ПЛОВДИВСКИ УНИВЕРСИТЕТ „ПАИСИЙ ХИЛЕНДАРСКИ“ – БЪЛГАРИЯ
НАУЧНИ ТРУДОВЕ, ТОМ 63, КН. 1, СБ. В, 2025 – ФИЛОЛОГИЯ,
PAISII HILENDARSKI UNIVERSITY OF PLOVDIV – BULGARIA
RESEARCH PAPERS, VOL. 63, BOOK 1, PART C, 2025 – LANGUAGES AND LITERATURE

DOI 10.69085/ntf2026c174

FEAR IN ELIZABETH BARRETT BROWNING'S *LAST POEMS* (1862)

Yana Rowland
Paisii Hilendarski University of Plovdiv

yanarowland@uni-plovdiv.bg

This paper delves into the range of fear that Elizabeth Barrett Browning's collection *Last Poems* (1862) displays. While the poems (many previously unpublished) were selected by the poet herself and were meant to present the diversity of her spiritual strivings and intellectual pursuits, the stamp that her death on 29 June 1861 put on her project could be treated as an instance of epoché in its own right. By focusing on the first section (fourteen poems in all, apart from the political verses and paraphrases of the same volume), I aim at exploring the ontological-phenomenological scope of self-telling in terms of a compound dread of ruination, nothingness, and recognition. Counter-identification emerges as an instrument of chronicling the lyrical self's exodic-exilic being.

Key words: Elizabeth Barrett Browning, fear, *Last Poems* (1862), ruination, nothingness, recognition, memory

> The I that constitutes dissolves into the work it comprehends, and enters into the eternal. The idealist creation is representation. … Death, in its absurdity, maintains an interpersonal order, in which it tends to take on a signification – … Death approaches in the fear of someone, and hopes in someone. (Levinas 1979: 126, 234)

In June 1861 Elizabeth Barrett Browning drafted a list of poems she had written which she was planning to publish.[1] Less than a year later, the

[1] I have adhered to Sandra Donaldson's 2010 edition (referenced accordingly) of Barrett Browning's works, preserving the writer's original spelling and punctuation. The citation of the Brownings' correspondence follows the volume series, as available at https://www.browningscorrespondence.com. Reviews of Elizabeth's works note the respective volume of the digitalized Brownings' correspondence (also a periodical's

edition materialized, temporalizing the final month of her life. Her husband, Robert Browning, called this collection "Last Poems". In his "advertisement" to the publication he supervised, he specified that his wife wrote those "to accompany and explain certain Engravings after ancient Gems, in the projected work of a friend, by whose kindness they are now recovered" (Browning. In: Browning 1862: i). The volume comprises 1) personal memories, confessions, dramatic monologues on life, death, and solitude; 2) political poems; 3) paraphrases (Cf. Donaldson, ed. 2010: 2-3). I shall be concerned with group one only.

Immersion

In the majority of poems, the lyrical speaker, who might remain nameless yet visibly agential, is self-subversive. An external power delimits her capacities, yet she herself generates restrictions to her own intellectual and emotional potential, manifesting the *idem–ipse* (sameness and aloneness) crux of her being in time. Her own identity she acquires by way of narrating, often in burlesque or elegiac overtones, uttering, simultaneously, her insurmountable disquietude over not having been, yet her unbearable anxiety over viable prospects of being, recognized, and found imperfect.

In her teenage years, Elizabeth wrote of having "forgotten [herself]", of her "many failings", of not even "in her imagination" daring "look[…] into [her] … own heart", of lack of self-comprehension, of the hardships of one's chronicling one's own life whilst pulling out "the records … from the dim and misty ocean of oblivion", warning her "most patient auditors": "keep up your spirits never to write your own life" (Barrett 1974: 119, 121, 132-133). She was also conscious of the dangers of exhaustive self-uttering. In her diary of 1831 – 1832 (unpublished in her lifetime), she could be seen considering self-arson and self-erasure, terrified at the prospect of "throwing" out on paper, "the thoughts of [her] heart as well as of [her] head", confessing "her love of solitude", defying enclosure "in [a] pouring rain" and through an unpunctuated exodus from her Hope-End-years childhood and innocence (Barrett. In: Kelley & Hudson 1969: 1, 19, 155). Her last letter written, addressed to her sister Arabella Moulton-Barrett, gives us an Elizabeth fearful of giving "nothing but pain", dreading the prospect of being "found" in her "Italian hole" and rescued, while assuming she was not worth "a thought and a half" (BC-29 2023: # 4911, 15 Jun [1861], pp. 153-156). Typical, somewhat, of the nineteenth-century

original proper dates and page(s)). Unlike collections and larger works, titles of poems appear in single quotation marks; titles of prose-fiction and research works are italicized.

