

## ON TWO INSUFFICIENCIES IN ELIZABETH BARRETT BROWNING'S POETRY

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This paper deals with two poems by Elizabeth Barrett Browning, both titled “Insufficiency” and written in the period 1844-46. The common ground is the problem of self-expression – ever limited because contingent upon one’s verbal capacity, physical wellbeing and phenomenal appreciation by an Other. Our optics of approaching the matter in hand is set upon the premise of modern European existential ethics and hermeneutics. We also feel the need to outline a broader thematic context by referring in particular to *Sonnets from the Portuguese* (1850).

**Key words:** Elizabeth Barret Browning, insufficiency, self-expression, ontology, selfhood, co-existence

In Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s poetry the problem of expressibility is a crossroads between her interest in man’s verbal prowess and in one’s moral duty. This issue features also in *Sonnets from the Portuguese* (1850). Her discussion of self-sufficiency and obligation, internal conviction and external demand, liberty and responsibility, intelligibility and loss of skill, create the image of a speaker suffering from a chronic inability to overcome her dependence on some greater, older, higher source of wisdom which both intellectually stimulates and delimits her desire to unfold and express herself. A most immediate representation of this we find in two poems of the same title – “*Insufficiency*.” One was published in 1844 and subsequently included in *Poems* (1844-56), the other – in *Poems* (1850), though apparently written five years earlier (Stone and Taylor 2010, vol. 2: 137, 423). EBB<sup>1</sup>, known for her fetishist care in arranging her poems, appears to have set both poems in a context which facilitates a discussion of the theme of insufficiency in ontological terms. The first poem (“*When I attain to utter forth in verse*”) – a sonnet – was preceded by the sonnet *The*

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<sup>1</sup> For reasons of economy of reference, here and henceforth the initials **EBB** shall stand for the full name of the poetess **Elizabeth Barrett Browning**, whilst **RB** shall stand for **Robert Browning**.

*Prisoner* (which speaks of “the great breath of all things summer-mute / [meeting] upon my lips” – ll. 3-4) and succeeded by two sonnets that linked up in their commemorative value (both were dedicated to EBB’s sister Henrietta and both focused on presence through facial expression as well as on female identity as covertly suggested, rather than overtly demonstrated). The second poem (“*There is no one beside thee and no one above thee*”) was preceded by the poems *Question and Answer* and *Inclusions* (which deal with the interpretability of natural phenomena and their role in man’s apparatus of self-perception as of a temporal being, as well as with the issue of physical and spiritual closeness as mutuality). Both poems titled *Insufficiency* imply that an Other’s being is always greater than our imagination and verbal skill so that self-expression as total individuation remains practically an unachievable lifetime conundrum.

The sonnet *Insufficiency* (“*When I attain to utter forth in verse*”) encourages us to ponder over the fact that our ability to render ourselves comprehensible is restricted by both our limited verbal skill and by time as factors of co-existence. Speech is evidence of one’s attempt to narrate oneself, to reveal what lies inside, yet, at the same time, it seeks for external recognition. The lot of the human being is to exist by way of interpreting in a phenomenal world of co-existence which coerces selfhood towards perpetual redefinition through remembrance. The lyrical speaker continually attempts to express herself:

When I attain to utter forth in verse  
Some inward thought, my soul throbs audibly  
Along my pulses, yearning to be free  
(ll. 1-3)

She fails because she senses that she could ever do that only partially, that she could never succeed in rendering herself complete and/or completely comprehensible and recognizable since simultaneously she admits that she cannot tell herself apart from, or break free from

[...] something farther, fuller, higher, rehearse  
To the individual, true, and the universe,  
In consummation of right harmony  
(ll. 4-6).

Further in the poem we read the regretful conclusion that “the effluence of each is false to all, / And what we best conceive, we fail to speak” (ll. 10-11), as she laments over man’s power of reflection which is

