall be in one thing – the less vain I shall be! – (*DEBB*, 1)
 May Annie be happy! – I am not.. & yet I am .. quite selfish. (149)
 I am not at all well this morning. ... how can I write when I am so unwell!
 (195)*

Caviling at herself, she hoped for approval. The said Annie was the daughter of Hugh Stuart Boyd, a classical scholar and the poetess’s prominent intellectual role model in the period 1828 – 1832. The Biblical reference that hems the genesis of EBB’s own diary fictionalizes yet verifies her own sense of incompleteness, imperfection, and her steady tendency toward literary self-revelation as cure against self-forgetting.

A pertinent feature of EBB’s development of Self in her diary is her awareness and deciphering of somatic impulses – recording these could be viewed as a prolonged attestation of irregularities of body and mind. As

Elizabeth's latest biographer concludes, bodily indisposition deprives one of one's creative prowess: "the paradox of the thinking self" is in that "the life of the body enables and limits the life of the mind" so that "writers' bodies create resistances, forcing interplay between self and world" (Sampson 2021: 6). A diary is a kind of self-portrait, and in this case – a fit compensation for EBB's "camera-shyness" in general (ibid.). On the other hand, wishing to please neighbours and family friends, by 13 Aug 1831, EBB had already agreed to model for Eliza Cliffe. Prefiguring her own poem *To E. W. Cliffe Painting My Picture*, 1838 (written some seven years after her abandonment of *Diary*), the writer alludes to her own imperfection: her features "are now literally beginning to stand out from the canvass," "the paint is beginning to crack from redundancy" (*DEBB*, p. 88). The image inspires notions of exaggerated accuracy and praise EBB must have felt uneasy about. In EBB's diary *body* may be recognized as one of the elements of self-expression, which, in the light of Susan Sontag's reputable study of disease as metaphor, bestows on a human being an opportunity for individuation and self-aestheticization through self-denial. The latter implied a kind of hypersensitivity deemed attractive because of the physical and almost always psychological dependence feminine tubercular melancholy carried (Cf. Sontag 1978: 13, 16, 30 – 32). EBB's striking thinness, her immateriality – through protracted lung disease – befits such a cultural construct of femininity. The poetess sought compensation in drugs, books, and excessive intellectual labor. Then there was also the violent self-chastisement for idleness – a sin hardly supported by actual facts. There were also doubts about her efficiency in assisting Boyd, her being faithful to God and knowledge as truth, but mostly, about being Papa's obedient and respectful daughter-writer. *Diary*, then, was an anticlockwise mechanism of the writer hospitalizing her own genius as a case study: as if she were her own patient (the "deer invalid", as her own family regarded her), in need of perpetual care against the oblivion of other people as well as against self-repudiation. Suffering could then be seen as character-expression (ibid. 43, 45) – at once accumulated and dispersed through diary narrative.

The narrator's steady anxiety over her own mental destitution and physical infirmity could be perceived in her tendency for apophatic self-representation: "<How unhappy> I seem on the brink of being! ... I felt breathless – dreading to hear something past supporting;" "... the tears which ran down my cheeks, seemed scarcely to unparalyze me... the trembling has scarcely yet gone out of my knees" (*DEBB*, 10 Jun 1831, 18 Jun 1831, 10, 21; see also entries on 19 Nov 1831, 6 Feb 1832).

Simultaneously, the diary dissimulates and confirms a quiddity of the writer's own – self-enfeebling doubt, provoked, partially, by the agency of H. S. Boyd whose presence required of EBB active research of Old Greek and regular journeys to his own house. It could be argued that the narrator of this diary would maintain purposefully an external presence for the sake of dialogue. This external presence – Boyd, father, God, or other, literary, role models – would “subtend” the *I* by way of “putting it into question” through maintenance of discourse as transcendence of *ownness*, which would justify the writer's own life as a duty and would create, if we were to rely on Levinas's ethics of otherness, “the epiphany of infinity” whereby the regime of bodily and spiritual independence would be conditioned by the need to represent oneself so as to be appreciated from without, to participate in a liturgy (Levinas 1979: 69, 168, 195, 202). *Diary* could be seen as EBB's substantiation of her striving to free herself from the stagnation of home, from her dependence on other people, and from the cloistering strains of her own excessive self-reflection. It could also serve as testimony of her ambition to depart from the regular trips to Boyd, and from a clinging to the safety of routines. But any lenient attitude to work would induce a feeling of guilt: “a little” (as on 29 Aug 1831), rather than a lot of, reading of literature would immediately usher in the disappointment of self-proclaimed physical and mental imperfection – two features of EBB's perception of Self. Ultimately, however, undulation between self-proclamation and self-cancellation – two dominant features of EBB's diary – would fall within the ambivalence of simultaneous resistance, yet yielding, to bodily and mental ailments (e.g. hysteria, infantilism, anorexia, melancholia, and schizophrenia, which have been attached to EBB's creative persona)² in the 19th-century woman's borderline position in a largely patriarchal world.

