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***Tracing Stereotypical Patterns in the Perception of Foreign Otherness:  
The Poetic Representation of the Portuguese Other in some Victorian Poems***

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**1. Stereotypical Patterns, Foreign Otherness and Victorian Poetic Perceptions**

In 1922, Walter Lippmann (*Public Opinion*) initially introduced his theory of the ‘stereotype’ to explain our ‘sociological imagination’ and how public opinion is formed. He significantly used the term ‘fictions’ (4-8) – or ‘pictures in our heads’ – to mean the representations which we make ourselves because reality is too vast, complex and fleeting for direct experience. Basically, we tend to reconstruct reality on a simpler model, forming a *pattern* or cultural apparatus that not only informs opinion but eventually affects our real environment. This because, once formed (as Elliot Aronson states, in *Social Psychology* 2005), stereotypes or generalizations about a group of people are intrinsically resistant to change that is based on new information (434), even if they may provide useful formulaic communication aids when we have to deal with ‘difference’ or the Other, as Manfred Beller recognises in *Imagology* (2007).

The global circulation of people that occurred in the nineteenth century is known to have fostered unprecedented intercultural encounters, which in turn created (the need for) very specific cultural patterns – images or fictions – connected with nation, race and identity. Like other societies of the period, the Victorians generated their own figures of the Foreign, according to their perceptions, constructions and articulations; and they inevitably projected upon foreign nations and peoples an amalgam of repressed desires and apprehensions, fantasies and idealizations, in the sense of Mario Erdheim’s *Psychoanalysis and Unconsciousness in Culture* (1988). Thus, the ‘foreign’ became itself a cultural trope or fiction, being turned either into an ‘inferior race’ or else a ‘noble savage’, described mainly through binary associations and prevailing utilitarian or exoticizing discourses, as Karl-Heinz Kohl, in *A Disenchanted Look* (1986) concludes.

Rebecca Saunders (*The Concept of the Foreign* 2003) indeed states that the *foreign* (literally, a noncitizen) tends to be defined or approached in hierarchical negative terms: not belonging, being unfamiliar, unnatural, incomprehensible and inappropriate (6) – thus, misunderstood; but its mere presence serves to ‘thematise’ and ‘interrogate’ the familiar, the pure and the proper, unsettling and exposing them to critical inspection.

My paper intends to show how some Victorian poets and poems particularly render the concept of the foreign Other unstable, eventually proving that in this generic form foreignness may be either positively or negatively marked. As Saunders argues, the foreign “may evoke, on the one hand, the exotic, artistic or liberatory, or, on the other hand, the strange, improper, or threatening” (2003: 7). This sense of the foreign, as being both threatening and alluring, may be explained by the process of decontextualization (ignorance of native practices or circumstances) that often affects the perception of foreignness (Saunders). But I believe that it is the common partaking of ‘the structure of the Sublime’ that characterises both the act of writing poetry and that of perceiving otherness in this period. As Saunders states, “beauty and terror become in it inseparable, two facets of the same intensity” (8), as the forces of attraction and repulsion. Besides, the metaphorical language of poetry indeed offers a richer perspective of the multiple shades and varieties of foreignness and highlights the complexity of reconciling self and hetero-images or perceptions in verbal discourse.

As we know, the strong affirmation of Englishness as a prevailing self-image in the Victorian period, through Anglo-Saxon revivalism, Protestant individualism and colonial domination, invited extensive comparison with Continental Europe, especially with Southern Catholic countries and their peoples – resulting in responses of both fascination and disgust. This paper suggests that, in the more specific context of the English poetry of the period, the Portuguese generally emerge as passive victims of history, prisoners of their past, being perceived as dreamy and effeminate (as opposed to the Spaniards, who are viewed in more masculine terms). This idea, thus, constructs a discursive and a poetic tradition that thematised Portugal either as backward or else as a terrestrial paradise.

Representations of Portugal (the country, its people and culture) are not very abundant in English literature, but the early nineteenth century – in the aftermath of its Peninsular and Liberal Wars, in particular – provided some of these poets with the ideal historical and artistic occasion for focusing their attention on a small peripheral country. Although names as those of Byron or Southey are well-known to have provided some of

the most famous descriptions, it is to the later poetry written by women that I will mostly recur in my analysis, a choice that results from a confirmation of their unabated literary interest towards the foreign or Iberian Other. I will show that Felicia Hemans, Charlotte Elizabeth Tonna, Charlotte Brontë, Emily Brontë, and Elizabeth Barrett Browning have substantially contributed with their poetry to *re-imagine and re-configure Portugal* as a romantic, exotic and passionate country, with a very rich history but also with a markedly decadent and bigoted outlook.

