

ELIZABETH BARRETT BROWNING'S DENIALS

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Based on a selection of poetical works written by Elizabeth Barrett Browning in the period 1838 – 1856, this paper defends the ontologically productive role of denial. A diversity of expressions of negation reveals the poet's dialectical frame of mind which fermented between *The Seraphim* (1838) and *Aurora Leigh* (1856). Additionally, denial, perceived as self-doubt, invites a specific recognition of Barrett Browning's poetical dedications in terms of the human experience that her writing exhibits through narrative.

Key words: Elizabeth Barrett Browning, denial, self-perception, Other, narrative

Some thoughts ahead

Between around 1838 and 1856 Elizabeth Barrett¹ (Browning from 1846 on) produced a number of works disparately homogeneous. Between *The Seraphim, and Other Poems* (1838) and the emergence of *Aurora Leigh* (1856) – a period which includes some of her most impressive ballads, shorter lyrics, poetical meditations, political poems, *A Drama of Exile* (1844) and *Sonnets from the Portuguese* (1850) – with moderate spells of inactiveness, she wrote profusely, improved her socio-cultural awareness, and became the woman poet seen as a rival to Dante, Milton, Byron, Wordsworth, and Tennyson. Well reviewed (though not always favorably), with her *Essay on Mind* (1826) and her interpretations of *Prometheus Bound* (1833 and

¹ Abbreviations: BC – The Brownings Correspondence (quoted by volume, year of publication, page number(s), etc.); EBB – Elizabeth Barrett Barrett (the poet's maiden name); AL – *Aurora Leigh*; Browning 2010 – Elizabeth Barrett Browning's complete works, cited by volume, and edited by Sandra Donaldson. Barrett Browning's authentic spelling and punctuation have been adhered to.

1850)² she also gained popularity as a literary critic, translator and contributor to periodicals. The poems to be discussed are, at first glance, hard to unite. Some are certainly of better quality and more memorable than others. Yet they all, in various degrees, and with possibilities of comparison of Elizabeth's work to that of other nineteenth-century English women poets, reveal a trademark: The positive potential of denial in terms of exploring perception, self-definition, and the ethical foundations of writing.

"... the silence of my womanhood..."

In the opening scene of a poem drafted in 1840, but composed mostly in 1843 – 1844 (Cf. Browning 2010, 1: 3), *A Drama of Exile* (ll. 1–5, 16–20), on "the outer side of the gate of Eden", Lucifer vociferates a plea for the Earth's outcasts, being one of them: "Who's safe from fall? / He saves not. Where's Adam? Can pardon / Requicken that sod". Oscillating between monism and dualism, Lucifer, in a roundabout way, asks to be recognized: Unable to find his counterpart, Adam, he suggests that the sinful by definition nature of a living creature may not be promised salvation through universal pardon since the source (God), just as well as the target of forgiveness (Adam: "Unkinged is the King of the Garden", / The image of God"), are subject to the ultimate instability of their mutual dependence, and to preordination. Lucifer dwells in a state of existential anxiety and irredeemable doubt. In another, later poetical meditation, *A Denial* (pub. 1856), the poet interrogates her own perception of true affection and happiness. Using a diversity of language means of negating (some of them far from a clearly visible opposition in grammatical terms), she rejects the possibility of unambiguous expression, stable conviction, and a physically verifiable image of herself (ll. 1 – 2, 9 – 10, 27 – 28, 44 – 48, 54, emphasis added):

it is <i>too late</i> to meet	And one beloved woman feels
<i>O friend, not more than friend!</i>	thee dear! –
...	<i>Not I!</i> – that cannot be.
<i>I love thee not, I dare not love</i>	<i>I am lost, I am changed,</i> – I
<i>thee!</i> go	must go farther, where
In silence ...	<i>The change shall take me worse,</i>
...	<i>and no one dare</i>
Can life and death agree,	<i>Look in my face and see.</i>
...	...
In all your wide warm earth	<i>I love thee not, I love thee not!</i> –
<i>I have no part</i>	away!
...	

