

FLUSH'S TIME IN ELIZABETH BARRETT'S LOVE LETTERS TO ROBERT BROWNING

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This paper follows the relationship between dog and man in Elizabeth Barrett's love letters (Jan 1845 – Sept 1846) to her future husband, the Victorian poet Robert Browning. Elizabeth's attachment to her pet, Flush, encouraged her to explore voice, sight, and motion as tools for identifying the interaction between diverse levels of life as underpinning authorial intentionality. Co-operating and competing, the human being and the non-human being became participants in a narrative whole founded on the sense of time that the presence of the Other ignited by way of questioning – in dialogue – the autonomy of subject and object.

Key words: Elizabeth Barrett, Flush, Other, dialogue, time, boundary

For my daughter's two dogs – Richelieu and Dvořák –
best family friends, best listeners, best whisperers

*As with every bottomless gaze, as with the eyes of
the other, the gaze called “animal” offers to my
sight the abyssal limit of the human: ... the
bordercrossing from which vantage man dares to
announce himself to himself...*

(Derrida 2008: 12)

Flushing each other out, or to begin with

To “flush out” could mean to force something, or someone out, into the open, to become visible so as to be grasped, to urge one to reveal themselves, out of refuge. As for a possible usage of this phrasal verb in the literal context of hunting, Flush, Elizabeth Barrett Browning's companion, never substantiated such a definition. In terms of his inhabiting a common

ground, where hunting for an identity of one's own means dialogizing with an Other, Flush proved invaluable.¹

Boundary as contact from the angle of philosophical anthropology has barely been explored in regard to Flush. Scholars have focused on the shared between the woman and the dog "repressed bohemianism", on Elizabeth's sense of guilt over her superiority as a human being and her devastation at Flush's death in 1854 (Taplin 1957: 60, 68, 176, 282), on imprisonment and liberty as a middle ground between the woman and the dog, the woman fearing harming the beloved other (e.g. "whatever she touched turned to evil," Kenmare 1957: 182 – 185). Noted has been the erecting of boundaries in terms of seclusion, obstinacy of mind, peevishness and hostility to "unpetticoated" strangers (Hewlett 1953: 106, 165, 195, 277). A shared "narrow and theoretical understanding of ... real people ... based on pure moral imperatives and social codes" has been revealed (Karlin 1987: 147, 149, 151 – 152, 247). Research exists on encoding the concepts of arrival and departure that Flush facilitated in creating an ontic boundary (especially when stolen) in the epistolary communication between Elizabeth and Robert (Cf. Markus 1995: 32, 62 – 63, 69, 86). The mutually transformative relationship between Flush and Elizabeth in a beyond-self incarnational perception and control over time and space, in a shared "overinvolve[ment]" with the unknown has emerged (Sampson 2021: 120 – 122).

Both the dog and the woman could be said to have somehow flushed each other out of an opaque, oblique, familiar nursery into a more hazardously reflexive environment of polymorphous mutual identification through a second to both of them meaningful other (Robert). Between January 1845 and September 1846 (the courtship correspondence), the poet's internal clock acquired a prominently cross-species face, voice, and language of its own that had neither been so clearly seen before, nor would remain the same after Elizabeth's flight to Florence.

... there is nothing to be done but to be ready to receive him at the earliest moment, & to love him at all moments, for your sake, until we reach the 'inherent merit,' the loveability for his own. ... it is a matter of assurance that there is no room for fear, if you send him directly

¹ This article focuses on Flush as regards the ontological range of the notion of frontier in the courtship correspondence. Other aspects of Flush's presence (beyond the scope of the current paper, but part of a larger research project) include: street-walking and canine talking in Elizabeth's London days; theft, loss, and canine mourning; paternal instruction vs. canine whispers in writing as self-confrontation; English homeland vs. Italian dreamland – a self's cross-species cultural transposal.

hither ... by the railroad to Basingstoke, with a direction on the card .. ‘to be forwarded by the first Exeter coach’—& the coachman both there & at Exeter will be commissioned to feed him & see to his comfort generally. There is no danger ... if he is packed carefully in a **hamper**.

