



Article professionnel

Article

2022

Published version

Open Access

This is the published version of the publication, made available in accordance with the publisher's policy.

---

“Historic, side-long, implicating eyes” : looking back at Michael Field’s  
aestheticist lyric poems

---

Zeitz, Megan

**How to cite**

ZEITZ, Megan. “Historic, side-long, implicating eyes” : looking back at Michael Field’s aestheticist lyric poems. In: *Noted : The English Department Journal*, 2022, n° Spring, p. 23–32.

This publication URL: <https://archive-ouverte.unige.ch/unige:186415>

## “Historic, side-long, implicating eyes”: Looking Back at Michael Field’s Aestheticist Lyric Poems

MEGAN ZEITZ

*Editor’s Note: This essay is excerpted from an MA3 assignment submitted to Professor Simon Swift in the context of his autumn 2019 seminar “Victorian Poetry.” Michael Field is the pen-name of the poets and lovers Katherine Bradley (1846-1914) and Edith Cooper (1862-1913).*

### Co-creating the half-secret language of art and love: “A Girl” and “It was deep April, and the morn”

In *Portrait de la jeune fille en feu*, Marianne and Héloïse are depicted as not only the co-creators of Héloïse’s portrait, but also as the co-creators of a love language which only they—and the audience, who is privy to their narrative—can understand. As a prelude to their first love scene, Héloïse asks Marianne: “Vous pensez que tous les amants ont le sentiment d’inventer quelque chose?” (1:23:40-1:23:43); the answer is that what these two lovers invent is a secret language which intimately connects Sapphic love and art.<sup>1</sup> Near the end of the retrospective narrative of the film, on the eve of their parting, Héloïse tells Marianne that she wants an image of her to remember her by. Marianne asks Héloïse for a book so that she can draw a portrait of herself in it. She asks Héloïse to pick a page number and Héloïse chooses page 28 (1:43:40-1:44:17). Back in the frame narrative, years later, Marianne is at an art exhibition at the Salon du Louvre. She suddenly sees Héloïse again—as a portrait. Marianne’s eyes explore the painting and focus on one striking detail: Héloïse’s figure is holding a book in her hand and her index finger keeps it slightly open on page 28 (1:53:57). At that moment, we, along with Marianne, understand the secret language spoken by the portrait, because we have been privy to—and have participated in—the creation of this language by closely and attentively observing the characters’ narrative. I suggest that this dynamic of collaboration between art and love, between two female lovers who are also co-creators of art, between the language of

---

<sup>1</sup> “Do you think that all lovers feel that they are inventing something?”

the artwork and its readers/beholders, is enacted in Michael Field's poems "A Girl" and "It was deep April, and the morn."

As Ana Parejo Vadillo underlines, Michael Field's poetics is intimately connected to Bradley and Cooper's domestic space and to their real-life romantic relationship, as they were "married in art, lovers living and writing in fellowship" (2011, 1), living by the Paterian aestheticist principle of "an erotic coupling of decorative art and desire" (2011, 8). They themselves claimed that "life, between equals, requires an Art" (Parejo Vadillo, 2011, 10) and had an openly-secret romantic language which they had created for each other in their letters and in their joint journal *Works and Days* (Saville, 539): Bradley was "Michael," Cooper was "Henry" or "Field," and the artistic-romantic union of the two was, of course, "Michael Field." As Marion Thain demonstrates, this half-secret language is encoded in their poetry in general, but especially in the poems of *Underneath the Bough*, whose aesthetics is overtly erotic and, less overtly, dual and collaborative. Thain describes this aesthetics as an *ars erotica*, a concept which will prove useful for my discussion:

In erotic art the knowledge gained through pleasure 'must remain secret' . . . the truths of sex are only potent if they remain hidden within a poetry of reserve . . . The women's dual authorship is, without doubt, itself a kind of erotic secret, the true meaning of which can only be learned through the reader's initiation, through close reading, into the poetry. (96)