very much a power a posteriori. A grievous recognition of the fact that thinking and being contain a high dose of imitativeness and of copyist regurgitation of truths familiar and not so familiar which bind us all within the common lot of cognizing by way of inheriting, rather than merely by piloting pioneering discoveries. The poet chooses to describe herself as “a wind-exposed, distorted tree, [...] blown against for ever by the curse / Which breathes through nature” (ll. 7-9). This carnal, material metaphor suggestive of some bodily failure as well as of some external harm, is undoubtedly symptomatic of a gendered self-perception which accounts for a state of dependence whereby individuation is mediated by objectification. Unsurprisingly, the finale urges the reader to see existence as continuity: in the future, perhaps in another world, in the world beyond, earthly spiritual deprivation shall be rewarded by rejuvenation, renewal of the soul’s potential whose task it shall be to “seek / Fit peroration, without let or thrall” (ll. 13-14). The first six lines of this sonnet contain also a hope of spiritual liberation through language, through speech and utterances of a higher truth, of God’s truth, of eternal harmony which humbles one down and lets one float in the varied world of the Almighty’s benevolence. In the eight lines which ensue there surfaces the opposition – they dismiss the belief in individual power of existence whilst suggesting the opportunity of rebirth of man’s inner power of thought and feeling – when the soul’s “ashen garments fall” one may be able to resume one’s journey of self-defining and self-narrating (ll. 12-14). Here the poet perceives literary activity as a type of existence: words, speech and poetry-writing are like breathing which regulates a self’s bodily functions moderated by constant exchange, inclusion and exclusion. Whilst the poetess utters rhymes, she expresses herself as if she were giving birth yet she admits she is phenomenologically dependent on an external source of self-fulfillment whereby she can be seen to rear sense and meaning as interpretation of an external original. The examination of this poem may also be a helpful route towards the investigation of the poetess’ preference for looking back in time as a point of orientation in her poetics of self-perception – a unique amalgam of interrelated dependences on literary-historical and private othernesses. The temporal distances which EBB bridges in her poetry demonstrate her obsession with the matter of truth and truth-telling – both relative concepts in view of the contingency of remembering and interpreting, as they, too, depend on language – itself a metaphysical product of communal being (the notion of being and speaking as “rehearsal”, rather than as ultimate verity, lurks in line 4 of the poem). The two poems in hand are as much about selfhood as they are about speech

and poetic expression where imprisonment and liberation co-exist as they remind us of the fact that language is a lifetime experiential product. As such, it signifies the need to relate to external reality which both kindles and curtails our imagination. We speak in order to be, to survive, to affirm ourselves. Sometimes, as EBB's three sonnets dedicated to the blind classicist Hugh Stuart Boyd (whom she knew in person) indicate, speech may virtually prove to be the only tool for establishing ourselves and our relationship with the world where insufficiencies – physical or mental – confirm being alive as being in obligation. A blind man's eyes may mock those of the living which seem blinded by tears of regret and guilt. Grecian phrases may return and choke the poetess' utterances with lore from before and from the beyond (see especially the sonnet *Hugh Stuart Boyd. Legacies*, 1850, ll. 7-11). As a matter of fact, in March 1845 EBB chose to compare herself to 'a blind poet' as she shared with RB "her lack of opportunities to know the world" (being confined by her poor health, as well as by her own father's dictatorial paternalist attitude, and within a close domestic environment at 50 Wimpole Street, London, in the period 1838–1846). By this she would have also implied her admiration for the poet Aeschylus and his "growing blind from staring at the sun in her unpublished '[Aeschylus's Monodrama]'" (Donaldson 2010, vol. 2: 159-60).<sup>2</sup> Blindness, as an insufficiency which requires mediation and intervention, is to be observed also in her drama *Aurora Leigh* where the blinding of Romney Leigh is a functional means of equating social, gender and aesthetic differences.

Formally, the sonnet *Insufficiency* ("When I attain to utter forth in verse") conforms to the Petrarchan type, its rhyme being *abbaabbacdcddc*, i.e. an octave and a sestet. However, the inbuilt contrast between the two parts happens in line 7 where we find summation of the poetess' not necessarily simply feminine fear of being exposed and distorted because being forced to recognize at all times a superior authority which is believed to facilitate the process of one's self-formation. The problem of expressibility may not categorically be defined as gender-specific, and it does not really meet a solution as the poem as a whole argues that self-expression and individuation depend on external appreciation and are thus threatened at all times by the instability of verbal and visual signs. Signification is only partial, momentary, looking as if – it is phenomenal, it

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<sup>2</sup> EBB produced two translations of Aeschylus' *Prometheus Bound* and in 1842 she wrote the insightful essay 'Some Account of the Greek Christian Poets' in which she registered her interest in reading and translating under Boyd whose temporary amanuensis she had become (Donaldson 2010, vol. 2: 159-60).