² EBB's poetical translations, in the context of her own original compositions, her *Diary*, and her relationship with the classical scholar High Stuart Boyd, remain beyond the scope of the current research.

Here, denial equals self-confrontation and unbearable internal doubt. Is she the right woman, is she a faithful partner, is she her own self? Ultimately, such states of self-split signal the arrival of the modern, poignantly self-conscious individual through the question: Who am I? This “heavily-drafted” (Donaldson in Browning 2010, 2: 411, 413) poem presents a speaker in a state of physical immobility, muteness, emotional deficiency, self-coverture and even moral disgrace (Cf. esp. ll. 6, 15, 17).

Between psychology and philosophy, denial appears to span a cohort of meanings from cessation to continuation. Denial as self-rejection could indicate self-sacrifice, self-martyring, over-exhaustion of one’s old self-image, being “abused or undervalued”; it is a crossroads between descriptiveness (what one has done) and prescriptiveness (what one has not done) – both seem too lead back to childhood to look for answers in (Ackroyd 2001: 264 – 265), and both hint at a temporal awareness in need of some narrative to develop and serve as solution. Denial could also be related to self-defense in time of identity-crisis, especially when one feels uncertain about “one’s role, purpose, and meaning in life” (Matsumoto, ed. 2009: 246). Self-relativization – sabotage of the feasibility of the “I” – is a stepping stone to cognizing the axial role of another individual as an ampler truth, older, yet more vulnerable because in need of comprehension by the “I”. Self-denial could be taken as “erosion of knowledge” – an acosmic question mark to “the ultimate reality of the world” (“the world of worldliness”; Audi 1999: 6, 825) – particularly if torn from the perceiving mind.

The element of competitiveness in the diffuse negation we encounter in *A Denial* has a reason and an end: The presence of another woman creates a contextual domain for the lyrical self. A sevenfold epiphora (“Look in my face and see”) spreads a bouquet of self-riveting protestations that chart an individual’s place in life in a narrative that balances between remembrance and anticipation. It is exactly because none of the riddles the female speaker articulates can be solved unequivocally that she stands out obviously. She may not approach her beloved, for she is physically incapacitated (stanza I); she dares not love him, for she sees that life and death disagree in giving hope yet in removing it from man almost too soon, denying all living creatures and relationships lastingness and fulfillment (stanza II); she is lighter than a song which “overcomes” her (stanza IV); she is feeble both in her feelings and in her appearance (stanza VI); she loves him not and repudiates him (stanza VII). Ironically, denial helps the speaker rear a voice of her own: While she wanes, she can be told apart; she becomes distinct exactly because she is unlike the other woman

who is so much more prominent. Hauntingly, she comes into being – if verbally – because she confesses she is nobody.

Denial in terms of self-diminution as self-exposure – a gesture of begging the attention of the onlooker – features in Elizabeth Barrett's love correspondence with Robert Browning. Begun in May 1845 and "in effect part of a running conversation" (Kintner, ed. 1969: xxiv – xxv), Elizabeth's letters typify her own sense of internal decline through isolation and physical weakness she experienced before meeting Robert. Personal infirmity and spiritual helplessness would miraculously inspire generosity and sensitivity for the weak, the oppressed, and the suffering, as seen from her political poetry (e.g. *Casa Guidi Windows* [1851] and *A Curse for a Nation* [1855], notably in her Anglo-Florentine period (Cf. Treves 1956: 75, 209). Yet notions of entombment, morbidity, solitude, and disbelief in her (on the part of other family members regarding Elizabeth's capacity to lead an independent life), crop up in the correspondence with other friends, as she mourns her life before marriage (Kintner 1969, ed. xxxvi). Unsurprisingly, deep guilt settles down in her mind – by marrying, she has broken a decreed image her own father's faith in her inspired: a pure, chaste, obedient daughter and innocent child, now a rebel, eloped (ibid. xxxviii – xxxix). Robert's words of affection in his first letter to her (10 Jan 1845) must have come as pleasant tidings:

I love your verses with all my heart, dear Miss Barrett, ... [your poetry] into me ... has gone, and part of me has it become, this great living poetry of yours, not a flower of which but took root and grew – ... the fresh strange music, – and I love you too: ... I feel as at *some untoward passage in my travels* – ... close ... to some world's – *wonder in chapel or crypt...*; and the *half-opened door shut*, and I went home my thoughts of miles, and the sight was never to be! (Kintner, ed. 1969: 3 – 4, emphasis added).