But then comes my dread – **Is it not a robbery? – or rather shall you not miss him?**— ...

If Flush ... comes, he is sure to be loved. The logic is so strong!—**There is no escape from the conclusion of love.**

So wrote from Torquay Elizabeth Barrett in mid-December 1840 in a letter to thank her friend, the writer Mary Russell Mitford, for her offer to provide a floppy-eared, big-eyed, furry companion who would console the poet in time of irremediable guilt and grief over the loss of her brother, Bro, who had perished in a boating accident in July of the same year (BC, 4: 1986, 305 – 306, #779, mid-Dec 1840, emphasis added). And then, a couple of weeks on, the sense of dread: that she would be taking such a little darling to “the London Streets prison, for ever & ever” (ibid., 310 – 311, # 783, 28 Dec 1840), that her “obstinacy” and “perversity” of character could prevent her from reciprocating to the dog’s genuineness of mind and soul: “the dog is too good, too caninely noble, for some of my base purposes. But I shall make it up to him, at least something of it, in love & care. *I must love him, coming from you – pretty or not – ears or not! The love is a certainty whatever the beauty may be* – and if I am to see in his eyes, as you say, your affectionate feelings towards me, why the beauty must be a certainty too. ... I open my arms to your Flush – and shall give notice to the coachmen, that he may suffer no cruelty on his Wednesday & Thursday’s journeys.” (BC 5, 1987: 3 – 4, # 787, 2 Jan 1841).

Temporalization, or traces

“Measures of time”, Paul Ricoeur says, “show no care for us. This does not prevent some of our clocks, however, from having written on their faces a mournful *memento mori*” (Ricoeur 1990: 123). Do hampers have the faces of clocks? Certainly not. Unless we consider the trace that the hamper, in which Flush once arrived to Elizabeth, a “sign-effect” of the kind Ricoeur implies as he speaks of remnants of time against the fleetingness of human life: he calls these “traces” and deems them “homogeneous with calendar time” (ibid. 120). An axial moment of such a measuring scale could be Flush’s arrival in a hamper – a punctum also of counting the human, a time-space (so to speak) of enclosure, a “junction... [of] the overlapping of the

existential and the empirical” (ibid. 125). Nearly five and a half years after Flush’s first landing on her lap, Elizabeth complains to Robert:

... I *must see & will see you to-morrow* – I cannot do otherwise. It is just as if Flush had been shut up in a box for so many days. My spirits flag ... So come, dearest dearest – & let the work bark at our heels if it pleases. I will just turn round & set Flush at it. For two or three days I have not been out – not for two days ... not out of this room. (Kintner, ed. 1969, vol. 2: 857, letter # 447, 7 July, 1846, emphasis in original).

Apart from the visible trauma inflicted on the woman’s psyche by the unflagging patriarchal rule over the home domain at 50 Wimpole Street London, this illuminating confession points at the significance of time as shared time. No hamper is mentioned in this letter yet the writer admits she feels jailed, stifled by the care, impersonal decorousness and alienating upper-middle-class silence her family treats her with. She possibly feels hampered by a sense of guilt in disallowing Flush the right of free space his species would naturally require – she dramatizes this inconveniencing thought in a self-reflexive way, projecting her own hermetic life onto the life of her companion. “It is just as if” amends her human being’s reasonableness of judgement, which resorts to a metaphoric exchange: a man’s place for a dog’s.² Immured, seeing herself as a dog imprisoned in a box (a reminder of Flush’s arrival), Elizabeth declares her need to identify lack, or loss, as a character-formative feature of writing. The no-longer available, as well as the wished-for, both imply time and space, but they also indicate the relativity of the relationship between perceiver and perceived. The box is an artificial, human-made, alienating environment that also serves to isolate a sensitive and prone to self-interrogation mind. Interiority gets externalized thus – exteriority gets assimilated reciprocally. Such a minimal sample of self-historicization confirms the role of the dog as an aid in the author’s approaching her own self. The inevitable glancing back at, or remembering, a previous moment actualizes the past and defines it empirically “in terms of the Other” (Ricoeur 1990: 147): “the character of pastness is abolished by

