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## Recalling the Poetics and Politics of the Exilic and Migrant Other in Some English Women's Poetry

*Fain would I know if distance renders  
Relief or comfort to her woe.*  
(C. Brontë)

In her work on *The Artistry of Exile* (2013), Jane Stabler explains that “[i]t seems to have taken about five centuries for the concept of exile in English to grow from an externally imposed sentence into a form of identity” (p. 5) and, I would add, into collective memory as well. Although famous exiles such as those of Ovid and Dante<sup>1</sup> can be interpreted both as historical events and as ‘states of mind’, she stresses that “the *figurative* meaning of the noun ‘exile’ to describe a banished person only emerged in the Romantic period” (p. 5) as such, when identification with historical and literary outcasts began to serve both political and aesthetic purposes.<sup>2</sup> Therefore, literal and figurative dimensions of the term are inextricably related in the poets analysed here, in whose texts the imaginative conditions of the categories of exile, refugee, expatriate and *émigré* overlap and run into each other. Furthermore, the power and role of women in national histories, whether of Britain or of other European countries, also preoccupy many of the poets analysed here; as Andrew Ashfield states, they “remain unique examples of how historical realities such as the invasion threats of the 1790s and the drama of the expanding empire in the 1830s” combined with their own domestic and artistic concerns (1995, p. xv).

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<sup>1</sup> Ovid, the Roman poet who lived during the reign of Augustus, was sent by the later into exile in a remote province of the Black Sea. Dante Alighieri (c.1265-1321), a major Italian poet, was also condemned to perpetual exile for political reasons.

<sup>2</sup> For example, the *Oxford English Dictionary* dates the term ‘exile’ to Oliver Goldsmith’s vision of displaced peasants in his *The Deserted Village* (1770). And it took not a long time for Romantics such as Southey, Wordsworth and Byron to strategically appropriate the term in works such as *Botany Bay Eclogues*, *Lyrical Ballads* and *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage*, respectively.

Moral fracturing issues, and deep questioning, emerge in poems that explore national identity, as those of Charlotte Smith in the context of the Revolutionary Wars and those of Felicia Hemans in the context of the Napoleonic Wars. So numerous are the poems about the carnage and bloodshed of military conflict, and the related fears of displacement, that one senses a common criticism on the part of women poets such as Joanna Baillie, Anna Laetitia Barbauld, Charlotte Smith and Felicia Hemans. For example, Barbauld's *1811*, in heroic couplets, "hauntingly conveys a civilian society crumbling under the pressure of the Peninsular War" and "Hemans incessantly returns to the ethics of battle and to the place of women in a warring society" (Armstrong, 1996, p. xxviii). In the same way, the Crimean War with its slaughter at Balaclava and Sebastopol prompted eloquent poems by Adelaide Anne Procter and Louisa Shore; as Armstrong emphasises, "the 'heart' empowers because it enables the woman poet to mount a critique of masculine values." (*Ibidem*)

Given the large number of poems about Italian nationalism later in the same century, one wonders if this passionate cause was an expression of these women's anxieties about an implicitly oppressive and violently masculine British nation-state. Barrett Browning repeatedly turns to Italy as a motherland that must be liberated from tyranny, while others like Harriet King celebrate the expatriate heroes of the Risorgimento.<sup>3</sup> Conversely, on the face of imperial and colonial rule, some poets give way to a consideration of different cultural identities; Eliza Cook celebrates national power in her "Englisman" poem (1838), at the same time that she shows a radical awareness of cultural difference in "Song of the Red Indian" (1845), urging respect for Native American customs, beliefs and rituals through the figure of the Other. Identification with this other, namely in terms of the oppression and the subordination of women, made slavery a pre-eminent theme in poets such as A.L. Barbauld, H.M. Williams, Hannah More, Letitia Elizabeth Landon and Elizabeth Barrett Browning, as

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<sup>3</sup> During the whole nineteenth century, in fact, Italy emerges as a major favourite location for intellectual exiles: not just the Byron-Shelley circle itself during the Romantic period but also the Browning-Rossetti group in the Victorian period.

poems such as More's "The Negro Woman's Lamentation" (1800) and E.B. Browning's "The Runaway Slave at Pilgrim's Point" may testify.

