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ELIZABETH BARRETT BROWNING'S BEGINNINGS: 1812 – 1814

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In this paper I explore Elizabeth Barrett Browning's first ever 10 poems, composed [c. 1812–1814]. These initial poetic attempts suggest the emergence of the young writer's cultural awareness of time and space in relation to her growing sense of duty. I stress the importance of the element of boundary as part of the poetess' self-conscious narrative representation of selfhood as a communal phenomenon, of which the rest of the poems she wrote in 1814 inform, as they also provide keys to deciphering the poetess' mature ontological orientation.

Key words: Elizabeth Barrett Browning, child, time, space, duty, selfhood

Aged just eight, Elizabeth Barrett addressed her sister Henrietta:

Thy gentle smile displays thy virtues sweet,
Altho' dear Addles far too much you eat,
But now you have a horrid cold,
And in an ugly nightcap you are rolled,
Which spoils the nat'ral beauty of your face,
Where dimples play in every cunning place;
I wish you would so nicely run,
And then we would have merry fun,
But o'er the fire you poking sit,
As if for nothing you were fit.
Our little Lamb is very well,
Oh come into our pretty cell!
Indeed I hope you'll soon get better,
And I am, dearest Henrietta!
Your very dear Elizabeth Barrett
Compared to you a chatting parrot.[1]

[1] I have adhered to Barrett's original spelling and punctuation – as they appear in the authoritative five-volume edition of her works (Donaldson et al.) referenced hereby.

So much could be perceived in this poetic dedication – *An Epistle to Henrietta* – which Barrett penned on 14 May 1814, when still a child: her affection for her sick sister, her concern for the health of her own family, her sympathy for animals, her desire to cohabit a secret (but perhaps prison-like) place of girlish innocence, her reservations about stereotyped female appearance and position, and most importantly, her admitting being dependent on external models in writing as imitation, to begin with. Elizabeth, "parroting" about, trying to heal her sister and hoping to be noticed, heard, and responded to. Far from being an occasion of amateurishness and infantilism, this autobiographical work opportunely hints at what later unfolded as Barrett's tendency to at once erect and demolish barriers: to thank her family, yet cavilat and contest established roles, customs and talent as inherited. In *To My Dearest Papa 27th April 1814*, Barrett cautiously worships her father as the inextricable core of her conscientious being: "Sweet Parent! Dear to me as kind / Who sowed the very bottom of my mind", ll. 1-2). Between 1814 and 1826 – her juvenile period – she acknowledged her father directly in no fewer than 14 poems. Critics have noticed that Barrett was more reticent in poeticizing her mother.[2]

The first ten poems [c. 1812 – 1814] are shortish and fragmentary, ranging between political protest, didactic admonitions against error, landscape pieces informed by a sense of longing for natural harmony, exercises in devotional writing, dramatizations of her inner life, balladic narratives about disobedient children lost (and, sometimes, rescued) and poetic reckonings of justice through providential control. In those, a sound family is foundation for knowledge, for developing self-perception and for cultivating the skill of interpretation; it sets a distinct horizon beyond which the young poet's self-image appears threatened with dissolution. Even in the most pictorial lyrical pieces parental guidance is sensed as a restrictive yet liberating solitude, care, and communitarian concern. The practice of forced impressment for military purposes (in the Anglo-American war of 1812, Cf. Donaldson et al, eds. 2010, 5: 159) is scorned in Elizabeth's earliest poem: *On The Cruelty of Forcement to Man*. The tragedy of war stands out against the insensitivity of the "gentle Maiden" who "[looks] at the misery of [the poor lad's]" enforced separation from his family. Brought up in obedience, Elizabeth was nonetheless encouraged to voice her opinion and identify injustice. Later on, she followed news in the press regularly. The "gentle Maiden" of the poem is a sarcastic self-fashioning aimed at revealing at once a young woman's

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[2] In another, festschrift, volume I have explored the presence of the father in Elizabeth Barrett Browning's juvenile poetry 1814 – 1826.

naivety yet urging revision of conformist piety by demanding reconsiderations of the principles of in the treatment of men. Scorned is feminine reticence and non-intervention in political affairs.[3] Barrett practically attacks herself as she grumbles about a woman's detachment, indifference, and fear which fret her ability to act and empathize. She at once lifts the veil of femininity and erects a barrier: gentle maidens, even if intelligent, do not intervene in the masculine world of political ambition. She was to change that in poems like *Lady Geraldine's Courtship* and *Aurora Leigh* where a woman's art liberates, heals, and contributes to, human life.