² On physical enclosure and internal imprisonment, on places of heterotopian othering, subalternity, thinghood, and cross-species identity transformation, see Susan Hamilton’s research on dog’s “lethal chambers” and the photographic institutionalization of the extermination of vagrant dogs in Victorian England (Hamilton 2017: 83, 89-91, 93, 95, 97-98). On the empathic element of animalistic pedagogical representationalism, cross-species identity-formation, hierarchical limits and the need to help “any proper object of charity”, see Sarah Trimmer’s *Fabulous Histories* (1786) (Trimmer 1815: 3, 6, 12, 16, 18, 20).

the atemporal act of rethinking [an] event in its internal thought” (ibid. 146), which helps overcome the difficulty of obtaining “knowledge of [an] [O]ther and knowledge of the past” (ibid. 148).

Some ears and a nose: a sniffable-visible strip of time-space

Why does Elizabeth write to Robert so: “But think of his sense! – Flush beats us both ... Next to Flush we may be something, but Flush takes the *pas*, as when he runs down stairs (Kintner, ed. 1969, vol. 2: 633, letter # 319, 447, 17 April, 1846, emphasis in original)? One of many instances of a combined sense of boundary, motion, distance, and other-awareness as qualitative characteristics of defining the self in comparison, in relation, and in lieu of another. An earlier liminal moment: “I did not go down stairs ... only opened the window & let in the air. I have not been quite well ... as far as just sensation goes, ... as usual, ... a passing common headache, ... you may think of me as in the drawing room...” (ibid., 629, letter # 317, 16 April, 1846). Flush’s decision-making agility and magnetic power in ruling open as well as closed spaces is juxtaposed to Elizabeth’s sickliness, wretched invalidism.

A self’s interiority is as much the self’s own, as an other’s, it is a kind of possession. Reciprocally, the self’s internal, natural sense of exteriority predates and could enhance (rather than hinder) one’s own self-spacing and self-timing, helping one understand the fluid frontier between the mind and the body. In *Levels of Organic Life and the Human* (1928), Helmuth Plessner argues against “the restriction of the existence of the *cogitans* to the scope of our own I” (Plessner 2019: 36). The human being has long been deemed toiling under the misfortune of the inconvertible duality “internal experience – external experience” and the scientific belief that qualitative would have to be perceived but as subjective (ibid. 37). A view on the need to cure ourselves of the disease of identifying “physical existence with measurability, which has made us blind to those properties of physical nature that cannot be measured” (ibid., 38), which could be substantiated in an account of a day’s sunshine shared between Elizabeth and Flush (Kintner, ed., 1969, vol. 1: 254 –255, 31 October, 1845). Writing to Robert, Elizabeth traces time, recalling a conversation between herself and Mary Russell Mitford:

I was forced to answer every ten minutes at least – & **Flush**, my usual companion, **does not exact so much** – & so **I am tired & come to rest myself on this paper** – **Your name was not once spoken today**; ... I was afraid of questions ..., with a pair of **woman’s eyes behind** them; those are worse than Mr. Kenyon’s, when he puts on his **spectacles**. ... O my angel

at the **gate** of the **prison!** ... I ... sate here alone but yesterday, so weary of my own being that to take interest in **my very poems** I had to lift them up by an effort & **separate them from myself & cast them out from me into the sunshine where I was not** – feeling nothing of the light which fell on them even – making indeed a sort of factitious personality associated with them ... but knowing it to be all far **on the outside of me .. myself ... not seeming to touch it with the end of my finger** ... & receiving it as a mockery & a bitterness when people persisted in confounding one with another. ... because I am a woman & have written verses, it seems so amusing to the letter-writers of your sex to write & see ‘what will come out of it,’ ... how could it all make for me even **such a narrow strip of sunshine as Flush finds on the floor sometimes, & lays his nose along, with both ears out in the shadow? It was not for me ... – it was not within my reach** – I did not seem to touch it Flush came nearer, & I was grateful to him ... for not being tired ... when he has chosen rather to stay with me all day than go down stairs. ... **I was a burthen.** ... (Letter # 143, original emphasis in italics; added emphasis in bold type)