Katharina Rennhak has remarked (2006) that Charlotte Smith frequently adopts tropes of exile, homelessness and wandering to depict the situation of women in late eighteenth-century English society. Exile is used in her texts (both the novels and the poems) as a strategy to imagine communities, i.e., to partake in the political project of outlining reformed models of society. Smith's long poems *The Emigrants* (1793) and *Beachy Head* (1807) "explore personal isolation against the background of larger themes of the exile of classes and the conflict of nations [...] they do chart possibilities of engaging private/public themes different from those of the main romantic canon" (Ashfield, p. 33). The first poem has as its subject the plight of the displaced French loyalists during the Reign of Terror in France; if their circumstances were widely familiar in England, they were even more intimately so to Charlotte Smith herself because "she had offered refuge to some of these displaced clergy and aristocrats in her own home" (Behrendt, 2010, p. 164). She focuses on these *émigrés'* powerlessness to redress their situation and suggests that "individual freedom and dignity vanishes when subjected to the indiscriminating instruments of institutional power" (p. 164).

[...] beholding the unhappy lot  
Of the lorn Exiles; who, amid the storms  
Of wild disastrous Anarchy, are thrown,  
Like shipwreck'd sufferers, on England's coast,  
[...] (II, ll. 9-12) <sup>4</sup>

Her earlier poem "The Female Exile" (1792) had been precisely suggested by the sight of a French lady and her children wandering the Kent shore: "[...] she beholds them, with / anguish, / Now wand'ers with her on a once hostile / soil, / Perhaps doomed for life in chill penury to languish, / Or abject dependence, or soul-crushing toil" (ll. 25-8). Besides being profoundly anti-war, "emphasising at every point how the disruption of individual families parallels the larger disruption of civilized society on both sides of the English Channel"

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<sup>4</sup> All the quoted excerpts from Charlotte Smith's poetry are taken from Andrew Ashfield's anthology (1995) in the bibliography.

(Behrendt, p. 165), *The Emigrants* “seeks to create an internationalist consciousness of the need for reform in the political conduct of nations” (p. 165).<sup>5</sup> The poet expresses the hope that the emigrants’ painful exile may finally lead to the extirpation of their reciprocal hatred. But, despite their ideological differences, she describes their condition and her own as nearly reflexive: “I mourn your sorrows; for I too have known / Involuntary exile” (I, ll. 155-6).

The figure of the exilic and migrant other is also metaphorically represented in *Beachy Head*, where Smith compares it not only to the romantic “lone Hermit” but also to herself and her recollections of a happier past: “I was condemned, / A guiltless exile, silently to sigh, / While Memory, with faithful pencil, drew / The contrast” (ll. 6-9). Often viewed as a fragmentary revision of the previous poem, this text suggests that only by accepting Smith’s ‘geological map’ might the French emigrants themselves – now internationals or transnationals – “regain / Their native country”. Jane Stabler reminds us that Smith “was in an ‘involuntary exile’ in Normandy between 1784 and 1785 to escape imprisonment with her husband for debt” and that her “detachment from the land she calls her own would increase, ushering in a more radical sort of alienation” (2013, p. 6). The migrants’ “compounded loss of language, country and means threatens their very sense of cultural and personal identity” (Curran, 1988, p. 201), and critics, such as Stuart Curran, see Smith’s fascination with statelessness as quite consistent with her psychological condition as a woman writer.<sup>6</sup>

In her important chapter on “States of Exile”, Tricia Lootens rightly observes that “nineteenth-century transatlantic culture (...) remains haunted by traumas of exile, be it the forced internal exiles of American Indian nations within the US or the enslavement of African Americans” (Lootens, 2008, p. 14). She affirms that “even within the overt terms of Plymouth Rock landing celebrations, homecoming *is* exile” (p. 15). And she adds that “Plymouth Rock [is] a crucial site within the development of what we have come to term the ‘poetess

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<sup>5</sup> In Smith’s novel *The Banished Man* (1794), for example, her characters seem to achieve a transnational, transcultural state through international intermarriage and multilingualism.

