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INFANTICIDE AS SELF-DE-FACEMENT: ELIZABETH BARRETT BROWNING'S "*THE RUNAWAY SLAVE AT PILGRIM'S POINT*"

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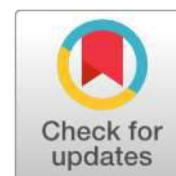

Abstract

Based on Elizabeth Barrett Browning's *The Runaway Slave at Pilgrim's Point* (1847), and trusting, at the same time, existential phenomenology and deconstruction, this paper aims at investigating a guilty individual's impulse for self-authorization (and self-narration). It discusses infant mortality, motherhood, and suffering, in which Elizabeth Barrett Browning's oeuvre abounds. Despite the unceasing critical interest in the poet's abolitionist leanings, the ontological uniqueness of *The Runaway Slave* is yet to be explored, having been dominated so far by militantly politicized researches on women's rights, the religious incongruities of Victorian culture, and the wavering solidarity that nineteenth-century England demonstrated for nations struggling under foreign despotism and illiterate self-government. Infanticide could be perceived as an act of self-de-facement, rather than of self-declaration. Considering muteness against the voicedness of the Face, this paper reveals the travail of a Self's inevitable sacrificial exposure to an Other, and by extension, the foundational role of alterity in authorial intentionality.

Key words: Elizabeth Barrett Browning, infanticide, self-de-facement, narrative, responsibility

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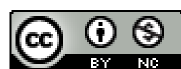
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> Fear for all that my existence – despite its intentional and conscious innocence – can accomplish in the way of violence and murder. … Fear that comes to me from the face of the Other. (Levinas, 1999, p. 23)

A Janus-like Creature of Its Own

It would not be hard to predict the range of cultural debates on the dichotomy gender–psyche that a fragment from *The Infanticide Act* (1938), which condemns the unlawful imposition of power of one individual over another, could fuel:

> Where a woman by any wilful act or omission causes the death of her child being a child under the age of twelve months, but at the time of the act or omission the balance of her mind was disturbed by reason of her not having fully recovered from the effect of giving birth to the child or by reason of the effect of lactation consequent upon the birth of the child, then, notwithstanding that the circumstances were such that but for this Act the offence would have amounted to murder, she shall be guilty of felony, to wit of infanticide, and may for such offence be dealt with and punished as if she had been guilty of the offence of manslaughter of the child. (Kohl, 1978, p. 219)

Dwelling on the intellectual and syntactical convolutions of the above definition, I daresay it seems a fairly steady ground[1] for an incriminating depiction of the identity of woman as inseparable from the identity of child. Woman seems assigned, by right of biology, the potential to donate, as well as to deprive. It is this very biology (which presupposes also suffering during labor, and hormonal change resulting in postpartum depression, itself related to breastfeeding) that makes guilt a foreseeable and ineluctable ingredient in the perception of woman as a wrongdoer. A raison-d'etre clue: Woman's chances of self-understanding would become seriously jeopardized if she were severed from her own infant. The act of violation of a child's life was typified in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Britain as a female act. Woman emerged as both accountable and innocent – a felon by right of her own nature.

As a cultural phenomenon, infanticide has a long history which shows the simultaneity of English society's desires to reveal (and acquit) yet conceal (and calumniate) women of compromised morality and dubious descent, in particular in relation to savage and advanced communities' mentalities of regulating want, physical

[1] *Infanticide Act* (2010, s. 1): https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/Geo6/1-2/36/section/1/2010-10-04

defects, and moral stigma. In *The Runaway Slave at Pilgrim's Point* (Donaldson et al., 2010, vol. 1, pp. 409-430) a black woman slave soliloquizes over her loss of her beloved – also a black slave, murdered by white men. Raped, and, subsequently, mothering a child by a white master, she decides to erase traces of violence inflicted on her. Resenting the result of her own tragedy – the undesired birth of her infant – she strangles the helpless newborn by way of putting her kerchief over his face, thus depriving her offspring of the master's right over her. An improvised burial service is completed at a grave dug by herself (l. 183-187)[2]. Finally, she could be seen at the place of the arrival of the onetime exiled pilgrim fathers (Donaldson et al., 2010, vol 1, p. 429). She claims sanity of mind: 'I am not mad: I am black'; 'in the name of the white child waiting for [her]', she leaves her white tormentors 'curse-free / In [her] broken heart's disdain' (ll. 218, 250-253). The poem was commissioned by the Boston anti-slavery league and came out in the American *Liberty Bell* in December 1847 (issue of 1848). The narrator is the black woman herself.

Family History and Elizabeth's Ontological Vice

Elizabeth depended on the income her family had amassed from slave-holding and ship-trade on sugar cane grown in their Jamaican estates at Cinnamon Hill. This clashed with her outspoken abolitionist convictions, as well as with her sensitivity for physical trauma and spiritual suffering, as she signalled in her poems describing mourning mothers, orphaned children, yoked martyrs, inflicted death, brittle friendships, and forsaken outcasts. Under the advice of her husband, Robert Browning, Elizabeth was persuaded to change the original title, *Black and Mad at Pilgrim's Point* (Donaldson et al., 2010, 1, pp. 410-414), which spared the foregrounded degree of recognition of the woman slave and yet afforded a more discreet aura for the theme of self-destruction. The poet placed a diversity of accents on the Self and the Other in the course of the narrative, in a disarmingly obliging yet not unambiguous manner open to Levinas' Face-to-Face ontology. Levinas believed that 'The Face is seigniory and defenseless itself. … The face is the locus of the word of God in the other, a non-thematized word. … It is the death of the Other that challenges … good conscience' (Levinas, 1999, pp. 104, 166). Barrett Browning