Though unevenly distributed in the above fragment, Flush's role is incremental in that he indicates what Elizabeth has not yet and what she feels she is. Signing excessive devotion, this episode is also a manifestation of a desire to at once stipulate and postpone a boundary of perception, a limit of appearing, being, and self-declaration that becomes indispensable between two participants in a shared habitat – the home of Flush and Ba (as she was called by her brother, Edward, and by Robert). What it also tells us is that ostensibly physically inconspicuous properties of a presence may be naturally extended to the roots of a being's intuitive self-grasp. Consider, for instance, a configuration of time-space composed of the length of a dog's ears (in the shadow) and the agility of his nose (in the sunshine), compared to the size, length, position, and capacities of a human being's ears and nose. The writer is not far from an Aristotelian perception of the soul as the form the body, which could impart to the nose-ears image the value of an entelechy, where the inner and the outer merge in the recognizable calmness, sincerity and trustfulness of this canine companion who, defenseless, nudes his allegiance and love for his human friend. Rather than being “unmixed with corporeality”, the dog's soul becomes prominent in “metaphysical-ontological terms”, “as the form of the organic body, ... a natural being”, as Ernst Cassirer generalizes on the matter of the link between subject and object in the culture of the Renaissance and beyond (Cassirer 2000: 123, 126). Barrett's confession about her poems being her “outsideness” signals the human being's struggle to achieve concinnity between internal and

external, time and space. Such self-observational writing cannot be but based on the “substantive opposition” which both endorses the ultimate reality of the mind and denies its autotelic absoluteness (ibid. 128, 141). The investigation of the problem of the boundary between bodies, between the mind and its corporeal outer expression, between permanence and change, could help one understand also Elizabeth Barrett’s faith in what Cassirer explains as man’s sense of “identity only in relation to ‘otherness’”, in the correlativity in and between thought and matter, in *placedness* (rather than *spacedness*) as “the work of the mind” (179 – 180).

No man could be in the way described above – at such two places at the same time thus – via such a protraction of one’s own body (the floppy ears and the extra-large and keen nose) in this particular way. Though never the same in perceiving time and space, the human and the non-human partake of a grand cosmic design (the natural revolving of day and night, sun and shadow, visible and invisible), which compresses into a common capsule the sense of frontier that each creature’s faculties (aural and olfactory, in this case) allow and require as identifiers of their particular owner. Flush would be Ba’s external interiority which would guarantee her at once being and appearing to herself and to others – a body “given for an interiority and ... grasped by it:” neither pure relation (or extension to another), nor absolute self-sufficiency (Plessner 2019: 40). Imprisonment, self-escapist recognition of one’s talent (the poems cast out of herself and into the sunshine), grief over inefficiency (“a burthen”), the danger of physical items magnifying the dread of another intruding into her own soul (spectacles concealing a man’s inquisitive gaze), the voyeuristic essence of the external world, the enviable but vital markers of bodiedness that her dog’s ears and nose could offer – all these may be seen in the light of “the essential connection between the subjectivization of the qualitative side of the physical and the forward displacement of the self: ... that which appears becomes equivalent to the content of consciousness and in a certain sense must be identical to it” (ibid., 40-41, 45)³. The ultimate boundary of this peculiar bodied ideational presence is Flush – a vital mobile petiteness of space.