is processual by virtue of it being produced by common mortals in interaction. It is natural to signify, just as it is natural to deceive when interpreting for reasons temporal, cultural, generational, and private. To desire to narrate oneself, to speak, is a hazardous venture as it is evidence of willingness to come out of oneself, to leave the safe habitat of self-certainty, to break the bounds of self-content, to depart from familiarity and to seek for recognition from an Other whose ideal original source is suggested to be the demiurge (“something farther, fuller, higher” – l. 4). Above all else, we are faced with the problem of poetic self-expression and of poetic being as a type of existence which negotiates and itself requires negotiation in order to be: “When I attain to utter forth in verse / Some inward thought, my soul throbs audibly / Along my pulses, yearning to be free” (ll. 1-3). The curse of nature suggested in lines 8-9 (“the curse / Which breathes through nature”) is the curse of time which compromises man’s potential – physical and mental. The art of poesy is presented as phenomenal, deeply ingrained in natural history despite the fact that it also denotes human history, especially if we would consider the example of the aestheticization of the female individual (in this case of the female mind) as an object of reflection, rather than as a reflecting subject. Whilst familiarizing the reader with the process of self-telling, the poem suggests that de-familiarization is at the bottom line of self-comprehension as recognition from outside. In the sonnet *The Prisoner*, which immediately precedes *Insufficiency*, we register self-representation as deprivation, exclusion and imprisonment. The lyrical self here features as an observer locked inside a sick room and may only distantly be allowed to hear “the great breath of all things summer-mute” (l. 3): her lamentation is extended to “Nature’s lute” that “sounds on behind this door so closely shut” which prohibits the “wild music” (ll. 6-8). Metaphoric invalidation and incapacitation are emphatic ways of maintaining that poetic self-perception implies external appreciation as well as overcoming boundaries (or healing after illnesses) whose outermost reach is found, nonetheless, in the genderless phenomenon of mortality which makes incompleteness and insufficiency lifetime markers of human existence (i.e. human existence as approximation, rather than as utter certainty or completion).

Being one of seven thematically related love lyric pieces (that were eventually separated from *Sonnets from the Portuguese* – Donaldson 2010, vol. 2: 407-08, 423-24), the poem “*There is no one beside thee and no one above thee*” works as an apt preface to EBB’s famous sequence of 44 sonnets. It has its own way of admitting the impotency of speech – in terms of conveying justly another person, as well as in terms of self-expression.

Self-expression depends on one's verbal prowess which crumbles before the vehemence of feeling. Emotions consume the speaker and nearly annul her self-certainty as she confesses to be a dumb, burdensome, untalented admirer of a higher being – God or a supreme lover. Doing, acting and serving are implied traits of the lyrical self's identity – a kind of existence through contributive dependence. What she can do is love, yet, like everyone else, she cannot “express thee though all should approve thee” (l. 4). She is verbally limited and as such she is a burden, a weakness, a defect that may be best removed for the sake of the Other's healthy existence. By admitting that she possesses insufficient skill to communicate to this better Other, or to communicate this better Other to the reader, the poetess additionally defines insufficiency as an essential trait of telling herself apart. That is, she can be known exactly because she is incomplete. Insufficiency, incompleteness, deficiency, impotence, plainness thus acquire an ontological status: they come to denote being alive and being human, owing something to someone else through whom one may be able to perceive oneself:

I.

There is no one beside thee and no one above thee,  
Thou standest alone as the nightingale sings!  
And my words that would praise thee are impotent things,  
For none can express thee though all should approve thee.

II.

Say, what can I do for thee? weary thee, grieve thee?  
Lean on thy shoulder, new burdens to add?  
Weep my tears over thee, making thee sad?  
Oh, hold me not – love me not! let me retrieve thee.  
I love thee so, dear, that I only can leave thee.

Albeit in need of assistance and care, the object of signification surpasses by far the subject that chooses to relate to it. Words are “impotent things” – they could nearly do more harm than justice to the original which she can only ever mimic. The poem looks like an unfinished sonnet with erratic, unconventional, experimental rhyme. As pointed out in note 2 to the above poem in Sandra Donaldson's complete edition of EBB (Cf. Donaldson 2010, vol. 2: 424), such context of self-negation coincides with that of sonnets III and IX from *Sonnets from the Portuguese*, where the poet refers to herself as “a poor, tired, wandering singer, . . .” who faces someone with a “chrysm on [his] head” (sonnet III, ll. 11, 13). Alternatively, she appears as one who “soils thy purple with my dust” or breathes “poison on thy Venice-glass” (sonnet IX, ll. 11-12). A linguistic