individual's anxieties about self-understanding, considering also the materiality of memory that writing secured against protracted inconveniencing thoughts about self-control ("body and soul"), "state[s] of fear and of self-conscious identity", and a general "self-terror" identified with the "craft[ing] of a social and psychological sense of acceptable personhood" (Shuttleworth 2018: 181-182). Elizabeth's symptomatic dread of failure, smallness, imperfection, of being discovered in her clandestine inner and outer spaces echoed also "midcentury literature [which] reflect[ed] and amplifie[d] on Victorians' intense interest in psychophysiology" (Gilbert 2018: 90).

There seems to be further history. Julia Markus has dipped into the poet's uneasiness about her being overpraised, and the hazards of excessive worship and "exaggerated apprehension" (Markus 1995: 291-293). In the 1860s, reviews on *Last Poems* ranged from dithyrambic to denigrating, one of the few points of agreement being the poet's self-critiquing attitude and her concern for a world lacking in inspiration and goodness: "She felt a mother want about the world", and maintained "a deep-felt love for man" (Hannah Lawrance, *The British Quarterly Review*, 1 Oct 1865, pp. 359-384. In: BC-31, 2024: E651000A., p. 329); "little else than specimens of prose run wild" (Anon., *Bell's Weekly Messenger*, 29 Mar 1862, p. 6. In: BC-30 2024: E620329C., p. 367); a poet with a "hysterically irritable" heart (Anon., *The Englishwoman's Domestic Magazine*, June 1862, pp. 90-91. In: BC-30 2024: E620600A., p. 368). Mary Russell Mitford's recollections of her communication with the poet revealed Elizabeth's sincerity of mind, fatalism, devotionalism, acute sensitivity to pain, and her ability to liaise with the external world (such as the tempestuous sea, where her brother, Edward, had perished in 1840) through "the moans of one dying" (Mitford 1855: 169-171). Fear has also been related to social roles and the value of art: Quirarte-Ruvalcaba has explored the potential of water amidst threatening, liquefying visions of multiple evil, as in some of the Paris scenes in *Aurora Leigh* which develop the suppressed voices of the underprivileged (Quirarte 2024: 76). She has also focused on the poet's "solitude, isolation, and endless hours of reading", her early "obsession with her own health", and her "morbid … semi-invalid[ism]" as domains in her quest for "creative freedom" (Quirarte-Ruvalcaba 2024: 3-4).

Ruination

A survivor's dead friend, albeit unfaithful, impedes self-expression:

'I saw her, I who speak,
White, stiff, the face one blank:
The blue shade came to her cheek
Before they nailed the plank,
For she had been dead a week.'
…
Who's dead here? No, not she:
Rather I! or whence this damp
Cold corruption's misery?
While my very mourners stamp
Closer in the clods on me.
('Where's Agnes' [1859], ll. 6-10, 101-105)

In a feverish self-debate over the possibility of unity of discourse in the absence of a viable interlocutor (participating hereby through the survivor's self-subversive oration), and colonized by the memory of her recently departed friend, the speaker's mind is caught in a kind of slippage: the transition from the delusion of a living one's agency over a dead one to the request for acceptance that the dead one seems empowered to execute, though unable to respond in the conventional sense of the word. This transition, terminating with a plea – even when no voice in response may be heard – verbalizes "an expectation that can be satisfied only by mutual recognition," an equation between the living and the dead in "a relationship of identity between one thing and another" (Ricoeur 2005: 19, 23). Counteracting "against some other person", the speaker becomes "imputable" without being guilty, her own dignity and wholeness compromised, laid prostrate before the dead one as her irrefutable "inquisitor" and author who makes a subject out of her, answerable, to the extent of being able to pronounce her name: "Agnes" (ibid. 254). Through a narrative of paralaxic shifts of the distance between observer and observed, revising her very own nature, and appeasing her inner controversies, working against a superficial dismissal of her friend as "mere dirt" (l. 87) for lying, the speaker ends up chiding herself for her own profound doubt, amidst a confusion of reveries of her dead friend.