³ “... because it is *given beforehand*, interiority gazes at itself, veils the body’s naked existence, renders the body in the *image* of its appearance” (Plessner 2019: 43, emphasis in original). Philosophical anthropology suggests ways to explore Flush in relation to the ineluctability yet hazards of mistrusting idealism, corporeality, pregivenness (someone/something “in” and “to” someone/something else) and unconditional consequentiality in accepting interiority as contrasted to exteriority. On traces of Flush as a “stand-in” for “objects of lost or distant affections” in Elizabeth oscillating “between two culturally sanctioned subject positions: male and female”, see Kevin

Εἶδωλον

That she should perceive boundary as an indispensable element of self-defining can be derived from Elizabeth's dread of being anathemized in the Communion Service (for her descent as an heir of slave-owners; see Kintner, ed. 1969, vol. 1, 333, letter #180, 20 December, 1845), and her persistent anxieties about being followed yet being expectant of hearing "the footsteps of [her] letter" (i.e. Robert's response) in the world of "I & Flush" (Kintner, ed. 1969, vol. 2, 609-610, letter # 308, 9 April 1846). Scorned for her dim, quaint, uneven rhymes and thoughts in her poetical endeavours between 1833 and 1844, she moderates her fear of perceiving one's own true self in a remark on the relational worth of distance and on self-loss:

... critics ... bark the loudest, ... at their own shadow in the glass, as my Flush used to do long & loud, before he gained experience & learnt the *γνώσι σεαντόν* in the apparition of the brown dog with the glittering dilating eyes, .. & as I did, under the erasure. And another moral springs up of itself in this productive ground; for, you see, .. 'quand je m'efface il n'y a pas grand mal' (Kintner, ed. 1969, vol. 1, 145, Letter # 73, 8 August 1845)

Providing a translation for both expressions (in Old Greek and in French, *ibid.* 146), Kintner specifies Elizabeth's insatiable itch to know herself, as well as her feeling of living in the background, in a margin, where she gets spent and could pass unnoticed by others. Distance and transgression allow the critics, like Flush, to meet their own imperfections.

If no actual physical boundary existed, it would be invented for the sake of satisfying one's internal need to become visible, i.e. comprehensible.

Morrison's research on "incoherent beasts" in Victorian culture (Morrison 2011: 94 – 95, 99, 102 – 103). On loss, "immoderacy of intersubjective affection", "artifice" and "rampant anthropomorphism" issuing from Elizabeth's devotion to writing on Flush as a way of self-display and "stabilization" of her own mind, on non-human hagiographies prototyping man in Victorian literature, see Margini (Margini 2018: 56 – 58, 60, 69, 74 – 76). On "canine interiority", "race memory" and an "empathic" perception of the non-human animal in rearing an "intersubjective becoming" of the self, see Karalyn Kendall-Morwick (Kendall-Morwick 2021: 56, 58, 61, 66, 85, 88 – 89). Slightly more explored in terms of the ontological value of the notion of frontier in the communication between human and non-human presences (especially in regard to names, eyes, ears, and colour) seem to be Elizabeth's poetical works: 'The Pet-Name' (1838), 'To Flush, My Dog' (1843), Sonnet XXXIII (*Sonnets from the Portuguese* [1850]), 'Flush or Faunus' (1844), and 'The Runaway Slave at Pilgrim's Point' (1847). In these, various forms of prosopopoeic contact-substitution between the woman and a non-human being reveal interiority as a non-solipsistic, cross-species, intersubjective event.