[2] The Brownings' Correspondence (coded coommonly as 'BC') has been quoted by volume, year of publication, page number(s), date, and letter number. The edition of the Brownings' Correspondence used is the electronic one at https://www.browningscorrespondence.com. The poet's authentic spelling and punctuation in her correspondence, and in her works (see Donaldson et al., 2010, as referenced) have been adhered to.

built the lyrical speaker's identity in a comparatist manner. The black woman identified at once with two equally formidable human presences (and sources of self) who she wanted to remember: Her dead, murdered by her white masters, lover – black, like herself – and her dead, murdered by herself, child – white, unlike herself. God had created, but abandoned her and her enslaved brethren in a world housing other impenetrably-coloured yet blessed creatures and phenomena, peacefully and freely coexisting, 'glad and merry as light' ('a little dark bird', 'a dark stream', 'the dark frogs', 'the darkest night', ll. 29-35). The woman slave, her lover, and her child had no proper names; in their common wretchedness, relativism of importance, and anonymity, they formed a mutually prosopopoeic entity, signifying yet intimidating one another. The female slave repeated her lover's 'name' as a salvatory incantation (l. 78-84), wondering whether she could be a legitimate creation of God (ll. 22-28), interrogating the relevance of her own being: 'I am black, I am black! – … And tender and full was the look he [her lover] gave – / Could a slave look *so* at another slave?' (ll. 57, 61-62). The kernel component of the slave's self-authorizing impulse comprised her partner and her infant whose face she dared not behold for its dazzling and alienating whiteness (ll. 120-121). With both the lover and the child dead by the end of the poem, gone was her own domain of self-identification. The narrative's effect was not recuperative but malignant: It repeated the tragic occurrences without resolving either the woman's pain over the loss of her beloved, or allowing her to forget her infant's outlawed birth and enforced death.

Stuck in an ontological vice, the female slave describes the child on her breast as 'an amulet that hung too slack' (ll. 107-108). The unorthodox rite of burial she performs over her own child (who she has murdered) and her maiden song (which metamorphoses into the song arising from the grave where she has placed her dead infant who wishes to reconcile 'the souls of both of us', ll. 190-196) transform the avenger into a penitent seeking forgiveness. A detestable token of imposed power at first, the child becomes the sole guarantee for redemption for those 'born of the Washington-race': It is in his name that the mother swears readiness to absolve her violators, yet she does not deny responsibility for her atrocious deed, nor does she plead to be martyred. Heaven 'break[s]' the clouds upon the mother's brain (the problematic metaphor in l. 247 suggests at once a blessing and a curse): Her child is 'waiting for' her (l. 250-251), promising reconciliation and alleviation of her solitude. The child is a Levinasian

facilitator of understanding. Its death is its mother's death: She becomes 'no longer able to be able', or to grasp; 'the subject [the mother is] loses its very mastery as a subject' (Levinas, 1987, pp. 72, 74). The exteriority that the child ensures when alive is that necessary 'relationship with a mystery' which is 'a property of space' and which could 'lead the subject back to itself through light' (Levinas, 1987, p. 76). Its disappearance is the dissolution of the woman's own face.

Some Ironies of Self-Confessing

The Runaway Slave at Pilgrim's Point was a response to a request from two American Garrisonians – abolitionists titled thus by critics after the name of the journalist William Lloyd Garrison (1805 – 1879), a proponent of human rights. It emerged in a climate of cultural tension on women's rights, transcontinental communication on slavery (resulting in genre experimentation in the works of women writers, as obvious from *Aurora Leigh* (1856)), and the poet's personal doubts about sanctification of role models, for which her correspondence provided copious clues (see, for, instance, BC 6, 1988, pp. 60-65, 30 Aug 1842, # 999). In writing, Elizabeth found a terrain for meeting social duties: 'people invoke me from America, as if I might be dead. … I have to write for the anti-slavery people at Boston' (BC 11, 1993, pp. 212-215, 1 Dec 1845, # 2122). *The Runaway Slave* was also her avowal to radically-minded American intellectuals James Russell Lowell and Maria Weston Chapman: Separately, each had requested a contribution to the matter of slavery. A confession the poet made to Robert Browning was prompted by a sense of guilt for her ancestors: 'I would give ten towns in Norfolk (if I had them) to own some purer lineage than that of the blood of the slave! – Cursed we are from generation to generation' (BC 11, 1993, pp. 251-253, postmark of 20 Dec 1845, # 2144)!

The word *slave* has a traceable history of its own in Elizabeth's autobiographical writing: It signals a strong sense of duty yet a fanciful desire for escape and protection whereby the poet seeks a private space and time (BC 1, 1984, pp. 212, 4 Mar 1825, # 208; BC 3, 1985, pp. 292-295, 26 Oct 1837, # 594). The Self's own body, mind, and soul get blended with the Other's in a homogeneity which disallows cognizing either's in isolation. A similar tendency has been scrutinized by Meg Jensen who has observed of female self-writing practice that no single 'life experience, … however … formed and disseminated, [could] really [...] provoke 'universality' of empathic response' (Jensen, 2018, p. 67). The

irony is contained in the fact that (as with the fictitiously autobiographical *Aurora Leigh*, or *Sonnets from the Portuguese* – especially # 28, 33, and 42), the confessor risks, at the expense of the universality of experience and emotion they seek through the solidarity that self-narrative invites the reader to partake of – their own individual unity for they are barely able to abstain from succumbing to a connection with the Other through aesthetic experience, which works towards generic typification and collective comprehensibility via intersubjectivity, or 'betweenness' (Jensen, 2018, pp. 68, 77, 79-80).