Shorn of a space, a time, and a genre of her own, woman cautiously and methodically accepted and turned her internal doubts and bodily feebleness into that creative zest whose written self-exposure engendered narrative as ownership through oughtness. As she devoured modern literature, (most importantly) the Bible, also news from the press, EBB moulded a pedagogy of oscillation between self-denial and self-confidence, loneliness (especially when ignored by Boyd) and socialization, the experience of physique and of spirit (*DEBB*, emphasis added):

² On this matter see, for instance, Dally 1989: 41, 46 – 47, and Dennis 1996: 40-41. Further on, disturbances of this sort could be related to woman's right “to define herself” (Dennis, 63).

- (1) And the “*skeleton*” of *Friendship*... but I am getting wrong again! Oh I never never should have begun this journal! – No one should write journals, who «is» not wiser, on a hundred points than I am! & stronger, on a thousand! – (16 Jun 1831, p. 19)
- (2) How I hate this punctiliousness of mind which can only exist in a petty mind. ... my own? (6 Aug 1831, p. 80)
- (3) I did not go out again. ... but I finished *Antonius*: & then I began & nearly finished the *Messeniennes* by Casimir De la Vigne. ... Unwell, very unwell all the evening ! A strange nervous depressed feeling, as if I were both soulless and boneless! – (12 Aug 1831, p. 87)

The point of intersection of all of the above fragments of *Diary by E. B. B.* appears to have been an incurable sense of inferiority through which the narrator would identify herself more and more. However, ambition never flagged: a horizontal, passive, perspective in self-representation would get contested by self-courage. Thus, even virginal self-enclosure, pedantic insistence on solid faith in the scriptural truth, and analysis of life as an inherited vast (but equivocal) text to interpret, depended on private judgment: “I am neither frigid nor rigid...,” “We read Gregory – a part of the funeral oration on his father... to despond about the strength of one’s mind, is to diminish its strength” (13 Oct 1831, p. 157; 25 Oct 1831, p. 168).

Gusts of illness provoked narratorial gusts – a story of the writer’s daily being in which the heroic and the non-heroic alternated, opening the door for auto-rejection in favour of worship of elseness which would normally appear under masculine guise. One way to further the discussion about the writer’s at times sadomasochistic desire to unravel the sovereignty of her own mind would be to peep into the cultural and gender specifics of femininity as examined by Simone de Beauvoir. In her seminal study of “the second sex” Beauvoir reveals that woman could act herself out verbally yet diminish her own solidity through ambivalent contemplation of her own psycho-somatic wholeness, prompted by a burning wish to escape herself – distracted, fearing mental vacancy (Cf. Beauvoir 1956: 439, 509, 587), similar to the way EBB indicated that especially in example # 3 quoted above. Further considerations of unreason and malady as civilizational markers could need Foucault’s perspicacious reflections on the spectacularization of mental instability and other forms of strangeness, deformity, lack, and aberration from decorum – a tendency which would find favour with a ruling corps of adults willing to teach redemption (Cf. Foucault 1988: 67 – 69, 82), especially to female “pupils”. Didacticism of this kind could encourage resistance and stealth – both transpire in EBB’s diary’s self-parlance and self-gaoling. Mariana-like,

Elizabeth would get trapped in a balladic “imagery of fixation and distraction”, while she would be overwriting and stylizing her own experience, that which would have already occurred, and had been written about more than once, and which Angela Leighton would sagaciously term *déjà écrit* (Leighton 1999: 223, 228).

EBB’s feverish stream-of-consciousness narrative exposes the dialectics of the writer’s persuasively worded need to believe yet her doubts about the efficacy of practices, as well as the long-term communal consequences of doctrinaire worship. The Bible was EBB’s most solid building block in her search for self-definition as Christian, daughter, woman, and writer. Various entries contain variously colored instances of allegiance and disobedience to a daily routine in service of God as the ultimate truth:

Why sh^d. I take the pleasure in lacerating myself, & kissing the rod? ... Got home & to bed – at last! Intolerably tired! So tired as to lie awake instead of sleeping, – & to dream when I did sleep, *of my teeth tumbling out.*³ ... Read the bible of course; but thought the bible, far less than I should do. ... *Thy will – Oh Lord!* – (DEBB, 1 – 3 Jul 1831, pp. 39 – 41, emphasis added)

The writer would encourage contact with the Bible as a prophylactic against idleness, spiritual infirmity, and selfish introspection, yet she would insist that this contact be active, conscious, creative, and responsible. When she failed in the steadiness and intelligence of daily reading and research of the scriptural texts, she ached – so did her independence of mind.