<sup>6</sup> Curran states as well that “The constant theme of Charlotte Smith’s *Elegiac Sonnets* is of rootless exile.” (200).

tradition” (*ibidem*). In this context, Felicia Hemans’s “Landing of the Pilgrim Fathers in New England” (1825) is the most popular of poems on the migration or exile of the British in the American continent, having served as well to ‘spiritualise’ and ‘memorialise’ the colonial origins of the United States.<sup>7</sup> She does enhance the sacrifice which is implicit in the dislocation (“The heavy night hung dark”) and the exilic condition: “Why had they come to wither there, / Away from their childhood’s land?” (ll. 27-8).<sup>8</sup> In fact, and according to Lootens, the poem “parades as well as dissembles economic, expansionist, and imperial ambitions” (Lootens, 2008, p. 16). Yet, it is also a “gendered patriotic work” as the Pilgrim Mothers take centre stage, helping the poetess “to perform her patriotic role of pointing to heaven as the nation’s ultimate home ground” (*Idem*, p.17). This suggests that the heavenly project “had clearly transatlantic national implications”, in that “after death, all earthly exiles ... will comprise a transnational spiritual family” – an Anglo-American Christian or Protestant one, Lootens concludes (cf. pp. 18-19).

Still in the context of the early European migrations, Hemans’s extended dramatic monologue *The Forest Sanctuary* (1826), in Spenserian stanzas, seems to fit the traditional quest motif of the epic as it follows the thought processes of a sixteenth-century Spanish Protestant forced to emigrate to the forest of North America.<sup>9</sup> Her emphasis now is clearly on the “fugitive”, who escapes “in silence and in fear” (l. 231), taking us close to the author’s own private grief. It is the imagined or *remembered* voices of the three deceased women he has known in the past that serve to fortify his spiritual strength during his exile from his beloved homeland. The “voices of [his] homeland” that sustain him in the wilderness of the New World are, in fact, the blessed household voices belonging to the women he has been closest to throughout his life, including his wife Leonor. For Hemans, these voices bring to

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<sup>7</sup> The poem was first published in the *New Monthly Magazine* (1825), then in the *League* (Boston, 1826). It went through several editions until the 1880s, and was often printed as a gift-book with engravings.

<sup>8</sup> All the quoted lines from Felicia Hemans are taken from Susan Wolfson’s edition of her works (2000) listed in the bibliography.

<sup>9</sup> The poem is written within the context of the Spanish Inquisition, which executed the protagonist’s two sisters in an *auto de fe* and led to his wife’s death on the passage out to America, where he arrives with his son.

the Spaniard's mind both joyful and painful memories of his homeland and his childhood home.

Indeed, Felicia Hemans and Letitia Landon confronted and experienced personally the negative effects of empire; separation, loss and exile are thus recurring themes in their respective poems and correspondence.<sup>10</sup> Hemans's initial *Tales and Historic Scenes* (1819), as G. Kelly notes, "present these conflicts from a Romantic feminist viewpoint, showing the deaths of individuals, communities, nations, and empires in the cycles of 'masculine' history" (2002, p. 25). Her major work, *Records of Woman* (1828), develops the form and themes of those earlier attempts, showing the costs of "masculine" history (as conflict, war and destruction) to individuals, especially wives and mothers, and emphasising the heroism and sacrifice of women in the face of history. The chronicle, as Susan Wolfson observes, "was meant to elaborate a general plight of gender – of, in effect, "wrongs" that were readable as transnational, trans-cultural, trans-historical" (2000, p. xv). Although Hemans distrusts Romanticism's *wanderlust*, as a liberal and a republican, she is interested in the *image* of woman as a Romantic exile of some kind: not so much a nostalgic wanderer but more a victim of imperial history and its Promethean male deeds. Letitia Landon seemed to embody this same image of victim of male history. She died a mysterious death shortly after writing a lyric called "Night at Sea" (1838), a monologue by the poet's *persona* on her way to Africa, leaving behind her career as popular poetess and social life in London, to start a respected married life in a foreign land.<sup>11</sup> The poem seems to express the poet's bitter feelings at the end of her life and, responding as it does to Hemans' "A Parting Song" about the sorrow of separating from her friends, represents a communion of female recollections about separation and exile.

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<sup>10</sup> Members of Hemans's family, namely her brothers and husband, were involved in the military actions during the Peninsular Wars.

<sup>11</sup> Landon sent the poem to the editor of *The New Monthly Magazine* from Africa, after arriving there in October 1838.