'Bianca among the Nightingales' (unpublished previously) resonates with the plaintive voices of the lonely maidens of Tennyson's early poetry and with Romantic representations of the singing bird as the soul's expression. The story is that of the rivalry between an Italian woman, Bianca

(the singer), her lover, and an English woman. Brought to insanity by her inability to give up on her lover, Bianca lends herself victim to her evil thoughts about her contestant, "a worthless woman" (l. 100): "She might have picked out both my eyes, / And I still seen him in my dreams!" (ll. 120-121). Her anguish unfolds recursively: a saturation also of a woman's sense of limit and fear of silence in a masculine world, or, as Bianca argues, the "coverture of death drawn forth" amidst the contradictory singing of the nightingales, and her beloved's "own soul's life' between their notes" (ll. 30, 38). Self-split, she dreads imagining, "Too bald to sin, too weak to die; / Such women are so. As for me, / I would we had drowned there, he and I" (ll. 82-84). And then a moment of reduction of sense, with a benumbed idea of what she does, who she is, where she dwells, and what is said:

> Giulio, my Giulio! – sing they so,
> And you be silent? Do I speak,
> And you not hear? An arm you throw
> Round some one, and I feel so weak?
> – Oh, owl-like birds! They sing for spite,
> They sing for hate, they sing for doom!
> They'll sing through death who sing through night,
> They'll sing and stun me in the tomb –
> The nightingales, the nightingales! (ll. 136-144)

A deliberately impaired, cut short of breath and length, perplexedly-rhymed, Spenserian nonet, the poem's final stanza – a bold iambic tetrameter erected on seizures in the first line which broadcasts the birds' compound voice uttering Bianca's lover's name – reduces the speaker's self to a Husserlian protention, in a kind of existence beyond the limit of reason. This ultimate spending out of the lyrical speaker's inner psychological reservoir meets the criteria of what Pauline Simonsen has defined as "redundant women" – unwedded, rivalled, widowed, or not yet come into age, caught in "the ideology of relativ[ity]", "resenting their own fate in assuming … roles[s]", also through discourse that lets "their own language reproduce […] their self-perceived entrapment" (Simonsen 1997: 512, 527-528). To a similar failed self-resolution gravitate also Barrett Browning's early romances 'The Romaunt of Margaret' (1836) and 'A Romance of the Ganges' (1837).

In 'My Kate' (1855), the poet opts for a suspended denouement of the narrator's future – the survivor may have held an unsettling fear-hope prior to the demise of her friend, which, nonetheless, is self-exclusive in effect:

> My dear one! – when thou wast alive with the rest,

I held thee the sweetest and loved thee the best:
And now thou art dead, shall I not take thy part
As thy smiles used to do for thyself, my sweet Heart
–
My Kate? (ll. 36-40)

A Husserlian retention, the above picturing allows for gauging the temporal stretch of the two friends' consciousnesses as far as the implication of the presence of the past through the departed one. Faced with her own temporalized being, the speaker shifts from a eulogy on her dead friend's benevolent nature to the agenda of assuming a definite place of her own in relating to others, hoping to emulate a charitable life, sanctifying memory, eroding her own self-certainty, which helps her know who she herself is.[2] She fears, yet wishes for, a future, but the disappearance of her friend stamps her own being with death and makes of time a gaping silence. What she dreads most of all, perhaps, is whether she would remember things and persons the right way, rather than lest she should forget altogether. Or, in Ricoeur's terms:

> With [the] unsettling idea of the threat of effacement comes that of forgetting. To be sure, there are many forms of forgetting that do not stem from the wiping away of traces, but from deceit or a bad conscience. And there are many kinds of effacement that serve only to conceal something that remains ineffaceable in remembered experience. (Ricoeur 2005: 112)

Prosopopoeically, the dead speak through the living (as in 'Died…' [1856], of the same collection).