In her notebook of 1824 – 1826, Barrett argues: "an unagitated life is not the life for a poet" (Mermin 1989: 28). Reclusiveness amidst books and passivity may not have been all too natural: more likely, in them there was a rescue from, and a protest against, the constraints of the young poet's gender and position in her family, as she voiced her striving for liberty and her objections to slavery. Elizabeth saw some of her poems as "a chaos of illegibility" which her mother was quick to preserve. The earliest-known literary works are found in "a thick album of blank pages" – of those the first thirty are in her own hand, on continuing pages, uncorrected, the remaining works – in the hand of her mother, also mostly uncorrected (Donaldson et al, eds. 2010, 5: xxi-xxii). A joined project between herself and her mother, then, her earliest poems disclose Elizabeth's own inner life yet assess society's mores and habits. In 1814, father Edward Moulton Barrett called her "Poet-Laureate of/ Hope End" (ibid. xxv, xxviii).

The initial 10 poems demonstrate enviable comprehension of the world around; they explore a child's inner life, psychological, and emotional experiences; they challenge established views of family intactness.[4] As a middle-class child, young Elizabeth was allowed literacy – a pre-requisite for composition – and had the leisure to read and write. In her survey of 19th-century juvenilia, Christine Alexander insightfully argues that young writers

> voiced a microcosm of the larger adult world, disclosing the concerns, ideologies, and values of the age. It is popularly believed that the Regency and Victorian child was to be seen and not heard. … [Children's works] demonstrate the young author's appropriation of the adult world and the assumption of a power they would not otherwise have in a world where [they] were frequently denied quite basic human rights, let alone a voice. They offer a window onto the

[3] On "self-fashioning" and insubordination in the works of young writers in early nineteenth-century Britain, see Langbauer 2016: 52.

[4] On humanism and dialogism in Barrett's early works, see Taylor 2005: 140-141, 147.

> development of self, uniquely documenting the apprenticeship of the youthful writer. (Alexander 2005a:11)

Human virtues and vices, as could be expected of a writer this young and schooled under the patronage of her extremely exacting father, occupy a central place in Elizabeth Barrett's attempts to arrive at a feasible definition of her own position in life, of family, society, nature, and nation. Fascinated equally with the empirically available vastness of the natural world and with the impact of the Word in English faith practices, the child poetess produced poems of didactic inclination, with a strong fairy-tale element, eulogistic of a benevolent Deity (mindful of human suffering). Chiefly brief sketches, these poems try to spell out a truth. Incompletion and incapacity lurk beneath bravery and independence of mind, as in 'Near to a shady wood where Fir trees grew', where we learn of a lost girl – the beloved niece who flees from her uncle and is believed to have been dead for a long time but is eventually found and, ultimately, forgiven. A narrative triad includes the above poem and two others – 'Loft on the top of that high hill' and 'Upon the boundaries of a lofty wood'. In the former we meet Ellen, who lives in a lonely cottage" on a hill top, mourning "her hapless fate". Ellen's demise is suggested but not confirmed in the phrase "gone … / Into that dreary waste so desolate" (ll. 3-5). In the latter, Ellen, dweller in the "beauteous little Ivy'd cottage", is resurrected as a literary character. Beloved daughter, befriended by her own "Father dear" and by God, "one Eve" she is bestowed a "golden vessel" by a "lovely form" – the vessel contains "Fortune love". This divine present, pregnant with Christian implications regarding the corporeal essence of love, knowledge, and history, spares not her father – he dies shortly after that, in peace: "he saw, / She listened wisely, to his virtuous law" (ll. 15-16). The father's abrupt demise could suggest a young writer's anxiety about trespassing paternal law – a major offence. Cautionary tales are not at all an exception in juvenile literature which sets standards, norms, and boundaries as it guards disobedient children against mischief and excessive self-interest. They urge constant vigilance, activeness and condemn the practice of sleeping through light and time (Cf. *On Early Rising* (ll. 1-2). A three-line poem such as 'Ah! Virtue – Come My Steps to Stay' may purport to show the female child the way to moral and spiritual improvement, but in fact it castigates motion as sinful, even if physically inevitable in the transformation of an infant to an adult.