Michael Field's Sapphic erotic aesthetics in the poems of *Underneath the Bough* is indeed half-concealed, revealed in the spaces of the not-directly-visible, unexpectedly appearing within a context of seemingly familiar conventions of love poetry—on the condition that readers observe the poems closely and tactfully. The poetry of *Underneath the Bough*, moreover, queers the expectations of lyric poetry as theorized by John Stuart Mill: "[f]or Bradley and Cooper, then, the lyric is not 'overheard', in line with Mill's famous definition, because it is often directly addressed from one woman to the other" (Thain, 114). Furthermore, I suggest that the poems also converse with their readers and—as did the eyes of the figures in the portraits—implicate them in their secret language. In Michael Field's poetry, we do not eavesdrop on, nor do we look voyeuristically at, the erotic exchange; rather, we are invited to participate in it and to observe closely what is half-concealed: that the lyric 'I' is in fact double and allows for an egalitarian erotic-artistic dialogue between the poet and her muse, who are both "poet and muse" (Thain, 106).

This queering of the poet-muse dialectic is dramatized in the poem "A Girl" both in its

content and form. As was the case with the lyric portraits of *Sight and Song*, the poem begins with a seemingly familiar *topos* that attracts the eye: an erotic love sonnet that describes the aestheticized appearance of the female muse using commonplace naturalistic metaphors and similes. However, upon a closer look, aside from the fourteen lines, the poem deviates from the traditional sonnet forms with a peculiar rhyme scheme (AABBBBCBCDDEED) and a paradoxically regular-yet-varied meter: it is iambic all throughout—safe for the last line, which is an irregular trochaic dimeter with a hypermetrical foot—with one mono-meter (1), trimeters (2, 4, 5, 6, 7, 9, 10, 11), two pentameters (3, 8), one tetrameter (13) and one dimeter (12). Content-wise, the motif of the poet (whose love is unrequited) addressing a persuasion poem to his female muse is subverted: Michael Field's dual authorship and Sapphic romantic relationship shines through when the volta in line 10 and the conclusion of the poem reveal that the lyric 'I'—which readers are invited to assume may also be female—co-writes texts with "a girl," whose soul is "knit" (10) with that of the speaker. Moreover, the speaker does not try to convince her muse to love her—their souls are already knit—nor does she urge her to write with her; on the contrary, she leaves "a page half-writ" (11), giving her muse and co-poet the choice to complete the "work begun" (12). What is even more striking is that the poem does not stage an overheard address from the 'I' to an absent, muted 'you,' but instead dramatizes the 'I'—which is almost effaced as to leave room for the poetic presence of the girl—overtly telling readers about her lover and co-writer. We are made privy to the speaker and the girl's intimate relationship, which entangles erotic love and artistic creation.

The eroticism of the poem is neither hidden nor obvious, but rather half-concealed; it is visible, but it remains somewhat secretive, just like the soul of the girl is "a deep-wave pearl / Dim, lucent of all lovely mysteries" (2-3). The visual strategy which was used explicitly in *Sight and Song* is repeated implicitly here: lines 4 to 10 subtly paint an idealized portrait of the girl's face, which is eroticized with commonplace metaphors and similes, such as "flowered" (4), "soft as seas" (5), "the lips apart / Like aspen-leaflets trembling in the breeze" (7-8) — a gesture which entices the eye and, like in "La Gioconda," abruptly blocks the erotic image from sight in line 10, which directs the attention to the collaborative writing of the 'I' and the girl. As Angela Leighton points out, Michael Field's strategy of blocking the potency of sight, or directing it elsewhere, serves to efface the traditional subject-object—that is the poet-muse—dichotomy so that "something else, invisible and secret, can flash between" (11). What flashes between the visual lines of "A Girl," its "lovely mysteries" (3), I would suggest, can hardly be seen but can be heard and felt. The common-place imagery of the sea—"deep-wave pearl" (2) and "seas" (5)—and the wind—"breeze" (8) and "tempestuous" (9)—to evoke eroticism comes to life when

paying attention to the meter, the sounds, and the rhymes of the poem: the fluctuating meters of the lines—with their repetitive iambic pattern but of varying durations—joint with the repeated /i:z/ rhyme of “mysteries” (3), “ease” (4), “seas” (5), “trees” (6), and “breeze” (8), mimic the sound and the feel of the flux of waves in the wind—as well as the sound of moaning and the sensation of sexual pleasure, hence vividly materializing the eroticism of the poem.