One of Barrett Browning's permanent anxieties was that art rested in sacrifice. In 'A Musical Instrument' (1860) "the great god Pan" pulls out the soul of a reed to make a pipe to play on; by analogy, he "mak[es] a poet out of a man", draining man's interior with beastly satisfaction (ll. 15, 39). In both cases, savage artisanship (Pan "hacked and hewed") prefigures beauty, which leaves the lyrical speaker bereft of hope for herself and her own kind, and gratified with the sound of silence only (ll. 19-24). Poethood stems from denial and negation ("the reed … grows nevermore again / As a reed with the reeds in the river", ll. 41-42). The narrative, fed on loss, works toward disunity, dispersal, and destruction, rather than organicism, consolidation and healing. Art fostered through killing is a sin. Tracing the "assertion of

[2] Elizabeth's paraphrases of works by Theocritus, Apuleius, Nonnus, Euripides, and Heine, included in *Last Poems*, nuance the poet's anxiety about the fragility of preserving the Other and the self-anonymization that a survivor gets threatened with through loss.

female poetics," Şafak Horzum has isolated Barrett Browning's ontology of messianic Christianism which urged her "to correct the misconception of associating creative imagination and power with such a controversial figure as Pan the goat-god" (Horzum 2023: 843, 850). Elizabeth dreaded being identified through an affinity for a character such as Pan.

Nothingness

Long before the publication of *Last Poems*, Elizabeth had felt thinning out, atrophying, corroding, becoming a spectre of her previous Self. In her letters she wrote she had become "the rag of a Ba" ('Ba' being a name used by her family to address her), sometimes dragging behind a reverie (one variation of which was united Italy), barely able to recover from protracted spells of illness (BC-25 2017: #4144, 4 Mar [1858], pp. 57-60; BC-26 2019: #4464, 10 Aug 1859, pp. 245-247; BC-27 2020: [10 Feb 1860], pp. 179-182; BC-29 2023: [18 May 1861], pp. 128-130). Sincere and unique, the perception of self-disappearance could be acknowledged as an emblem of the nineteenth-century woman poet. Betwixt and between, this feeling of self-loss was at once longed for and kept at a distance. Karlin has spoken of "frailty and plaintive lingering" (connected with symptomatic vagrancy and attention-seeking) as part of the creative woman's "affirmation", expressed, for instance, as a bird's mournful chirping in poetry (Karlin 2013: 49-50). Blankness, delicacy of frame, and a sense of finality told apart, J. H. Ingram believed, Barrett Browning's final months of life, when she was "sick at heart and bodily ill" (Ingram 2017: 144, 147; original publication 1888). The morbidity, "cynicism" and "bitterness" of her verses was, ultimately, to be identified with her feeling of uselessness, attributable to her father's steady neglect of her emotional needs ("actually, she had been nothing to him"; Boaz 2010: 208-209, 214; original publication 1930). Treated as an invalid and self-invalidating, Elizabeth was "beginning to fold up and lay away, one by one, hear earthly garments" (Clarke 1935: 258, 261, 266-267). Her final collection of poems has been seen as her "own epitaph" (Forster 2004: 357, 369). With its insistence on "depletion", "exhaustion of expressivity", and "disparage[ment]", she was perceived to "address the cost of women's traditional poetics" (Chapman 2003: 280).

And yet she was very much alive. The poems of the collection in hand are feverishly dialogue-oriented. Phenomenological models of her own imagination, they declare a striving to preserve something greater than herself, something of the world before, as well as of life after, her. In 'Little Mattie' (1842, early draft), the child's death catalyses the adult speaker's

perception of time by setting an ultimate limit of comprehension not to be conquered. The guilt the adult experiences over the fact that she has survived (while the girl has died) allows one to regard this ballad as a self-exposing critique on the efficacy of faith and on purported responsibility. Denying an adult's right to be beneath the veil of the girl's own mourning mother who gets addressed, the lyrical speaker questions her own very self for "scolding" the girl: "You, her mother, with wet face, / Having had all in your case? // Just so young but yesternight, / Now she is as old as death. … Show me Michael with the sword / Rather than such angels, Lord!" (ll. 11-14, 76, 82-83). The perlocutionary vein of the poem works towards the erosion of the purpose of an adult's (a mother's) existence through language which gets defeated by death.[3] The Levinasian conscience-interdiction (or "Face") that the Other is, an emanation of whom the dead girl appears to be in this poem, is not "a numinous essence arousing fear and trembling," but "an absolute" carrying time (Levinas 1979: 215, 235):

> To be temporal is both to be for death and to still have time, to be against death. In the way the menace affects me in imminence resides my being implicated by the menace, and the essence of fear. It is a relation with an instance whose exceptional character is due not to the fact that it is at the threshold of nothingness or of a rebirth, but to the fact that, in life, it is the impossibility of every possibility.