Paul de Man's astute and succinct reasoning in favor of the predominantly structurally 'representational and cognitive' element of autobiography – of which the incestuous black mother's tale in the scrutinized poem could be an instance – provides substance for the present research. de Man wishes to contest Philippe Lejeune's opinion about the 'contractual, grounded not only in tropes but in speech acts', approach to the act of self-telling, which Lejeune, according to de Man, suggests as the dethronement of 'the signature that gives the contract [of autobiography] its legal' status and leads to the curtailment of the flourishing of the autobiographer's 'epistemological (…) authority' (de Man, 1979, p. 922). The 'specular' (p. 923) in self-cognition cannot be avoided because of the presence of an Other in a Self's account of their own experience, in what has been in physical terms, as well as in the dialogic ingredient that any speech act (in writing, or in oral communication) contains on a perlocutionary level, for a speech act prompts a perception of the time before, as well as after, given an Other's presence as an axial point of provocation and reception. Neither the female slave's black lover, nor her 'white' babe (except for its song from the grave, but with no actual words uttered) are given the license to speak yet their faces speak for them in a way evidential and to the effect of signifying 'language as name and as voice' (p. 926). 'Voiceless entities' are 'made as intelligible and memorable as a face' – these alleged voicelessness-es (God, who remains a silent observer of the woman's crime; the black lover, when still alive, but especially when dead; the babe, who gets no chance to prove himself other than within a violated woman's psyche and space) 'posit the possibility of (…) [a] reply' by the white woman as a speaker of her own life: Such substitution is 'the trope of autobiography' (p. 926). Acts of affectual, responsive doing, and of contemplating, converge and make inter-substitutable woman, lover, child, God, and the white aggressors, on the one hand, and face, look, voice, and language, on the other. de Man may not be easily maneuvered around: Auto-narrative looks like a

gesture of tropifying intentionality through mutuality, which doubles the ontological predicament: '[God] must have cast his work away / Under the feet of his white creatures, / With **a look of scorn**, – that the dusky features / Might be trodden again to clay' (ll. 25-28); 'And **tender and full was the look** he [the black lover] gave – / Could a slave **look** *so* at another slave? – / **I look** at the sky and the sea' (ll. 61-63, emphasis in original); (ll. 103-105); 'My own, own child! I could not bear **/ To look in his face**, it was too white. (…) I tell you all, / **I saw a look that made me mad**! / The master's look …' (ll. 120-121; 142-144); 'I am not mad: I am black, **/ I see you staring in my face'** (ll. 219-220, emphases added).

Philippe Lejeune views a woman's self-narrative as 'a discourse of persecution' which assigns an external Other the role of threat and yet legitimation of the One: The Other helps throw the woman's identity into relief, typifying her as a victim (Lejeune, 1987, p. 209). If writing, or speaking, contains some conciliatory hope, it also embodies the very failure that it seeks to avoid (pp. 211, 214): Women narrators vociferate, yet they fumble for words and leap into mad tirades, which could be a way of looking at the female slave's haunting and obsessive laughter 'Ha, ha!', as she relates, in the greatest of detail, the murder of her own babe (ll. 126, 155, 162). Her verbal agency may not resolve either the weight of her crime, or the burden of her origin ('I am not mad: I am black', l. 218) that define her. The female autobiographical act – of which the black mother's rhetoric of self-interrogation as self-narrative in *The Runaway Slave* presents a special instance – is one of self-disarmament, or self-de-facement, of peeling the disguise of intrepidity and uniqueness that the face has in its potential to metonymize the individual. It is a kind of self-epitaph, self-prohibition, self-affliction, and exodic resolution, stamping exilic narrative as woman's ownmost self-expression. The slave anonymizes yet eulogizes herself. In her addresses to God, her white masters, her murdered lover, and her dead infant, the black woman ruins the prop of her own understanding, proving that any act of speech is autobiographical to the extent that it is one of accountability – a request to an Other to partake of her deed (de Man, 1979, pp. 921-922). Such an act is at once causative and responsive, a 'chaismic figure (…) crossing the conditions of death and of life with the attributes of speech and of silence' (p. 927). Which would also suit Lejeune's reflections (developed in "The Autobiographical Pact"): While narrator and principal character coincide, it is the "I" of discourse that defines the individual, and not the individual – the

"I" of discourse (Lejeune, 1988, pp. 4, 9). The nameless slave could also be an epitome of the poet's own sense of deprivation and restriction which she experienced under the austerity of the parental vigilance that also stimulated her literary talent. In the poem, the missing 'proper name' (woman's, lover's, babe's, aggressor's) stands behind the first-person narratorial discourse (p. 11). The gradual enfeeblement (through deaths caused and described) of human physical presences is counterbalanced by the augmentation of the speaker's desire to name the departed metonymically, with a special focus on voice, eyes, and face. Officially illiterate and all too impulsive, the black woman's narrative of her plight is an intelligently terse command over the "I" which calls for others: 'O slaves, (…) end what I begun!' (l. 231). Her pardon for the white oppressors, and her, eyes seeking the divine, question her self-confidence. This is, and is not, the murderous black mother's own story of herself: Remove the others, and she would vanish. Each of the dead claims a space of their own: Autobiographical means also biographical.