The poem ends with an intimate interweaving—the souls of the ‘I’ and her co-author and lover are “knit” (10)—of writing and eroticism when the speaker claims that “[t]he work begun / Will be to heaven’s conception done, / If she come to it” (12-14). In these lines, “work” can mean both text and sex; “conception” can mean—with amusing irony for a poem co-written by two women in a homosexual relationship—*artistic creation* and *sexual reproduction*; and “[i]f she come to it” can be understood both as *if she decides to complete the text* and *if she has an orgasm*. The result of the artistic and erotic collaboration of the two writers and lovers is then an orgasmic production of beautiful and pleasurable poetry. This poem itself is a work of poetic *jouissance* co-produced by Bradley and Cooper, a *jouissance* that readers can also “come to” by reading the poem aloud to feel its wave-like rhythm, thereby breathing along with it, which allows them to corporeally experience the poet-lovers’ desire along with them. It is through this intimate and active collaboration with the artwork that readers can perceive and sense its secret language of art and love, which is half-concealed at the heart of the poem, much like the word *art* is half-concealed in the “heart” (9) of the girl.

The intimate bond between love and art is consecrated in the poem “It was deep April, and the morn,” which may have been one of the first poems that Bradley and Cooper wrote together in 1878 (Saville, 539) and yet feels as if it could have been the last poem that they ever wrote together; it is, after all, the last poem of the second edition of *Underneath the Bough* (Thain, 122-123). This poem seems to epitomize Michael Field’s aestheticism: it stages a poetic space, abstracted from any social scene, a paradoxically utopian mythological hell where the poetic avatars of Bradley and Cooper can forget about the world “pressing sore” (3), and where they indeed have the possibility to be “Poets and lovers evermore” (6). As in “A Girl,” the poem makes readers privy to a deeply intimate moment: a secret pact between what we can identify as two incestuous female lovers and aesthetes who seek to escape the pressure of the world’s judging looks and to be secluded within an aesthetic space of their own making.

However, paradoxically, the world created in the poem is far from being solitary and melancholic: once more, its aesthetics is one of collaboration between poetry and love,

and the voice of the poem is not the traditional single lyric ‘I’ but instead an implicitly dual ‘we,’ created by the bond between “My Love and I” (4). Moreover, the space of the poem does not stand in complete isolation from the world; it is shared with its readers, who are invited to witness the narrative of the oath that the two lovers swore on the altar of love and poetry. Furthermore, as Marion Thain and Julia Saville both underline, “the poem works against . . . disenfranchisement by encoding its complaint within references to a literary history” (Thain, 93) and by forming an “alliance to a community of poets” (Saville, 539). Indeed, the poem invokes the most celebrated of the English poets, Shakespeare—himself a master of half-concealed homoeroticism in his sonnets—whose birthday is the occasion of the pledge and of the poem. The speaker also calls on Apollo, the Ancient Greek god of poetry. Thain also explains that the final line of the poem—“Indifferent to heaven and hell”—may be a reference to Baudelaire’s poem “Lesbos” (1857)—hence creating a tie with Sappho, Bradley and Cooper’s poetic idol and subject matter in their volume *Long Ago* (1889) (Thain, 93). The poem, then, connects the two poets and lovers to a glorious poetic tradition and to a community of queer poets, aesthetes, and lovers—a community which includes readers, as the poem is meant to be read by lovers of poetry. The subversive narrative power of the poem is that it transforms an expectedly tragic fate—descending into hell for being queer, that is, for being aesthetes and incestuous homoerotic lovers—into a mythological utopia, where “hell” (15) can rhyme with “dwell” (16). This is a poetic space where queer aesthetes and lovers of poetry—“those fast-locked souls . . . [w]ho never from Apollo fled” (11-12)—can form a timeless and placeless community of “Poets and lovers” (6) who subtly resist the social world and its “judgement” (10).