In *Imagined Communities*, Benedict Anderson has pointed to a connection between the history of the nation and individual biography, in which both are seen as narratives of identity and personhood (1983, p. 203). Yet, the lyric “I” is recurrently concerned with questions of the location or dislocation of the self. And, in the personal lyric, the self is either home or away, facing internal or external division, and always in search of an identity or a chosen location. In the poetry of the Brontë sisters, the conflicts of the nation (whether they are presented in a real or a fictionalised manner) are reflected in the conflicts of the self, and the word “home” – a metaphor for both place and being – assumes a nuance of different but related meanings: from the familiar hearth or the exalted homeland to the poet’s mind, Nature or God’s bosom. In “Exile as Romance and as Tragedy”, Thomas Pavel argues that “a loss of homeland sometimes affects the characters of (...) romance and tragedy, the former specializing in metaphorical exile, the latter occasionally focusing on exile proper” (Suleiman, 1998, p. 28). As avid readers of both genres, the Brontës absorbed the Neo-Platonist vision of earthly life as ‘exile’ that informs these plots as a whole.<sup>12</sup> But they also looked at the character of the political exile with interest, namely the exiled monarchs (male and female), whose predicaments of power they explored poetically: dramatic loss of life, demotion from power, and captivity.<sup>13</sup> In its narrow sense, a political banishment (most famously, Napoleon’s), exile in its broad sense designates every kind of estrangement or displacement, from the physical and geographical to the spiritual – the latter being frequently equated with death in the Brontëan lyric.

For example, as Charlotte Brontë switches the perspective from external to internal worlds, she often engages in a visionary trance, through which she escapes from the English school of drudgery or forced exile and ventures out to Africa, “a far and bright continent.” In

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<sup>12</sup> The ‘plots’ that the Brontës read most avidly were in the form of Walter Scott’s novels and William Shakespeare’s tragedies.

<sup>13</sup> Many of the characters created by the Brontës, especially in the collaborative Gondal sagas of Emily and Anne Brontë, are frequently subject to banishment from their native land due to political and/or amorous rivalry and strife. These outcast rebels (usually ‘Republicans’) either literally rot away in forlorn dungeons or pine over their doomed fates in isolated isles, yearning for their dear ones and the fields of home.

figuring this space of colonial vision, Brontë seems to underline the extent to which her occupation of that imaginative space is a strategy of survival. The theme of exile (or the exilic character proper), besides being a haunting subject in the poetry of the Brontës, seems thus to constitute also a fit image for the woman poet's personal predicament. One of the compositions which best express female displacement and the role of memory is Emily Brontë's "Lines by Claudia", a 1839 poem, in which the woman speaker's own country could be England or, alternatively, Gondal. This depends on whether the reader interprets Claudia as being a real Englishwoman banished during the Interregnum (for being a supporter of Charles I) or as an imaginary Gondalian heroine:

[...]  
 I did not dream, remembrance still  
 Clasped round my heart its fetters chill  
 But I am sure the soul is free  
 To leave its clay a little while  
 Or how *in exile misery*  
 Could I have seen my country smile?  
 In English fields my limbs were laid  
 With English turf beneath my head  
 My spirit wandered o'er that shore  
 Where nought but it may wander more  
 Yet if *the soul can thus return*  
 I need not and will not mourn  
 And *vainly did ye drive me far*  
 With leagues of ocean stretched between  
 My mortal flesh you might debar  
 But not the eternal fire within  
 [...]  
 (ll. 15-24, my emphasis)<sup>14</sup>

The separation between body and spirit/mind, very probably caused by a real or symbolic death (exile), makes it possible for the speaker to somehow return to her homeland and witness its victory or devastation, allowing as well two different readings of the poem: (1) Claudia's body lay exiled in England while her spirit wandered in her own country, or (2) it seemed that both body and spirit returned to England from exile. The Brontës' body or lyric subject, whether personal or fictionalised (in the realms of *Angria* and *Gondal*), experiences many different instances of displacement: as departure, uprooting, evasion, transportation,

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<sup>14</sup> All the quoted excerpts of Charlotte and Emily Brontë's poetry are taken from Juliet Barker's edition (1993) in the bibliography.



confinement and even burial or entombing. All of which – whether real or symbolic – cannot be fully understood separately from the specific time and place they found themselves in. One, thus, cannot help connecting the idea of the personal lyric as a transformation of human crisis, and as a safeguard of the integrity of the self in a chaotic world, with the notion of exile as authorship and of the author as a displaced artist.