'And yet God made me, they say'

Late eighteenth- and nineteenth-century English poetical self-narratives abound in specimens of the autobiographical impulse. They warn of frustrations in store for those willing to explore the dichotomies mother–infant and Self–Other. Two eloquent, if somewhat ostensibly remote from each other, cases beg mentioning. In Emily Brontë's poem from her Gondal saga *A Farewell to Alexandria* (1839), also known as *The Outcast Mother*, a mother intends to leave her babe unattended, in a forest, in the snow, hoping that it would not die (Brontë, 1992, pp. 106-107, 258). The mourning mother is A.G.A., Gondal's Queen. Aware of her own dark nature, she is about to perform a perversely cautionary, self-authorizing act. The tone of voice of this self-exposing mother, whose 'breath would pause' and 'eyes would melt', may be way softer than the voice of the black woman slave in Elizabeth Barrett Browning's poem, yet her decision could be seen as no less lethal for her babe. Recalling mild July weather, sylvan music and peace, she departs: 'Farewell unblessed, unfriended child, / I cannot bear to watch thee die' (ll. 11, 35–36). In *The Negro's Complaint* (1788), William Cowper omits motherhood from direct mentioning for the sake of revealing descent through an expansive equation between cultural opposites, promoting originary authentication between body and mind: 'though slave they have enrolled me, / Minds are never to be sold / … affection / dwells in white and black the same' (ll. 7–8, 15–16, Cowper, 1860, pp. 365–366).

Poems of self-denial, which often narrate also of the dangers impending over the life of an Other, or those displaying an openly abolitionist element, could be inscribed into a more general debate on the matter of namelessness and repressed identity. They emblematize the Victorian era as the time of women seeking special recognition through 'metaphors of slavery' (Moers, 1976, p. 16). A fairly recent study of *The Runaway Slave* has noted the immediacy of the infanticidal experience the poem conveys: It 'is written so passionately that it exceeds the margins of fiction and begins to seem like biography', twining together slavery, madness, and murder (as well as, most likely, Elizabeth's rebellion against her father, and her fears of motherlessness), fending off extreme judgementalism (Schaub, 2011, pp. 558-559, 561). As Julia Watson has observed perspicaciously, because life-writing is backed by 'authorized traditions of representing … in Western culture' and 'patronymic privilege', women's autobiographical impulses to monumentalize selfhood could be seen 'in the light of alterity and dialogue', as a 'possibility of breaking into speech about … silence' – through various forms of cultural and genre 'métissage' seeking to transform the reader-witness (Watson, 1993, pp. 58, 61, 71, 73). Transformative narratives, all the same, fail to compensate for the loss of an infant's life. They offer no ultimate remedy for a very young individual's right of 'expression of human freedom', which gets savagely snatched away based on a simple quantitative consideration: The sheer insufficiency, the innocent beginning, the lack of time to enjoy life that the infant's demise means (Kohl, 1978, pp. 207, 210, 215).

The problem of infanticide as the perpetrator's loss of identity may find a place in a larger, compound discussion on illegitimacy of birth, surveillance over the individual, osmosis between victim and violator, marriage-law restrictions, punitive societal customs, ignorance about the true value of a child's life, and awareness about active versus passive suffering at the prospect of death. As Anne-Marie Kilday has written, in the period 17th – 19th centuries, in Britain, parasitical or outlawed by birth newborns faced the threat of extermination which sprung from the threat of the excommunication of the wronged woman, who, if poor (rather than well-off and literate), was to hide after transgressing (not always unwillingly) and face a life of denial (Kilday, 2013, pp. 51, 53, 55, 58-59). The secrecy enshrouding illegitimate births 'added weight to the belief that new-born child murder was … a pre-meditated and deeply deviant crime, … render[ing] infanticide a capital offence in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries' (p. 61).

Woman's 'abhorrence of bloodshed' made asphyxia a common way in lethal imposition of power (Kilday, 2005, pp. 174-175, 182, 184). In *The Runaway Slave*, no details are provided about the woman's living in secrecy, or about her expecting, but the newborn is defined condescendingly: 'an amulet that hung too slack' upon her breast (ll. 107-108).

Annie Cossins' eye-opening investigation of female criminality expounds on the beastliness of Victorian society: Woman was a deeply sexed, deviant thing, the female body 'marking the boundaries of morality and immorality' – an essentialism paired with religious distrust for woman as a greater (than man) sinner (Cossins, 2015, pp. 57, 65, 156). In Elizabeth's poem the mother seems riotously conscious of her deed, seeking no assistance from a baby-farmer or any other Malthusian:

> ...
> I covered his face in close and tight:
> And he **moaned and struggled**, **as well might be**,
> For the white child wanted his liberty –
> Ha, ha! he wanted his master-right.
>
> He moaned and beat with his head and feet,
> **His little feet that never grew** –
> **He struck them out**, as it was meet,
> **Against my heart to break it through**.
> I might have sung and made him mild –
> But I dared not sing to the white-faced child
> The only song I knew.
>
> I pulled the kerchief very close:
> **He could not see the sun**, I swear,
> More, then, alive, than now he does
> From between the roots of the mango . . . where?
> . . . I know where. Close! a child and mother
> Do wrong to look at one another,
> When one is black and one is fair.
> ...
> And he **moaned** and **trembled** from foot to head,
> He **shivered** from head to foot;
> Till, *after a time*, **he lay** instead
> **Too suddenly still and mute**.
> **I felt beside, a stiffening cold**
> **I dared to lift up just a fold**, ..
> As in lifting a leaf of the mango-fruit.
>
> (ll. 122-140, 148-154, emphasis added)

In its own way, the above fragment suggests curiosity about the act of murder, as well as seriality in perhaps witnessing similar deeds ('as well might be', l. 124). And yet it prompts reflections about deprivation and denial, rather than unassailable victory or true self-content. While the duration of this act is dubitable ('after a time', l. 150), the relativism about permitted and efficient – sparing an innocent from further suffering, or depriving an innocent from a chance of enjoyment of life – pales before the terror of a growing awareness that the speaker is seized with. The mother obeys the bewitching voice of the dead child coming from its sylvan grave: The song reduplicates her own maiden song iterative of her lover's name ('It was only a name – a name.', l. 84), which remains unknown till the end but comes to question her own certitude of judgement and justice (ll. 183-196). The infant's death is the mother's death, despite the feigned advantage surfacing in the pardon the black slave grants her violators finally.