A child writer this young (in 1812 Elizabeth was but 6) could hardly be expected to draw poetic inspiration from the past in actual as well as cultural terms, the reason being the humble time allowed the memory of

such an infant. This is not to say that her poems are devoid of an understanding of time and space as part of her self-perception. In her poetic tributes to her nearest of kin the narrative element is obvious: a story resulting from a request to be heard by those who have the authority to answer, with questions raised to adults, and didactic tales produced for the sake of self-instruction. *On Early Rising* [c. 1812 – 1814] juxtaposes active, sound, vigilant knowledge (a good girl named "Health") to indolent, ignorant, and oblivious passivity (a girl named "Sloth"). Echoing mediaeval dream-vision allegories, such personification of vices and virtues requires things to be done, regretted and learned from. The poem's end – abrupt and elliptically punctuated – generalizes yet personalizes experience in a moralistic way. The frailty of human nature is dressed in female attire: small wonder in view of the writer's age and the exemplary fatherly model, by contrast. Discernible is a summons for social involvement, with a suggestion of choice and an emphasis on knowledge, righteous existence, and "light" which itself creates "time": "How foolish to slumber away from the light, / And slumber away from the time!" (ll. 1-2). A tale of warning such as this one is a manifestation of what, following Paul Ricoeur, we could identify as a relationship of the "I to the Thou and the We … temporally structured from its very beginning", with the girl speaker in the poem stuck in an ontological vice as agent and sufferer of actions past and possible, with memories of similar actual occurrences as a suggestion of likely such ahead (Ricoeur 1990: 113).

If children's literature delivers wisdom and peace by way of warning through suffering and tragic occurrences, then juvenile literature or literature written by children does something similar, but in a more self-conscious and cathartic manner. Juvenile literature is informed by knowledge which stems primarily from tales read/told to children yet it still counts as a past, a "remembered past" which modifies the "lived present, and the anticipated future" as own and not own, with the child writer as a sufferer and agent of sense – not in isolation, but in relation (Ricoeur 1990: 13). The poem discussed above pertains to the "we-relationship" that Elizabeth Barrett Browning's poetry so unabashedly promotes in her later ballads, sonnets, novel in verse, and in her political poetic appeals, all of which critique poetic talent and make its private duration be commensurate with public time (ibid. 114, 119, 124). Janus-like, Sloth and Health appear as the two sides of the same persona as the child writer sets boundaries to her own knowledge of right and wrong in relation to other people. If "to slumber" suggests being naturally prohibited light, the connotation may be that a state of mental darkness ought to be

avoided because it is wrong in ethical terms. A precaution against ignorance and insensitivity, the poem outlines the likely domain of the existence of the learning individual, the child, but above all else – the girl. This girlish time, available in the first initial poems discussed above, inserts, by way of admonition, private experience and personal time into general, or universal time, or in Ricoeur's ontological platform of narrative, this may be seen as a history constituted "through the [inscription] of phenomenological time on cosmic time" (Ricoeur 1990: 127). A consequence of this is the simultaneous authentication and denial of the child writer's uniqueness. Sarah Kersh, researching Victorian amatory sonnets and the issue of marriage, indicates how Elizabeth Barrett Browning's later and mature engagement with the theme of human rights extends the above duality into a sensitive treatment of freedom and education in poems such as *The Runaway Slave at Pilgrim's Point*, 1847, and *A Plea for the Ragged Schools in London*, 1854 (Kersh 2010: 37). The poetess claims intelligence, empathy, and mobility as markers of a female (poetic) existence, which implies boundary-crossing as self-awareness. Nuancing the feminist views of Gilbert and Gubar, we could observe that Barrett challenges literary conventions in terms of genre as gender. The sonnet, is, purportedly, a non-female territory in the Victorian age, but a territory where middle-class (and above) juvenile female writers, dissolving the debilitating images of angelic passivity or monstrous irregularity found in male narratives, ventured to operate (albeit sometimes threatened by stereotypical personality crises seen in androgynous lyrical voices such as the one found in Barrett Browning's "Sand sonnets" of 1844, Gilbert and Gubar 2000: 68-69). The poetess' first sonnet, in the form of an epistle, is addressed to her mother: *Sent to Mama on 1st May 1814*. In an intensely critical way, it deals with the suffering of a woman who, aided by no one, loses her "infant Babies" and drowns herself, departing from life, unknown and unwanted (see esp. ll. 1-4, 11-14). Studious from an early age, the poetess wrote laboriously, self-consciously, and wholeheartedly, as she cultivated sensitivity for other people, other cultures (Greek and Italian, most obviously), and other languages. American 19th-century journals of art and education stress exactly Barrett Browning's perseverance in learning, in writing for the young and her profoundness in treating universal subjects (Cf. Anonymous 1857: 125; Anonymous 1896: 82).