To which she responds with a letter twice the size of his (a telling feature of her own emotional-intellectual investment in their relationship) – a soliloquy on the hardships of being woman, poet, and learner. Coy yet frank in naming the difficulty of comprehending Self if disconnected from what lies beyond Self, she transforms narrowness (the 'crypt' Robert suggests) into an auto-reflexive space of her own which may be accessed but by a single traveler:

... the humble, low voice, which is so excellent a thing in women – particularly when they go a-begging! ... *if you had entered the 'crypt,'*

you might have caught cold, or been tired to death, & wished yourself 'a thousand miles off' ... I am your debtor, ... I live to follow this divine art of poetry ... , I must be a devout admirer & student of your works. (Kintner, ed. 1969: 5, emphasis added)

Bashful, Elizabeth assumes secrecy as a policy of self-protection – this very policy shields her from friends and customarily curious impostors alike. She vehemently subjects to examination her originality of thought at the same time that she affirms her own genius. *Sonnets from the Portuguese* (1850) become the place of self-exegesis and self-reference: by then she must have been tempted by a kind of Bildungsroman self-telling impetus, by self-revision and self-quotation (e.g. *Sonnet XLII*). This would account also for the “stronger narrative, [novelistic] trajectory than that found in most earlier sequences” the poet produced (Donaldson & Neri in Browning 2010, 2: 432).

Self-prefacing and a sense of the past

A consensual, contradictory terrain is found in the presence of the home, childhood, parental protection, and a greater Other – a premise for the nineteenth-century woman poet’s critique of taxonomies, established morals yet a harbor for her spasmodic-escapist emotional abandon. Elizabeth, perennially unhappy with herself, as Percy Lubbock maintains based on her letters (Lubbock 1917: 43, 69), longed for father Barrett’s approval and trembled at the thought of his rising anger about each smallest novelty introduced to her fixed daily routine of an invalid, including new or familiar visitors (ibid. Cf. 48, 60). In her correspondence she archives details about her merciless practice of revising her own works – she hardly ever wrote all too hectically; and feeling helpless and dependent, she pondered on being “bad” even when she hardly communicated *in* her family (ibid. Cf. 65). In her dedication to her father in her preface to the 1844 edition of her poems, she seems self-constricted: Her recollections betray a self-nullifying conviction that, shorn of her father’s blessing, her existence would be quite improbable. Aware that a character on a white page costs more than an ethereal bodily presence, she cleverly manoeuvres to sanction at once the patriarch’s word and a space and time of her own:

When your eyes fall upon this page of dedication, and you start to see to whom it is inscribed, *your first thought will be of the time far off when I was a child and wrote verses, and when I dedicated them to you who were*

my public and my critic. ... Of all that such a recollection implies of saddest and sweetest to both of us, it would become neither of us to speak before the world; nor ... to one another, with voices that did not falter. ... you, who hold with me over all sense of loss and transiency, one hope by one Name, – ... accept from me the inscription of these volumes, the exponents of a few years of an existence which has been sustained and comforted by you as well as given. ... to return to a visible personal dependence on you, as if indeed I were a child again; to conjure your beloved image between myself and the public, so as to be sure of one smile, – and to satisfy my heart while I sanctify my ambition....
(Browning 2010, 1: 1, emphasis added)