It will be noticed that in this intercultural ‘encounter’, which can be a real or imaginary one, early Victorian women poets re-imagine and reconfigure Portugal for different purposes and by using very different literary themes and strategies, resulting both in positive and in negative impressions or imagotypes. For example, Felicia Hemans rewrites the famous Portuguese tragedy of Inês de Castro as a decadent *tableau* of post-mortem coronation by enhancing the female figure’s mythical and aesthetic dimensions. In turn, Charlotte Elizabeth Tonna places her ‘poetic romance’ in the mediatic or recent context of the Peninsular Wars in order to suggest Portugal as the feminine inferior Other and Britain as her saviour. The Brontë sisters use geographical and topographical elements derived from Portugal to conceive the imaginary characters and plots mainly present in their fictional poems and juvenilia. And, finally, Elizabeth Barrett Browning appropriates and reworks Portuguese literary traditions and amatory conventions in order to ‘voice’ her elaborate poetics of melancholy.

## **2. Felicia Hemans’s *Inês de Castro*: Rewriting the Portuguese tragedy as a decadent/feminist *tableau***

Felicia Dorothea Browne Hemans (1793-1835) was one of the first female authors to appropriate this European myth of ‘love beyond death’ in her poem “The Coronation of Inez De Castro”, inserted in her volume *Songs of the Affections* (1830). To understand her personal involvement in the Portuguese historical context, it is necessary to analyse the connection between the suffering caused by armed conflict and national identity, between *domestic loss* and *national sacrifice*.

The poem, composed of twelve melodious octaves in alternating rhyme, is based on the legend that king Pedro ordered Inez’s body exhumed from her grave, seated on the throne, crowned and, in a macabre final gesture, forced the entire court to swear allegiance to their new queen by kissing the corpse’s hand. Inez would only then be reburied, this time in the Monastery of Alcobaça, in an extraordinary religious and stately

ceremony (April 1361), which is also described by Hemans as an illustration of Staël's epigrammatic statement about the union of Love and Death.

Hemans's poem seems to answer the initial question posed by Elizabeth Bronfen in *Death, Femininity and the Aesthetic*: "How can a verbal or visual artistic representation be both aesthetically pleasing and morbid, as the conjunction of beautiful woman and death seems to imply?" (1992: x). In fact, against the natural order of things, the bright coronation rites must, most unusually, give way to the dark burial rituals and mournful lamentation instead of joyful celebration. The uncanniness of the figure of a dead Inez sitting silently on the throne with a "pale still face", whose "jewell'd robes fell strangely still [...] So stone-like was its rest" (vv. 29-32), becomes a paradox. In the end, although Love is proclaimed as "mightier" than Death by the poet, there is a pervasive and inescapable sense of "wasted worth" (v. 82). Because through this ceremony Inez could not be brought to life to re-write her 'history' and, thus, that of Portugal:

And the ring of state, and the starry crown,  
And all the rich array,  
Are borne to the house of silence down,  
With her, that queen of clay.  
(vv. 91-4)

As Inez is finally taken down to her tomb, we realise once again her statue-like and sculptured existence, standing as an aestheticized and perpetuating monument to a nation's grief.

Although Hemans may have felt identified with this woman's predicament, her ironic descriptive lines clearly distance her from the rich aristocratic setting, unlike her own middle-class one, and that she probably senses as being not only ostentatious but decadent. The poet's exotic cultural displacement allows disturbingly familiar themes to emerge in a foreign scene that signals a universal condition for her: feminine sacrifice finally rewarded. The poet's feminine romantic revisionist strategy is the one of presenting woman as historically significant and, therefore, as worthy of being memorialised, if only as a victim of imperial history and its Promethean male deeds.