The line “The world was on us, pressing sore” (3) echoes Pater’s assertion in the conclusion to *The Renaissance* that “experience seems to bury us under a flood of external objects, pressing upon us with a sharp and importunate reality, calling us out of ourselves in a thousand forms of action” (86-87). The strategy of resistance to the pressure of reality through abstraction enacted in the poem is what Lee Edelman perceives as the political power of queerness: “the efficacy of queerness, its real strategic value, lies in its resistance to a Symbolic reality that only ever invests us as subjects insofar as we invest ourselves in it” (18). Such resistance is employed by Michael Field to relieve the female figures of their poems of the pressures of the subject-object and artist-muse dialectics, and to create instead a queer aesthetics wherein there is only art in a dialogue with lovers of poetry. Marion Thain designates negativity and absence as hallmarks of 1890s Decadent poetry, and notes their conspicuous absence in the poetry of Michael Field (15): as she argues, Bradley and Cooper “write not from a mythology of loss, but from a construction of

eternal presence” (113). Although the dynamic I have located in Michael Field’s poems is often one of willing abstraction into the aesthetic and of half-concealment, I agree that their poetry deviates from the traits common in the works of their contemporaries. Indeed, the aesthetic world offered by “It was deep April”—to invoke Baudelaire’s likely implicit presence in the last line—is the world of the *Idéal* without the Spleen: the lovers of poetry spend “no hour among the dead” (13); they eternally “laugh and dream” (7), they “sing” (8) their devotion to poetry and to each other, “[h]eartening the timid souls” (9) of readers to encourage them to join the cult of poetry and love by breathing life into the poem as they read it.

## Conclusion

In the final sequence of *Portrait de la jeune fille en feu*, years after the end of their love story, Marianne sees Héloïse one last time across an opera concert room—but Héloïse does not see her. This time, she is not aware of being looked at and she does not look back. The concerto begins. The piece is the final movement of Vivaldi’s “L’estate” (1725), which Marianne had played for Héloïse on the harpsichord years before. After the introductory notes, the camera leaves Marianne’s face, along with her subjective narration, and the focus shifts to Héloïse. The camera zooms in and settles on her face until the very end of the film, so that viewers can closely observe her features. As the music plays and grows more and more intense, we can see Héloïse’s face become animated by a blend of sorrow and joy and we can see her breathing become deeper—and, because we understand the narrative significance of the music piece, we feel her intense emotions along with her (1:55:37-1:58:17). This the climactic last musical moment out of three in an otherwise music-less film, which entirely depends on the sounds of the waves crashing, the fire cracking, and the characters’ breathing to generate its rhythm. The music reanimates Héloïse’s face and breathes life into her as it vividly revives the corporeal memory of her romantic and artistic collaboration with Marianne, which is ever present and lively in artform.

As I argued in this essay, this reanimation is exactly what Bradley and Cooper, as Michael Field, subtly perform in their aestheticist lyric poems: through the synthesis of painting and music, of image and sound, of sight and song, they breathe life into the disrespectfully deadened, idealized, or eroticized female figures of paintings and poems. As I have shown, this poetic performance draws on their own romantic and artistic collaboration, and it requires the active collaboration of readers, who are invited to closely observe, not so much the imagistic content, but the material form of the poems to perceive the narrative that is half-concealed within them: a narrative of willful abstraction

and artistic agency, of egalitarian and tactful dialogism between artworks, models, artists, beholders, and readers which results in a shared aesthetic jouissance. In Michael Field's poetic portraits, readers/beholders are not voyeurs or eavesdroppers because the poems are aware of being read, observed, and listened to; they—like Mona Lisa's implicating eyes—invite readers to collaborate in the making of their half-secret language of art and pleasure. In Michael Field's poetry, readers do not find themselves in a state of solipsistic dreaming which dissolves the liveliness of the object of the gaze by trying to capture it, nor do they find themselves captives of the aesthetics of the artwork—countering the late-nineteenth century anxiety surrounding “the sense of perception as ‘catching’ or ‘taking captive’” (Crary, 3). Their poetic aesthetics is a *via media* which demands that the gazing subject efface themselves to enter in a collaborative dialogue with the artwork, as to reveal, not what the artwork is to them, as Pater suggests, but what the artwork's form contains—what I called a thought of form—and then let subjective imagination interpret its poetry.