The analogy is based on a transposition via sculpting an image of what is definitely unlike, or impossible to accomplish – the relationship of absolute coincidence between a human and a non-human being. An impossibility of alternating loss and gain, being perceived and perceiving, palpable in being an exteriority to another and impalpable in being one's own interiority:

An immediate *grasp of the I* is possible and actual only in mediated form, just as the one-and-the-sameness of *being an I* is so only by virtue of being split. Only where this condition is upheld does an I persist in a genuine self-position. ... only the *cogitatio*, the living act, the I as self, not as being, can function as an opposing sphere to the *res extensa*, ... [it] ... in fact includes the opposing position of the I as *res cogitans*, as being, as object. ... As lived unity of first and third person the I constitutes itself as I; it is *res cogitans* and *cogitatio* in one. The profound teaching of the gospel that only whosoever loses himself shall find himself applies to the I in a descriptive sense. (Plessner 2019: 44)

The dualism of subjecthood – being able to be regarded and to regard – prompts the protean essence of time-space: existent and non-existent, surveyable/quantifiable and non-surveyable/non-quantifiable, either way one starts the inquiry. The Gordian knot is the conjecturable virtue of the human being's capacity to know what happens in a dog's mind, yet the unavoidable comparison which brings together (to the degree that it rends asunder) the two interlocutors, Ba and Flush, in this superficially monologic time in the epistolary narrative of a literary bride-to-be. Human language and conventional education prove but feeble props for identity building which requires a wider expanse – one beyond the human species, human perception of time and space, and the human semiotics of the written discourse as a trace. Sedentary and ambulatory elements in self-defining furnish Elizabeth's messages to her beloved but Flush is the crux of her sense of limit. On 24 March, 1846 (Kintner, ed. 1962, vol. 1: 556, letter # 281), again "meeting [Robert] in letters", but also herself and Flush, thinking of gondola river journeys, citing her own previous correspondence, she says that she is an "image": "The *εἰδωλον* sits by the fire – the real Ba is cold at heart through wanting her letter," and she gets regarded by Flush's "reproachful eyes". Self-contemplation based on the disapproving look of the other – the non-human animal – engenders in the writer a feeling of inconvenience, of a nudity that Derrida would explain through the "insistent gaze of the animal, a benevolent or pitiless gaze" in time of "*animalséance*" (Derrida 2008: 4). Which "rob[s] [the self] ... of the certainty that what we

have ... is an existence that refuses to be conceptualized" – naming ('Ba', or 'εἰδωλον') proves an infirmity, for the "name survives" both the identifier and the identified, "sign[ing] ... disappearance" (ibid. 9).

A strange form of "sovereignty and ... loneliness" as oneness, for both Flush and Ba – a kind of entity awaited by, and awaiting, death, promised by the very name each bears as a value to the other (ibid. 17, 20). The limit of time, space, and the self that the animal poses before one (even in such mundane descriptions of the shared warmth of the fire) is an enigma. Namely, to what extent the cognizant mind of the human being, who speaks and writes, has the right to judge about the feelings, suffering, memories and expectations of a non-verbal other. Man's experience could only be "transgressal if not transgressive", which Derrida calls "*limitrophy*": the self as/in the gaze of the animal other (ibid. 29). Following her companion, Flushie, Ba follows herself: a bidirectional movement (or comprehension), a kind of self-following by way of other-following, an existence that could be called "*animot*", whereby the trace followed (scent, smell, the memory of a facial expression in one's mind) is also the trace left, for a trace exist but between two, in view of the notion of an end, or (ir)reversible disappearance; the trace is a trace of and for the present as well as the absent in the (auto)biographical act of grasping and being grasped (ibid. 55-56, 63). Flush, like his mistress, would look at its own "image", "gnashing his teeth"; he "has learnt by experience what an image means, ... and now contemplates it, serene in natural philosophy. Most excellent sense, all this is! – & dauntlessly 'delivered'!" (Kintner, ed. 1969: 556-557). Elizabeth walks unstably about the house, hoping that she is "not [her] own ghost" – "my history of to-day for you [i.e. Robert]!" (ibid., vol. 2, 584-587, letter 297, 3 April, 1846). A fine, albeit mundane, instance of the external scope and origin of a writer's, as well as a character's, interior time-space as self-perception. The minimalistic model of narrative as a living need to make sense of time as communication (leaving traces behind and arising out of traces) between two individuals, adhered to hereby by Elizabeth in her love letters to Robert and erected on the notion of frontier that Flush could be said to have provided, is seriously indebted to a striving for equality. The dog becomes the master of a unique tongue of his own between two human lovers, Elizabeth utilizing imagery which suggests a dichotomous framework for self-perception which I would propose to be called bicephalous, or bicardiac – always involving consideration of two heads (holding two minds), two hearts (two souls), two identities (articulated in an independent language, but with possibilities of exchange and mutual understanding), strung in one. Elizabeth confesses she wished to have "two