cripple that denies herself the chance to be treated as an equal, the speaker nonetheless emerges as the more prominent out of the two – the Other being only vaguely drawn by the hint that “there is no one beside thee and no one above thee” (l. 1). The Other is passive, she is active – yet she retreats. It is obvious that the discussion of the problem of identity happens as a discussion of the problem of the existence of boundaries and limits whereby approach and departure regulate exchange between one and an Other who can be “retrieved” – as if he has been consumed by, or made part of, the speaker’s own selfhood (l. 9). At that, usefulness, practical application of potential, duty and service are important conditions for mutual recognition (utilitarian notes lurk). The self-imposed exclusion sensed in the last two lines of the above poem appears somewhat counterbalanced by the poetess’ earlier commemorative lamentation. What we have is no less than a metaphoric leap across literary time: the poetic talent as the song of the nightingale, which gets singled out as its notes reach common mortals from above (ll. 1-2). But even amidst the nightingale species there are some who are better than others so that some are doomed to repeat, echo and interpret what the better ones have chosen to produce. This is devotional chanting tuned to earlier emblems of poetic being (the English Romantics) as well as to a typically Victorian, almost vocational, gradualist zeal for describing life in natural, empirical, spatial terms in a world where all and everything spring from, and terminate into, one another.

*Sonnets from the Portuguese* (1850) prove that for EBB poetic self-perception was closely related to the acquisition of a sense of historical belonging, history bearing a sense of wisdom and creative-instructive authority. Commemorative verse both accentuates the need to remember as a methodology of being and confirms the inevitability and imminence of loss to mortality, which destabilizes the ontological background of an individual’s existence and self-perception. Speech – poetic speech included – emerges as the privilege of the survivor whose lot it is to discourse whilst feeling lack – on a private as well as on a literary-historical level. Speech both contextualizes the speaker as an ontological signifier and de-textualizes her as an abstract entity bound to inherit, to interpret, rather than to fully belong with the object of contemplation. Let us consider some examples which deal with the interrelated problems of insufficiency and inexpressibility in ontological terms (my bold type throughout these excerpts; the italicized lines in sonnet XLII show the poetess’ original emphasis).

Example one:

[...]. The widest land  
Doom takes to part us, **leaves thy heart in mine**  
With **pulses that beat double**. What I do  
And **what I dream include thee**, as the wine  
Must taste of its own grapes. [...]  
(VI, ll. 8-14)<sup>3</sup>

Example two:

I think of thee! – **my thoughts do twine and bud**  
**About thee**, as wild vines, about a tree,  
[...]  
[...] O my palm-tree, be it understood  
**I will not have my thoughts instead of thee**  
**Who art dearer, better!** [...]  
(XXIX, ll. 1-2, 5-7)

Example three:

I **lift** my heavy heart up solemnly,  
As once Electra her **sepulchral urn**,  
And, **looking in thine eyes**, I overturn  
The ashes **at thy feet**. Behold and see  
**What a great heap of grief lay hid in me**,  
And how the red wild sparkles dimly burn  
Through the ashen greyness. [...]  
(V, ll. 1-7)

Example four:

What can I give thee back, O **liberal**  
**And princely giver**, who has brought the gold  
And purple of thine heart, unstained, **untold**,  
[...]  
[...] **am I cold**,  
Ungrateful, that for these most manifold  
High gifts, **I render nothing back at all?**  
[...]  
[...] For **frequent tears have run**  
**The colours from my life, and left so dead**  
**And pale a stuff**, it were not fitly done  
To give the same as pillow to thy head.  
Go farther! Let it serve to trample on.  
(VIII, 1-3, 6-8, 10-14).

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<sup>3</sup> 'Sonnets from the Portuguese' are hereby quoted by number of sonnet, immediately followed by relevant lines.

