

**THE SENSE OF AN ENDING: ELIZABETH BARRETT
BROWNING’S PERCEPTION OF DEATH
(BASED ON *THE SERAPHIM AND OTHER POEMS*, 1838)**

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This paper is a tribute to Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s perception of death according to *The Seraphim and Other Poems* (1838). While I focus more specifically on the image of the mourning mother in *Isobel’s Child* and *The Virgin Mary to the Child Jesus*, I suggest a wider context for the poetess’ experience of mortality, drawing on her correspondence and her poetry in the period 1826 – 1844, as I aim at exploring the cognitive value of a survivor’s sense of an ending whereby loss gets transformed into aesthetic experience.

Key words: Elizabeth Barrett Browning, death, knowledge, aesthetic experience

In his practical guide to parenting (*Some Thoughts Concerning Education*, 1693) John Locke discovers happiness on the cusp between a healthy body and a serviceable mind:

A sound mind in a sound body is a short, but full description of a happy state in this world. He that has these two, has little more to wish for; and he that wants either of them, will be but little the better for any thing else. Mens [sic] happiness or misery is most part of their own making.

(Locke 1779: 5)

True yet not true as far as Elizabeth Barrett Browning¹ is concerned. For while she displays – and from 1826 on with bouts of excess around moments of loss in her own life – awareness of her own physical frailness, she evidences of a growing mental volume. Child-rearing in Elizabeth’s family, firmly propped against the Lockean model of an intervention in a

¹ Further on abbreviated as “EBB.”

person's emotional and physical wellbeing as seen fit (also according to the child's gender) endorsed self-scrutiny and an exorbitant sense of obligation. While Locke embraces independence in an individual's auto-managerial capacities, Barrett espouses the view of the wholeness and soundness of the self as a social construct externally defined. As she parted with dear relatives, the past accreted to a fuller reality and brought the poetess to a debilitating state of interpretatory and philosophical abandonment to the notion of time as a human entity, with an accent on Christ's death:

We may stand upon the fulcrum of the death of the Divine Person, & thence argue its necessity, – ... & I confess it seems to me doubtful whether we should ever reach the revealed fact. ... Man does not only suffer eternally that he may, as a finite being, suffer immensely, ... to satisfy the eternal & immense demands of that law which is the transcript of God's perfections. (BC, 2, 75-77, Let. 269, EBB to Hugh Stuart Boyd, Sept 1827, emphasis in bold type)

In her 1826 translation of Gregory of Nazianzen's *Oration 38*, she tailors comprehension of time according to Christ's exemplary sacrificial life:

He who was without flesh taketh upon Him flesh; the word is envelopped [sic] with the grossness of matter, the invisible is seen, the intangible is touched, the eternal has a beginning, the son of God becomes the son of man, Jesus Christ, the same {yesterday} today & for ever. ... That which is, & is for ever having proceeded from {that} which is for ever, above cause & reasoning..." (Nazianzen. In: Browning 2010, 5: 459)

The virtuosity of EBB's dialectical vision of Christ shall later saturate her elegies, ballads and odes in which death shall emerge as a goal and a starting point of self-comprehension, a fulcrum of rational thought and of poetic inspiration, a remembrance yet an anticipation, a retention yet a protention. Knowledge – a panacea against frail health yet an admission of one's own imperfection.

For EBB the years 1826 – 1844 were marked by growing poetic self-appreciation yet increasing dread over insufficiency, physical and psychological unsuitability for human company. The loss of mother, grandmothers and two brothers etched death in the poetess' perception of reality as a temporary truth. She sought refuge more frequently in literature. *The Seraphim* poetic collection (1838) is a perspicacious journey

of self-discovery by way of Biblical scholarship – a declaration of faith which blends life experiences with artistic practices. It is the densest manual to EBB’s private ethic of mourning as enlightenment. Succinctly and confidentially, *The Poet’s Vow* establishes Christ’s sacrifice as a criterion for goodness and true being: all the succeeding poems further this platform and topicalize death as an anti-solipsistic mechanism for cognizing. A Byronic outcast, the Poet forsakes Rosalind, withdrawing from human society for loftier philosophical goals. Promised bride of Sir Roland, Rosalind, left to her own grief over her dead mother (ll. 186-191), wanes and dies alone, in exemplary non-protestation and devotion to the Poet – “a lonely creature of sinful nature – / ... an awful thing” (ll. 274-275). A mediaevalist iconic woman “rooted in ... human suffering” (Cooper 1988: 43), Rosalind prepares for death, leaving behind a scroll:

I left thee last, a child at heart,
A woman scarce in years.
I come to thee, a solemn corpse,
Which neither feels nor fears.
I have no breath to use in sighs.
**They laid the dead-weights on mine eyes,
To seal them safe from tears.**
(ll. 416-422, emphasis added)

Upon discovery of this message, the Poet’s “inward mind did die” (l. 465) – “A human creature found too weak / To bear his human pain” (ll. 484-485); next morning his body is found in the bier beside that of Rosalind (ll. 489-490). The cautionary corollary of this ballad transpires when Sir Roland brings his little son “to watch the funeral heap” (ll. 494-495).

Such convoluted messages as the one found above (ll. 421-422) asseverate the place of death in the poetess’ self-expression as she seeks to achieve an exemplary image of absolute sustenance and moral immaculacy. The writer’s unapologetic interest in the permanence & serenity of death, the inevitability of the end, the brevity of happiness, the corruptibility of human achievement, the criteriological presence of heaven as a measurement of time, are visible in: *On the Death of Thomas Hope ESQ^r* (1831), *The Poet’s Record* (1831), *A Sunset* (1832), *To Mary Hunter on Her Birthday Sept 11th from Her Affectionate E.B.B.* (1833). In the first 5 years posterior to EBB’s mother’s demise, the poetess’ phraseology of mourning reveals a mind considerate of the validity of death as a decreed regulatory mechanism of existence: “So full of death is life. So fast to things / Most high & beautiful corruption clings, / As reptiles to the marble

Vatican!” and “To learn the best that Life can give... by dying!” (*The Poet's Record*, ll. 6-63, 135); “What time our footsteps tread / The hollow places of this mortal way / .../ The dwellings of the dead” (*To Mary Hunter...*, ll. 1-4). Winding back the clock to 1826, we stumble over EBB's translation of Gregory of Nazianzen's *Orations 38 & 39* – a prophetic postulation of parental absence as a test of endurance for self-identification and for truth which institutes Christ's life and death as the perfect marriage between humanness and divinity, with a compound of space and time, as a meaningful whole: “he who was without a mother, becomes without a father;” “He was born –, but he was begotten –, of a woman ... but of a virgin. This is human, that is divine. Fatherless on ... earth, but motherless in Heaven ...;” “he destroyed death by death – he is buried – but he riseth again. He descendeth unto hell – but he leadeth from thence the souls of the righteous – but he ascendeth into Heaven ...” (Browning 2010, 5: 459, 468-469). While translation allows for a modest degree of ingenuity, the choice of what to translate is authentic and in this case it falls very opportunely into the poetess' growing feeling of orphanhood and her concern for her mother's health, which informs her two final poetic addresses (odes) to her mother: *The First of May. 1827* (1827) and *To My Beloved Mama* (1828). In *The Poet's Enchiridion* (1827) EBB dwells on the brevity of human life, the irreversibility of time, the evasiveness of truth, and the weight of the past which erodes poetic dignity: “My song! mine ancient song! which was to me / A pleasant hope, is now a memory, / For memory is the ashes of our hope. / ... / ... ‘What is life' with faltering breath / And all things sensible do answer – *Death*” (ll. 1-3, 65-66)!

That poetry promises self-comprehension whose path leads but to the grave is palpable in *The Preface* and the *Analyses* of the books of the *Essay on Mind* (1826) which balance mimeticity and bona-fide experience: “poetry is the enthusiasm of the understanding;” “the living are sent for a lesson to the grave;” “condemnation of those who deprive historical facts of their moral inference;” “it is impossible even to have a just idea of PARTS, without acquiring a knowledge of their relative situation to the whole” (*Preface and Analyses...*, Browning 2010, 4: 77-79, 83-94). EBB's inclination for inter-relativizing part and whole, temporariness and eternity, general and specific, displays her hermeneutic swerve: “Mortality's deep waters span / The shores of Genius, and the paths of Man” (Book I, ll. 66-67); “... History ... rakes cold graves, and chronicles their clay” (*Essay*, Book I, 209, 217); “The human chronicler is human still /... / The deathless fame exists for buried man” (Book I, ll. 453, 457).

