

APPENDIX III

Autobiographical Essays by EBB

AMONG THE COPIOUS juvenilia that are extant, five autobiographical sketches have survived. They are published here to provide background to EBB's early correspondence.

1. MY OWN CHARACTER¹

"Sure I am that all the light we can let in upon our own minds all the acquaintance we can make with our own understandings will not only be very pleasant but bring us great advantage in directing our thoughts in the search of other things" Locke[.]²

Under the authority of so great a man I proceed in the investigation of myself with no small anxiety[.] Hitherto I have forgotten myself I have thought niether of my few perfections nor of my many failings[.] I have endeavoured to extricate myself in the windings of other souls—of other characters[.] I have endeavoured (I may say) to seek truth with an ardent eye—a sincere heart—of that I can boast—but I have never even in imagination looked into my own breast— How few indeed know themselves! The investigation of oneself is an anxious employment[.] The heart may appear cor[r]upted by vanity exalted by pride soured by ill temper & then that brilliant phantom so dear to every soul self estimation fades for *ever*—& those shining clouds on which you have soared so often to fame sink under self debasement—but shall such weakness prevent us from looking into ourselves? No!—

I am not vain but I have some tincture of pride about me which I fear not to own on the contrary which I like to boast of— I am not at all insensible to flattery when in a proportionate degree but when outraged I am conscious of it— I prefer praise most when seasoned with censure as it then appears under the light of truth— I detest flattery when given by those whom I feel unworthy[.] I detest flattery when carried (as I said before) beyond just limits— I confess that I enjoy fame more than any worldly pleasure. I know it is transient & yet I worship it as such— I am fond of reading & of all literary oc[c]upations— I hate needlework & drawing because I never feel oc[c]upied whilst I work or draw— I know not why—but I always am

1. This item dates from June 1818. It was written in a notebook which bears the title "Memorandum Book Containing [*sic*] the Day & Night thoughts of Elizth Barrett," now at Wellesley College (see *Reconstruction*, D1410). It was published previously in *BIS*, 2, 119–121, with two other entries, not of an autobiographical nature, from a copy in the hand of EBB's mother. This publication is from EBB's original manuscript.

2. John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1690), Introduction. In a notebook recording EBB's reading during the period 1824–26, the lengthiest analysis is devoted to Locke's *Essay* (see *Reconstruction*, D1369).

fatigued— Dancing I consider as mere idleness— I abhor Music— I am told it is the trouble of learning that I dislike— It is not so— I have no desire to learn— I always feel weary—full of en[n]ui when at the piano— I sit down discontented & I rise disgusted[.] Homer I adore as more than human and I never read Popes fine translation without feeling exalted above my self—³ I dread being despised as vain more than I can express—

I am not cowardly in the least on the contrary I can sometimes brave the greatest dangers without fear nothing can provoke me more than a tax of cowardice which I hate— I am not in the least obstinate but I am always decided in what I think right— I have a resolution to bear pain or to do any thing that I wish.

I am very passionate but impatience is my ruling passion— I can confess without shame I am willing to repent & I can forgive without malice but impatience leads me into more faults than I can repent—but I CAN restrain myself tho' it must be with a strong effort— Perhaps I have passed over many very many of my faults perhaps I have looked only at my best side— However this may be I know not but if it is considered that this is written with an earnest desire of improvement with an earnest desire of reaching the truth—perhaps I MAY be forgiven—

2. GLIMPSES INTO MY OWN LIFE AND LITERARY CHARACTER⁴

To be ones own chronicler is a task generally dictated by extreme vanity and often by that instinctive feeling which prompts the soul of man to snatch the records of his life from the dun and misty ocean of oblivion— Man is naturally enamoured of immortality, and tho the brazen trump of fame echoes his deeds when he sleeps[,] tho the cold sod is closed oer his corrupted form yet he shrinks from that deathlike that awful stillness, the dreadful attribute of the grave— Nothing can more plainly denote the souls eternity than the instinctive thirst for immortality which universally throbs in the heart of man— Would that benevolent Being whose kind spirit finds pleasure in the happiness of his Creatures have implanted in their bosoms such a feeling in vain? Is it consonant with divine mercy to tantalise us afar with the bright and heavenly fields of immortality and then closing at once the glorious prospect, forbid that endearing hope to console and allow the cold turf to moulder with our dust and the soul which once animated it fondly considered by us immortal, instead of those glorious & celestial plains to find its last sad assylum in the grave?— The sage midst sandy desserts or buried in the awful stillness of wooded vales boasts that he can forget the world and despise its greatness, but oh can he as sincerely desire to be forgotten by it[,] can he look unmoved on the damp and mournful tomb which his own hands have framed and where soon his wearied limbs shall

3. Alexander Pope translated *The Iliad* (1715–20) and *The Odyssey* (1725–26).

4. This essay, the most ambitious of the five, is undated. Its context clearly indicates that its composition did not take place all at one time. The first part, composed in 1820 when she was fourteen, was later expanded to include her fifteenth birthday the following year. It was first published in *HUP*, I, 3–28. (Forman also published a later incomplete draft copy of this essay in *HUP*, II, 4–8, the manuscript of which sold with Forman's library and has not been located—see *Reconstruction*, D1298.) It is printed here from the manuscript in the Huntington Library (*Reconstruction*, D1297), which bears a docket by RB: "Her own life & character to her 15th year."