Charlotte Brontë's insistence on the nineteenth-century dilemma of whether to sail abroad or to stay behind is recurrent in many compositions, threatening to be transformed into a tortured obsession – the feminine sense of the lack of a proper place or cause. In "Mementos", a poem of 1837, we find the Angrian narrator vaguely alluding to exotic elements treasured up but long forgotten in a stately Hall, haunted for years: "These fans of leaves, from Indian trees – / These crimson shells, from Indian seas" (ll. 9-10). These relics from the past seem to tell a tale of passion and grief in colonial wilds and they haunt and determine the female descendant's own life and character:

[...] passion  
Surged in her soul with ceaseless foam,  
The storm at last brought desolation,  
And drove her exiled from her home.  
(ll.189-92)

The symbolic images of the soul's submersion are mingled with the more palpably real ones of travelling and sea-crossing: "She crossed the sea – now lone she wanders" (196). If home for this autobiographical character is associated with the site of an unspeakable past of feminine pain and suffering, to run away to exile doesn't seem to resolve the drama at the heart of her being either: "She will return, but cold and altered" (l. 205).

Brontë has one or two poems in which the speakers are, in fact, colonizing men – traders, soldiers or missionaries. Instead of suffering, as women do, the consequences of the colonial struggles in which their mates are implicated (grief, abandonment and death), they exploit colonialism for their own particular ends (faith, ambition or adventure). "The Missionary" (1845) is spoken by a man simultaneously moved by his faith and by the wish to

depart from his land. The fate or experience of the British missionaries abroad, especially in India, seems to have fascinated Charlotte as much as the stories of martyred saints. The poem opens already on board the ship that will take him to his far off destination, and from whose deck he has one last glimpse of the English coast he wishes to leave behind: “England’s shores are yet in view, / (...) I cannot yet Remembrance flee” (ll. 16, 19). Yet, he demonstrates an almost uncontrollable wish to move far away, to break all bonds with his native country, to forget certain affections, in order to cultivate a new existence:

Plough, vessel, plough the British main,  
 Seek the free ocean’s wider plain;  
 Unbind, dissever English ties;  
 Bear me to climes remote and strange  
 Where altered life, [...] Shall stir, turn, dig, the spirit’s soil;  
 [...] Mere human love, mere selfish yearning,  
 Let me, then struggle to forget.  
 (ll. 1-2, 5-15)

One can, furthermore, find a correspondence between the Brontës’ feelings of remoteness at Haworth and their lives as teachers and governesses away from home – whether they chose to stay or were compelled to leave, they remained, paradoxically, exiles.<sup>15</sup> But while for Emily Brontë the brief Belgian venture took her out of her environment and language, and it was mostly an experience of uprooting, for Charlotte it meant the discovery of the promised land – the site of a much-hungered for intellectual and affective fulfilment.<sup>16</sup> Compared with this land, Barker states, “Haworth seems such a lonely, quiet spot, buried away from the world” (Barker, 1995, p. 432). For the eldest sister, it is this home which is now implicitly equated with exile, as in the 1847 poem “The Orphan Child”, also inserted in *Jane Eyre*: “Why did they send me so far and so lonely, / Up where the moors spread and grey rocks are piled?” (ll. 5-6). Here, the meaning of the word exile would widen in order to

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<sup>15</sup> The theme of the exilic Other (man or woman, real or fictional) is a haunting one in the poetry of the Brontës. Someone who, for political, religious or professional reasons, is forced to leave his/her homeland, and is transported to remote, forlorn places, seems to constitute a fit image for the women poets’ personal predicament.

<sup>16</sup> In February 1842, Charlotte and Emily Brontë entered the Pensionnat Heger, in Brussels, as boarding pupils. In November of that year, unable to be away from home, Emily returns to Haworth for good, while Charlotte goes back to the Pensionnat, where she stays until January 1844.

enclose life itself as a long, weary and dreary way for the lonely traveller (ll. 1-4), on his journey to the home of rest – Heaven (ll. 19-20). The pervasive vision of life as a pilgrimage, and of its final heavenly reward, may thus explain the recurrence of this religious metaphor in the poetry of the Brontës. In her youth, Charlotte had been particularly interested in the biblical story of St. John, exiled in the Island of Patmos, as her poem with the same title, written circa 1832, after she had left Roe Head as a student, suggests:

The holy exile lies all desolate  
In that lone island of the Grecian sea.  
And does he murmur at his earthly fate,  
The doom of thralldom and captivity?  
(ll. 1-4)

The narrator wonders if, in his slumber, the saint's "soul" is "[...] on some far journey gone / To lands beyond the wildly howling wave" (ll. 11-12) or if "[...] to his freed soul is it once more given / To wander in the dark, wild, wilderness" (ll. 21-22). The answer points rather to a visionary experience of revelation and liberation: "From his eyes a veil is rent away" (l. 25).