Memory which embodies the time of her first steps in writing encouraged by Papa kindles and enhances Elizabeth's prefatory self-narration. Father and offspring-poet are, however, fictionalized in this paratext: The peculiarity of this fictionalization is in the diminution which the writer employs to claim an identity of her own at the expense of aggrandizing that of her father. The sustainability of the written word is certainly a motif underlying her self-exploratory impulse, and the role of imagination is made obvious as she fabricates the presence of an ultimate protector. Moreover, we have experience narrativized ahead of itself – human time, a time wished for, projected, protention, yet retention, relatable to an actuality, to a past (childhood), no less of an event, though one bearing negative connotations about her own self-esteem. The prohibition to speak of this clandestine pact is yet another proof of the ideological worth of denying equality between the two individuals: In her ineffectuality, she is made prominent, while his superiority is thrown into relief. An interface between one human being and another, the written word assumes demiurgic potency. Anxious to deserve the approval of an older, better, superior Other, EBB finds herself blessed with no steady female ancestry and on 7 January 1845 she writes to Henry Fothergill Chorley: "How strange! ... I look everywhere for Grandmothers & see none. It is not in the filial spirit I am deficient, I do assure you—witness my reverent love of the grandfathers!—" (BC 10, 1992: 13 – 15).

Not long after, in *Sonnet XXXIII (Sonnets from the Portuguese)*, she seeks solace in the small and cozy world of infancy while she denies she could exist independently (emphasis added):

Yes, call me by my *pet-name!* let me hear
The name I used to run at, *when a child,*
...

Call me *no longer*. Silence on the *bier*,
While *I call God* – call God! – so let thy mouth
Be heir to *those who are now exanimate*.

...

Yes, call me by that name, – and I, *in truth*,
With *the same heart, will answer and not wait*.

The well-known pet name was ‘Ba’. The chief by that time ‘exanimates’ include her two grandmothers (Elizabeth Moulton, neé Barrett [1763 – 1830], and Arabella Graham Clarke [1755 – 1827], neé Altham), her beloved brother, Edward (drowned in a boating accident in Torquay in 1840), her brother Samuel, who died in 1840, and her uncle Samuel, who died in 1837). In the present of the revealed emotion time gets narrativized, the before of childhood is discovered (a perception of pastness), as well as the expectation of the end (a perception of futurity). The lyrical speaker’s oscillation between lived time and foreseen time within the experience that consciousness is parallels the conflict also of the poet imagining herself now as a dependent freed from care, now as a fully-fledged adult prepared to answer for herself. Writing is thus subtle self-exhibitionism of the impossibility of swerving away from speaking as narrating in, and about, time. It is a form of denial of linearity of narration, straightforwardness of authorial perception, and of one-dimensionality of self-confession: In *Sonnets from the Portuguese* the nearly catechetical call-and-response form precludes, hermeneutically, the singularity of the existence of both perceiver (the poet narrating) and perceived (the poet narrated of).³

“... nobody can understand me...”

In her letters 1842 – 1843 to Richard Hengist Horne, Mary Russell Mitford (similarly overwhelmed by paternal protection), and Hugh Stuart Boyd, Elizabeth Barrett demonstrates even more unabashedly her doubt about her own efficacy as a human being, stressing her worthlessness against the looming figure of her father, mourning, yet bathing in, her preeminent physical weakness (as she also dwells on George Sand, Victor Hugo, Felicia Hemans, Wordsworth, Tennyson, and Browning), which at

³ In the longer version of this research, the discussion moves on to examine self-denial in EBB’s autobiographical writing. *Aurora Leigh, Diary by E. B. B. 1831 – 1832* and a bouquet of Romantic and Victorian women poets’ works (L. E. L., Felicia Hemans, Mary Howitt, Caroline Norton, Frances Anne Kemble, Emily Brontë, and Isa Blagden) are seen to intersect over themes like female anonymity, the improvisatory element of women’s poetical narration, the problem of internal isolation, the hardships of self-portraiture (with references to Sappho and George Sand), and the reflexive potential of guilt.

once marginalizes and singles her out. An outstanding feature of denial as self-defining in this period seems to be her overall conviction of her own emotional and intellectual impotency, impenetrability, and professional obscurity (BC 6, 1988: 146 – 150). Attached to her father and her most trusted correspondents, she drifts away, commonly sinking “into ... darkness & doubt” (ibid. 1 – 2): “you [she says to M. R. Mitford] loved me & thought of me better than I deserved” (ibid. 5 – 7); “Except for [my father] my existence has no value to any earthly creature” (ibid. 13 – 14); “I am clear that I am born never to be understood” (ibid. 104); “I live out of the world altogether, & am lonely enough & old enough & sad enough...” (ibid. 162 – 165); “I am used to be told that nobody can understand me – that is my destiny” (ibid. 338). The last fragment hints that Elizabeth’s inner sense of obscurity has a source beyond her own volition – she solicits an identity of her own by way of exclusion.