hearts to love [Robert] with, & two lives to give [him]” (Kintner, ed. 1969, vol. 2, 1000 – 1003, letter 522, 25 August, 1845).

Flush – invention and reality, a Derridean outermost-innermost boundary of Elizabeth’s self-defining, and a noetic premise of her own identity. Writing to Robert and finding it impossible to not think and speak of Flush, Elizabeth appears to have been reinventing an Aristotelian query about the essence of the soul – her own and that of another being. That is, the immediacy of quantifying yet qualifying a creature’s internal world which could not be released from corporeality, sustained by an invisible indigenous entelechy (Cf. Aristotle 2016: 2-6). In this sense, also of interest to Elizabeth seems to have been the registration of a living being’s externally visible internal states, as well as the reincarnationist conviction in the possibility of the transfer of the soul between two different beings sharing the same place, fate, and surrounding social world (ibid. 9-10). On the other hand, her “distress” over losing her canine friend forever to the London dog-stealers (letters # 535-545) does urge one to perceive her love letters to Robert as a hermeneutic reflection on the destructive interdependence between part and whole, soul and body, dog and man.⁴ Elizabeth’s most intimate spells of time seem to have been also Flush’s most intimate spells of time – and vice versa: both in terms of the existence of insurmountable boundaries, and of possibilities for (cross-species) conversion. Which allows for interpreting the love letters through what is known in behavioral science as the MSR test, or the mirror self-recognition test. The eyes and the voice of a living creature are two most immediate informers of emotions and of physical processes occurring in the body (one of the most self-betraying of which is pain), so it appears logical that the writer should choose those for exploring intentionality, personhood, and metacognition. The Other – a dog named Flush – might not be able to respond in a conventional way, using human language as a contractual sign system, which erects a barrier to the human

⁴ “... why is it that the soul is destroyed at the same time as the being of flesh and of the other parts of an animal?” (Aristotle 2016: 14). Elizabeth Barrett could be observed contending that life at once “reaches” and “proceeds from” the soul which is “moved” by external stimuli validated ideationally by the soul’s reciprocating (ibid. 14-15). Naïve as such a logic of research may appear, it might be curious to spot the high level of spiritual interpenetration (or ensoulment from without) between the author and the hero in this epistolary literary narrative where perception and recollection may not be unproblematically divided in one’s comprehending one’s own identity as sameness and aloneness in time and space (ibid. 14, 19-20). Perception and recollection both lead away from, and to, what is exterior, as well as interior, to the human being. Letters # 535, 537, and 542 (1 – 4 September, 1846) are a particularly telling proof: they deal with the time of Flush being stolen, feared for, and Ba’s expectation of him being restored.

being's ability to interpret the Other's mental processes and declare categorically states of happiness or discomfort. Such states must be assumed but they could only be attested empathically, which is true even of two creatures of the same species sharing the same means of communication: One could not fully coincide with another. Which would mean that the knowledge one develops of another is inevitably founded primarily on empathy. Mark Rowlands' proficient research on animal identity has demonstrated vividly the need to acknowledge the similitude of the empathic element in understanding an animal close to the human being, such as a dog, and a "pre-linguistic child" (Rowlands 2002: 3 – 4, 9, 14). One's grasp of an other's volume of physical response to, as well as mental investment in, an incident, or a stimulus, always remains tentative and incomplete. Because of such a conjectural level of awareness of a non-human other's interiority and conceptualization of the world (ibid. 21), the human being could never reach a satisfactory degree of self-certainty, since the feeling of such an ultimately unknown other being creates but an unreliable, though very necessary, mirror for the human being's own reception of a self-referential image. Looking at this mirror, man never goes beyond himself, yet without it there would be no man. Elizabeth's contemplation of Flush's oftentimes magnified eyes, his agile ears (capturing, metaphorically, sun and shadow), and his alarming voice (growling at strangers), is her attempt to make sense of time as a time of sharing, which requires reinventing oneself through accepting a non-verbal creature's autonomy, decision-making, intentionality, and image-building, "the way they believe things, the concepts in terms of which they represent the things they think about" (ibid. 22).