Just such an impossibility opens the road to (self)recognition and motivates the pronominal dynamics (the skeletal usage of personal pronouns) of the narrative as a falsely observational self-exclusion that explodes in the performativity of the "I" in stanza VII in 'Little Mattie' (see also Ricoeur 2005: 19, 21, 95).

Intended for *The Keepsake*, 'My Heart and I' (1857) is an epiphanic revelation of a survivor's inconspicuousness, a tribute to art, and an epoché on time. Begging understanding from an unknown confidante, the poet initiates discourse out of loss, despite the indifference that the world shows for her:

> I.
> ENOUGH ! we're tired, my heart and I.
> We sit beside the headstone thus,
> And wish that name were carved for us.
> The moss reprints more tenderly

[3] Two other political poems of the same collection, 'Only a Curl' (1861), and 'Mother and Poet' (1861), extend the adult's self-identification as self-reproach over the death of a child.

The hard types of the mason's knife,
As heaven's sweet life renews earth's life
With which we're tired, my heart and I.

II.
You see we're tired, my heart and I.
We dealt with books, we trusted men,
And in our own blood drenched the pen,
… (ll. 1-10; see also ll. 15-21, 33-37, 43-49)

Removal and withdrawal from life emboss the identity of the speaker who contemplates a memorial she wishes were her own, imparting to her projected demise a doubly vivid face by way of the inclusion, on equal terms, of her own heart as a partner. Together, they narrate a life of their own (in the repeated epiphoric "my heart and I", completing each of the seven stanzas). She somehow slaughters her own future, dipping her pen into her own blood (betrayed by people) – by implying the imminence of death, and by suggesting the finale of the "I's" very own counterpart (the heart) which would experience the double death of physical termination and verbal suppression (ll. 15-18).

Abstract yet concrete, exodic-exilic, in 'The Best Thing in the World' (1842) the poet flakes off pieces of the world's harmony (the 'June-rose, the 'sweet south-wind', 'truth', 'light', 'memory', 'love'), glueing them to her own growing sense of imperfection, summarizing, in a prophetic final couplet, her philosophy of immediate connection with life: "What's the best thing in the world? / Something out of it, I think." (ll. 11-12). Directly, yet intangibly, she wishes to preserve something from life, with a terminus foreseeable, and in the negation of her own presence, throwing all else into relief against herself as blankness, vacancy, and feebleness. Strongly relational, the poem could also be seen to typify the Victorian woman's consensual position: nullity and intermediacy, between "the unspeakable and the all too familiar", the "signature of a silent abstraction" which simultaneously "commodi[fied] and sanctif[ied]" what Tricia Lootens has called "Poetess" (Lootens 2017: 3-4).

Recognition

A handful of poems (composed between 1842 and 1846) deal with adultery and the poet's attempts at recovery from the grief of neglect and seclusion. They offer a venue for the exploration of the emergence of narrative identity through the fear of self-revelation in discourse. In them one may not hope to find a promised reunion with a beloved; they do not

offer the "Soul Sleep" of the resurrectionist poetics of Christina Rossetti, for instance, where peace awaits the patient, blessed with "the … freedom to contemplate God without having to struggle against the temptations that beset the living" (George 2011: 21, 24-25). Rather, these poems could be taken to materialize a "young woman['s] querying the mind's paradoxical pleasure in representations of anguish" over the ways of the world (Stone 2024: 182-184). In some, the narrative is a mind's dialogue with itself on the topic of betrayal where the identity of the speaker gets exposed through the need to accept secondariness as one's allotted place or through a penitential desire to reverse time and correct one's neglect for a devoted lover, as in 'A False Step' (1862).