Fearing the inarticulacy of the phenomenal world, disagreeing with the social order, doubting the benefits of a complete mergence with a spiritual companion, the poet is unable to grasp being (“the broad life-wound / Which soon is large enough for death”), with the “namelessness” of “things” being part of divine truth (*Human Life’s Mystery*, ll. 31 – 42, 50 – 60). Other works where denial discloses her insufficient comprehension of the universe in relation to the phenomenon of death (the loss of the mother and of childhood in *A Child’s Thought of God*: “We cannot see our God; and why?”; ll. 3, 12 – 15) offer a more diffuse mistrust for a benevolent power in life (*Proof and Disproof* [1856], *Inclusions* [1845 – 1846]). Elizabeth disclaims yet affirms loneliness as a catalyst of her zest for learning, at times doubting absolute devotion to another, ambiguous about the ethical validity of finitude.

Domna Stanton could help us situate Barrett Browning’s struggles with her auto-destructive emotional power in view of women’s impulse to record “the concerns of the private self” as a “crisis of moment of transformation” needed for the woman poet in didactic-epistemological terms (Stanton 1987: 4 – 5, 8). With time, in her transition from sonnet- and ballad-like narrative to dramatic monologue, Elizabeth seems to put more faith in herself through aestheticization of the familiar into “a world created in art that she can then inhabit” (Cooper 1988: 101 – 102). This is also a journey from being seen to seeing, from a male (as sonnet would have it) to a female (as dramatic monologue would allow it) narrative, from woman as object to woman as subject (ibid. Cf. 107, 109 – 110). Nonetheless, she lives by a hypnotic fixation on the past as a haunted private ground of her own, which limns the world of Self by denying it

peace and happiness. In “The Lay of the Brown Rosary”, Fiona Sampson argues, Onora’s love affair becomes part of the brooding gloom of the buried-nun story (Sampson 2021: 136), the past being a fictive boundary for the descendant woman’s (Onora’s) sense of self. Increasingly drawn to woman’s experience as a cultural critique of the limits of Self and the creative genius, Barrett Browning develops what Helen Cooper defines as “the poet’s sophisticated insight into women’s contribution to their own oppression” (Cooper 1999: 127): Women regularly and diversely curb their own potential. One such delimiting act of denial of Self could be perceived in the poet’s close communication with Hugh Stuard Boyd – a rare diversion, more of an obsession, particularly after Elizabeth lost her mother (herself prone to nervous depression) in 1828, which was also accompanied by her engrossment in books and “serious study of history, philosophy and theology, the ancient classics, and English literature” – a reaction to her father’s “morose” character (McCarthy 1955: xii – xiii).

Sat on a fence

Self-denial surfaces in Elizabeth Barrett’s poetry between her first mature volume, *The Seraphim* (1838), and *A Drama of Exile* (1844): It is palpable in her sonnet *The Soul’s Expression* (pub. 1843):

With stammering lips and insufficient sound
I strive and struggle to deliver right
That music of my nature, day and night
...
Which step out grandly to the infinite
From the dark edges of the sensual ground.
This song of soul I struggle to outbear
Through portals of the sense, sublime and whole,
And utter all myself into the air:
But if I did it, – as the thunder-roll
Breaks its own cloud, my flesh would perish there,
Before that dread apocalypse of soul.

