Transatlantic Exchange and Poetess Tradition in Felicia Hemans and Elizabeth Barrett Browning: “Landing of the Pilgrim Fathers in New England” and “The Runaway Slave at Pilgrim’s Point”

Paula Alexandra Guimarães (paulag@ilch.uminho.pt)

Studies of the ‘Transatlantic’ suggest “The representation of liminal and fluid inter-national spaces”, “images of crossing from one side to the other, of the fluid space between, the juxtaposition of ‘old’ and ‘new’ worlds, etc.” but also, and more significantly, concepts of “transatlantic intertextual influence”. If increased numbers of people crossed and re-crossed the Atlantic in the 18th and 19th centuries, following patterns of exploration, trade, emigration, warfare and tourism, texts on both sides of the divide also circulated widely. Thus, British and American textual exchanges and print-circulations frequently involved crossings over and blurrings which have not been wholly explored.

In particular, the involvement of British women writers in the major geopolitical changes that occurred in the British Atlantic world has only very recently been investigated. Feminist critics, namely, have been interested in reclaiming a tradition of nineteenth-century popular poetesses whose verse circulated broadly on both sides of the Atlantic and who became a vehicle for transatlantic exchange, thus suggesting a commodification of women’s sentimental lyric. In the Traffic in Poems: Nineteenth-Century Poetry and Transatlantic Exchange, Meredith McGill “seeks” precisely “to make visible the currents of trans-and-circum-Atlantic poetic exchange” (3); for him, “women poets”, in particular, “are … figures who make legible the extra national origins of national myths and make it possible to track the shifting currents of cultural exchange.” (4).

An important name, not only in early nineteenth-century transatlanticism but also sentimental culture, is the one of Felicia Dorothea Hemans (1783-1835), a late Romantic ‘Poet-ess’ who was interested in the rewriting of national imperial history(ies) and other Western myths. Mrs Hemans, as she was known on both sides of the Atlantic, published in the 1820s two poems about the colonial enterprise in North America, “Landing of the Pilgrim Fathers in New England” and “The Forest Sanctuary”.
These constitute, according to Daniel Hannah, “an important window onto the complicated interrelations of desire and displacement that sometimes structured the nineteenth-century transatlantic imaginary” (2011). With a regular presence in popular magazines and ornate manuals, from which she made a living, Hemans quickly became one of the best-selling poets of her century in the United States and Britain.

Hemans’ ten-stanza hymn “The Landing of the Pilgrim Fathers in New England” was first published in the New Monthly Magazine in 1825, then in the League (Boston, 1826), becoming one of her most famous poems, often printed as a gift-book with engravings, and going through several editions until the 1880s. Originally inspired by Daniel Webster’s celebrated bicentenary oration with the same title of 1820, it caused the American editor, Andrews Norton, to comment that “These glorious verses will find an echo in the breast of every true descendant of the Pilgrims”. The poem contains an epigraph taken from the American poet William Cullen Bryant’s The Ages, of 1821, which describes the arrival of Europeans to a savage Indian world and recounts the triumphal American expansion: “Look now abroad – another race has fill’d / Those populous borders [...] / The land is full of harvests and green meads.” But Hemans owes several details to another poet called Robert Treat Paine and his Ode about the voyage of the Pilgrim Fathers, written for and sung at the 1806 anniversary of American Independence.

Hemans’s version, predictably, avoids all reference to colonial greed and violence, exalting the joy and purity of the settlers’ faith and freedom of worship instead of the usual values of conquest. She enhances not only the sacrifice which is implicit in the exilic condition – “The heavy night hung dark”, “Why had they come to wither there, / Away from their childhood’s land?” – but also the fact that these pilgrims follow a higher calling, which is clearly neither that of the conqueror nor of the simple fugitive. In the last part, she replies to her own questionings in the poem, as if anxious to rule out all the politically incorrect interpretations:

- What sought they thus afar?
- Bright jewels of the mine?
- The wealth of seas, the spoils of war? –
- They sought a faith’s pure shrine! (ll. 33-36)
McGill states that “The Felicia Hemans of ‘Landing of the Pilgrim Fathers’ – a keynote of 19th-century ‘Founders day’ celebrations – is instrumental in conjuring Plymouth Rock as a site of redemptive, apolitical, spiritual exile – a myth that sutures British pride in a heroic, embattled Protestantism to an emergent American nationalism.” (5-6) As the foundation of both Nations is thus of same Protestant stock, she seems to suggest, there is no fundamental difference or rift in this gesture.

In The Forest Sanctuary (1826), a long narrative poem or extended monologue, “Hemans tells the tale of a [Spanish Protestant] family fleeing from the Inquisition to find a life in the New World.” The emphasis now is clearly on the ‘fugitive’, who “flying comes” to the new world “in silence and in fear”. In Hemans’ own words, the “Poem is intended to describe the mental conflicts, as well as outward sufferings, of a Spaniard, who, flying from the religious persecutions of his own country, in the sixteenth century, takes refuge, with his child, in a North American Forest. The story is supposed to be related by himself, amidst the wilderness which has afforded him an asylum.” (quoted in Wolfson, 269).