The *Prometheus Bound* volume (1833) allows a closer, more mature, less imitative, more sophisticatedly nuanced in terms of literary allusions look into mortality. Suffering unto death is posited as the outmost reach of human understanding. EBB's *Preface* to her translation of Aeschylus wavers between the pagan and the Christian, tipping the balance toward the satanic as the more "humane:" "Satan suffered from his ambition; Prometheus from his humanity: Satan for himself; Prometheus for mankind: ... But in his hell, Satan yearned to associate [with] man; while Prometheus preferred a solitary agony" (Browning 2010, 4: 181). Next to the Saviour's suffering no parting, no grief, no opportunities missed could be too unbearable: "And think, "The death, the scourge, the scorn, / My sinless Saviour bore – / The curse – the pang, too deep for tears – That I should weep no more"" (*Remonstrance*, ll. 36-39)! In Christ, the disparity between holiness and humanness, punishment and reward, is solved through death – an inimitable essence.

Sacrificial death does not merely append aesthetic experience – it contains the celestial and the human so that faith and the imagination prevail in poetry as truth:

I thought, that, had Aeschylus lived after the incarnation and crucifixion of our Lord Jesus Christ, he might have turned, ... from the solitude of Caucasus to the deeper desertness of that crowded Jerusalem ... to the ... meekness of the Taster of death for every man; ... not the Titanic 'I can revenge,' but the celestial 'I can forgive!' ... Poetry is essentially truthfulness... (Browning 2010, 4: 289-293)

Death may appear scary because phenomenally incomprehensible; its essence is confirmed by God's infinite will: "Nay, death is fearful, – but who saith / 'To die,' is comprehensible" (*The Seraphim*, ll. 166-167). Ador phrases it best of all: it is the human being's privilege to be able to love the Son of God truly – more than "sinless seraphs" ever could (ll. 696-697). The promise of salvation could only ever be validated through man's sinful terminal life in which death could only ever exist as a barrier and therefore as an incentive for grasping the ungraspable; mortality then becomes a gift:

Ador. For He, the crownèd Son,
Has left his crown and throne,
Walks earth in Adam's clay,
Eve's snake to bruise and slay –
Zerah. Walks earth in clay?
Ador. And walking in the clay which He created,
He through it shall touch death.
(ll. 237-243)

Further poems in this volume promote human authenticity through the cancellation of a future for a female individual whose victimization and invalidation within patriarchal austerity relativises and particularizes the person, the space and the time she impersonates, with only God suggested as the ultimate redeemer (viz. *The Poet's Vow* and *The Romaunt of Margaret*, Taplin 1957: 62; Cooper 1988: 18-20).

Published first in *The Seraphim* volume in 1838, *Isobel's Child* gets mentioned in a letter EBB writes to Lady Margaret Cocks, in which she affirms the ennobling effect of Christ's sacrifice: "... we have taken that man of sorrows to be our Saviour & our Lord, [we] may look up thro His sorrow to His joy—which is, without sorrow, for ever & ever! Amen" (BC, 3, 284-286, Letter 590, EBB to Lady Margaret Cocks, 29 Sept. [1837]). A mother doubts the efficacy of her babe's sudden departure: "O little lids, now folded fast / Must ye learn to drop at last / Our large and burning tears? / O warm quick body, must thou lie, / When the time comes round to die" (ll. 138-142). Remembering mother Mary, who was not denied the "mother-joy," she considers herself too young to suffer: "O God, I am so young, so young – / I am not used to tears at nights / Instead of slumber – not to prayer / With sobbing lips and hands out-wrung! ... / And must the first who teaches me / The form of shrouds and funerals, be / Mine own first-born beloved? ..." (ll. 193-196, 202-204). Lady Isobel implies that it would be untypical because unjust for a mother so young to lose her child rather than just that it would be untypical and/or unjust for a babe to die. The poem echoes John Milton's *On the Death of a Fair Infant Dying of a Cough* (1673), which also traces a surviving mother's agony over the loss of her babe but through the voice of an omniscient male commentator who rebukes her for her grief which disallows her to perceive her actual duty to God (ll. 71-74). In ethical terms, the dying child renders Isobel as "someone axiologically yet-to-be" (Bakhtin 1990: 13): by departing before its mother, the infant bestows death as a gift upon the remaining adult; survival becomes the ethics of *living after* and of cherishing existence as remembrance. Isobel attains intensified self-definition as she is granted the chance to perceive "the inequality in principle between the *I* and the *other* with respect to value in Christian ethics: one must not love oneself, one must be indulgent toward the other; ... we must relieve the other of any burdens and take them upon ourselves," as Bakhtin argues in *Author and Hero in Aesthetic Activity*, warning of the individual's "*I-for-myself's*" epistemological deficiency; in the poem this warns of "the insufficiency of ethical justification" of Isobel's own existence in which her child's death is *the aesthetic event*: "I changed the cruel prayer I made, / And bowed my