There is a narrative of hypothetical processuality: Sense wavers between involution and evolution of Self, boundaries get demolished and almost immediately erected, the poet falling prey to, and triumphing over, her own self-inexpressibility, stuck between recollecting and anticipating. The prognosticated futility and hazard of direct self-exposure explains the poet’s mistrust in the feasibility and positivity of her existence: “that dread apocalypse of soul”. In *Sonnets from the Portuguese* she allows to be

stolen by the other poet (her rescuer) yet disallows full consummation of the bond. She hopes for avoiding perdition, postponing the inevitable, yet she offers herself for the sake of the ascent of that other, better poet:

Unlike are we, unlike, O princely Heart!
 Unlike our uses and our destinies.
 ... me,
 A poor, tired, wandering singer, singing
 through
 The dark, and leaning up a cypress tree?
 The chrism is on thine head, – on mine, the
 dew, –
 And Death must dig the level where these
 agree.
 (III, ll. 1 – 2, 10 – 14)

Go from me. Yet I feel that I shall stand
 Henceforward in thy shadow. Nevermore
 Alone upon the threshold of my door
 Of individual life, ...
 (VI, ll. 1 – 4)

... O Belovëd, it is plain
 I am not of thy worth nor for thy place! ...
 (XI, ll. 9 – 10)

... I cannot speak
 Of love even, as a good thing of my own:
 Thy soul hath snatched up mine all faint and
 weak,

And placed it by thee on a golden throne, –
 ...
 (XII, ll. 9 – 12)

Nay, let the silence of my womanhood
 Commend my woman-love to thy belief, –
 Seeing that I stand unwon, however wooed,
 ...
 (XIII, ll. 9 – 11)

And, looking on myself, I seemed not one
 For such man's love! – more like an out-of-
 tune
 Worn viol, a good singer would be wroth
 To spoil his song with, ...
 ... laid down at the first ill-sounding note.
 I did not wrong myself so, but I placed
 A wrong on thee. ...
 (XXXII, ll. 6 – 12)

 If I leave all for thee, wilt thou exchange
 And be all to me? ...
Alas, I have grieved so I am hard to love.
Yet love me—wilt thou? Open thy heart wide,
 And fold within, the wet wings of thy dove.
 (XXXV, ll. 1 – 2, 12 – 14)

She is racked with self-doubt, self-accusation for an affliction yet to occur, exiting and transcending herself yet returning to herself, validating an unbreakable bond with an Other. She seeks reciprocity and recognition yet steps down. Permanent conflictual being which denies self-respect makes the poet's persona visible yet shatters her hopes for a future and leaves her with a sense of self-regret and doubt whether she may not be merely ignored (Sonnet XXXV, ll. 1 – 2).

Elizabeth was pathologically prone to inventorizing her faults in a diaristic, reconstructive-destructive, self-prefatorial, self-renegotiating, looking-glass manner – through borrowed experience. Her own “unworthiness”, as in *A Denial*, infuses a greater power of emotion as she portrays her attachment to her beloved (Winwar 1950: 165 – 168). Yet portraying Elizabeth – and by extension, Elizabeth's motivation to be portrayed and to portray herself – was a hard business, sanctioned by father

Barrett, as Michele Martinez argues. He approved only one image of his daughter – that on a snuffbox (painted by an unknown artist ca. 1810, when she was still a child – a telling feature of her parent’s attitude to her); between 1823 and 1843, perhaps for fear of losing a sickly angel, the family (especially her own mother) sketched and water-coloured portraits of Elizabeth “as a convalescent”; Elizabeth was plagued by uncertainty about the reasons for, and the effect of, portrayal: She suggests this in poems such as “To E.W.C. Painting My Picture” (1838), “On a Picture of Riego’s Widow, Placed in the Exhibition” (1826), and “The Picture Gallery at Penshurst” (1833)” (Martinez 2011: 64 – 68). Inter-textually, Elizabeth’s hesitancy over being seen was echoed in her choice to draw Flush rather than herself (for R. H. Horne’s *A New Spirit of the Age* [1844]), as well as in *Aurora Leigh*, where Aurora’s mother’s portrait, once commissioned by Aurora’s own father, and Kate’s portrait, painted by Vincent Carrington, reflect the incongruities yet benefits of men’s efforts to interpret the soul of woman authentically, without sexualizing it (ibid. 83 – 85).