The development of an especial trade between a speaking, self-reflecting, *I*, and an ideal, addressed, *Thou*, in the broader, beyond-religion, sense, maps the polemics of EBB’s being through writing: a being on the verge between exteriority and interiority to events. This trade extends over a communication between memory (on which EBB relied as on a receptacle of verifiable items of the past but which she recorded, also, as the process of cognition) and her own body. Such practice produces yet receives signals of time and space as shared entities. At that, Other became to her, as Other would become to Levinas, “a point that [was] absolute with regard to history – not by amalgamating with the Other, but in speaking with him” (Levinas 1979: 52). Apart from God, EBB’s father was a pivotal point of reference in his daughter’s emerging sense of selfhood.

³ EBB’s nightmare of her teeth “tumbling out” portends her succumbing to, fear of, and dependence on, her father whose intactness would guarantee her own.

Mr. Barrett got awarded a prominent portion of EBB's diary – he would grow to be a manifestation of EBB's burdened concern for Other's wellbeing and health which would urge her betraying her exhaustion, her unsurpassed sensitivity, yet worrying docility and incorrigible guilt for which the recuperative conversing through narrative offered some partial compensation (*DEBB*, pp. 5, 40, 103, 174, emphasis added):

Poor Papa! He is the person to be thought of, & felt for! – (6 Jun 1831) ... No letter from Papa today; ... *Is there* any reason *why I should be* elated about anything? (1 Jul 1831) ... And my dear Papa's mind, – (*should he not be* dearest to me?) ... I am unhappy now. There, whom it *will indeed* pain me to leave. ... he *will* write to me & not forget me. Oh I hope «not»! (26 Aug 1831) ... My cold is better, ... Reading Plato ... *May* God bless my dear Papa! ... *If* resignation *is possible* to him, it sh^d. be easy to us! – (2 Nov 1831)

Papa's lengthy absences unsettled EBB, causing spiritual anxiety and threatening her with intellectual paralysis. Yet she came to doubt absolute devotion to parent. The interrogatory-modal frame of the above examples provides food for thought.

In further entries in the *Diary* we could come across an abundance of examples of Elizabeth's voracious reading practice and citational verve. As an interpreter, she expressed the dynamics between involution (cloistering herself within her own narrative and shrinking from the public eye) and evolution (unfolding, in a careful day-to-day dialogic call for response to role models past and present). She examined and tailored her own literary intelligence to a standard which included Heyne, Euripides, Mrs. Radcliffe, Germaine de Staël, Jonathan Swift, La Bryere, Lamartrine, Thomas Gray, Oliver Goldsmith, P. B. Shelley, to name but a few. Her persistent references to such writers iconized her as a sequestered, intelligent literary maiden acculturated through communicating the necessity, just as well as the actual process, of recording reading. In the meantime, self-images of malady, of intellectual and physical insufficiency would slip into her letters: "a slovenly student", "a lame horse" (BC, vol. 2, 15 Dec 1827, pp. 99 – 100; BC, vol. 2, Oct 1831, p. 217). Such self-chastisement would develop into an almost pathological anxiety about an imminent calamity – an anxiety summative of both external and internal factors, not least of the writer's own inability to find a fitting counterpart to her own capacious memory and her unbridled will for learning. Subsidiary, though not unimportant, considerations of her unstable sense of self could include EBB's uncertainty about marriage prospects, the daunting and, very likely,

self-imposed drill of her daily studies, and her struggle to accept the world as an un-female realm. A lacuna threatened to devour EBB's final diary entry: "Went in the pouring rain. Left" (*DEBB*, 23 Apr 1832, p. 241). Such elliptical escapism could have also be prompted by one's discerning the futility of writing in a world impervious to change and improvement, a world which could promise no ultimate justice in proportion to human effort: "The world is the world and I cannot make it Heaven. Only it is hard that I who w^d. have done «everything», sh^d. be directed by those for whom I w^d. have done it, to the example of those who w^d. have done nothing" (*ibid.*). Despondency stemmed from the disapprobation the poetess feared – rather than always experienced – on the part of her own father and her current literary mentor, Boyd. Hence the fatalism: a thin "shadow, looking worse & worse," "like a ghost" (*ibid.*, 11 Mar 1832, 4 Apr 1832, pp. 224, 232) – images imposed by those around her – in this case, her own Papa and Mrs. Martin. The diarist projected herself by way of affirmation through negation: "What will next year see? I great deal of sorrow perhaps, – & perhaps my grave;" "I am "not (I think) built for posterity" (*ibid.* 31 Dec 1831, 23 Jan 1832, pp. 199, 208). Marriage, happiness, composure – tasks, it would appear, unfulfillable.