In their recent work on Elizabeth Barrett Browning, another major Victorian woman poet, the critics S. Avery and R. Stott (2014), have significantly included a section on "Woman as Exile", in which they identify a new political keynote in the poet's work: "the construction of the exile figure" (p. 90). As she writes in the Preface of her narrative poem *Drama in Exile*, "I took pleasure in driving in ... the Idea of EXILE" (quoted in Avery); yet, this concern had already surfaced in earlier poems, such as "Riga's Last Song" and "The Vision of Fame" (1826), *The Seraphim*, "Cowper's Grave" and "The Exile's Return" (1838). And indeed, as these critics state,

The politics of exclusion and alienation which the exile figure embodies became increasingly fundamental to Barrett's writings and were a dominant feature of her work of the 1840s where, ..., not only women but working-class figures, children and slaves are constructed as political exiles forced to negotiate as best they can potentially destructive power systems of 'alien tyranny' (Avery and Stott, 2014, pp. 90-91)

Particularly interesting is the way in which Elizabeth Barrett explores the issues of women being exiled from the centres of authority and control in the public place, namely, in

works as *A Drama in Exile* and “The Romaunt of the Page”, a ballad included in *Poems* (1844). In the first, she rehearses the biblical narrative of the expulsion from Eden through Eve’s perspective, rather than Adam’s, and rewrites the androcentric tradition of epic as constructed by Milton’s *Paradise Lost*. In the second, she presents a woman who works as a page for the man she loves and who, like Eve, is constructed as an exiled figure who is subsequently able to critique woman’s restricted role from the margins. But, due to her own confined circumstances, the poet would herself embody this figure: after secretly marrying against the wishes of her family, Elizabeth Barrett Browning ran away to Italy (the paradigmatic land of English literary exiles), putting herself into the position of the very same exile with which she had been perennially fascinated.

It is highly significant, therefore, that the first political poem that she wrote after her semi-voluntary escape was “The Runaway Slave at Pilgrim’s Point”, in 1845, when the Boston Anti-Slavery Bazaar asked her to contribute to the cause. When she took up the commission, E.B. Browning was evidently conscious of the fact that her own family had been plantation owners for generations and that she owed her privileged situation to the work of slaves (who had themselves been displaced from their homelands). Therefore, the task was probably faced with the deliberate intention of redeeming herself from the sins of her forefathers. Constructed in the form of a complex dramatic monologue, it gives voice to a black woman slave who had been raped by her white masters and who, to prevent the perpetuation of discrimination, takes the final dramatic gesture of murdering her mixed-blood baby-child. It is no coincidence either that the poem takes place at Pilgrim’s Point in New England, the symbolic site of previous exiles of English origin fleeing religious persecution: “I stand on the mark beside the shore / Of the first white pilgrim’s bended knee, / Where exile

turned to ancestor” (I, ll. 1-3).<sup>17</sup> The descendants of these were now the perpetrators of the systems of tyranny that were creating further displacement and suffering.

The topic of forced displacement is taken up again, with great charisma, in the late nineteenth century by the hand of Mathilde Blind, a New Woman poet, born in Germany and very early on closely acquainted with the issues of exile. Her mother had become involved with the movement for a united and democratic Germany and, in 1849, married Karl Blind, a radical political writer and activist. He was one of the leaders of the Baden insurrections during the revolutions of 1848, the suppression of which led to his exile from Germany. After being expelled from France and Belgium, the family was granted asylum in England, having settled west of Regent’s Park. For the next thirty years their household became both a haven for Europe’s radical exiles (namely, Joseph Mazzini) and an influential intellectual salon.

The haunting figure of the exile thus inevitably emerges in several of the poetic compositions written at the English *fin-de-siècle* by this most sophisticated and cosmopolitan poet and biographer, connected with the larger Pre-Raphaelite artistic circle. One of these works is the beautiful collection of songs with the suggestive title of *Love in Exile (Songs and Sonnets, 1893)*, which imagines a female speaker addressing her beloved from the distance of her exile, evoking the memories and the places from their common past as a compensation for their forced severance:

[...]  
No longer like an exile on the earth  
I wildly roam,  
I was thy double from the hour of birth  
And thou my home.  
(V, ll. 14-16)<sup>18</sup>

A lifelong supporter of progressive causes, Blind was bent on exerting a political impact with her poetry. After having visited the site of a ruined Scottish village in 1884, she recorded her impressions and composed one of the century’s most remarkable narrative

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<sup>17</sup> All the quoted excerpts from E.B. Browning’s poetry are taken from Isobel Armstrong’s anthology (1996) in the bibliography.