The controversies and denial pertinent to self-expression typify Victorian women poets: They aim at self-affirmation by way of self-questioning, by doubting a one-dimensional perspective on life, gender, class, and an unambiguous spatiotemporal awareness. Which justifies Angela Leighton’s paradigm of three chief images of a woman poet’s antagonistic, solitary, Faustian self-defining: “the mask”, “the picture”, and “the mirror” (Leighton & Reynolds 1995 xxxv – xl). Convulsive, self-denying reconfiguration of linear time (palpable in acts of “selection, intensification, stratification, fragmentation, disorientation”, as Hywell Dix insists, revisiting Philippe Gasparini, Dix 2023: 5), may count as autofictionalization, which imparts to the composition of *Sonnets from the Portuguese* universality (she starts with Theocritus in line 1 of *Sonnet I*) and allows the writer to archive her own literary past by way of engaging with literary history, as she cautiously re-considers the tyrannously identarian worth of devotion (ibid. 7, 14). She seems trapped in an ontological vice: a “public and private identit[y], between the self who writes and the self who is read” (Rundle 1996: 247) – a strategic metatextual “confrontational space” her prefaces and dedications abound in, moderately stylizing her fermenting poetical ego.

In the wake of internal struggle

A concise diary of Elizabeth Barrett’s affair with Robert Browning, *Sonnets from the Portuguese* may be read as a postponement of the end, “a phantasmagoric space where writing runs into death. The infinite post-

script:” A premeditated, theatrical, yet faithful final word spoken by a hypersensitive lonely woman poet (Lejeune 2009: 189):

... Indeed, those beds and bowers
 Be overgrown with bitter weeds and rue,
 And wait thy weeding; yet here's eglantine,
 Here's ivy! – take them, as I used to do
 Thy flowers, and keep them where they shall not pine.
 Instruct thine eyes to keep their colours true,
 And tell thy soul, their roots are left in mine.
 (*Sonnet XLIV*, ll. 8 – 14)

She sees her own death as imminence, as a symbolic palette of flowers – she also suggests her beloved's death, for if the roots of his soul be in her, then upon her demise, he, too, would perish: A metaphysical perception of the naturalness and interrelatedness of love as denial and resurrection in a vegetative, organic way. Which conveys allusions to the poet's audacity of faith in the human being, a common mortal, in her poetical drama on the Crucifixion, *The Seraphim* (originally 'Drama of Angels', writ. 1836, pub. 1838): Man loves more, in self-denial, "with ... memories":

...
 Ador. Do we love not?
 Zerah. Yea,
 But not as man shall! Not with life for death,
 (II, ll. 664 – 666)

Suggesting a crucial difference, she throws man and angel into relief.

There exist other pieces in the period 1838 – 1846, not all lyrical poetry, some more politically aware than others, not all prominent, yet illustrating the wide spectrum of ethical and ontological concerns that denial in terms of the poet's acceptance of the end signifies (e.g. *Crowned and Wedded*, *Crowned and Buried*, *Human Life's Mystery*, *The Claim*, *Calls of the Heart*, *A Child's Thought of God*, *Rhyme of the Duchess May*, *A Valediction*, *The Mourning Mother*, *The Virgin Mary to the Child Jesus*, *Isobel's Child*, and *The Runaway Slave at Pilgrim's Point*). In all those the non-coincidence of the I with itself in the process of communication between Self and Other stands out. Storytelling then erodes hopes for a reserved space for a single dominant discourse of Self (in speaking-of/designating versus self-designation). Ricoeur's reflections on identity as a lingering between sameness (*mémeté*) and selfhood (*ipséité*) are much needed:

... the hermeneutics of the self is placed at an equal distance from the apology of the cogito and from its overthrow.

... there is no illocution without allocution and, my implication, without someone to whom the message is addressed. ... every advance made in the direction of the selfhood of the speaker or the agent has as its counterpart a comparable advance in the otherness of the partner.