'In the death-dark where we may kiss and agree'

By the time "*The Runaway Slave*" was republished (in the Chapman & Hall 1856 two-volume edition) Elizabeth Barrett Browning had produced a number of other poems of ontological and autobiographical merit on suffering, infant mortality, and duty to the Other. Her growing belief was that imposed misery deprived the perpetrator of that vital exteriority which guaranteed the authenticity of the Self.

Joshua King's percipient placement of the poet amidst radically-minded upper-class Congregationalist mid-century women has disclosed the poem's 'ecumenical vision, commitment to integrity, call for immediate action', as well as the Pilgrim Fathers' 'failure in America', which could be seen to render infanticide 'a parody of Christ's sacrifice' (King, 2017, pp. 3, 8, 21). Some earlier biographical scholarship has been more modest in praising the poet for such a 'horrifying story': Albeit aimed at 'redress[ing] a great social wrong', the poem seemed 'too blunt and shocking to have any enduring artistic worth' (Taplin, 1957, pp. 113, 194). Dorothy Mermin has noted the black woman's radical provocation to her white pursuers to look at her, 'displaying herself … [as] their victim and a murderer whose unsated rage mirrors their own murderousness' (Mermin, 1989, pp. 156-158). Angela Leighton has argued that the enslaved woman's terrible deed could be read as an instance of 'break[ing] with two sacred myths of English Victorian society: The myths of motherhood and fatherhood', the man's name, nonetheless, having a

procreative significance in inspiring speech and in 'steady[ing] the woman's words' (Leighton, 1986, pp. 40, 43). The child in the poem is known to be male but has no name – neither has the woman's black lover (whose name she is known to be singing to herself), nor do any of her white masters, or any of the pilgrim fathers.

Now more intimately (in first-person narratives), now somewhat more remotely (in third-person narratives), Elizabeth Barrett Browning declared herself against solipsism. Other poems (some unpublished in her lifetime), in which face, voice, and identity were involved in the complexity of self-defining based on the hermeneutic relationship between mother and child, surviving and dead, and One and Other, might include: The juvenile Petrarchan sonnet *Sent to Mama*, also known as *'Twas dark – the tempest blew aloud* (1814) (Donaldson et al., 2010, vol. 5, p. 167), in which a poor mother, having lost her babes to the chill of winter and misery, drowned herself; *Isobel's Child* (1837) (Donaldson et al., 2010, vol. 1, pp. 267-288) – a mother's lament over the death of her sick child, whose suffering she had witnessed; *The Virgin Mary to the Child Jesus* (1838) – a mother's address to her self-sacrificial child who set a criterion of being she would hardly be able to meet; *A Child's Grave at Florence* (1849) (Donaldson et al., vol. 2, pp. 387-394) – a poetical response to the grief of another family over the death of their infant daughter; *Hiram Powers' Greek Slave* (1850) – a description of a nameless chained naked Greek woman, whose physical perfection and 'divine face' (l. 12) concealed her spiritual anguish and confounded the viewer's gaze (Donaldson et al., 2010, vol. 2, pp. 147-150).

Compared to the poems listed above, *The Runaway Slave* offers discrete opportunities for an intersection of ethics and aesthetics; the contrast in colour (related to conceptual oppositions to do with age, sex, and social status) presents food for thought and urges one perceive the relativism of self-sufficiency in the impulsively rendered female slave's story of her own life. The dichotomic unity between the two colours (white and black, and nuances of light and dark) underpins the poet's hermeneutic-phenomenological attitude to the matter of self-knowability, which provokes a peculiar perception of time and space. The slave's skin and the night share an impenetrability, impassability, and dingy ghostliness (ll. 5, 19, 28, 30, 35-36, 39, 57, 92, 106, 114, 169, 202, 218, 251), which is formulated through the self-defining laconic 'I am black!' (reiterated at least seven times, with variations of the grammatical person between 'I' and 'We').

Blackness butts into the light of day, the mobility of water, the shining stars, and alienating angelic whiteness (ll. 7, 11, 34-35, 48-49, 89-90, 115-116, 121, 162, 167, 169, 199, 250). This contrast does not bring together protectively, but rends asunder antagonistically. Yet none of these contrastive entities of presence could exist independently – each contains a portion of its alternative: The pilgrim-souls emerge from 'the land of the spirits pale as dew' (l. 11); God offers 'sunshine and … frost' (l. 49), sitting 'coldly … behind the sun' (l. 89) which conveys not warmth but deathly chill (l. 168); white men are not 'able to make Christs again' (l. 242). Though at some point the woman specifies that the events she is describing happened 'a month ago' (l. 168), the momentous part of the story is the act of murder, which makes of the whole an intensely yet conscientiously shared self-extinguishing protracted description of the pain and deprivation that the infant is put through (stanzas XVIII–XXII).