Barrett Browning had apprehensions about being known through stapling and stereotyping within social roles and models. There was an undercurrent: a drive to fulfil roles that would reward a lonesome, wandering spirit with the steadiness of social respect. In 'Void in Law' (1862) the poet assumes the balladic self of a mother mourning her unwedded solitude and identifying herself through her hapless babe, abandoned by the babe's father and irradiated by the hope of divine salvation only. What she could not help is avoid relating herself to both the child and her former lover, feeling responsible for her "dispossessed" babe's ruined happiness: "Two souls met upon thee, my sweet; / Two loves led thee out to the sun" (ll. 12, 64-65). Prominent for its usage of possessive pronouns (e.g. "my child", "my baby", "my knee", "my breast", etc.), this work is a sketch of a self-portrait. The poetical drama 'Lord Walter's Wife' (1859), once rejected for publication by W. M. Thackeray on account of impropriety, is an instance of a woman's fear of, and indignation with, conventional proportioning of identity: "If a man finds a woman too fair, he means simply adapted too much / To uses unlawful and fatal. The praise! – shall I thank you for such? // … // There! Look me in the face! – in the face! … Avoid us for fear we should cost you a scar – / You take us for harlots, I tell you, and not for the women we are" (ll. 29-30, 47-50). As in her early collection *An Essay on Mind, with Other Poems* (1826), one is presented with the dichotomy "the improvisatrice and the sexualized *femme fatale*" against the trio of "creativity, … danger, … and fragmentation" in nineteenth-century women's poetry (Avery 2025: 29). Barrett Browning's letters predate the above poem: "I do confess to the greatest horror of being caught, stuck through with a pin, & beautifully 'preserved' with other butterflies, & beetles, even in the album of Corinna in yellow silk – I detest that particular sort of victimization" (BC-18 2010: # 3173, 3 Mar [1853], pp. 347-350). The fluctuations of a woman's mind

and heart inform the perlocutionary poetics of 'May's Love' (1862) and 'Amy's Cruelty' (1857).

The fear of recognition as the guilt of a survivor features in 'A Song for the Ragged Schools of London' (1854) and 'De Profundis' (1860). Inspired by the Italian Risorgimento and prefiguring the social-protest tone of *Aurora Leigh* (1856), the former captures the hungry voices of destitute children forced to live in a callous, albeit financially prosperous, Victorian world. It is an adult's, mother's, and English national's self-deprecating confession, as well as an eye-opening investigation of the dialogic grain of an I-narrative which questions the speaker's right to be before "these others – children small, / Spilt like blots about the city;" "Begging, lying little rebels;" "Wicked children, with peaked chins, / And old foreheads! …"; "Fierce and ravenous, staring through / At the brown loaves of the baker" – "Our own babes cry in them all: Let us take them into pity." (ll. 44-45, 58, 65-66, 75-76, 127-128). The empathetic closure, which summons her "sisters" to commiserate and care for the starving, volumizes the tragedy of infant urban pauperism and the nonchalance of adults and of better-off mothers who, the poet admits with regret, she belongs to.

'De Profundis' is a song on the sorrow of recognition as the solitude of outliving. It cherishes God in a mourner's heart. The poem presents a kind of dwelling between actually experienced and wishful experiences, with the past extended over the present (in the variedly repeated – in the final line of each of the twenty-four stanzas – "my days go on") and into a Ricoeurian fusion of psychological time and physical time, chronicling diurnally the poet's sensibility through her repercussions of being the successor to dear people no longer there[4]. In this concise private poetical calendar of grief, each beloved person's demise could be a phenomenological candidate for an axial moment of counting time back and forth, before the loss and after it, as in stanza I, where a treasured "face" arises, and with it – the dawn, filling life with sense. When no more, the face steals light, leaving behind a retention of survived affliction (ll. 1-5, 26-30). The survivor, feeling "lizard-like" (ll. 66-70), lingering between *I*- and *You*-narrative, "heart-bare, heart-hungry, very poor" (l. 34), curses herself for possessing a mind. Each recollection, verbally expressible, denudes her identifiability through the debris of her presence after the departed. She wishes to reverse time, but her future seems to creep up on her past, blending the experienced and

[4] Elizabeth's sister, Henrietta, had passed away earlier in 1860, and her brother, Edward, had perished in a boating accident in the summer of 1840 (Donaldson et al. 2010: 50).

experienceable in a child's game, whereby reason gets suspended for the sake of a total immersion in impression:

> And having in thy life-depth thrown
> Being and suffering (which are one),
> As a child drops his pebble small
> Down some deep well, and hears it fall
> Smiling – so I. THY DAYS GO ON. (ll. 116-120)

Autobiographically, the above poem could also be perceived as an instance of subversion of self-referentiality, with the poet sharing her inability to endorse the "autobiographer's intentional act" of preserving memorable events by way of "verbaliz[ation]", since those events form "a gestalt of pastness" as "absen[ce]", undermining the representational potency of narrative as "the writer's present self-identity", following Louis A. Renza in *The Veto of the Imagination* (Renza 1977: 3-8).