Bravery of mind yet anxiety regarding wholeness is the case in Barrett's earliest poems. The soundness of the family unit gets threatened by dissolution upon an infant's disobedience, as in "Near to a shady wood…"

where "There lived retired a long loved niece, / Who from her Uncle fled" (ll. 4-5). But it is in these instances of breach of normative behaviour (i.e. when imposed limits may no longer serve a self as a satisfactory foundation to exist) that a sense of history emerges, with a desire to narrate as a desire to account for sameness and difference. The child writer speaks of death, parting, estrangement, burdened by a feeling of being orphaned, regretful, assuming a balladic air of (feigned) infantile innocence. We thus draw close to "the ideal of contemplation of purity" which evokes "both heaven and the grave" in the world of a woman who appears to "lead a posthumous existence in her own lifetime" (Gilbert and Gubar 2000: 25; see esp. "Upon the boundaries of a lofty wood" ll. 5-16). Wisdom and considerateness yet waywardness and excessive knowledge (of others, nature, as well as of oneself) leave the girl a loner. The narrative position is one of a marginalized, hesitant, ghettorized, cloistered human being, expelled from communal mercy by accident (or due to insubordination) yet acutely conscious of a need to socialize; hence the compensatory dramatic narratives of sundered and restored (miraculously) relations, in semblance of English Romantic ballads, and with Wordsworth in mind – a poet Barrett greatly admired (Cf. Stone 1995: 49-90, Jenkins 1995: 21).

Abandonment, tragic enclosure, frugal existence amid calamities, death being a regular visitor – these pervade Elizabeth Barrett's poetry of 1814. Emblematic in this sense are poems such as: *The Hermit*, 7 May 1814, written 3 weeks prior to her father's birthday ("in a wilderness unknown" a Hermit lives alone, hoping to meet God, subsisting but on water and herbs, ll. 1-4); *On an Eruption of Mount Etna!*, which occurred between October 1811 and May 1812 (Donaldson et al, eds. 2010, 5: 168), where Flora is advised to strive for God whom "the Parent" considers better than himself despite the tragedy of lives lost to the natural disaster; *The Beggar Boys Petition to little Sam*, 26 July 1814 (an orphaned beggar boy implores mistrustful friend Sam: "a piece of bread is all I ask", l. 9); the sonnet *On a Ship being lost at Tynemouth*, 4 August 1814 (the dramatic tension of the terrible tragedy of the drowning of a ship with people on board is rendered the unavoidable consequence of The Gods' wrath); 'Down in a Vale, a little cottage stood', 26 August 1814 (the fairy-tale like grim story of the bizarre demise of a girl, or a young woman, who inhabits "a little cottage" in "a spacious wood" and who dies from a dagger in her breast, trusting "great God's" mercy, ll. 1-5, 15-22). The culmination comes with *Sebastian or the Lost Child – tale of other times*, October 1814 – a dedication to Mrs Barrett (possibly her own mother, from whom the poetess requests a sum of money, asking that the story be circulated round the public), with a