From the point of view of ethics, the depraved black woman is in a Levinasian situation of 'existing without existents', i.e. 'without a starting point', for each subject – the mother, as well as the babe – is 'a subject … [as] already a beginning'; the murder of the infant is an event which questions 'the eternal subject' (Levinas, 1987, p. 49) and grace that God is, and the subject that the survivor strives to be. The woman's suffering becomes the perceiver's suffering aggravated by the impossibility of detachment from her life-narrative which 'is an absence of all refuge' (Levinas, 1987, p. 69). When the woman strangles her babe, she is left with no Face to face, i.e. with no time to accomplish, for 'the condition of time lies in the relationship between humans' as history (Levinas, 1987, p. 79). From the point of view of structure, the woman's predicament is an illustration of the temporal act of understanding, which underlies also autobiography. Claiming authorship over the act of infanticide, she claims authorship over herself, and so emerges as 'the subject of her own understanding', which she insists upon yet wishes to 'escape' because of 'the coercion' that 'specularity' (i.e. cognizing and seeing, also being cognized and seen) presupposes as a focus on 'the proper name, on memory, on birth, eros, and death' (de Man 1979, pp. 922). The case is further complicated: Should one wish to perceive the wretched woman's story as a terse expression of her autobiographical impulse (her story is all we know about her), one would have to meet the namelessness of the protagonist, who is also the narrator – the murderous mother herself, but behind whose identity there stands that of the author. The child has no proper name – neither

does his mother: they mirror each other, constituting a common generic type, or class, of anonymity. To add a biting remark: Take *The Runaway Slave* away from Elizabeth Barrett Browning, and she would not be the Elizabeth Barrett Browning – a speaker of those needing a voice, face, and name of their own, and lingering between obedience and riot. Then, who is really the dedicatee of this bizarre tale of woe, which is at once a dramatic monologue, a ballad, and an ode? Who is being eulogized: The child, the mother, or the poet herself?

A strident nineteenth-century female voice, Elizabeth was threatened by no dearth of immediate critical attention. Some reviewers thought she had 'erred in her poem "The Runaway Slave", in so far as it [was] directed against [the] American Union' (BC 17, 2010, pp. 288-290, E510201A, reprint of an anonymous review of Elizabeth's 1850 *Poems*, published in *The Literary World*, 1 Feb 1851, pp. 85-86). Others admired the poet's 'trenchant denunciation of American slavery', her compassion for 'the wrongs of the captive negro-women' (BC 17, 2010, pp. 290-293, E510300B, reprint of an anonymous review of Elizabeth's 1850 *Poems*, published in *The Eclectic Review*, March 1851, pp. 295-303), her 'outburst of passionate remonstrance' (BC 23, 2016, pp. 269-273, E560700A., reprint of an anonymous review of Elizabeth's 1850 *Poems* and *Casa Guidi Windows*, published in *The New Monthly Magazine*, July 1856, pp. 369-378), and her receptivity and inability 'to become an unpersonal spectator of human woes' (BC 30, 2024, p. 367, E620300B., reprint of Edwin Paxton Hood's review of Elizabeth's 1862 *Poems* (EBB), 5th ed., Chapman & Hall, published in *The Eclectic Review*, March 1862, pp. 182-212).

'... to look at one another'

Although nowhere else in Elizabeth Barrett Browning's other poems on motherhood and infant death may the motif of infanticide as self-de-facement be certifiable to the extent that it is in *The Runaway Slave*, there could be strongly sensed an adult's disconcerting attention to the endangered integrity of body and soul, jeopardized infancy, defenselessness, and the mutual dependence between survivor and dead, which asks the scholar to revisit the range of responsibilities and power an adult has over the life of the young. In the aforementioned sonnet 'Sent to Mama on 1st May 1814' the infant babies 'shut ... poor little eyes' and 'die, contended in their mother's arms' (ll. 6–7), but the alarming description of the mother's grief aims at showcasing the loss of the health-

sustaining distance and ontic blessing that the Levinasian Other's look and Face contain. The mother is left to the solitude of her own vacant gaze and to a reality of absence and meaninglessness where gone is 'the refractory to all light', relationship with 'l'Autre' – she is alienated from life and bereft of the much needed and productive viable link with her own self through the life-sustaining exteriority that the Other (her babes) could give her: Their Death steals her own singularity (Levinas, 1987, pp. 74-75). With no infanticide committed, the survivor's guilt creates a sense of deprivation, of self-erasure. *The Runaway Slave* is a wider project: In it, the 'rape victim' participates in 'a reparative meaning and significance borrowed from a Christian framework' – she pardons the white pilgrims, leaving her oppressors curse-free 'in the name of her own child, who becomes a purposefully ambiguous type of the Christ child' (Miller, 2014, p. 643).

The ethical value of the infant's Face may take some time to detect in *Isobel's Child* (1837, Donaldson et al., 2010, vol. 1, pp. 267-288), but it is no less indicative of the mother's autobiographical impulse. The child enters a passionate conversation with his mother, proves impressively eloquent and mature, despite its young age, begging her to grant it permission to fly to Heaven. The 'innocent faces' of babies like her own might not at all be 'meant for [her]' (l. 240-241). The self-estranging effect the child's face has on the mother initially is a hidden lesson in divine wisdom: The child, and not the mother, is the philosopher (l. 269-288). The babe's plea 'Mother, mother, let me go / Toward the Face that looked so,' (ll. 444-445) is a craving for harmony, completion, and aesthetic perfection (Heaven beckons with 'a little harp', ll. 484-485). Another example of a mother's failure to comprehend the wisdom that her child emanates is *The Virgin Mary to the Child Jesus* (1838, Donaldson et al., 2010, vol. 1, pp. 477-487). Word and gaze are points of mutual identification of mother and child: 'So, seeing my corruption, can I see / The Incorruptible now born of me'; 'What is my word?'; 'Awful is this watching place, / Awful what I see from hence –… / A child, without the heart for play; / Ay, a Creator, …' (ll. 106-107, 127, 164-169). Elizabeth Barrett Browning's poems of motherhood are poems of mourning which, following Levinas' existential-phenomenological views, could be taken to interrogate the mother, urging her to 'ask [herself] whether [her] own being is justified' and whether she may not be usurping 'someone else's place' – the place of the one whose voice, even when dialogue is assumed, rather than really heard, is 'an order … to answer for the life of the other person' (Levinas, 1999, pp. 28, 103).