One of the trickiest points of comprehension seems to be the uncertainty about possible parallels between human language and dog language in terms of the "combinatorial" and "recursive" structure of the arrangement of thought in relation to an individual's sense of time as "personhood" (different from the biological category of the human being), i.e. recognizing oneself (as the "same thinking thing") "in different times and places", one's metacognitive skills (i.e. thinking "about oneself and one's mental states and processes"), and non-objectifying "pre-intentional self- and other-awareness" (Rowlands 2019: 4, 15, 113, 167). To Elizabeth, time, intruded into by boring visitors, would be a spiral of combination, return and anticipation: "I will write ... I have written ... I am writing" (Kintner, ed. 1969, vol. 1, 495). Flush in time, and time to Flush – inevitably from Elizabeth's own position via human language – would probably look somewhat different. She believes time to him seems ignorable and regrettable when he hears "nonsense", or when the fringes of his ears are disturbed by an impertinent guest (ibid. 497, 501). To his human mistress Flush

appears wise and generous, as she wishes to decipher his mind and promote him to a higher position (ibid. 515), which also shows her inability to be other than unpardonably human, i.e. delusionally sure about being in control. This is especially the case when she observes and writes about Flush's "beseeching eyes at mealtimes", yet she warns Robert not to dare talk of Flush "foolishly" (ibid. 529-530). The boundary seems impregnable, yet without it neither the human, nor the non-human could be seen. Intentional self-awareness, or making a topic of one's inner state, inside one's mind, and presenting oneself as "me" (even before immediate physical contact), cannot be ultimately isolated from bodily self-awareness. In written discourse, evidence of all this works for the human being. For the non-human being entirely other criteria for self- and other-recognition may apply – way beyond the written page yet not less reliable and identity-confirming (Rowlands 2019: 111-112), which could bring to a non-human being's mind a world of objectionable signals (e.g. Robert's persistent flowers or imposing umbrella). Bodily value in defining time-space is based on the multiplication of images of the self and the other to the effect of the writer attaining herself as the object of her own conscious activity. Elizabeth seems to have objected to Robert "throwing" her (as if from a height) into a commodified, instrumentalized bouquet of spectral presences – the phenomenon of the "thirty-six Bas"; she seems to have been afraid of "looking into a mirror cut into facettes ... met on every side by the same face, twenty times repeated", as if she were "like Flush, who, before he learnt to be a philosopher, used to shiver with rage at sight of the Flush in the looking-glass, and gnash his teeth impotently" (Kintner, ed. 1962, vol. 2, 642-643, 650).

Who knows what, after all?

"Flush doesn't know that we can recover him, & he is in the extremest despair"; "*I am your Flush, and he is mine*" (Kintner, ed. 1969, vol. 2: 1031, 1046, Letters # 535, 542, 1 September, 4 September, 1846, emphasis in original). These are some of the confessions Elizabeth made to Robert about her floppy-eared friend – evidence of the writer's perennial yet unprecedented in its intensity fumbling for an adequate expression of her faith in the imagination as responsivity and responsibility for an Other. Unable to pronounce her name actually, Flush turned out to be her most truthful friend, who, one might guess, deemed human words a pardonable insufficiency and a bearable limit, requiring perhaps no more than the frankness of the unutterability of contact the other's place in the now had to offer.

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