meekened face, and prayed / That God would do His will! And thus / He did it, nurse! He parted *us*” (ll. 528-531; (Bakhtin 1990: 38-39, 41-42)). It is then that Isobel considers her own death a possibility: “My death will soon / Make silence” (ll. 537-538). Her own “knowledge” of death is her survival of her own child’s death, Isobel’s actual “own” death remains but an imminence. The death of the miraculously speaking babe may appear aestheticized, yet the ethical moments in it prevail and this is obvious in Isobel’s final suggestion that after her child’s departure there is nothing left for her to live for (ll. 535-538).

The startling transfiguration of the mind of a “three-month’s child” into an adult (ll. 372-379) is seen in its prayer to be freed from mother’s “loving cruelty” (ll. 394-397) and myopic sanctimoniousness (ll. 456-461) which prohibit her grasp of the true “teacher” – beyond death (ll. 473-475):

‘Let me to **my** Heaven go!
A **little harp** me waits thereby –
A harp whose strings are golden all,
And **tuned to music spherical**,
Hanging on **the green life-tree**
Where no willows ever be.

...

And **when I touch it, poems sweet**
Like separate souls shall fly from it,
Each to an immortal fyte.
We shall all be poets there,
Gazing on the chiefest Fair.’

...

Thy prayers do keep me out of bliss –
O dreary earthly love!
Loose thy prayer and let me go
To the place which loving is
Yet not sad; and when is given
Escape to thee from this below,
Thou shalt behold me that **I wait**
For thee beside the happy Gate,

...

(ll. 484-489, 493-497, 504-511, emphasis added)

Effectively, heavenly grace augments the union between parent and child – through the promise of the ultimate aporetic “rendezvous” which implies the “impossible simultaneity” for two individuals of arriving at meaning together (Derrida 1993: 65-66). And since awaiting means being conscious

of this, it is the case that the mother, who arrives there “late” by Derrida’s definition, is granted the chance to respond to death *first* – as she experiences it “knowledgeably” – by way of surviving her own child. Infant sagehood is a marked feature of Barrett’s early work but what a stark contrast between the above poem and her later work *The Runaway Slave at Pilgrim’s Point* (1847) where a desperate black mother chokes to death her own “far too white” child, wishing to spare the child from disgrace in its own mixed-race future! Yet the Derridean “awaiting” at “the limits of truth” lurks even there: the mother hopes to rejoin her babe and forgives the white perpetrators of her own misery: “In the name of the white child **waiting for me** / In the death-dark where we may kiss and agree, / White men, I leave you all curse-free / In my broken heart’s disdain” (ll. 250-253, emphasis added).

The child as an adult is a two-fold figuration of the Western civilization: an ideological refusal, from early mediaeval times almost until the 15th-century, to “accept child morphology in art,” and a sign of “*hysterical* mourning” – “the death of the self as the death of another, *la mort de toi*, thy death,” as Philippe Ariès concludes (Ariès 1962: 34, 37; Ariès 1976: 67-68, 70). The younger the individual depicted, the more natural the fusion of humanness and divinity. Albeit minimalist in scale, the resolution through the infant’s illness in *Isobel’s Child* claims the poetess’ cosmological and apocalyptic thinking. The plot draws the reader to a grand finale whereupon the child – father of man – would be dubbed a true poet, philosopher, or musician within a higher existence of which it is worthy (Omer 1997: 97-99). In the folklore of infant deaths in the 17th–19th centuries, such an occasion of departure, granted (because asked in advance) to an infant, may be seen as a metaphorical baptism: the attribution of a steady status (in opposition to life’s adversities, one of which was poor health) to an individual of a yet non-defined position in the community, vulnerable and subjugated to the “providential Will of God” which would disallow incidents with no tutorial value (Simpson 2000: 11, 16, 19).

Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s “smile of death” (her last words recorded being ‘It is beautiful!’) – the death of a child – suggests “a glimpse of future glory,” beatified through a departure too early of one too innocent, a “stern test of faith” (Wheeler 1994: 49) which would legitimate the relationship adult–infant in cultural-historical terms. Another way of looking at the poem would be to see it as a validation of mortality to a juvenile audience – not really EBB’s ultimate purpose but an anthropological effect from our present standpoint. A contribution to the instructional literature of Protestant England which, since the end of the

17th century, had allotted death an exegetic significance – a fact in notable pedagogic manuals, such as: James Janeway’s *A Token for Children* (1671), Nathaniel Crouch’s *Remarks Upon the Lives of Several Excellent Young Persons* (1678), *The New England Primer* (1690), and *The Children’s Friend* periodical (1824-82) (Avery 2000: 87-89, 102, 104, 105). The *Primer* says: “I in the burying place may see / Graves shorter there than I. / From death’s arrest no age is free, / Young children too may die. / My God, may such an awful sight / Awakening be to me! / Oh! That by early grace I might/ For death prepared be” (as qtd. In: Avery 2000, 94). The *memento mori* motif is made prominent through the altered roles: in Barrett Browning’s poem it is the child that instructs the adult about death.

The prefatory editorial notes to *The Virgin Mary to the Child Jesus* sketch EBB’s interpretative range: Milton’s *On the Morning of Christ’s Nativity* (1629), *The Holy Bible* (Luke 2:19), William Wordsworth’s *Intimations of Immortality* (1807), Robert Montgomery’s *The Messiah* (1832), Felicia Hemans’ *Records of Woman* (1828) and Anna Jameson’s critical volume *Legends of the Madonna* (1852). They all hint at the adoration of Christ & child (Stone & Taylor. In: Browning 2010, 1: 477-478).² To these I should like to add Barrett Browning’s translation of Gregory Nazianzen’s *Oration 29* (1826), on the miraculous strength of the Babe which rends asunder the girdle of mortality and is accepted into Heaven (“He was bound with swaddling clothes, but ascending he burst the bans of death. He was laid in a manger, – but he was glorified by angels, heralded by a star, & worshipped by the magi” (Barrett Browning 2010, 5: 468)). EBB’s most mature dramatic monologue *Mother and Poet* (1861): “What can a woman be good at? ... / ... but hurting her breast / With the milk-teeth of babes // What art’s for a woman? To hold on her knees / Both darlings! To feel all their arms round her throat;” and for a finale – the immaculacy of “Christ of the five wounds, who look’dst through the dark / To the face of ‘Thy mother!’” (ll. 11-13, 16-17, 66-67). Not to forget the poetess’ translation of the mediaeval English lyric *Stabat Mater* (1852) – a mother’s lament of her son “nailed to death, and desolated” as her heart gets “undone” before Christ’s agony (ll. 13-18, 22-24).

² Milton instructs: “But see, the Virgin blest / Hath laid her Babe to rest: / Time is our tedious song should here have ending” (*On the Morning* ... ll. 237-239). Wordsworth trusts infant wisdom rather than adult ignorance: “Heaven lies about us in our infancy! / Shades of the prison-house begin to close / Upon the growing Boy” (*Intimations* ... ll. 66-68).

The poem is an intense rendition from the point of view of the mother of the history of the begetting of Christ, her adoration of her child's innocence, her internal doubt as to the efficacy of her own existence, her admiration of her son's inborn unsurpassed wisdom, through to her acceptance of the forthcoming tragedy. The work consists of 12 stanzas, most of which (with the exception of VI, IX-XI) finish with an epithet descriptive of the dynamic of the relationship mother-child and portending the moment of death, with alternating spells of rise and fall of hope: "my saving one," "my weary One," "my dreaming One," "my worshipped One," "my kingly One," "my crownless One," "O loving One" (ll. 11, 20, 32, 58, 75, 121, 132, 180). Mary disclaims her parental supremacy and confirms her own status of a common mortal – her distinctive feature against her son's ideality: "So, seeing my corruption, can I see / This Incorruptible now born of me" (ll. 106-107; 75-76). The suggested departure of the child strips the mother of reasons to live yet it is her true self-comprehension. The babe's sorrowful, "unchildlike shade," its startling "holiest" and "noblest" wisdom, composure of mind, salient purity of body and soul, surpass Virgin Mary who defines herself as "more child than maiden" (ll. 89, 94, 131). The child's typical recumbent position – *lying asleep* – is a significant, culturally burdened figure of death. Mary reveres her own infant as if it were an adult, and so, metaphorically, speeds up its finale – the sacrifice as the ultimate truth donated to humanity:

**This holier in sleep,
Than a saint at prayer:
This aspect of a child
Who never sinned or smiled;
This Presence in an infant's face;
This sadness most like love,
This love than love more deep,
This weakness like omnipotence
It is so strong to move.
Awful is this watching place,
Awful what I see from hence –
A king, without regalia,
A God, without the thunder,
A child, without the heart for play;
Ay, a Creator, rent asunder
From his first glory and cast away
On His own world for me alone
To hold in hands created, dying – Son!
(ll. 155-172, emphasis added)**

The birth of infant Jesus and its foreseen death are instances of Ricoeur's "axial moment," or "founding event" (Ricoeur 1990: 106, 108), according to which time begins to matter for Virgin Mary. The babe is at once an epitome of defenselessness and absolute potency. Its birth and death are the pinnacles of Christian calendar which "cosmologizes lived time and humanizes cosmic time" (ibid. 109). The trouble is that "the figuration of time by narrative comes together, in the narrative, it does not find its outcome there" (ibid.) – i.e. Barrett Browning's interpretation of Madonna Pia contributes to and complicates, and does not resolve, by endorsing its Christological dimensions, the fictiveness of time as a human construct.

Infant death establishes a holy model of faith. It is an instance of reward for the doctrinally underprivileged (the debased, the poor, the neglected, the frail), with a long cultural tradition which, despite "the slow decline in infant mortality throughout the nineteenth century" (Jay 2000: 128), could be discerned in tales of dying children. Such a reward maintains a reliable iconography, also, of woman as passive, submissive and grateful to fate. The Madonna mourning her babe (in advance) as acceptance of holiness maintains "death as seductive and desirable," and "the child deathbed – a scene of renewal for the adults present" (Reynolds 2000: 175, 178-179). In *The Virgin Mary* the mother confesses that "the slumber of his lips me seems to run, / Through my lips to mine heart, – to all its shiftings / Of sensual life, bringing contrariousness / In a great calm. **I feel, I could lie down / As Moses did, and die, – and then live most**" (ll. 33-37, emphasis added). The poem is about Mary's "return into herself, a return to [her] own place outside the suffering person," her growing sense of admiration for, yet helplessness to change the lot of, the doomed who draws the temporal contours around her own life (Bakhtin 1990: 170; ll. 23, 26, 153-172). The child in the art of the 14th – 19th centuries, as Philippe Ariès proves, stands for "the theme of Holy Childhood [which] would never cease developing in both scope and variety" and the "religious iconography" would accommodate "a lay iconography" – a blend easily spotted in The Blessed Virgin's own somatic self-consciousness in the poem (ll. 33-37 – as quoted above; ll. 101-105), which confirms also Ariès' observation about the joint representation of child and parent (Ariès 1962: 23, 26, 38, 40), whereby the child maintains the cultural memory of the undistorted good into the fallen world through the model of "Christ's death and resurrection" (Wörn 2004: 242-243). The co-dependency and co-referentiality between mother and child in EBB's religious poetry could also be synchronized with her own experiences of acting as a child–adult in her relationship with the blind scholar Hugh Stuart Boyd, which prompted

her Janus-like position of incapacitation-power to the effect of her becoming his “satellite” (Rodas 2007: 109-110, 112). This may be a likely motif behind the composition of the poem *The Mourning Mother*, 1844 – a lament on the premature death of a blind babe which “out of the dark ... trod, / Departing from before [the mother] / At once to light and God” (ll. 46-48). An example of Victorian literary self-fashioning, or “selving” as well as being “selved-up,” in Valentine Cunningham’s postmodern critical idiom, *The Virgin Mary to the Child Jesus* may be perceived as an instance of self-revisionism (akin to Tennyson’s *Ulysses* or Browning’s *Pauline*): the poetess hides behind the religious mask of a mourning mother who donates to humanity her most precious thing – her own child – a prosopopoeia of EBB’s assumed missionary role as daughter, mother, artist and servant of God (Cunningham 2011: 189, 191, 193, 376).