Denied a chance to survive – because of a physical malady, death, untimely (otherworldly) wisdom, poverty, or living in slavery – wretched infants find a safe haven in Elizbeth Barrett Browning's works. They belittle the adult even when no trauma or pain is caused by an older one to a younger one. From a broader cultural perspective, such a privileged status of the child may be a token of regret over brevity of life, a kind of memento-mori sign to the adult who is unconditionally responsible for the wellbeing of an infant. The death of an innocent young individual throws the mother's presence into relief, which could be seen to create, to agree with Philippe Ariès, a kind of 'iconography of childhood' whereby the child is assigned 'a man's personality' and 'a place of honor' in an ontology which gravitates toward 'a probable loss' (Ariès, 1962, pp. 32, 35, 39, 47). Fear for the life of the Other who might get hurt, or fear exhibiting the survivor's responsibility about the departed, leads the viewer to self-identification through self-denial. The impulse of narration is of this ilk in *A Child's Grave at Florence* (1849) (Donaldson et al., 2010, vol. 2, pp. 387-394). The death of infant Lily is documented in a portrait she would become 'in Old Correggio's fashion' (l. 130). It is the very painting that could reactivate the poet's grief at the tomb of such a bereft of a promise life (ll. 9-12). The eulogy conceals the peril of anonymization of two lives: As a re-visitable monument of sorrow, the work of art typifies and thus delimits the departed child and the mourner, conjoining them in the relational entity viewer–viewed. In *The Cry of the Children* (1843) (Donaldson et al., 2010, vol. 2, pp. 431-436), the working children's 'pale and sunken faces', looking at death, make the adult's gaze complicit in their misery (ll. 25-39, 159-160). In *A Song for the Ragged Schools* (composed 1854, published 1862) (Donaldson et al., 2010, vol. 5, pp. 30-35), the ragged children, 'hungry-eyed', huddled on doorsteps, wicked, peak-chinned infant London vagrants, with 'old foreheads,' interrogate adults (ll. 44-70, 120-128). In *Aurora Leigh*, adult Aurora's autobiographical impulse gets catalyzed by her finding Marian (sold, when a child, by her own mother to a beastly-eyed man) and Marian's own bastardized child: An encounter that blurs Aurora's perception about decorum and stirs her peace of mind. To this sobering effect contributes the power of the look (Marian's own, as well as the look one is allowed through Marian's room's window, whose 'curtainless' poverty steals away one's chances of privacy and guiltlessness, Donaldson et al., 2010, vol. 3, Book IV, ll. 99-101, 150; Book VI, ll. 226-240, 305-451, 552-571).

The concreteness, materiality, and the torturing plea for help which wretched young individuals (ostensibly just generalized and remotely mourned, some dead, others about to die) confront the poet with provide her also a face and an identity of her own – that of a survivor.

An Epistemological Impasse, or Some Final Queries

The first half of the nineteenth century in English poetry seems to have been haunted by self-conscious descriptions of guilty adults suffering the wretchedness of infants, loss of freedom, and an insurmountable sense of exile. Exploring manifestations of adult self-de-facement through afflictions caused to children requires a larger terrain, but perhaps a handful of synonymous daunting vignettes could prompt self-reflection. For instance, what is the true nature of the lonely, husbandless mother's babe whose 'wicked looks' demand response in Wordsworth's *Her Eyes Are Wild* (1798) (Wordsworth, 1994, pp. 144-145, ll. 47-48, 86-90)? Or, has Martha Ray, the mad mother in Wordsworth's *The Thorn* (1798), indeed hanged her babe, or drowned it, and what is the countenance of its assumed resting place, the thorn, telling her (pp. 197-200, ll. 199-220)? Is there no possibility of avoiding the deathly water cataract, against which an abandoned by her husband mother rows a boat and perishes – is there no other chance to rescue her female babe and spare it a 'woman's weary lot' in Felicia Hemans' *Indian Woman's Death-Song* (1826) (Hemans, 2000, pp. 377-379, ll. 36, 38-42)? One wonders whether in Epistle II of Lucy Aikin's poetical *Epistles on Women, Exemplifying Their Character and Condition in Various Ages and Nations* (1810), the Indian woman might have made a decision other than to murder her own babe to save it from 'toil, and pain, and strife' ('Die, little wretch; die once and be at peace!', Feldman, 2000, pp. 6-15, ll. 9-12, 29-35). This self-epitaphic narrative seeks to explain the roots of cruelty through 'want'. Charlotte Smith's pro-human *The Emigrants* (1793) (Curran, 1993, pp. 132-163) contextualizes the escape from France and fleeing to England of opponents to radicalism during the French Revolution. While it urges one to recognize the lawless displacement of man in general, in *Book II* one stumbles over a solitary 'wretched mother' who hides in a thicket but fails to protect her babe from the cannon, whereupon they both die (ll. 239-291). The demise of mother and child torments the lyrical speaker – it is a Levinasian imagined infliction of harm on the Face, which the survivor (preserving in her first-person narrative the emigrants' own woeful recollections) proves unable to prevent.