sensible child in the role of an adult and the actual adult – an infantilized dependant (a favourite reversal also in the works of Charles Dickens and Charlotte Brontë). A precocious six-year old Sebastian goes into the woods alone, has a proleptic dream in which his beloved grandfather is waning for grief of losing his grandson, comes round and is miraculously able to discover his granddad and rescue him from the deep dungeon of a remote "magnificent Castle" through a trap door. With the parent missing, the child is left to manage on its own, hoping for help from above. This may suggest that the young writer felt alone, though provided for, in the company of her parents who otherwise ensured exemplary guidance in the acquisition of (experiential) knowledge.[5] These early intensely emotional dramatic tales commence the process of the thematic problematization of the (female) self's autonomy by way of focalizing the presence of the fallen, disobedient, or overly curious young person, whereby moralistic interrogation and relativization of existence help outline the position of dependence between one and many, child and parent, producer and recipient (Cf. Anderson 1993: 167, 169, 171). Tortuous poetic narratives were born from loss and disorientation, as Barrett Browning's letters inform. After her dear brother, Edward, perished in a drowning incident, she recorded: "… grief had so changed me from myself and warped me from my old instincts" (Letter to Mrs. Martin, December 11, 1840, Barrett Browning 1897, 1: 85).

The year 1814 was sadly memorable also for the loss of Elizabeth's infant sister, Mary, aged but three, who became no more on 16 March 1814 (Donaldson et al., eds. 2010, 5: 167). Humbled and left repentant, young Elizabeth felt existence as restriction. The reclusive protected, angelic, mortality-obsessea poetess, belittled by the presence of death in her life, would seek for compensatory mechanisms for survival, escapist states of mind, and distressing practices of insufficient nutrition and opium-addiction, desperately attempting to control her own life yet adhering to a familiar defenselessness and infantile feebleness as stability (Yegenoglu 1996: 1, 17-18, 64). The latter has its aspectual significance for the emergence of female knighthood – a female childe in search for confidence in relation to her filial sense of belonging and responsibility, referred to by Angela Leighton as the "orphaned" and "disinherited" "daughterly quest of Aurora Leigh" (Leighton 1986: 54). This implies a readiness to challenge boundaries, as well as moral considerations which get resolved through alteration and movement in time and in space as learning. The didactic

[5] For a discussion of reversed "stereotyped gender expectations" and challenges to "conventional gender hierarchies" see Taylor 2005: 146-147.

streak of Elizabeth Barrett Browning's poetry can be traced back to her early works, inclusive of translations[6] and other prose tales, such as *Julia or Virtue. A Novel*, July 1816. Julia Crapton, of the "asylum of misfortune" (Crapton Hall), gives her money to a blind "piper/harper", who praises her generosity; later, she is rescued from a fire in the house by the brave governess Philipa Octavia Mordant. Tales of courage and sympathy are troubled by the expectation of tragedy which threatens to dissolve family happiness by harming young girls, but, as argues Beverly Taylor, far more important seems to be the issue of "youthful rebellion against authority and … [the] curiosity about the unfamiliar and forbidden" (Taylor 2005: 138, 144-145) in the process of independent decision-making and in going beyond spatial limits allowed. As in children's literature (which differs from juvenile literature in terms of author and recipient), young Elizabeth attempts to both make the child better and independent, and yet keep it the same within the permitted by the family structure and certain inherited genre and gender hierarchies (Cf. Nodleman 2008: 158, 225).

Virtuous existence presides over Elizabeth Barrett Browning's juvenile admonitory writing, especially her poetic fragments, e.g. 'Ah! Virtue – come my steps to stay' [c. 1812 – 1814], and 'Oh! thou! Whom Fortune led to stray' [c. 1812 – 1814]. The element of choice is given in the oppositional structure of exchange and movement – there are two ways to go in the former poem (the virtuous and the wicked), and a return is proposed in the latter for that who has strayed ("Oh! Thou! Whom Fortune led to stray / In all the gloom of Vices way, / Return poor Man! To Virtues path", ll. 1-3). In both cases the elective and the internal is balanced by the compulsory, and the external. But in both cases the strayed sinner is purportedly vindicated by the fact that choice and action – much as they have to do with one's own will and predisposition – are made possible by conventions and arrangements of an already established order and system of signification of human behaviour. Pardon is implied in these initial cause-and-effect tales; they reflect on man's general state of dependence as a kind of validation of the young writer's own temporal awareness within set boundaries that make her a common, mortal being. The role of incident and fate, and the expectation of intervention from elsewhere in the life of the young writer mark her poetry of 1814 as an intense dramatic motion latent in ostensibly pastoral pictures of natural harmony (as in 'Wild were the winding[s] of the stream', 17 May 1814). Put together, the abrupt