... far from underpinning the ethical identity expressed in self-constancy, narrative identity seems instead to rob it of all support. (Ricoeur 1994: 4, 28, 43 – 44, 166)

Ricoeur's reflections on the difficulties of arriving at an uncontestably reliable mechanism of proving the independence of Self may urge us to appreciate the dialogic nature of denial in the poet's criteriology of being as being amidst others and thus becoming comprehensible. Comprehension presupposes comparatism, reflection, a sabotage of the absolutism of private judgment (as in *A Denial*, *The Soul's Expression*, and *Sonnet XLIV*), where the singularity of the "I" promoted by the utterance gets eroded by the very utterance which deprives the "I" of existence beyond dialogue (ibid. 1994: 49 – 50).

Locations get imagined, visited, remembered – rich with reality and story – they create ontological limits, stimulating yet curbing the poet's self-appreciation in view of mortality (*Cowper's Grave*, ll. 1 – 4, 12 – 16, 21 – 22, 36 – 44). Natural phenomena (sun, cloud, wind, etc.) form a collective background for the pulsation of the heart – the human organ most poeticized because perceived as a receptacle of emotion, an organ finite and small yet great in its ability to "guard the weakest," as in *The Weakest Thing* (ll. 1 – 8, 15 – 24). Poignant self-doubt – to the point of self-erasure – exposes the ordinariness, uncouthness, purposelessness of the speaker in favour of her love for an Other who gives her a little name, though her own verses may not be promised longevity in other people's minds (*The Pet-Name*, ll. 1 – 15, 31 – 35, 56 – 60). Or, as Hans Köchler summarizes, "the subject experiences himself as being a cause of doubt and interrogation and thus will reflect – "primarily" – on himself as starting from a comprehension of the world that has not been reflected upon before" (Köchler 1983: 182), but will eventually thus arrive at comprehension of life as the realm of the Other as a prerequisite for oneself – a transcendental reflection of "being-in-the-world" (ibid.).

Ironically, self-denial reveals the self-fulfilling potential of writing and the natural for man "coded program of the vital *self-individualization in existence*" (Tymieniecka 1983: 369):

Yet, Heart, when sun and cloud are pined
And drop together,
And at a blast which is not wind,
The forests wither,
Thou, from the darkening deathly curse
To glory breakest, –
The Strongest of the universe
Guarding the weakest!
(*The Weakest Thing*, ll. 17 – 24)

A Husserlian suspension of the laws of objectivity, the experience of the heart – earlier in the poem declassified as “the weakest thing” – turns into a uniquely subjective promotion of life, “transforming the very experiential significance of the human destiny” (Tymieniecka 1983: 370, 372), compared to physically more potent natural elements and phenomena (the sun, a cloud, the wind, a forest). Indirectly, severance and affliction are implied in this poem, but overall, the heart’s presence annuls a tragic resolution, becoming the very epicenter of temporal experience as human experience – it works toward what Anna-Teresa Tymieniecka describes as “*Imaginatio Creatrix*” (ibid. 358, 371) – a creative power beyond ordinary, natural time, a force of alternative genesis, of the human, and precisely in view of temporality.

One word more...

Phenomenologically oriented, Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s poetry displays the dynamics of the communication between external reality and human consciousness. A heart (and elemental natural events, as in *The Weakest Thing*), a burial place (and material objects, as in *Cowper’s Grave*), and a personal name (and processes, like ageing in *The Pet-Name*) are some of the points of the intersection between Self and Other, past and present, the ancestry of materiality and the ideality of the procreative impulse, glimpses at recollecting and anticipating – all unavoidably “existential moments (of being)” (Ingarden 1964: 28, 38 – 39), with “intersubjective communication” through autonomy–heteronomy, originality–derivation, self-dependence–contingency (ibid. 29. 42, 92 – 93). Narrative, which at once relies on, and contests the intangibility of, memory, records the currentness of the “I”, making it fluid, relative, and incoherent, pushing it beyond stability, urging it to see before and after. So, while an act of poetic creation may elucidate previously not all that well explored sides of a given “I”, it “cannot create a self-existent object” (ibid. 50), i.e. a consciously

experiencing substance entirely independent of elseness. In this, ultimately, lies Elizabeth Barrett Browning's trust in denial.

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