This Protestant is not of the same stock as the original pilgrims because he is a Spaniard and, for this reason, can only be seen either as a ‘conqueror’ or as a ‘fugitive’ /’victim’. But again “The theme won admiration in the United States: as Andrews Norton observed in The North American Review (of April 1827), fleeing “persecution at home to religious liberty in America, the hero has imbibed the spirit of our own Fathers; his mental struggles are described in verses, with which the descendants of the pilgrims must know how to sympathize” (quoted in Susan Wolfson, Felicia Hemans, 2000, 268). One cannot help noticing that the feeling that is employed here for this man is no longer admiration but merely sympathy.

“Having described, in some dramatic detail, the execution of the protagonist’s best friend and his two sisters in the auto de fé, she then describes the long sea journey which takes father and son to their land of liberty. The wife, however, dies of grief and weakness on the passage out. This difference in the fates of the men and the woman is not just a detail of the plot, but provides the main thematic interest of the work. […] The Romantic impulse is thus obviously counteracted by the feminine
impulse. The one travels outward in the spirit of freedom and adventure; the other looks back, homesick and regretful. [...] Hemans ... would seem to express that post-Romantic spirit of the age which ... was beating a retreat indoors, ...” (Leighton, *Writing Against the Heart*, 21-22). “Evidently the husband’s drive for freedom costs the woman her life. She is a victim of that pioneering spirit which is not her own. [...] just after her burial at sea, [...]’joyously’, father and son continue the journey. The emotional direction of the poem does not quite match its affecting declarations of loss. Male energy triumphs, almost brutally, over female nostalgia.” (22)

“This formula of sexual division is repeated in innumerable other poems. ‘Song of Emigration’, for instance, sets male against female voices, in a counterpoint of ideas as well as of metre. [...] Hemans’s story-telling mode ensures that the social context of the Romantic quest becomes explicit: the men’s freedom and joy is ... pioneering greed; [...] The nostalgia or even deaths [of wives and daughters] conflict with ... men’s imperialist energy.” (23) “However, Hemans’s imagination, far from remaining safe within its own ‘spot’ of home, constantly travels abroad (where she herself never travelled), in search of other lands for poetry.” (23) For Daniel Hannah (2011), “Hemans’s poetic mapping of both North and South America and the Atlantic as zones of displacement destabilizes [...] the narratives on the surface of her poems of emigration.”

In her turn, Elizabeth Barrett Browning seems to have made a mark as a Victorian Poetess, freely travelling back and forth across the Atlantic, in contrast with her predecessor. Although her “own early verse has its own faults of sentimentality and melodrama, her verbal exuberance, ..., at least breaks the ‘satin riband’ of moral delicacy and metrical correctness with which Hemans binds the ladylike body of her work.” (42) The extent to which Barrett Browning realises and reacts against the vitiating features of the older poet’s style is shown by the poem she wrote on Hemans’ death in 1835. Her “Felicia Hemans” was published in the *New Monthly Magazine* ... [and] It directly challenges Hemans’ own innumerable complaints about the emotional and domestic cost of fame. [...] It presses ... beyond the narcissistic consciousness of ‘woe’ ... Refusing to engage in aesthetics of tearfulness.” (Leighton, 43)
This, in spite of the fact that “In the 1840s the United States of America was faced with a major regional conflict. Sympathizing with slaves, many Northern residents assisted bondsmen in evading the capture of agents and prevented their return to lives under the yoke. From the abolitionist perspective, slave catchers violated the personal liberty of the fugitive. On the contrary, Southern owners perceived interventions on behalf of the bondsman as disregarding their property rights. As demonstrated by the later American Civil War, the dispute over the fugitive slave led to civic dissent and jeopardized the solidarity of the Union. In “The Runaway Slave at Pilgrims Point” Browning capitalizes upon these pre-existing geographical tensions. This imagined locale in Massachusetts was a place of religious tolerance and a safe haven for the enslaved woman, as the pilgrims and their history evoked multiple connections to antislavery discourse. For abolitionists, in particular, the pilgrim was a symbol of the liberty they felt was a universal right.” (Marilyn Walker, 2007)