Michael Field's quasi-manifesto, as expressed in the preface to *Sight and Song*, is a queer one, as I explained, among the dominant masculine strands of aestheticism of the later Victorian period, such as Ruskin's moralistic purification of sight and insistence on the truthfulness of representation, Pater's subjectively impressionistic perception of aesthetic objects, and Wilde's ironic irresolution of the issues of art's function and the relevance of the author, the critic, and the beholder in artistic representation. As Marion Thain asserts, Michael Field's poetry does not attempt to resolve the paradoxes of aestheticism, neither does it “collapse into dichotomy and irresolution” (204). According to her, the aesthetic paradox that Michael Field's poetry best navigates is that of attempting to represent a beautiful or pleasurable impression in artform, while acknowledging that impressions are, in essence, fleeting and that they are only lively in the moment of experience: “[t]his impossible desire to combine the diachronic with the synchronic is at the heart of Michael Field's aesthetic, and achieving that combination, or the illusion of its achievement, is Bradley and Cooper's greatest aesthetic triumph” (Thain, 16).

This triumph, I would like to suggest, is their poetic response to what Jonathan Crary describes as the late-nineteenth century paradigm of “perception [as] fundamentally characterized by experiences of fragmentation, shock, and dispersal” (1), which rendered “vision faulty, unreliable, and, it was sometimes argued, arbitrary” (12). It is precisely this paradigm of visual fragmentation and unreliable subjectivity that Pater addresses in the conclusion to *The Renaissance*, when he asserts that “[t]o regard all things and principles of things as inconstant modes or fashions has more and more become the tendency of modern thought” (86), a troubling epistemological regime which may have been a



motivation for 1890s aesthetes' and Decadents' "obsessive search for some 'unity of being' . . . a straining need for wholeness, for some ontological unity in what threatened to be a spiritually fragmented and impoverished world" (Snodgrass, 327). Michael Field's aesthetics in *Sight and Song* and *Underneath the Bough* offers a coping solution to the issue of fragmentation of fluctuation: a synthetic and collaborative approach which blends the fixed spatiality of painting and the temporal liveliness of music, sight and hearing, thought and desire, subject and object, poet and muse, and artwork and beholder, as to allow all the entities involved in the act of perception to obtain an "impression clearer, less passive, more intimate" (Field, 504). Bradley and Cooper's aestheticist poetry is a pact between them—the poets and lovers—between them and their readers, and between their readers and art. This is not the Faustian pact between life and art in the name of individualistic hedonism dramatized in Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*; this is a sustainable pact between love and art, an aesthetics of art for love's sake, which most fully realizes Pater's assertion in the conclusion to *The Renaissance*:

[W]e have an interval and then our place knows us no more. Some spend this interval in listlessness, some in high passions, the wisest, at least among "the children of this world," in art and song . . . Of such wisdom, the poetic passion, the desire of beauty, the love of art for its own sake, has most. (Pater, 88)

## Works Cited

- Brooke Cameron, Sally. "The Pleasures of Looking and the Feminine Gaze in Michael Field's *Sight and Song*." *Victorian Poetry* 51.2 (2013): 147-175. PDF.
- Clarke, Meghan. "The Art Press at the Fin de siècle: Women, Collecting, and Connoisseurship." *Visual Resources* 31.1-2 (2015): 15-30. PDF.
- Comfort, Kelly. "Introduction: Reflections on the Relationship between Art and Life in Aestheticism." *Art and Life in Aestheticism: De-Humanizing and Re-Humanizing Art, the Artist, and the Artistic Receptor*. Ed. Kelly Comfort. Basingstoke; New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008. 1-21. PDF.
- Crary, Jonathan. *Suspensions of Perception: Attention, Spectacle, and Modern Culture*. Cambridge (MA): MIT Press, 2001. PDF.
- Eastham, Andrew. "Aesthetic Vampirism: Pater, Wilde, and the Concept of Irony." *Art and Life in Aestheticism: De-Humanizing and Re-Humanizing Art, the Artist, and the Artistic Receptor*. Ed. Kelly Comfort. Basingstoke; New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008. 79-95. PDF.
- Edelman, Lee. *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive*. Durham; London: Duke University Press, 2004. PDF.
- Ehnenn, Jill. "Looking Strategically: Feminist and Queer Aesthetics in Michael Field's

