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978-0-521-14773-6 - 'Michael Field': Poetry, Aestheticism and the Fin de Siecle

Marion Thain

Excerpt

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*Introduction: 'something fierce, subtle,
strange, singular'*

field A region in which a body experiences a force
as the result of the presence of some other body or bodies.
A field is thus a method of representing the way
in which bodies are able to influence each other.¹

This definition of 'field' from a dictionary of scientific terminology could also be used as a rather apt literary definition of 'lyric'. If the lyric is a space designed to explore the way in which bodies influence each other textually, 'Michael Field' is a created and creative space of lyric production. Bradley and Cooper wrote in an era which resulted in Einstein's special relativity theory (1905); an era in which the understanding of the relationship between bodies across space and time was changed radically. Michael Field's lyrics seem to share the urgency of this investigation, and this study will suggest that Bradley and Cooper not only provide but also, crucially, embody a highly inventive resolution to the dialectic between bodies. They do this through the method of the paradox, which underpins the operations of this lyric 'field' in both spatial and temporal dimensions. The dual authorship itself is perhaps the most notable 'spatial' paradox, and I will be arguing throughout this book that it enables a poetics of presence based on amorphous desire which entails profound consequences for the operation of the Victorian lyric. Even more crucial to the framework of this study, and to its claim for canonical status for the writers' works, is a temporal paradox through which we can trace Michael Field's commentary on aestheticist preoccupations with history and time.

Recent interest in Michael Field has been driven in key part by the quirkiness of the dual aunt-and-niece authorial persona. Holly Laird encapsulated the flavour of much of this interest when she wrote in 1995, near the beginning of the recent rediscovery of Michael Field's work, of wanting to enable Michael Field to remain 'an odd couple on the

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not-too-distant horizon'.² Yet in my book (at the time of writing, this is the first full-length study of Michael Field), I have rather more ambitious plans for the writers. Michael Field is too interesting a part of fin-de-siècle aesthetics to remain on any horizon. In fact, the quirks and eccentricities of Michael Field's work can in many ways be best explained as manifestations of an exaggerated, or extreme, engagement with some of the most vital literary concerns of the age. This characterisation sees the oeuvre as both central to aestheticism³ and simultaneously at its extremities. Yet, as Ada Levenson noticed, this was the age in which the marginal *was* central.⁴ Within the space of 'Michael Field', Bradley and Cooper come to embody aestheticist ideals, and it is in relation to these ideals that they need to be contextualised. Perhaps looked at in this way they will cease to be the odd couple on the horizon and be seen instead as a rather bold interrogation and interpretation (sometimes an almost deconstructive *reductio*) of some of the core principles of aestheticism. My attempt to show Bradley and Cooper in this light will be founded, methodologically, on close engagement with Michael Field's texts, which are so often in danger of taking second place to the fascinating biography.

The life of Michael Field is exceptionally well documented, thanks to the survival of Bradley and Cooper's own copious diaries and letters, a biography by Mary Sturgeon, not to mention the short but lively recent biography by Emma Donoghue.⁵ A full-length comprehensive new biography of Michael Field needs to be written, but this is not a project which can be subsumed into the critical one I am attempting here. Nonetheless, at this point I do need to outline a very brief sketch of the lives of the aunt and niece. Katharine Harris Bradley was born in Birmingham to the wife of a tobacco manufacturer in 1846. Jonathan Freedman has pointed out that aesthetes tended to be middle class (citing Ruskin as the son of a sherry merchant and William Morris as the offspring of a successful stockbroker), and Bradley and Cooper were, similarly, writers who were not born into the literary scene but who infiltrated it from the prosperous merchant class.⁶ Katharine's father died when she was only two years old. She had one sister, Emma, eleven years her elder, who married James Robert Cooper and went to live with him in Kenilworth. It was here that Emma's daughter, Edith Emma Cooper, was born in 1862. The absence of Katharine's father undoubtedly provided the impetus for herself and her mother to move to Kenilworth to live with the Coopers around the time of Edith's birth. But Katharine was soon to play a far more central role within her sister's family than she could have expected. When Emma Cooper became a permanent invalid

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after the birth of her second daughter, Amy (in 1864), Katharine, at the age of eighteen, became the guardian of her niece Edith. The two were soon inseparable and Katharine became to Edith everything one woman can be to another: mother, aunt, sister, friend and, eventually, lover.