Example five:

[...] **I cannot speak**  
**Of love even, as a good thing of my own.**  
Thy soul hath snatched up mine all faint and weak,  
And placed it on a golden throne, –  
And that I love (O soul, we must be meek!)  
Is by thee only, whom I love alone.  
(XII, ll. 9-14)

Example six:

Ah, keep near and close,  
Thou dovelike help! And, when my fears would rise,  
With thy broad heart serenely interpose.  
**Brood down with thy divine sufficiencies**  
These thoughts which tremble when bereft of those,  
Like callow birds left desert to the skies  
(XXXI, ll. 9-14)

Example seven:

*‘My future will not copy fair my past’*  
I wrote that once; [...]  
[...] I turned at last,  
And there, instead, saw thee, not unallied  
To angels in thy soul! [...]  
I seek no copy now of life’s first half:  
**Leave here the pages with long musing curled**  
And write me new **my future’s epigraph,**  
New angel mine, unhopd for in the world!  
(XLII, ll. 1–2, 5–7, 11–12)

The two excerpts of, respectively, sonnets VI and XXIX (“*A Lover in Absence*” and “*Thought and Sight*”, as titled in manuscript form, and here quoted as examples 1 and 2) suggest some of the important states of EBB’s lyrical self’s perspective of being. These states feature in the whole sequence, namely: inclusion/exclusion, fulfillment/replacement, and denigration/appraisal. The words in bold throughout evidence an engagement with the notion of growth in companionship where the Other is always the kernel component, the props, the gist, the steadier and more knowledgeable element which, when embraced, augments and improves the poetic self, thus canceling the danger of solitude, unfulfilled potential and of stagnation within the delusive familiarity of one’s own inner world. There is a prevailing air of elegiac grief, self-questioning, haunting memories and excruciating confessionalism, subtly nuanced by feelings of

peace, orderliness and firmness of belief that many of the sonnets contain. In all her sonnets (including *Sonnets from the Portuguese*) EBB speaks both of female virtues and of male authority, of self-knowledge and of unfamiliarity/otherness, of cognition and of loss of perspective, of imprisonment and of total liberation. One prominent theme is the formation of the literary object of description as part of one's growing self-awareness. According to Wolfgang Iser, the literary object "never reaches the end of its multifaceted determinacy:" he suggests that indeterminacy (alternatively, insufficiency and incompleteness) is a fundamental existential precondition for intercourse, dialogue and participation (Iser 1993a: 9, 10). This status of every individual, as well as of every text as we hereby assume, creates the opportunity for speculation as well as for development and improvement as one is stimulated to bridge gaps all the time – between historical eras, texts, people, between one's own former self and the present. The gaps one stumbles upon and oneself constantly creates in the process of living and in literary interpretation allow for variety in the production and maintenance of meaning and sense whereby reading, composing and thinking are doubly beneficial in that we both narrate, and know an Other (place, time, event, text, person), as well as ourselves. The latter enriches, enlivens and complicates what may otherwise remain one-dimensional existence (Cf. Iser 1993a: 29-30, 226). This results in contextualization of one's own past – in *Sonnets from the Portuguese* the past of the poetess' own being before meeting her lifetime companion (in 1845), as well as of a poet's literary past. There is also a declaration of dependence on a better Other, on a "princely giver" – example 4, sonnet VIII (ll. 1-2) who changes the "face of all the world [...] / Since first I heard the footsteps of thy soul" (VII, ll. 1-2) and in whose sight she stands "transfigured, glorified aright" (X, l. 7 – a reminder of the Gospels of both Matthew and Mark and of the moment of Christ's Transfiguration in contact with God – Cf. Neri 2010, vol. 2: 450). *Sonnets from the Portuguese*, like the two poems titled *Insufficiency*, describe the process of understanding and of self-understanding whose initial stage is a reaction to something "which addresses us" and asks us a question – a text, another person or time – and which thus holds for the interpreter the possibility of "suspension of our own prejudices" (Cf. Gadamer 1994: 299). During this suspension there emerges a relationship – between a Self and an Other – a merging of horizons and perceptions thanks to interaction and stepping beyond the familiarity of one's own inner world and immediate environment (Cf. Gadamer 1994: 304).