### **3. Felicia Hemans, Charlotte E. Tonna and the Iberian Romantic 'theatre of war'**

Susan Valladares, in her article "Romantic Englishwomen and 'the Theatre of Glory'" (2008), addresses the issue of "how female literary interaction with early nineteenth-

century Spain opened up a geopolitical space charged with anxious questions about national identity and belonging” (106). She stresses that this period of political uncertainty and instability was peculiarly well suited for the intervention of British women writers and that the Peninsular War, in particular, afforded an opportunity for literary women to engage in a rewriting of both national and literary agency.

That is the case of Felicia Hemans, who wrote on subjects related to the Napoleonic Wars, namely the ode in heroic couplets *England and Spain: or Valour and Patriotism* of 1808 and *The Domestic Affections* collection of 1812. Besides having a historical or nationalistic interest in these events, Hemans also possessed personal reasons for addressing such a theme. Both her husband (Captain Alfred Hemans) and two of her brothers (Thomas and George Browne) were doing military service in the Iberian Peninsula at the time of the Wars, and she had become interested in all aspects of Spanish and Portuguese history and culture.

In a 1811 poem, in heroic couplets, entitled “To my Eldest Brother, with the British Army in Portugal”, she envisions her relative “distant far, amidst th’intrepid host, / Albion’s firm sons, on Lusitania’s coast”, and anticipates the happy moment of his return (*Domestic Affections*, 1812). Hemans clearly began her career by imagining Spain and Portugal as the embodiment of a fading chivalric ethos (a preservation of common European Gothic identity) but hers became also a political cause, by supporting British intervention in the Peninsula and deciding to write about it.

*The Convent Bell* is a long poem in seven cantos that tells the story of a group of British soldiers that, after the victorious battle of the Douro under Wellington, seek food and shelter in the secluded Convent of Saint Clara, before they move on to Talavera in Spain. It is there that their wounded Irish commander falls in love with a beautiful and noble Portuguese nun; an ill-fated romance that ends with the death of the hero in the battlefield and of the grieved nun in the convent. The theme is reminiscent of the story of Mariana Alcoforado, present in her *Lettres Portugaises* of 1669. An English translation—*Letters from a Portuguese Nun to an Officer in the French Army*—by W. R. Bowles had appeared in London in 1817 (just two years before).

Another woman writer of this period, the social novelist, reformist and religious tract writer Charlotte Elizabeth Tonna (1790-1846) would be the one to appear as the author of *The Convent Bell and Other Poems*, in 1845. In contrast with Hemans, her *Personal Recollections*, published in 1841 and posthumously in 1847, register a very biased attitude towards Portugal, the country where her only brother was stationed during

the Peninsular Wars and where he would inclusively live afterwards for a ten-year period, “on the staff of the Portuguese army” until the establishment of the Portuguese ‘Cortes’ and the dismissal of all British officers. He had cultivated some of the land in the interior, “Which he had gallantly fought to rescue” (209).

She writes that ‘It was a subject of continual sorrow to me that he was residing in the heart of *an exclusively Popish country*, far from every means of grace; not even a place of worship within many leagues, and *wholly shut out from Christian intercourse.*” (153, my emphasis). Her mother ‘[...] had been learning to prize her native land in a *disgusting region of all that is most directly opposed to liberty, civil or religious; to honourable feeling, just conduct, honest principle, or practical decency*: In short, she had been in Portugal!’ (103, my emphasis)

Upon her brother’s return to England, Tonna would anonymously publish a poem in seven Spenserian stanzas entitled “My Brother”, in which she welcomes him to his “island home” (1826). Tonna reveals some facts not only about her brother’s stay in Portugal but also her own thoughts and feelings regarding the impact of this experience in her own life. The poet uses the arguments of British nationalism and family ties to lure her brother back home, after “sixteen burning summer suns” had elapsed in his “far abode”. Portugal is “a moral sty” within which Britons are “condemned to seek/ Truth’s trampled pearl”, where “patriot honour” is “couched in falsehood’s blinking eye” and where they have met “War’s sternest blast of devastating breath”.

This more personal and realistic picture clearly contradicts the fictionalised or idealised representation of both the country and the people of Portugal that had occurred in *The Convent Bell*. An example is when one of the characters refers to “the dazzling sky, / A gold and purple canopy, / [...] vying with gorgeous flowers, / That nature in this lonely place / has strewed, to shame our richest bowers” (Canto I, stanza VII), and the author herself describes with awe the picturesque beauty and natural sublime of the Mondego region that her British heroes have traversed. But also, and more surprisingly, when the poet describes the amiable characters in the Convent of Saint Clara, namely Father Bernardo and Sister Maria.