The women were of independent means and had a good education. Bradley pursued her literary interests by attending a summer course at Newnham College, Cambridge, and (in 1868) by going to the Collège de France in Paris. In 1878, both women pursued classics and philosophy at University College in Bristol. Mary Sturgeon writes that it was an era when 'Higher Education and Women's Rights and Anti-Vivisection were being indignantly championed, and when "aesthetic dress" was being very consciously worn – all by the same kind of people. Katharine and Edith were of that kind'.⁷ Yet there were also pronounced differences between the women. Although Bradley and Cooper present themselves in their writing as a seamless whole, the women were in fact very different in appearance and character. Bradley was socially warm, exuding the air of robust constitution and good health, while Cooper was always shy, fragile and prone to illness, if more beautiful.

In 1875, Bradley published her first volume of lyrics (*The New Minnesinger*)⁸ under the pseudonym Arran Leigh, a name which is deliberately ambiguous in its gender. The next volume of poems to be published, in 1881, marked the beginning of the women's literary partnership, which was to last for the rest of their lives. *Bellerophon* (a volume slated by *The Academy*)⁹ was presented as the work of two people: 'Arran and Isla Leigh'.¹⁰ 'John Cooley' – a combination of 'Cooper' and 'Bradley' – had also been experimented with as the signature for the first draft of *Callirrhoe*.¹¹ By the time the women began writing together, their relationship was, in Sturgeon's words, a friendship 'clearly on the grand scale and in the romantic manner'.¹² This budding literary career was positively discouraged by John Ruskin, Bradley's mentor at this stage in her life. Bradley corresponded with Ruskin and became a companion of his Guild of St George for a while, but a series of letters between the two charts the rift which developed around Christmas 1877.¹³ In the following letter from Ruskin, one can hear Katharine's voice in the background, exuberant at obtaining a new pet:

Dear Katharine,

Your letter telling me you have lost God and found a Skye Terrier is a great grief & amazement to me – I thought so ~~far~~ [insert] much [end insert] better of you. – What do you mean? That you are resolved to receive only good at God's

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hands and not evil? Send me word clearly what has happened to you – then perhaps I'll let you talk of your dogs and books.

Ever faithfully yours,

J. R.¹⁴

Indeed, Katharine was only half joking when she claimed to have swapped her religion for a pet dog. The acquisition of this animal inaugurated a new phase of the poets' life, in which they found their way towards a sensual, pagan and erotic faith, which was very far from Ruskin's petty and puritanical doctrine.

While there is lots of evidence that Christian faith was not banished from their lives as comprehensively as they might claim, Bradley and Cooper do present their lives as structured around a dichotomy between what they described as pagan and Christian modes of being. Both seem in key part to be expressions of the women's spirituality, which is a constant throughout their lives. The term 'pagan' had a multiplicity of connotations at this time, but it does accurately signify the various facets of Michael Field's life between 1877 and 1907. As a matter of historical accuracy, then, I will use the term 'pagan' throughout this book to cover not only the Graeco-Roman non-Christian realm – and its pantheistic religion – which so fascinated the two women, but also those tenets central to Walter Pater's aestheticism (itself so connected to the ancient world) which structured Bradley and Cooper's experience at this time, and the 'perverse' sexuality (liberal heterosexuality and any homosexually inclined behaviour) which was connected with this lifestyle. Many contemporaneous sources – as well as Michael Field's own writings – show this particular diversity of usage to be entirely of its age.¹⁵

'Michael Field' was born out of this pagan mode of experience, and came into existence with the publication of the verse-drama *Callirrhoe* in 1884. It was at this time that the women's literary career began in earnest. 'Michael Field' was the name under which they were to establish their literary reputation, and which they used for all subsequent publications (except for those dramas, such as *Borgia*, which were published anonymously). Bradley even continued to publish under this name after Cooper's death. The pseudonym came directly from the women's private articulation of their identity. Fond of nicknames, Katharine was known amongst her friends as 'Michael', and Edith was 'Field' or 'Henry'. 'Michael' seems to have carried connotations of the archangel, while 'Field' has a less obvious significance.¹⁶ Clearly, 'Michael Field' is a bipartite name signifying not just the name of single, male author, but also two

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names of two women authors – and it is for this reason that throughout this book I refer consistently to 'Michael Field', rather than simply 'Field'.¹⁷ *Callirrhoe*, which was an instant success, brought the couple to the attention of Robert Browning, and secured his support.¹⁸ He took Ruskin's place as their new literary mentor, and this friendship was to last until Browning's death, but after the generally very successful reception of *Callirrhoe*, in 1884, Michael Field was never to be so joyously received again.