Closing words

Last Poems by Elizabeth Barrett Browning spell out the disabling grief, incurable solitude, and irremediable loss felt by a survivor at the death of an identity-defining Other. The poet at once resuscitated, and departed from, the experiences and people she sought to preserve (Cf. Levinas 1979: 206). She seemed to fall apart, unable and unwilling to reassemble, trampling on her own integrity of mind, spilling out in images of frailty, insignificance, and unfulfilled social potential. Works like 'Where's Agnes?', 'Little Mattie', 'My Heart and I', 'A Song for the Ragged Schools of London', and 'De Profundis' are an ontological recital of her fear of failure, of falling short of a standard of motherhood, womanhood and adulthood; they reveal her responsivity to infant mortality. At the same time, phenomenologically, the poet somehow trembled at the thought of being discovered in her entirety, which would deprive her of an intellectual-emotional shield she implied a woman was entitled to ('Lord Walter's Wife'). In an unhealed world of woe, she struggled without a counterpart to see, and thus – see herself, for "in order to identify it is necessary to distinguish, and it is in distinguishing that we identify" (Ricoeur 2005: 25). Disconsolate, she advised her own heart to take the narrow "cubit-space" beneath "the turf unmown", to forget "how the days go on" – days in which, apophatically, she saw herself as "No bird …, to sing in June", fearing she would not be as good as the world deserved ('De Profundis', ll. 46, 56-60),

often awaited by no one at the other end of the tether to meet her countenance.

REFERENCES

Avery 2025: Fame, Embodiment and Sexuality in Nineteenth-Century Women's Poetry. // *Women's Writing*, Vol. 32, No. 1. Abingdon: Taylor & Francis, 2025, 25 – 43.

Barrett 1974: Barrett, E. Two Autobiographical Essays by Elizabeth Barrett. // *Browning Institute Studies*, Vol. 2, March. New York, NY: AMS Press, 1974, 119 – 134.

Boaz 2010: Boaz, L. S. *Elizabeth Barrett Browning*. London: Longmans, Green and CO: 2010.

BC-18 2010: *The Brownings' Correspondence*. Vol. 18 (February 1852–March 1853, Letters 3001–3173). Eds. Ph. Kelley, Sc. Lewis and Edward Hagan. Winfield, Kansas: Wedgestone Press, 2010.

BC-25 2017: *The Brownings' Correspondence*. Vol. 25 (January 1858–December 1858, Letters 4110–4302). Eds. Ph. Kelley. Ed. Hagan and L. M. Lewis. Winfield, Kansas: Wedgestone Press, 2017.

BC-26 2019: *The Brownings' Correspondence*. Vol. 26 (January 1859 – October 1859, Letters 4303 – 4504). Eds. Ph. Kelley. Ed. Hagan and L. M. Lewis. Winfield, Kansas: Wedgestone Press, 2019.

BC-27 2020: *The Brownings' Correspondence*. Vol. 27 (October 1859 – May 1860, Letters 4505 – 4667). Eds. Eds. Ph. Kelley. Ed. Hagan and L. M. Lewis. Winfield, Kansas: Wedgestone Press, 2020.

BC-29 2023: *The Brownings' Correspondence*. Vol. 29 (February 1861 – November 1861, Letters 4838 – 4993). Eds. Ph. Kelley and Edward Hagan. Winfield, Kansas: Wedgestone Press, 2023.

BC-30 2024: *The Brownings' Correspondence*. Vol. 30 (December 1861 – December 1863, Letters 4994 – 5307). Eds. Ph. Kelley and Edward Hagan. Winfield, Kansas: Wedgestone Press, 2024.

BC-31 2024: *The Brownings' Correspondence*. Vol. 31 (January 1864 – August 1865, Letters 5308 – 5633). Eds. Philip Kelley and Edward Hagan. Winfield, Kansas: Wedgestone Press, 2024.

Browning, ed. 1862: Browning, R. *Last Poems by Elizabeth Barrett Browning*. Ed. R. Browning, London: Chapman & Hall, 1862.

Chapman 2003: Chapman, A. "In our own blood drenched the pen": Italy and Sensibility in Elizabeth Barrett Browning's *Last Poems* (1862). // *Women's Writing*, Vol. 10, No. 2. Oxford: Routledge (Taylor &

Francis Group), 2003, 269 – 286.