“The Runaway Slave at Pilgrim’s Point” was indeed a political commission published in the Boston anti-slavery journal, The Liberty Bell, in 1848, and was subsequently reproduced as a pamphlet. The subject was not, however, one of merely philanthropical interest. Elizabeth’s comments about her family’s slave-owning past are [usually] few and bitter. [...] On the other hand, her reserve did not stem from [simple] womanly reticence. [...] The relation between slavery and the condition of women [does] lurk in her consciousness like a constant irritant to speech.” (Leighton, 97-8) If the poem was also written by a runaway daughter, [fleeing from a tyrannical father], its anger and energy are also characteristically larger than any private grievances.” (98) “In some points, ‘The Runaway Slave’ recalls Hemans’ poem, ‘The Landing of the Pilgrim Fathers in New England’. Where Hemans, however, strings together an easy necklace of moral values, and then issues a loud clarion call to faith, Barrett Browning ends by putting even faith in doubt [first stanza].” (98)

I
I stand on the mark beside the shore
Of the first white pilgrim’s bended knee,
Where exile turned to ancestor,
And God was thanked for liberty.
I have run through the night, my skin is as dark,
I bend my knee down on this mark...
I look on the sky and the sea.

II.
O pilgrim-souls, I speak to you!
I see you come out proud and slow
From the land of the spirits pale as dew...
And round me and round me ye go!
O pilgrims, I have gasped and run
All night long from the whips of one
Who in your names works sin and woe.

III.
And thus I thought that I would come
And kneel here where I knelt before,
And feel your souls around me hum
In undertone to the ocean's roar;
And lift my black face, my black hand,
Here, in your names, to curse this land
Ye blessed in freedom's evermore.

“'The Runaway Slave’ is a dramatic monologue spoken by a black female slave who chooses the once ‘holy ground’ of the pilgrim’s landing place on which to kneel – not in awe, to pray, but in anger, to curse. Between the two events of kneeling, history has intervened. [...] The suggestively condensed line ‘Where exile turned to ancestor’ itself contains the paradox of history in miniature: that, even as the Pilgrims landed, there was a subtle transformation and they became, no longer drifting outcasts but powerful originators of a new line. [...] The issue of power and lineage is thus deeply embedded in the very metaphors of this poem which ... Elizabeth wondered were ‘too ferocious, perhaps, for the Americans to publish’ (Boyd: 283) / The slave herself has reached the ‘Point’ of freedom, ironically, out of terror of the very representatives of freedom: ‘O pilgrims, I have gasped and run / All night long from the whips of one / Who in your names works sin and woe!’ (12-14).

Unlike Hemans, whose moral positions are shining clear, Barrett Browning introduces this confusion: pilgrims who prayed have become ones who whip, nameless wanderers have bequeathed powerful names. The ideal of liberty has thus given way to tyranny, ... This is a poem which seems almost entirely free of sentimentality because, for all its emotional rhetoric, it appears to hold nothing sacred. Democracy,
religious liberty, family ancestry and even mother love cannot be kept [...]; it is a means of asserting a relativity of moral values which no authorial voice oversees” (98-99) because it is a dramatic monologue. “... The black slave projects a universe of segregation from its beginnings [because] the white God is complicit with the other half of his creation. The slave, who has seen her black lover killed, who has, herself, been flogged and raped, points, with persuasive logic, to those interlocking systems of religious belief, racial authority and simple brute force, which seem to make up the rationale of her pain.” (100)

“The English reading public ...seems not to have been troubled by the murder, rape and infanticide of ‘The Runaway Slave’. ... The reasons given for the act, as Angela Leighton suggests, are not ‘personal and passionate’ but coolly political ... Browning has behind it the perfect logic both of historical reality and of the imagination’s by now endemic colour codes ... Ultimately the slave kills her child, not out of love, hate or despair, but in order to break the natural line of mastership ...” (100) “She differs from Hemans in daring to doubt, not only the purity of the victim, [...] but also that there is any authority, ..., outside the social and historical systems of men ... And, as Leighton puts it, she also confronts sexuality, violence and power with few aesthetic sweeteners.” (102)

Subsequently, in “A Curse for a Nation” (1860), the Victorian poetess paradoxically addresses a country where slavery has become the focal point itself for discourses of sentiment (525). Elizabeth Barrett Browning thus foregrounds the constructions of cultural categories, such as ‘the struggling poetess’, ‘the suffering slave’ and ‘the woman in pain’ in her work “as it becomes a ‘place’ for multiple cross identifications”. By “transposing the slave narrative into sentimental lyric”, according to Jackson and Prins, “she performs a crossing between genres that is also a form of cross-cultural exchange”(2000).

While we may identify the transatlantic poetess tradition as one of ‘internal dissent’, “a tradition that seeks to convert women’s powerlessness and non-belonging to a form of extra national power” (Tricia Lootens, 2008), these poems have (too) easily been converted into representative national texts. For critics as Lootens, their
particular form of spiritualization parades, as well as dissembles, economic, expansionist and imperial ambitions. There is no doubt that they quickly became an American standard, serving as a staple of not only nineteenth-century textbooks and recitation collections but also 20th-century volumes such as *The Best Loved Poems of the American People*.

Thank You.