It was only for a very short while that Michael Field was thought to be a single male author. During that time the women received some intense personal interest from other writers who seemed to be looking for intimacy of a kind only made possible by a belief in their masculinity. André Raffalovich wrote with an enthusiasm which, on his discovery of their true identity, he retracts with a stiff apology: 'I thought I was writing to a boy, to a young man of my age whose world I appreciated'.¹⁹ From A. Mary F. Robinson, 'Michael Field Esqre' received, care of their publishers, a flirtatious little missive (postmarked 1885) containing directions to her house and an invitation to call. '[N]ext Tuesday afternoon' is singled out as particularly appropriate because 'you would find me singularly alone as my mother & sister are gone for a few days to Wales; & no callers generally arrive till after four'. The postscript acknowledges the unorthodoxy of this suggestion, adding: 'If you think it risking too much to come here, I am not making (am I?) any very American suggestion in proposing to meet you some morning (not Monday) at the National Gallery alone'.²⁰ Some knew, at this stage, that Michael Field was a pseudonym, but didn't know the identity of the writer; a guessing game ensued, involving some of the great sexological figures of the age and, in turn, linking concerns about the pseudonym with issues of gender and sexuality. Bradley wrote to Cooper:

Such a nice letter from Ellis [Havelock Ellis] this morning [. . .] An acquaintance of his, from careful examination of internal evidence, is confident that the book is written by a man & a woman. Ellis has another theory – I believe that of single female authorship; but he does not say [. . .].²¹

This quasi-phrenological reading of the contours of Michael Field's verse is seen to yield very specific conclusions – both wrong.

Bradley and Cooper left Bristol in 1888 to move, with their families, to Reigate. Their time at Reigate was both one of exploration and emergence into the public world, but also one in which they devoted themselves more and more to each other and their private realm.²² It was during this

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phase of their lives that they travelled in Europe, mainly with the purpose of seeing art of various kinds (during these trips they were sometimes accompanied by friends such as Bernhard Berenson). It was also during this period that they got to know Meredith (who sent them a letter of praise on the publication of *Long Ago* on 13 June 1889), A. Mary F. Robinson, Richard Garnett, Lionel Johnson, D. G. Rossetti, Oscar Wilde, Herbert Spencer and many other influential figures of the age. But it was the private environment they created for themselves at Reigate that was the focus of their lives. The house saw very few visitors, except for the artists Charles Ricketts and Charles Shannon, with whom the women gradually became extremely close friends. Bradley and Cooper's devotion to each other and to their work meant that Michael Field flourished, publishing prolifically. This does not, however, mean that their books were well received. The two great sadnesses for the women at this time were their bad literary reviews and the death of Cooper's father in 1897 in a mountaineering incident.²³

The close friendship with Ricketts and Shannon was to last for twenty years. The poets contributed to the artists' journal *The Dial*, and Ricketts published four of the poets' plays at his own Vale Press, and decorated nearly all of their subsequent books. Michael Field's books were largely published privately. They were briefly published by Mathews and Lane, but they believed this lost them prestige and they returned to paying for publication.²⁴ Their desire for their books to be beautiful objects was no doubt one of the forces motivating this decision. Indeed, their friendship with Ricketts and Shannon was based around a shared love of handsome objects. Bradley and Cooper showered Ricketts with gifts, while he made finely wrought jewellery for them (now held in the Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge). It was at the suggestion of Charles Ricketts that, in 1899, Bradley and Cooper moved from Reigate to a small Georgian house at 1, The Paragon, Richmond (the first house they were to occupy without other members of their family). It was here they set up home with a rather special flame-coloured chow dog named Whym Chow.

Whym Chow was the most important being on earth for Bradley and Cooper. Just as the Skye terrier became symbolic of a move away from institutionalised Christian faith, so their love for Whym Chow enabled him to symbolise a complicated nexus of factors which prompted their entry into the Roman Catholic Church in 1907. While undoubtedly in key part a response to Cooper's ill-health, aspects of their changing relationship with each other, and historical events, the women attribute their conversion entirely to the death of the beloved Whym Chow (it is

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on this occasion that Cooper writes that it was 'the worst loss of my life – yes, worse than that of beloved mother or the tragic father').²⁵ Bradley and Cooper were quite typical of a certain type of Roman convert at the end of the century, being educated, articulate, fairly wealthy and well connected, they were of the type who were able to 'wield influence in their new community'.²⁶ The women certainly did throw themselves into the Catholic world. Their conversion distanced them from many of their old friends (even Ricketts and Shannon), but opened up important new opportunities with spiritual advisers such as John Gray (himself a Decadent poet turned priest).