[6] Her translations from Cicero and Dante (*On the Death of Crassus*, 28 October 1819, and *Inferno* [c. 1819]) consider duty, guilt, sin, also life as a journey through "a darksome forest" (*Translation from Dante*, ll. 1-9). She produced those at 13.

endings of many verses indicate an intention, or content greater than the form and one mindful of a divine plan which the female child is expected to decipher as it breaches the normativeness of blind submission and unquestioning silence. By poetically addressing and narrating, young Elizabeth Barrett displays her perception of chance and choice in life as a journey toward self-comprehension. The poetess emerges through her characters' departures from, and returns to, the home, frontier-crossings, plights, rescues, and wisdom gained. Looking beyond restrictions yet conscious of those, she gives us: *To Flora*, 7 May 1814; 'Oh virtues gone, sweet virtue flies', 9 June 1814; 'Fair Emma pluckt the sweet carnation', 27 June 1814; *First French Lines*, 25 October [1814]; *The Way to humble Pride*, 1814; *Disobedience*, 1814; 'Oh Virtue sweet, Oh beauteous Truth', 4 November 1814; 'Far along a rugged wood', 4 November 1814; 'By a large and spacious plain', 7 November 1814; 'As I wandered along thro' a Wood', November 1814; 'Down in a Vale a cottage rose', December 1814; *The Seasons. Spring*, 12 November 1814. In those the presence of the girl conceptualizes sin ("fair Emma" kills the flower and becomes, involuntarily, the angel of death), parental profligacy (Mr Dorset's gambling passion nearly ruins his family in *The Way to humble Pride*), mercy and humanitarianism (a sister rescues her brother from drowning in *Disobedience*), un-Romantic danger (a Lion kills a child in a "rugged wood"), and seasonal regeneration (in the poetic cycle *The Seasons* – through to 1816; Flora impersonates the arrival of spring).

Many of the 1814 poems, modeled on Romantic fascination with nature, track down Elizabeth Barrett's relation to external reality which becomes an integral part of her mind. Her letters of 1834–1836 show that she cared for her family's, as well as for the public's, appreciation of her; she seems to have been fearful of being abandoned or punished for actual or assumed misconduct, of being left to exist unfulfilled, not needed. She stresses the importance of intuitive grasp, as well as of purposeful, coached knowledge, of the truth (Cf. Barrett Browning 1897, 1: 27, 34). Adopting, at times, the character's point of view (e.g. in 'As I wandered along thro' a Wood'), or addressing a public audience, the child poet aims at achieving a comprehensible medium for self-expression, for grasping her immediate surroundings, challenging boundaries, warning of the perils of disobedience, with infant loss and demise being the furthermost reach of tragedy (Cf. Taylor 2005: 141, 144). Thus, writing children "give an account of both their own and the adult world within a defined discourse", commenting on, varying, reproducing and denting a familiar ground (Alexander 2005b: 31-32). What we have is a very young adult, perhaps

with "deflected creative energies" because of the recognition of an authority and of source texts, auto-reflexive yet publicly instructive (Mermin 1989: 13, 24, 39), rather advanced for her time and gender, willing to rectify yet escape, to be taught yet to teach, to dwell in hazardous permanence and contemplative dependence, yet in motion (Cf. Kersh 2010: 4, 8, 13, 18), to be innocent yet unfemininely powerful (Cf. Yegenoglu 1996: 2, 3, 6, 20, 24, 41, 46), to break through "androcentric [textual] hegemony" and reach gynocentric empowerment by way of literary representation (Jenkins 1995: 19, 29), to be small and plain in body yet great and free in soul (Anderson 1993: 176). In the modernist period Barrett Browning was perceived as "the greatest woman poet since Sappho", "thrown back upon her books […], scholarly", and enviably literate (Ives 1906: 200). Barrett Browning's mature Congregationalist inclinations promote her respect for an authority in a dialogic way, as Karen Dieleman's inter-disciplinary study reveals. The poetess' "devotional" interest in the role model that an instructive Other presented was firmed by "intense scrutiny of the self and critical thinking about the actual world" (Dieleman 2009: 262). Typical for Barrett Browning is the lingering between absolute authority externally imposed and intellectual and spiritual independence internally assumed. With her "focus primarily on human experience" and her fear of being an "irreligious poet" in times of surging devotional composition (in the first half of the 19th century), she holds "ideas of authority and social power implied in notions of difference" regarding age, sex, place, time (Cianciola 2009: 368, 370, 376).