EBB's internal sense of incompleteness and impairment, her anorexic frailty, and the disapproving attitude she took to her own level of intellect – these are some of the most striking defining characteristics of the seeker of truth and good for whom writing came to signify a conscientious social duty. As her letters to Boyd 1828 – 1832 indicate, in her mind she struggled between faithfulness to the natural and the simple, as a kind of poetry of the ordinary (*BC*, 2, pp. 158 – 161), and the exquisitely literary, as her diary signals through numerous references to a wide diversity of works (literary, philosophical, religious etc.). This oscillation was further propelled by her constant guilt-ridden returns to the memory of her mother's death on 7 Oct 1828 (*BC*, 2, pp. 173 – 174) which she had been notified about from a distance, without actually being able to assist her dying parent. While Elizabeth admitted to being at the end of her tether, she embraced pain in a self-validating manner: "I have suffered ... in different ways, until my body could scarcely bear the struggle within, God knows – ... I am to suffer still & longer, God has willed" (*BC*, 2, pp. 301 – 302). She reiterated her own unwillingness to give up on suffering to the point of auto-defining negation. In a letter to Boyd she observed: "[Papa said]... that I was turning into a shadow, thinner & thinner every day" (*BC*, 3, pp. 7 – 8) – a day earlier, in her diary, she had denounced her own materiality saying, nearly verbatim, the same. Self-envisioning by way of

loss to others – in servitude, in infantile expectation of being instructed the right thing, would become a sign of EBB's narratorial autodidacticism.

Diary by E. B. B. could be acknowledged as the writer's early attempt at chronicling her own life – a unique tale which punctuated EBB's efforts of composing prose fiction and affirmed her poetic passion as a better venue for self-expression.⁴ As a genre, diary reflects the tension of one both involved in (and narrating), and observing from a distance, a story whose end would remain unknown to oneself. George Gusdorf would put the matter thus: in one's own diary one would feature as "the presence of spirit of a world forever gone" (Gusdorf 1980: 38 – 40). Through narrative, one would try and capture that which was shortly before and extend it by way of interpreting one's own place amidst a range of other presences. The written text would offer a chance for re-assemblage of oneself "in [one's] own likeness at a certain moment of [one's] history" – a continuous ontological addition of oneself to oneself, a sketch of one's own "being in time" (ibid. 43, 45). In this sense, EBB's diary evidences her toilsome arrival at approximate, rather than finalized, definitions of who she was as woman, Christian, and artist. This struggle was paralleled by her need to accept her own "insufficiency of cognitive comprehension" against "the axiological bodiedness" and tangibility of an Other who might ever be a veritable justification of authorship as a kind of "sympathetic co-experiencing of another's life" (Bakhtin 1990: 41, 84 – 85).

The applicability of Bakhtin's ethical perception of the literary act could be confirmed by the final entry in *Diary by E. B. B.*, which gathered, one last time, Mrs. Cliffe (mother of Eliza Cliffe, who painted a portrait of EBB), Annie (Boyd's daughter and Elizabeth's rival for the attention of Boyd), Arabel (one of EBB's sisters), Boyd himself, and, of course, Papa (*DEBB*, 23 Apr 1832, pp. 240 – 41). All these dramatis personae breathed life to EBB's mind whereby Past would be transformed into an active Present, with the episodes, distant as well as more recent, getting consolidated in an esemplastic exercise: a "restitution", a striving to accept Self in its processual unfolding, as response and responsibility. Encompassing less than a year of actual time, *Diary by E. B. B.* proved

⁴ According to Judy Simons, the abrupt termination EBB undertook of her own diary could be explained by the writer's search for adequate self-articulation which manifested itself more prominently in the consolidation of "public demands" and "personal elements" in her letter-writing practice (as a wider, more varied, and conversational, communication with the world (Simons 1990: 104)). Poetry, on the other hand, remained an especial place of more private, passionate, though not less distinct, worship of Other.

immeasurably capacious: reminiscences about a world of peaceful infancy forever gone and presided by a benevolent maternal figure (e.g. *DEBB*, 13 Aug 1831, pp. 87 – 88; 11 Oct, 14 Oct 1831, pp. 155 – 158); anxieties about one's own inefficiency; perennial involvement in hermeneutic journeys between known and unknown, one and many, intention of will and consequence of action. So, in a genre most confessional such as *diary*, a dialogue *I – Thou* is the case: it intimates the hazards of aesthetic solipsism and of literary practices detached from an active contact with life. Self-antagonistic in essence, EBB's diary is a most telling emblem of its author's identity: at once recollection and prospective construction; occurrence and imminence; fact and fiction; history and story; product and process; simultaneous promise and denial of spiritual attainment and of soundness of body and mind.

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