In February 1911 it was discovered that Cooper had cancer; she died on 13 December 1913. Bradley also died of cancer just under a year later on 26 September 1914. The last few years of their lives were spent reading and learning about theological doctrine, and writing continuously. *Poems of Adoration*, Cooper's last work, was published in 1912. Bradley's companion volume of religious lyrics, *Mystic Trees* (also her last work), emerged in print the following year. Both appeared under the joint pseudonym and the two were designed to be bound together by a strap to form one complete work. Sensitive to criticism as the women were, it would have hurt them enormously to read the entry on their work which appeared in the *Cambridge History of English Literature* just after their death, in 1916. The author writes of the 'curious fancy' of two women writing in collaboration under one masculine name, and the assessment of their work is damning.²⁷

In this book, my engagement with Bradley and Cooper's work is circumscribed by the name 'Michael Field', and so I will not be looking at the work of Arran and Isla Leigh. Although this early work merits investigation, it is not within my remit. It is only under the 'Michael Field' name that Bradley and Cooper began to write with authority and maturity, and, perhaps more importantly, the body of work composed under this name has an integrity granted by the self-conscious authorial construction that should not be ignored.

Under the name 'Michael Field', Bradley and Cooper published twenty-eight dramas (mostly historical verse-dramas) during their lifetime, with an extra three religious plays appearing posthumously. There is evidence in the diaries of at least twenty-six further unpublished (and unfinished) dramas.²⁸ Only *A Question of Memory* was actually staged (on 27 October 1893 at Jack Grein's Independent Theatre in London), and it was not well received.²⁹ It is the most performable of Michael Field's plays, being set in the fairly recent historical past, and requiring a

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relatively small cast; most of the others are rather more grandiose in their gestures and infinitely less stageable. It was, nonetheless, Michael Field's goal to get their plays performed. On 28 November 1891, for example, the women write in their diary of Arthur Symonds: 'It is horrible! Little Arthur has written a play accepted by the Independent Theatre. One may well hold one's eyes waking – asking why, & how, & if one is failing – the air round us is chill. It is bitter & very dark'.³⁰ Yet the plays were often received well as printed texts. *Callirrhoë*, the first published play, inspired great praise, and in 1893 *Harper's Bazar* carried a laudatory review of the published drama to date by T. W. Higginson.³¹ Higginson begins by suggesting that Bradley and Cooper should hold the title of poet laureate, if that award were to be made 'on the ground of pure strength of genius'. He goes on to compare the plays with those of Shakespeare, and it is clear that – on page, if not on stage – the drama was what made Michael Field's reputation. Lionel Johnson, in his introduction to the selection of Michael Field's poetry which appears in Alfred H. Miles's *The Poets and the Poetry of the Century* anthology of 1898, also believes that, 'It is upon her tragedies that Michael Field can most justly rest a claim to distinction'.³² Johnson goes on to sing magnificent praises of Michael Field, comparing their 'imagination', 'ardour' and 'magnificence' to, inevitably, those qualities in the work of Shakespeare.³³ These accolades did not, however, stop Michael Field feeling that, after the initial enthusiastic reception of *Callirrhoë*, the plays were not as well received as they would have liked. Indeed, the obituary of Cooper in *The Athenaeum* states that, 'After the discovery in the nineties that the work of two women had been taken for a man's, the issue of their books was for many years passed over in silence. But, new voices coming to the front, "Wild Honey" (1908) was better received'.³⁴

This critical celebration of the poetry in *Wild Honey* in 1908 is evidence of more than just the existence of a new generation of critics, less offended by the dual authorship. Although Bradley and Cooper originally saw themselves primarily as dramatists – and were caught up in the Victorian fervour for discovering a new Shakespeare – in the later years poetry seemed to become much more the dominant concern, and their prolific writing of verse was matched by its greater prominence in the diaries. Indeed, later in life 'Michael Field' would disown many of the plays. Bradley writes to John Gray (in an undated letter sometime between 1906 and 1914, but probably around 1908) of 'the Borgia series', stating 'These are not by Michael Field', and asking him to pass 'from the last signed work – by Vale Press – Julia Domna (?) – to "Wild Honey"'.³⁵ Those

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disowned plays include not only *Borgia*, but also *Queen Mariamne*, *The Accuser*, and all the other 1911 plays: *The Tragedy of Pardon*, *Tristan De Leonois*, *A Messiah*, *Dian: A Phantasy*.³⁶ This decision was no doubt motivated by issues of quality as well as worries about how the women's new Catholic acquaintances might view those plays. After all, none of the poetry is ever renounced, even though they blush at its paganism after the conversion.