- Sight and Song." *Victorian Poetry* 43.1 (2005): 109-154. PDF.
- Field, Michael (Katherine Bradley and Edith Cooper). "A Girl." 1893. *Underneath the Bough. A Book of Verses by Michael Field*. 1893. Portland: Thomas B. Moscher, 1998. 51. PDF.
- . "A Portrait." *Sight and Song*. Written by Michael Field. Eds. Elkin Mathews and John Lane. London: The Sign of the Bodley Head, 1892. 27-30. PDF.
- . "It was deep April, and the morn." 1893. *Underneath the Bough. A Book of Verses by Michael Field*. 1893. Portland: Thomas B. Moscher, 1998. 50. PDF.
- . "La Gioconda." *Sight and Song*. Written by Michael Field. Eds. Elkin Mathews and John Lane. London: The Sign of the Bodley Head, 1892. 8. PDF.
- . "Preface." 1892. *The Broadway Anthology of Victorian Poetry and Poetic Theory*. Eds. Thomas J. Collins and Vivienne J. Rundle. Peterborough (Ontario): Broadview Press, 2005. 504. Print.
- Fraser, Hillary. "A Visual Field: Michael Field and the Gaze." *Victorian Literature and Culture* 34 (2006): 553-571. PDF.
- Leighton, Angela. "Women Poets and the fin-de-siècle: Towards a New Aestheticism." *Victorian Review* 23.1 (1997): 1-14. PDF.
- Levinson, Marjorie. "Object-loss and Object-bondage: Economies of Representation in Hardy's Poetry." *ELH* 73.2 (2006): 549-580. PDF.
- Lysack, Krista. "Aesthetic Consumption and the Cultural Production of Michael Field's Sight and Song." *Studies in English Literature 1500-1900* 45.4 (2005): 935-960. PDF.
- Mill, John Stuart. "What is Poetry?" 1833. *The Broadway Anthology of Victorian Poetry and Poetic Theory*. Eds. Thomas J. Collins and Vivienne J. Rundle. Peterborough (Ontario): Broadview Press, 2005. 562-570. Print.
- Oxford English Dictionary*. 2020. Oxford University Press. Web.
- Parejo Vadillo, Ana. "Aestheticism and Decoration: At Home with Michael Field." *Cahiers victoriens et édonardiens* 74 (2011): 1-15. PDF.
- . "Sight and Song: Transparent Translations and a Manifesto for the Observer." *Victorian Poetry* 38.1 (2000): 15-34. PDF.
- . *Women Poets and Urban Aestheticism: Passengers of Modernity*. Basingstoke; New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005. PDF.
- Pater, Walter. *The Renaissance: Studies in Art and Poetry*. 1873. Project Gutenberg. 2009. PDF.
- Ruskin, John. "Of the Pathetic Fallacy." 1856. *The Broadway Anthology of Victorian Poetry and Poetic Theory*. Eds. Thomas J. Collins and Vivienne J. Rundle. Peterborough (Ontario): Broadview Press, 2005. 607-615. Print.
- Saville, Julia F. "Marriage and Gender." *A Companion to Victorian Poetry*. Eds. Richard Cronin, Alison Chapman and Antony H. Harrison. Malden (MA); Oxford: Blackwell

- Publishing, 2002. 526-542. PDF.
- Sciamma, Céline, dir. *Portait de la jeune fille en feu*. Lilies Films; Pyramide Distribution, 2019. DVD.
- Snodgrass, Chris. "The Poetry of the 1890s." *A Companion to Victorian Poetry*. Eds. Richard Cronin, Alison Chapman and Antony H. Harrison. Malden (MA); Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2002. 321-341. PDF.
- Thain, Marion. 'Michael Field.' Poetry, *Aestheticism and the Fin de Siècle*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007. PDF.
- Wilde, Oscar. *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. 1890. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008. Print.
- Zeitz, Megan. "Historic, side-long, implicating eyes": Looking Back at Michael Field's Aestheticist Lyric Poems." Master's graded paper. University of Geneva, 2020. PDF.