Tonna’s mixed revulsion and attraction for Catholic cultures most probably derived not only from popular anti-Catholicism, especially rife during the first half of the nineteenth century, but also from the English Gothic novels. It is significant that Ronald, the hero, finds Maria and the other cloistered nuns very much as he finds the Portuguese nation: helplessly subject to a tyrannical force and at the mercy of violence and bigotry.

For Diego Saglia (*Poetic Castles in Spain*), “[...] during the peninsular war, this conventional plot was endowed with *a strong political and military subtext*, and intercultural sentimental relationships were transfigured into allegorical representations of Spain [including Portugal] as *a lady in distress*, the French as her assailants, and British soldiers as *heroic knights coming to her rescue*.” (226, my emphasis).

In sharp contrast with this picture of ravaged and weeping Lusitania, stands the often evoked and praised image of Britannia or Albion, which as a powerful protective oak tree “spreads her shade o’er other lands, / While her protecting arms extend / A refuge for the poor, / And virtue, strength, and beauty blend / Her empire to secure” (III, stanza XII).

#### **4. Portuguese Topography in the Brontë Sisters’ Imagination and *Juvenilia***

The Duke of Wellington, a major protagonist in the Peninsular Wars and a well-known figure to the early nineteenth-century Portuguese people, was for the young Brontës a national hero and an imaginative symbol, including one of the intercultural contacts between the two nations. He, and his sons (Arthur and Charles) became for these poets compelling examples of the simultaneously fascinating and threatening potential of the intercourse or communication with the Iberian Other.

In their juvenile poetry (1829-1839), based on the fictional realms of *Angria* and *Gondal*, Charlotte and Emily Brontë ransacked the real locations and maps of the Peninsula in search of foreign, exotic names and places, as well as of the distinct physical and mental traits of the Southern other. Charlotte’s hero and *poetic persona*, Arthur Wellesley, first becomes the ‘Marquis of Douro’ (an allusion to the battle that was fought by that Northern Portuguese river) because he succeeds in his military campaigns. And, when his ambition turns into colonial enterprise and conquest, he obtains the title of ‘Duke of Zamor(n)a’ (a dark preview of Mr Rochester’s Jamaican past).

In turn, Emily’s heroine and *poetic persona*, Augusta G. Alme(i)da (with the same name of the Portuguese border fortress), is a powerful ruler who has had several lovers (including that handsomely dark one called ‘Fernando de Samara’, who would originate her famous villain Heathcliff). But who, like the Portuguese monarch herself during the Peninsular Wars (D. Maria I, the mad queen), would in the end be forced to run to exile, as an outlaw, pressed by a foreign invasion.

Furthermore, the sisters’ fictionalised poems abound with more or less detailed descriptions of bright luxurious landscapes, beautifully rich manors and romantic palaces,

which are possibly reminiscent of Portugal's architecture and scenery. Their male and female characters, often passionate and dark-featured, indulge in all sorts of stereotyped mannerisms and postures in their language and behaviour, supposedly the sisters' juvenile way of representing what according to them was *foreign*.

The Portuguese civil war, also known as the Liberal Wars or the 'two brothers' wars' (1828-34), which raged during the period in which they wrote their poems and that was reported in the British press (which, as we know, they avidly read), would in turn inspire the powerful fictional representation of the context of fratricidal conflict in Emily's *Gondal* (the royalist and republican factions); it was also an additional occasion for her to expound her own critical philosophy or negative idea of humanity.

### 5. 'A fondness for being sad': Elizabeth B. Browning's Appropriations of Portuguese Literature

The second part of Barrett Browning's *Diary* (1831-32) contains a curious seven-page list with the names of Portuguese and Spanish poets; a total of fifty-eight representatives of the Medieval, Renaissance and Baroque periods and respective genres. I will start with *Sonnets from the Portuguese* and the appropriation of the melancholy voice of Camões' 'Catarina'.