The diaries, which give us so much information about the literary lives of Bradley and Cooper, demonstrate that 'Michael Field' was equally prolific in the arena of life-writing. In the twenty-nine volumes of Michael Field diaries, from 1888 to 1914, people, places and events are described with an insight and a cutting wit which makes them powerful documentary evidence of the age. It is this aspect of the diaries which comes to the fore particularly in T. and D. C. Sturge Moore's edited selection from the volumes, published in 1933. Here D. G. Rossetti is reported as having a 'constraining fascination' which leaves his sister 'striving to work out his redemption by prayer and denial'.³⁷ An account of a meeting with Lionel Johnson ends with the stand-alone paragraph: 'We looked down at Lionel's feet; they were fabulous: tiny in girlish shoes and blue silk stockings'.³⁸ Of Oscar Wilde we hear that 'His body is too well tended and looks like a well-kept garden; his spirit, one would say, was only used to irrigate it'.³⁹ Yet the diaries are much more than receptacles for the amusing anecdotes that give such a powerful flavour of the age to Sturge Moore's edited volume. The diaries are well-written and carefully crafted literary works which have not received the attention they deserve as part of the Michael Field canon.

It is Michael Field's poetry that has been at the centre of the recent revival. Interest has focused particularly around the first three volumes of poetry published under the Michael Field name in the nineteenth century: *Long Ago* (1889), *Sight and Song* (1892) and *Underneath the Bough* (1893). Each volume has a strong rationale, with the first based around the Sapphic fragments, the second taking paintings as the inspiration for each poem, and the third taking *The Rubáiyát of Omar Khayyám* to frame its sensuous lyrical project. Yet in this study I suggest that the volumes published in the twentieth century are just as, if not more, interesting: from the mysterious and, I will argue, central *Wild Honey from Various Thyme* (1908), to the later religious verse in *Poems of Adoration* (1912), *Mystic Trees* (1913) and *Whym Chow* (1914), these volumes develop the most profound of Michael Field's concerns. *Dedicated* was published in 1914, but features poetry published mostly between 1899 and 1902 and so

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belongs to a rather earlier part of their career. The posthumously published selection of Michael Field's unpublished poetry (mostly their later work) – entitled *The Wattlefold* and collected by Emily C. Fortey – appeared in 1930 and brings the total number of volumes to nine. There are unpublished poems to be found in draft form in the diaries, many of which have recently been published in Ivor C. Treby's three-volume collection of Michael Field verse, *In Leash to the Stranger*.⁴⁰

While the range and quantity of work by Michael Field is huge, this book will establish a necessary focus by concentrating primarily on Michael Field's poetry, and is structured around analysis of the major poetic volumes listed above. The diaries and dramas (as well as an awareness of the importance of the dramatic mode to Bradley and Cooper's poetry) will inform my analysis, but more as an introduction to Michael Field's main concerns, and as a support to my reading of the poems. Chapter 1, in particular, is devoted to introducing the diaries, and establishing a critical framework for them, as well as providing an analysis of the play that most clearly sets out Bradley and Cooper's artistic manifesto. While apparent in the diaries and plays (and in some sense more naturally arising within these genres), this agenda is often much more interestingly worked out in the poetry. It is in the working of the lyric that Michael Field's authorial identity imposes the greatest problems and elicits the most ingenious solutions (the dual authorship raises quite different issues within dramatic writing, because collaboration is so much more common and much less problematic within the conventions of the genre). There are many reasons why Bradley and Cooper's poetry, rather than their drama, has surfaced as Michael Field's major legacy for today's critic (not least our lack of understanding of the closet drama genre), but an appeal to the impressive quality of much of the lyric writing must form a part of the explanation. For my purposes, though, it is in key part the nature of the aesthetic questions posed in the lyric verse, and the fascination of those lyric experiments, that leads me to focus on the poetry, particularly, as having an important role to play in our understanding of fin-de-siècle aestheticism.

Michael Field's poetry received rather mixed reviews, which frequently made the women, always sensitive to criticism, feel rejected and embittered. In the diary of 1892, Bradley and Cooper vent their anger over Richard Le Gallienne's review of *Sight and Song* which had just appeared in the *Daily Chronicle*. They are angry at his revealing the joint authorship and berating them on account of their female sex. Their worst fear is that 'He has tried to spoil the graveness of criticism before our work & to give it a simper'.⁴¹