The confusing status of woman as mother in *The Runaway Slave* (and in other poems which identify guilt and loss as innermost ingredients in an adult's self-perception) could only partially be resolved through the 'idealized realm of unity in death' that 'suffering under slavery' may be granted (Brophy, 1998, pp. 275-276, 281). A Romantic, Promethean, 'extreme challenge to the reigning ethos of [the poet's] day as well as the racist social and political power structures that promulgated it' (Harrison, 2020, p. 62), infanticide remains a Gordian knot against Elizabeth's humanist orientation. The murderous mother wishes to confront her own life as a slave, but killing her own half-white child (promised excommunication and possibly starvation anyway), she deprives herself of a chance to de-anonymize, through the next generation, her own potential. Mother and child are – prior to the murder, at the time of the murder, and after it – an entity. The murder is born out of an enslaved woman's fierce desire to be granted a chance for self-liberation by way of redefining warped values and moral scales. Her horrible deed promotes the victim to a higher (than her own) rank of ethical worth, leaving the survivor terrified at the infant sufferer's wordless (though not without resistance) departure from the world of the living. The runaway slave embraces yet rebuffs her own babe. Foreign to his divine whiteness (ll. 117-119, 177-181), she indicates the ominous potency of facial contact: It solidifies yet undermines her identity in her struggle to avoid being seen. The death of the child, whose face the mother has unsuccessfully attempted to forget, is her own death: When not seen by him, she merely hangs 'as a gourd hangs in the sun' (l. 226) – full of sense yet no one to give it to. The child is referred to as 'my little body' (l. 176), which could also be a reference to the mother's own body – diminished through suffering itself, and, prosopopoeically, granting the murdered infant a materiality and substantiality of his own.

In a number of other poems, the accusatory, abject, inconveniencing look of children works as an overwhelming call for response and a source of knowledge-building through inspiring a sense of obligation which limns the adult's idea of time and space in terms of surviving an innocent young Other[3]. Haunting images of departed and re-

[3] An adult's self-identification through a suffering young individual to the effect of a prosopopoeic mobilization of the imagined for the actual, the unheard for the audible, the dead for the living, the victim for the perpetrator, the helpless for the empowered, invites a generous range of works by Elizabeth between her Juvenilia and her mature poems, amongst which, for instance, her cautionary prose-fiction tales in the period 1814 – 1818 (*Sebastian or the Lost Child; The Way to Humble Pride; Disobedience; Julia or Virtue. A Novel; Charles de Grandville*), *A Fragment of an Essay on Woman* (1822), *A Child Asleep* (1839),

imagined young ones displace the facticity of adult viewers, stealing away the chance for them to acquire faces of their own. And yet a mother's loss could be related to a 'desire for individuation' in a world where 'women cannot protect their children, and maternity does not protect women' (Montwieler, 2019, pp. 79, 84).

The investigation of infanticide as self-de-facement in Elizabeth Barrett Browning's *The Runaway Slave at Pilgrim's Point* could be extended further so as to expose children's suffering, social polarity, and the omen of the anonymization of woman through coerced motherhood over a wide spectrum of reflective poetical works. A ragged selection of lines by poets willing to provide a voice, face, and place to unfortunate young ones seeking an identity of their own and (indirectly) of their wretched parents' own, could emboss the theme in hand. Enter Thomas Hood's 'noisy children', disturbing one's peaceful reading time in a 'world too full', but short of undertakers, a world made too tight by 'the large small family of charity, / Brown, black, or carrotty, / Walk[ing] in their dusty parish shoes, / In too, too many two-and-twos' (*Ode to Mr. Malthus* (1832), Clubbe, 1970, pp. 274-279, ll. 3, 15-21, 30, 91-94). There sounds Anna Laetitia Barbauld's second-person address to Agatha, which displays the allegorical 'Baby-house to lodge the dead' – a tiny sumptuous distilled image of Versailles, contrasting the 'sordid hands' of peasants and their toyless children (*The Baby-House,* (1811), ll. 1-10, 19-30, 37-40, 46-50, Feldman, 2000, pp. 82-83). There emerge William Blake's martyred urchins from *Songs of Innocence* (1789): Some born 'in the southern wild', 'black, but O! [their] … soul is white' (*The Little Black Boy*, ll. 1-2, 23, Blake, 1970, p. 10), others turning a deathly white colour, leaving their bags behind and soaring up to Heaven (*The Chimney Sweeper*, ll. 1-2, 12, 17-20, Blake, 1970, pp. 11-12).

The misery, defenselessness, and nobodiness of the pauper child reduce the adult to speechlessness which de-faces poet and reader alike.

The Princess Marie (1842), '*O Pardon Dear Lady*' (1842), '*Rock Me Softly – Softly Mother*' (1842), *The Mourning Mother* (1844), *A Child's Thought of God* (1844 – 1846), a partial translation of the Latin hymn *Stabat Mater* (1852), and *Only a Curl* (1861). Overall, de-faced infancy proved a pivot in the evolution of the poet's faith in the supremacy of the Other, which could be approached through what Emmanuel Levinas named 'the asymmetry of the I – You relation': 'The ethical disturbance' the Other produced in the Self, the Self being 'never discharged', but held 'hostage', 'obligated without guilt' 'to the encounter with the other … presupposed in all language' (Levinas, 1999, pp. 97, 101, 105-106).

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