EBB’s unpublished *Diary* of 1831–1832 documents her agony over her unrequited love for Hugh Stuart Boyd, her sadness over losing her home (Hope End), and her worrying self-absorption and self-denial. A testimony of her sacrificial self-expression, the diary speaks of unaccomplished womanhood, abandonment, and fear of passing in life anonymous and unacknowledged, though confirmed in faith:

I wonder if I shall burn this sheet of paper «like» most others I have «begun» in the same way. ... the oftener wrong I «know» myself to be, the less wrong I shall be in one thing – the less vain I shall be! – (Barrett 1969: 1, June 4th 1831, emphasis in original)

Read the bible of course; but ... far less than I should do. ... I pray now only that God may direct our going forth or our staying in: ... Thy will – Oh Lord! – (Barrett 1969: 41, 1-3 July 1831, emphasis in original)

When I go away I shall not be missed! – (Barrett 1969: 92, August 16 1831, emphasis in original)

The Seraphim volume lives between rejection and affirmation of life in EBB’s sonnetting elegiac chants in memory of her mother: “When some Beloveds, ’neath whose eyelids lay / The sweet lights of my childhood, one by one / Did leave me dark before the natural sun” (*Bereavement*, ll. 1-3); “All are not taken; there are left behind / Living Belovèds, tender looks to bring” (*Consolation*, ll. 1-2). We join the poetess’ prayer to “Lord God” in *The Measure* where we are taught “to look in patience upon earth and learn – / Waiting, in that meek gesture, till at last / These tearful eyes be filled / With the dry dust of death” (ll. 16-20).

We worship at the poet's grave – “a place where poets crowned may feel the heart's decaying. / ... a place where happy saints may weep amid their praying” (*Cowper's Grave*, ll. 1-2) – through to her excruciating doubt that her name may never be remembered and she may ease out of life forgotten (anticipating, thus, Christina Rossetti's *When I Am Dead, My Dearest*, 1848), with some of her dearest people no longer there to call her ‘Ba’:

Though I write books it will be read
Upon the leaves of none,
And afterward, when I am dead,
Will ne'er be graved for sight or tread,
Across my funeral-stone.
(*The Pet-Name*, ll.11-15)

From *Sonnets From the Portuguese* (1850), through to *Aurora Leigh* (1856), via *Christmas Gifts (Poems Before Congress)*, 1860), and then *Little Mattie, Bianca Among the Nightingales, Only a Curl* and *A Musical Instrument (Last Poems)*, 1861), we are troubled by an ultra sensitive to suffering, doomed to outlive, motherly, tone of voice which makes of an infant's death an occasion of utmost trial of human dignity, faith and knowledge. EBB's interest in Christ's birth and death lies at the core of her poetics of mourning and of her anticipation of the end. It was her firm conviction that: “the Divine Shepherd does not lead his sheep among thorns, but along the green pastures, & by the waters of resting” (BC, 3, 137, EBB to Hugh Stuart Boyd, 8th May 1835) – an honest evocation of Psalm 23. Barrett's philosophy holds that, ultimately, understanding means understanding *an other*, the limit of which is God: “I believe that the *understanding* is reserved for those who behold & shall behold the face of God” (BC, 3, 137, EBB to Hugh Stuart Boyd, 8th May 1835). An impossibility for living man who hangs on the cognitive aporeticity of death: “this death of the other in “me,” ... fundamentally the only death that is named in the syntagm “my death”” (Derrida 1993: 76).

Writing as unconditional surrender – to the memory of departed beloved people, to literary fathers, to humanity, to God and his long-suffering Son, to one's own poetic conscience, motherly self, childhood and infant lisping tongue (e.g. *An Epistle to Henrietta*, 1814). A long, martyrological list of duties which EBB fulfilled, trusting knowledge to be a relationship between two, the two, eventually, stationed on the two opposite sides of the final line. What better way to phrase this other than through the lips of St. John Chrysostom whom Barrett Browning

commemorates in one of her epigraphs to *The Seraphim* thus: “Ἐτερος γὰρ οὐκ οἶδα φιλεῖν, ἀλλ’ ἢ μετὰ τοῦ καὶ τὴν ψυχὴν ἐκδίδοναι τὴν ἐμαυτοῦ?”³

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³ “For otherwise I do not know how to love, except that I also surrender my life” (Browning 2010, 1: 78, note 3, p. 115; BC, 4: 22, letter 620, EBB to H. S. Boyd, [26 March 1838]). I am genuinely indebted to my colleague Efstratios Kyriakakis for his assistance with the translation of this sentence from Ancient Greek into English.

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