Sonnets I – V introduce the haunting presence of a greater Other and of a person walking in blindness, searching for something, constantly followed by shapes which ask for extension of her imaginative potential and emotional verve as she admits to a lonely, excluded, sad, empty and unfulfilled existence. Images like the “mystic shape” (which pulls the speaker’s hair back in Sonnet I), or the blind poet cursed by God to be deprived of the capacity of “seeing thee” (Sonnet II), or the “poor, tired, wandering singer” (as in Sonnet III), or the disconsolate bard (whose “cricket chirps against [her] mandolin,” as in Sonnet IV), indicate self-denigration and self-abnegation, lack of clear direction in life and apocalyptic, as well as metaphysical, portent of a fate meted out to a sinner positioned very much below a higher presence. Further, they also suggest suffered completion, consolation and remedy for a life of insufficient potential to comprehend being (e.g. the music mentioned in line 7 which “drops here unaware / In folds of golden fullness at my door” – Sonnet IV, ll. 7-8). Sonnet V recounts of a death explained as offering to a higher Other. A vertical juxtaposition is suggested through the contrast between the speaker’s low place and the addressee’s pivotal role of judge (example 3, see esp. emphasis). The urn contains grief – caused, presumably, by the loss of someone dear, barely compensated for by ritualistic oration.<sup>4</sup> The ambivalent urn which contains the poetess’ grief, her brother’s ashes and her memories of her classical literary predecessors is an emblematic example of EBB’s poetics of simultaneous fulfillment and deprivation, of summation and of dismemberment, of uniting and of parting, of motion horizontal (in time – through literary history) and vertical (in space – through a gaze directed upwards, to a better Other). At that, representation is the traditional emblem of femininity as exposed, as exhibited in Victorian culture (as a peacemaker, order-keeper and a person bringing out communal content). Yet representation and registration ultimately relate to the “aesthetics of the *secret*, the hidden experience” (Armstrong, 1993: 339) which often yields unorthodox ways of self-depiction and self-positioning in society where language (culture) and feeling (nature) swap all the times within the hermeneutic dichotomy of knowing and being (as the female poet needs a discourse to speak of her own discourse). This is also evident from the sonnet ‘The Soul’s Expression’ – not part of *Sonnets from the Portuguese* but one which shows EBB’s obsession with the theme

<sup>4</sup> Sonnet V alludes to Sophocles’ *Electra* where she “receives a funeral urn ostensibly containing the ashes of her brother Orestes. [...] in the myth *Electra* eventually discovers that her brother still lives.” By contrast, EBB’s brother’s demise (tragically, Edward drowned in 1840) proved, of course, final (Neri 2010, vol. 2: 446).

of self-expression as moderation of one's own "temporality and concreteness" (Chapman 2002: 113).

EBB's chronic inability to separate experience into two distinct realms – self and other – can be explained in anthropological terms. Self-formation presupposes simultaneous reception and composition of content – both firmly rooted in interpersonal experience whereby intentionality is always oriented towards some research of that which is not fully accessible in temporal and spatial terms, that which is never to be fully conceptualized. The anthropological element in EBB's poetry is to be seen in its performativeness: the lyrical speaker is "a creature of deficiency" marked by an "extra-genetic" desire to transport herself into other realms and across time and test the limits of her own mind and gender (Iser, 2000: 158). Not strictly tied to the exploration of Victorian poetry, Iser's views can nonetheless help us explain the dialogic nature of (self-)representation through (self-)interrogation in these sonnets. Especially as we assume that self-completion, self-sufficiency, and determinacy of meaning in general, are a myth within the reality of "human plasticity" which manifests itself through literature as "self-exegesis", literature as a demonstration of the "plenum of possibilities" that human beings represent, literature as a process rather than a finalized given (Iser, 1993b: xi, xiii, xiv, 88, 232, 235-36). Aporeticity – immediately discovered in the two *Insufficiencies* – is ingrained in *Sonnets from the Portuguese* and as the octave of sonnet VI confirms, aloneness of command of one's potential proves inefficient (the speaker walks in the shadow of her beloved, who may only command "the uses of [her] soul" VI, ll. 2, 4-5). Separateness, aloneness and singularity are not tantamount to uniqueness and individuality. It is, rather, the other way round. There can be sensed the proximity of an elusive celestial, higher being which, in Levinas' terms, helps the speaker "go outside of [herself]" in the form of an "address to the other," in comparison to whom the speaker's *I* is a "transcendental *I* in its nakedness" as it awakens "by and for the other" (Levinas, 1999: 97-98). There is also EBB's general, and in fact puritan, impetus to convey an experience of autobiographical value: confessional self-surveillance dominates the poet's desire to outline the progress of her own consciousness and memory (Tucker 2010: 629).