Clarke 1935: Clarke, I. C. *Elizabeth Barrett Browning. A Portrait*. London: Hutchinson & CO, 1935.

Donaldson, ed. 2010: Donaldson, S. *The Works of Elizabeth Barrett Browning*. Vol. 5. Vol. eds. S. Donaldson, R. Patteson, M. Stone, B. Taylor. London: Pickering & Chatto, 2010.

Forster 2004: Forster, M., *Elizabeth Barrett Browning. A Biography*. London: Vintage, 2004.

George 2011: *The Pursuit of Divinity: Religious Faith and Fear in Late Victorian Women's Poetry.* Unpublished PhD Thesis. Duquesne University. <https://dsc.duq.edu/etd/575/>(15.11.2025).

Gilbert 2018: Gilbert, P. K. Dreadful: Aesthetic Fear in Victorian Reading. // *Fear in the Medical and Literary Imagination, Medieval to Modern. Dreadful Passions*. Ed. by D. McCann, C. McKechnie-Mason. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018, 79 – 99.

Horzum 2023: Horzum, Ş. Assertion of Female Poetics and Subversion of Mythical Pan in Elizabeth Barrett Browning's Selected Poems. // *Social Sciences Research Journal*, Vol. 12, No. 7. Istanbul: Denta Florya ADSM Limited Company, 2023, 843 – 851.

Ingram 2017: Ingram, J. H. *Elizabeth Barrett Browning. Biography*. Create Space Independent Publishers, 2017.

Karlin 2013: Karlin, D. *The Figure of the Singer.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013.

Kelley & Hudson, eds. 1969: Kelley, Ph., Hudson, R. *Diary by E. B. B. The Unpublished Diary of Elizabeth Barrett Barrett, 1831 – 1832.* Eds. Philip Kelley and Ronald Hudson, Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 1969.

Levinas 1979: Levinas, E. *Totality and Infinity. An Essay on Exteriority.* Trans. Alphonso Lingis. The Hague/Boston/London: Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, 1979.

Lootens 2017: Lootens, T. *The Political Poetess. Victorian Femininity, Race, and the Legacy of Separate Spheres*. Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2017.

Markus 1995: Markus, J. *Dared and Done. The Marriage of Elizabeth Barrett and Robert Browning*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1995.

Mitford 1855: Mitford, M. R. *Recollections of a Literary Life; or, Books, Places, and People.* New York: Harper & Brothers, Publishers, 1855.

Quirarte 2024: Quirarte, I. Water as Metaphors of Self-Discovery in Elizabeth Barrett Browning's *Aurora Leigh*. // *Australian Journal of*

Victorian Studies, Vol. 28, No. Sydney: Australasian Victorian Studies Association (AVSA), 2024, 65 – 84.

Quirarte-Ruvalcaba 2024: Quirarte-Ruvalcaba, I. The Lady on the Sofa: Revisiting Elizabeth Barrett Browning's Illness. // *Humanities*, Vol. 13, No. 94. Basel, Switzerland: MDPI (Multidisciplinary Digital Publishing Institute), 2024, 1 – 12.

Renza 1977: Renza L. The Veto of the Imagination: A Theory of Autobiography. // *New Literary History*, Vol. 9, No. 1 (Autumn). Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1977, 1 – 26.

Ricoeur 2005: Ricoeur, P. *The Course of Recognition*. Trans. David Pellauer. Cambridge, Massachusetts – London, England: Harvard University Press, 2005.

Shuttleworth 2018: Shuttleworh, S. Fear, Phobia and the Victorian Psyche. // *Fear in the Medical and Literary Imagination, Medieval to Modern. Dreadful Passions*. Ed. by D. McCann, C. McKechnie-Mason. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018, 177 – 201.

Simonsen 1997: Simonsen, P. Elizabeth Barrett Browning's Redundant Women. // *Victorian Poetry*, Vol. 35, No. 4 (Winter). Morgantown: West Virginia University Press, 1997, 509 – 532.

Stone 2024: Stone, M. A Spirit of the Age: Elizabeth Barrett Browning's 1822–26 Notebook, Romantic Writers, and the Commonplace Book Tradition. // *Journal of Juvenilia Studies*, Vol. 6, No. 2. Edmonton: International Society for Literary Juvenilia (ISLJ), 2024, 182 – 211.