<sup>18</sup> All the quoted excerpts from Mathilde Blind’s poetry are taken from Judith Willson’s anthology (2006) in the bibliography.

poems about rural Scotland and the disastrous effects of the Highland clearances or evictions. Published in the year of the passage of the Crofter's Act of 1886, *The Heather on Fire* is her historical saga of the members of a Skye family who are evicted from their home, forced onto an emigrant ship, and their death when the ship wrecks on a nearby coast. Blind's poetic tale of denunciation is arranged into four cantos or duan, which trace three generations in the life of a doomed Highland family, combining high English diction and elements of Greek and Senecan tragedy with elaborate social and physical detail.

She describes the crofters' long-standing love for their island home, their laborious life, their response to nature and their relationships, but she also marks the exploitive dominion of "the lord of all that land". She narrates how this idyll is disturbed when neighbours report that the landlord's men have begun a series of evictions and they watch flames rise from several adjacent farms. When the evictors arrive at their cot, a series of dramatic events occur before "the great Lord's hireling men" drag the surviving family members to the emigration ship. The final scene shows the oldest family member as he watches in horror the ship making its way through a storm out into the open sea, where it suddenly breaks apart in the distance, with all the remaining family members. Psychologically charged, the final descriptive vignette is Turner-esque in the suggestion of the common dramatic fate of many emigrants:

[...]  
Therewith it seemed as if their Scottish land  
Bled for its children, yea, as though some hand –  
Stretching from where on the horizon's verge  
The rayless sun hung on the reddening surge –  
(Stanza XX)

As Sharon Krummel states in her thesis on the *The Politics of Migration in Contemporary Women's Writing* (2004), "There are continuities between the 'colonial' and 'postcolonial' eras, which the opposition between them tends to overlook" (p. 30). The density of the poetic language, she suggests, enables "the coexistence or even coalescence of

time periods”, as well as “contrasts between the place left behind and the place travelled to, to be powerfully evoked” (p. 78). She quotes Mary Warnock, writing that “the value we attach to *recollection* is understandable at precisely the point where memory and imagination intersect” (p. 92). For this reason, we find many contemporary poets engaging with differences within and connections across cultures; “collectively they indicate that feelings of displacement are a shared condition” (Dowson, 2011, p. 4). In their mid-Atlantic imagination, poets who migrated between Britain and the US “harmonised the preoccupying disjunctions of being somewhere and nowhere”, thus intervening in the record-making that has too easily been biased by male and or nationalistic agendas (Dowson, 2011, pp. 4-5).

By the end of the twentieth century, Jane Dowson states, a relatively large community of women poets – many of whom were British more by association than nationality or else expatriate – identified themselves with an uncertain sense of home (2005, p. 197). As she argues, “their impulse to use place as a cultural identifier is complicated but enriched by their experience of territorial, social and linguistic alienation” (p. 197). For instance, the migrant Sujata Bhatt claims that she writes from “my home which does not fit / with any geography” (quoted in Dawson, 2005, p. 197). As the New Zealander poet Fleur Adcock asks, “Are women natural outsiders?” (*ibidem*) If gender usually deepens the sense of cultural dislocation, it also endorses or subscribes the creative opportunities that are inherent to it. For Dowson, Jackie Kay, of Nigerian and Scottish descent, problematizes this issue in her poem “In My Country”: “she does and she doesn’t come from the Scotland she lives in, and the historical/biological accident she represents is transformed into political and aesthetic opportunity” (Dowson, 2005, p. 200). Finally, Jo Shapcott “has expressed [namely in her poem ‘Motherland’] her doubts about a national identity – Englishness – in the context of social alienation and territorial displacement” (*ibidem*, p. 202). Thus, whether writing from a colonial or from a postcolonial historical context, from a personal or a fictionalised literary

perspective, English women poets have variously used the functional trope of the ‘exile’ (or the ‘migrant’) to inscribe the challenging experience of displacement in the collective memory of female historiography and identity.

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