An apposite route to channel our discussion of expressibility, self-perception and insufficiency might be one which remembers Bakhtin's perception of being as a dichotomy of co-existence and as event ("событие бытия") whereby incompleteness, insufficiency and a sense of duty feature as conditions for being human: "Чтобы жить, надо быть незавершенным, открытым для себя – во всяком случае, во всех

существенных моментах жизни, – надо ценностно еще предстоять себе, не совпадать со своею полнотью” (Bakhtin 2003a: 95). This quote from *Author and Hero in Aesthetic Activity* (“Автор и герой в эстетической деятельности”) is a good periphrasis of EBB’s belief that the center of values of the self lies outside that very self, so that selfhood is in fact unattainable, unaccomplishable: it is always forthcoming and this is its major mark. In fact, Bakhtin’s views on partial, self-critical, self-denying and redemptive thinking (i.e. active, responsible thinking which marks off human beings), also developed in his early treatise *Toward a Philosophy of the Act* (“К философии поступка”), appear to be very appropriate a platform for comprehending EBB’s perception that one is never insured as faultless, self-dependent, unique and able, unless tied to, compared to and placed after, an Other to whom one relates through care and *Einfühlung*, or empathy (Cf. Bakhtin 2003b: 16, 19-20, 39). Both the shadow following the lyrical speaker in ‘Sonnet I’ (“how a mystic Shape did move / Behind me, and drew me backward by the hair, ... / ‘Guess now who holds thee? – ‘Death,’ I said. But there, / The silver answer rang... ‘Not Death, but Love’”, ll. 10-11, 13-14) and the many instances of the splitting of selfhood indicate a firm conviction that one is never in possession of an alibi in being (to remember Bakhtin yet again) merely for the sake of being, unless being be partial, shared and considerate. EBB’s poetry is charged with a very high dose of activity (seen, for instance, in the presence of verbs of motion) related to the need to fulfill a duty, to try a promise, to foresee the development of a relationship. Thus the focus gets cajoled away from consciousness onto external reality which contains opportunities for verifying selfhood. This bounds, eventually, on the matter of freedom as self-affirmation – unachievable in reality in the long run, as Paul Ricoeur maintains:

Self-affirmation [...] calls on the other to attest and applaud; it is the other who certifies me as myself. [...] in waking up from anonymity I discover that I have no means of self-affirmation other than my acts themselves. “I” am only an aspect of my acts, [...] I have no means of affirming myself on the fringes of my acts. This is what the feeling of responsibility reveals to me. [...] reflection appears to itself as an articulation of a connection between the agent and the act which is more fundamental than all reflection (Ricoeur 1966: 57-58).

In the two poems title “*Insufficiency*”, as well as in her *Sonnets from the Portuguese*, the poetess readily transfers the reader’s attention from the spectator’s mind onto the object of observation. This object emerges as a continuous experience of dialogue, of exchange. Or, in Gadamer’s words,

what we have is a confirmation of the ontological value of losing oneself as a spectator in “the experience of the Thou” which destabilizes one’s “methodological sureness” and complacent self-sufficiency (Gadamer 1994: 128, 358, 362). The protective role of the “Thou” implies limits: physical, spiritual and linguistic. In many other sonnets of this sequence further on (e.g., VIII, VIII, XI, XIII, XIV, XVI, XVII, XIX, XXII, XXIII, XXVII, XXXI, XXXIII, XXXV, XLI, XLII, XLIII), the lyrical speaker (as in fact also the interpreter) is iconoclastically encouraged to balance between various competing voices which offer guardianship, protection and wisdom: God’s, her lover’s, and that of her literary predecessors. Shakespeare can often be sensed, and then, of course, Milton and Donne, but also other Continental poets such as, for instance, Petrarch, Camoens, Luis de Góngora, Vittoria Colonna, etc. The poetess implies that reciprocity and exchange are kernel components of a mutually gratifying and edifying communion and partnership. She nonetheless constantly admits to her poverty, ignorance and lack of resource, as demonstrated by example 4, sonnet VIII cited above (ll. 1-3, 6-8, 10-14). Apart from the ceremoniousness of self-neglect, the word “untold” in line 3 of Sonnet VIII points at a crucial idea – that incompleteness is a shared characteristic between two partners because one’s heart could only ever be truly “told” by someone else who can utter, or pronounce, his/her partner’s name and thus identify him/her. Telling herself apart from, as well as narrating herself in view of, her literary predecessors, demonstrate EBB’s hermeneutic obligation and the profuseness of her creative memory (both of Barbara Neri’s comments to this poem confirm the poetess’ knowledge of, and indebtedness to, Donne’s poem ‘The Extasie’ – apparently referred to through the idea of togetherness – Neri 2010, vol. 2: 448). Poetic motivation presupposes sharing and enrichment through uses, manipulations and utterances in time, also very much in view of the male sonnet tradition in the development of love poetry (Blain 2001: 181). Quite in unison with the empirical context of the mid-Victorian age, a significant place occupies the matter of origin. In the chain of biological development, the lower, though less mobile and sophisticated (the female lyrical speaker in this case), feeds the higher and provides the whole with opportunities for communal improvement. A crucial pre-requisite for the latter, of course, is a type of self-perception which implies incompleteness and an inextricable need for revision and amendment to allow for alterations and variation, in short, for an alternative presence or point of view – that of an Other as an external focal point of definition of personality. Such perception foreshadows Ricoeur’s reflections about shared existence as true existence:

one can only ever hope to be a “co-author” at most of one’s own life in reality, rather than an autonomous creator (Ricoeur, 1994: 160). Or, in Bakhtin’s terms, what we have is a conviction about man’s lack of an ability to objectify oneself out of touch with an external, *transgredient*, point of extension found in propositional dichotomies of inter-subjective relationship such as: gift/need, pardon/crime, blessing/sin etc. (Bakhtin 2003a: 117, 165, 246). This determines the focal place of the Other as a centre of values in a (literary) work of art whose purpose is at all times externalization and dialogue, as Bakhtin argues in *Author and Hero in Aesthetic Activity*.

The two poems titled ‘*Insufficiency*’ (especially when viewed in the context of *Sonnets from the Portuguese*) demonstrate a belief in the significance of language, speech, and writing as constituents of the poetess awareness of reality as well as of her self-awareness. Speech as a skill inevitably presupposes externalization, leaving the bounds of safety, of self-conceit, it means division, or transportation from signifier to recipient, it happens when there is an object to refer to and transfer oneself to: [...] **I cannot speak / Of love even, as a good thing of my own** (XII, ll. 9-14, example five). Comprehension implies levels, external assistance and spatial distribution: “**Brood down with thy divine sufficiencies /** These thoughts which tremble when bereft of those, / Like callow birds left desert to the skies” (XXXI, ll. 9-14, example six). The latter quote from Sonnet XXXI describes the process of acquisition of knowledge as orchestrated from without, as a kind of descent from above. An unabashedly religious view whereby the Other (the male beloved, or God) has an instrumental role in that he conveys knowledge, organizing the female speaker’s random thoughts into a feasible whole. More importantly, there is the insistence on knowledge as crossing of boundaries between two within the ontology of transfer, exchange, and complementation in communication. Incompletion emerges a pre-condition for learning and being. Selfhood and self-expression are preconditioned by an Other person’s active participation. This means both remembering and anticipating: “I seek no copy now of life’s first half: / **Leave here the pages with long musing curled /** And write me new **my future’s epigraph**” (XLII, ll. 1–2, 5–7, 11–12, example seven). Writing appears as a most shape-shift, flexible metaphor of being: it can be “curled” or unrolled, re-written or extended, revised or prognosticated etc. – never entirely independent, or singly managed. Interaction lies at the bottom of each literary act – itself relativised by its own existence. The lyrical speaker’s anxiety about the impotency of her speech, her desire to produce a fair rendition of the Other (the beloved or

God) and retrieve him indicate a more in depth, more lasting and irresolvable struggle to justify the existence of language as a means of survival as well as her own existence as a linguistically containable entity. She hopes to attain liberation by way of uttering the Other and herself. Far from admitting defeat, she declares her helplessness to think and be in the absence of an external referee. The “fit peroration” (“*When I attain to utter forth in verse,*” l. 14) is a metaphor for the mutual fitting which occurs between two individuals as mediated by language: language as an aid to, and product of, achieving identity by means of denying self-enclosure and self-sufficiency. Identity gets problematized as communication and responsibility in progress, and selfhood – as a process, rather than as a product. There stands out the operative function of an alter consciousness which enables self-cognition. The self begins to get shaped as it begins to matter. Otherness is the poetess’ ethical premise – that premise which precedes, contextualizes and obliges creativity and individuality, as it also motivates her pronounced tendency to discuss existence in social terms. Poetry emerges hereby as an anthropological fact but also as an anthropological necessity. Thus, EBB may be seen to prefigure Levinas’ perception about the other who “affects us despite ourselves” and helps us measure being “on the basis of [the] sense” we make because of, as well as for the sake of, someone else (Levinas 1989: 118-19).

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