EBB's "Catarina to Camoëns", published in *Graham's Magazine* in 1843, bears the following explanatory sub-title: "Dying in his absence abroad, and referring to the poem in which he recorded the sweetness of her eyes". Browning had once declared that EBB's condition resembled that of the Portuguese Catarina: he fancied the relationship between the invalid poet and the dying Catarina in his letters to her during their courtship in 1845-1847. Browning discerned that "Catarina to Camoëns" dramatised a keening voice with meaning deeply private to EBB and determined that, in her sickroom, she need *not* muse about an 'exiled lover' as had Catarina on her deathbed.

Barrett Browning would also mention Camões and his *Lusiads* in her later poem "A Vision of Poets" (*Poems*, 1844). But in the case of *Sonnets from the Portuguese* (1850), she hoped that her readers would take the title to mean 'from the Portuguese language' and not from 'the Portuguese Catarina'. The title also echoes Lord Strangford's translations – *Poems, from the Portuguese of Luis de Camoens*, published in 1803. This was the time in which English readers were introduced in proper fashion to the Portuguese poet's courtly lyrics and songs of exile. Strangford's long introductory "Remarks on the Life and Writings of Camoens" presented the tragic story of the unappreciated poet,



exiled because of his unfortunate love for Dona Catarina de Ataíde. Likewise, it was those lyrics by Camoens chosen primarily for their supposedly autobiographical but also erotic and melancholy content that most attracted the English readers of the nineteenth century.

Another Portuguese text that might have influenced EBB and her poetics of melancholy, both directly and by way of its impact on Strangford, was *Letters of a Portuguese Nun*, first published in French in 1669 as *Lettres d'une Religieuse Portugaise*. The letters, five in number, are the record of an ill-starred affair of love, seduction, and abandonment between a real Portuguese nun at Beja – Mariana Alcoforado – and a French army officer, Noël de Chamilly. The love portrayed in both her poem and the nun's *Letters* is chivalric and full of devotion. Another similarity resides in the respective stories, in particular the confession of a long-concealed affection on the part of the woman: Mariana's for the departed officer and Catarina's for the banished poet.

This feeling of abandonment, in both cases, originated highly lyrical and also exquisitely melancholy outpourings, both on the part of the Portuguese poet and the Portuguese nun. And, through EBB, on the part of Catarina as well, who is finally given a voice of her own. Not a translator from the Portuguese, Elizabeth Barrett expanded on Camões and the Portuguese nun in another way: she invented a chapter missing from the biographical accounts of both – the voice of the Other.

The *Portuguese Letters*, in their turn, had such a phenomenal impact on both sides of the English Channel that to write 'à la portugaise' became a veritable code for a certain style – written at the height of passion in a moment of disorder and distress. Certain cultural assumptions underlay the code of the Portuguese style: not only was Portugal viewed as the land of passion but also the nun's sensuality and sensibility were attributed to the extremes of heat, intensity, and mystery in her environment. EBB absorbed the characteristic 'doubleness' of amorous discourse present in the nun's *Portuguese Letters*, for they are addressed both to the chevalier and to herself. That ambiguity is maintained throughout the letters and the sonnets, oscillating between the pathos of direct statement and that of interior monologue. Both women authors efface the male beloved (who becomes a mere pretext) by focusing on their motives for writing, as if 'writing for themselves'. Both seem to sustain their melancholy passion by writing.

In EBB's *Sonnets*, there are also subtle allusions to or appropriations of another Portuguese poet, Sister Maria do Céu, an eighteenth-century Carmelite nun, who between 1736 and 1741 published a long narrative in verse (*Deceptions from the woods, disappointments of the river*) about love from, and about, the perspective of a female

‘pilgrim’. Her famous mannerist duality of flowers of love and of death, as Barbara Neri has shown, is appropriated by EBB in her sonnets XXIII and XXIV (17); and, indeed, EBB’s chilling lines “grave-damps falling round my head” and “dreams of death” assume another hue of meaning in the context of Maria’s funerary poem. Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s work thus seems to suggest the possibility of rethinking a symbolics and an aesthetics of loss through the more exotic medium of Portuguese female voices such as those of ‘Catarina’, ‘Mariana’ and ‘Maria do Céu’.

But, as we saw, all the Victorian women poets analysed here surprisingly engage with a foreign cosmopolitan poetics as they innovatively appropriate and rework major patterns and stereotypes of Portuguese culture, history, geography and literature for their own creative and intercultural purposes.

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