Willing to comment and judge yet reticent and observant, Elizabeth Barrett shares in her earliest landscape verses of 1812–1814 her impressions of a wise, motherly, protective yet submissive Nature presided by divine intent, mindful of its children, and ensuring that all live in harmony: the trees and "the young rosebud" ('Soft as the dew from Heaven descends', ll. 3, 5-6); "the gentle rill", "the panting snowdrop", "the reddening rose", and the sweetly singing "linnets" ('Soft were the murmurs of the gentle rill', ll. 1, 3, 6); the yellow-breasted bird hurrying to its "mossy nest" to shelter her "young ones' […] life from every snare" ('Its golden plumage glittered on its breast', ll. 3-4); the "lilies of the vale", the tree blossoms, the dewed "Poppies" and the oak amidst "the verdant Earth" ('Ye lovely lilies of the vale'). Reviving the child's familiar, natural habitat, these descriptive pieces of topographical merit look like fragments of a larger picture of the writer's environment reflected upon in terms of the distribution of roles and relationships between its members. Thus, "a gentle breeze embraced the trees"; "the dew from Heaven descends" upon

waiters on providence – i.e. flowers; "the linnets sweetly sang repose"; flowers and tree blossoms bow to greet the girl; the golden-plumaged bird rushes to fulfill her motherly duties. Such compact narratives are packed with dramatic intensity. Consisting of few lines, they are not deficient, faulty, or amateurish. They mirror the writer's horizon of expectations – limited within its recognizable boundaries yet making room for contemplative queries about the distribution of power, order, and will in the universe. In the covertly questioning lull of Elizabeth Barrett's earliest verses is heard the child writer's hunger for information that would satiate her desire to build an entire picture of life in which she hopes to have a place.[7]

In quite a Gnostic way, Elizabeth Barrett would put stress on "the process of knowing over the attainment of a body of knowledge" (Jenkins 1995: 23), as she would oppose, cautiously, the fixity of doctrines, of decorum, shyness, and submissiveness (expected to befit a child). She would not fear *begin*, and leave it there, interrupting herself in the middle of growing tension in a balladic narrative or in peaceful, unpretentious descriptive pieces, to reach a climax in the dynamics of self-expression in her mild yet terse and reproachful verdicts over disobedience. She would linger over nature's bounty, in search for metaphors for self-explaining and self-defense. She would reveal the dynamics of existing through thinking – a substantive contact with life and with the external world. She would imply selfhood as a process rather than as a thing, evocatively endorsing motion, escape, and change as figurations of mental activity. Barrett's early contemplative poems overflow with emotion: the poetess is restless lest she should miss out on the beauty of nature, the variety of life, the wisdom of other living creatures which, too, she finds, communicate between themselves, displaying feelings, apprehensions, and claiming recognition. Humanizing nature and slipping into pathetic fallacies, Barrett nevertheless trusts the derivation of sense and of wisdom from nature. These two tendencies compete and convey the growing mind's awareness of the matter of inheritance versus original production in the emergence of a poet. They demonstrate the typical for Barrett Browning hesitation between absolute certainty, independence of judgement, and confidence in the right to exist, on the one hand, and relative self-appreciation, modest decision-making and doubt in the ultimate reason for a person's being on earth. Memorable stories we find in: *On the return of the fine Season*, 29 April [1814]; *To the Fishing Net Written the Morning the Pond was drawn*

[7] On silences in Barrett Browning's mature poetic landscapes, as well as on the issue of survival under "strong" patriarchal authority, see also Leighton 1986: 75.

at Hope End, 10 May 1814; 'Wild were the winding[s] of the stream', 17 May 1814; *Upon the Rose blowing after the Lilly*, 8 June 1814; and 'Fair and chrystal is the Spring', 1 September 1814. Sensitive, humane, profound, and articulate, the young poetess professes care for the Other as the lore of being:

> *Reflect reflect, on fishes' life*
> *And lead not man and fish to strife,*
> *Reflect reflect a moment more,*
> *Ere you shut Charity['s] sweet door!*

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