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RAPTUROUS FORMS: MATHILDE BLIND'S DARWINIAN POETICS

By Jason R. Rudy

Inspired whilst on holiday in 1893, the poet and literary critic Mathilde Blind speculated on the potential for intimacy in great poetry: "The poet only truly lives when he feels the rapture of communion; when his soul mirrored in a sister soul is doubled like the moon glassed in the Lake of Nemi" (*Commonplace book* 36; hereafter *CB*). Blind here alludes to the belief that from the shores of Lake Nemi, located just southeast of Rome, one might witness a perfect reflection of the moon upon the lake's still waters. Like the moon that casts its light down on the lake, Blind imagines the poet radiating outward toward her readers and experiencing with them "the rapture of communion," a flash of sympathetic confederacy. It was an ideal Blind had considered from her first volume of poetry in 1867 to her recently published *Dramas in Miniature* (1891), and it had determined most notably *The Ascent of Man*, Blind's 1889 poetic re-writing of Darwinian evolution. In her work as a literary critic as well as in her poetry, Blind singles out moments of passionate communication, such as lines of D. G. Rossetti that "set[] ones nerve tingling" (*Correspondence*; letter to Richard Garnett, 10 October 1881), and Shelley's poetry, which is like an "electric telegraph of thought flashing its fiery spark through the dull dense world of sense" ("Shelley" 97). At its best, poetry fuses an "intensity of feeling, [a] depth of thought, music, and form" (*Correspondence*; letter to Richard Garnett, 26 January 1870) so as to resonate most effectively with what Tennyson called "the deep heart of every living thing" (*Poems* 1: 85).

But Blind is not always confident in the likelihood for communion in the modern world. Earlier in 1893, Blind had mourned "the present state of disorganization" apparent in an increasingly secularized and atomized culture. She suggests "one may be chilled to the Soul by . . . complete isolation from the pulse of a collective life. Nay, the Soul may gradually perish for want of appropriate nourishment" (*CB* 24). Having been raised in a household of frustrated revolutionaries – Blind was the stepdaughter of Karl Blind, a political exile from Germany involved in the failed republican insurrections of 1848; Marx, Garibaldi, and Mazzini were all frequent visitors to the Blinds' London home – Blind's poetry reflects on and participates in a life-long desire to strengthen sympathetic relations among individuals, even as it acknowledges the difficulty, and near impossibility, of achieving such a goal.[1]

This essay examines Blind's complex ideal of rapturous communion from the perspective of evolutionary theory, focusing in particular on Blind's nuanced juxtaposing of poetic form with Darwinian theories of development. Blind has rarely been acknowledged as an

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important voice in *fin-de-siècle* arguments concerning evolution and poetics – she remains unmentioned, for example, in Lionel Stevenson's *Darwin Among the Poets* – and yet one would be hard pressed to find a poet more preoccupied, both formally and thematically, by late-nineteenth-century evolutionary theory.[2] In particular Blind's manipulation of lyric voice, which I shall address in the second part of this essay, relies on the poet's strained engagement with Darwinian theory. Blind struggles, finally, to imagine an individual, lyric voice that yet resonates with "the pulse of a collective life," and this struggle plays out as a formal collision between isolated lyric "spasms" and organized metrical impulses.

I. Formal Evolutions

More than most poems, Mathilde Blind's *Ascent of Man* upholds Alice Meynell's claim that "[i]f life is not always poetical, it is at least metrical" (*Rhythm* 1). The poem achieved a degree of popularity, if not notoriety, through its use of varied metrical structures, driving rhythmic impulses, and vivid imagery to portray the drama of human evolution. Blind "hurries her reader along, breathless and perspiring perhaps, but never anxious to stop," writes a critic for the *Athenaeum*; "We have known her book to be read in the Underground Railway, and the reader to be so absorbed in its contents as to be carried unawares several stations past his destination" (Rev. *Ascent* 87). Rhythm and meter are important not only for the poem's ability to absorb its readers, even to the point of distraction, but more significantly as part of Blind's understanding of evolution itself. In the *Ascent of Man*, life on earth progresses ineluctably toward something like metrical form, from "[a] pulse stirred in the plastic slime" to "[h]armonies of confluent sound" that "[l]ift you at one rhythmic bound / From the thraldom of the ground" (*Poetical Works* 159, 188; hereafter *PW*). In Blind's evolutionary model, humankind achieves "a flaming world embrace" by accessing the metrical uniformity of a "universal heart," a rhythmic beating with which every human being might sympathize (*PW* 189).

Blind did not have to look far in Darwin and other evolutionary writings of the time to justify foregrounding rhythm and meter in her own developmental narrative. Rhythm in particular marks Darwin's ideas of evolution, and especially his theories of sexual selection. The reader of *The Descent of Man* (1871) will learn of the "vibratory movement" of peacocks and birds of paradise that in the process of mating "rattle their quills together," and of the male North American grouse, who "drums rapidly" with his wings against either tree stumps or his own body so as to lure female grouses from out of hiding (Darwin 2: 61–62). To the extent that these animals rely on rhythmic patterning as part of their mating rituals, vibratory experiences enable their continued development as species. This is true, Darwin suggests, for humans as well: "the suspicion does not appear improbable that the progenitors of man, either the males or females, or both sexes, before they had acquired the power of expressing their mutual love in articulate language, endeavoured to charm each other with musical notes and rhythm" (Darwin 2: 337). Darwin consistently identifies rhythmic utterances as important substitutes for "articulate language," as when he quotes from an eighteenth-century scholar to describe the patterning of a hen's clucking: "when she has laid an egg, [she] 'repeats the same note very often, and concludes with the sixth above, which she holds for a longer time'; and thus she expresses her joy" (Darwin 2: 51). Rhythm, then, is a kind of language, one more universally accessible than written or spoken words because, as we shall see, it is felt physiologically rather than processed intellectually. Darwin recognizes the evolutionary

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importance of such physiologically experienced rhythm inasmuch as rhythm facilitates the communication required among animals for procreation.

Darwin also gestures in these descriptions toward his belief in a necessary truth to rhythmic form. We see this readily, for example, in his casual attribution of joy to the rhythmically clucking hen. Why must the cluck necessarily indicate "joy," and not, say, *relief*, or any number of other possible emotions? Darwin also assumes every hen expresses the very same emotion by way of her patterned clucking; there is a truth, according to this way of thinking, in rhythmic patterning such that a hen's clucking *will* mean the very same thing no matter which particular hen lays the egg. Such thinking on rhythm had its most vocal proponent in the Victorian literary world in Coventry Patmore. Patmore insists, for example, that "[t]he six-syllable 'iambic' is the most solemn of all our English measures"; something inherent in iambic trimeter lends itself to brooding subjects: "It is scarcely fit for anything but a dirge" (Patmore 27). Tennyson famously responded to Patmore's reasoning with his own six-syllable – but hardly solemn – iambic poem:

> How glad am I to walk
> With Susan on the shore!
> How glad am I to talk!
> I kiss her o'er and o'er.
> (qtd in Hallam Tennyson 1: 470)

Nonetheless Patmore's rhythmic logic had by the late 1850s already become a commonplace among critics of poetry, and Darwin in 1871 was just one of many to suggest that, at least among animals of similar bodily structure, rhythm communicates particular knowledge from one individual to another.

As one might imagine, Darwin's thinking here relies less on poetic theory than it does on the physiological and medical treatises to which poets at mid-century were looking for inspiration. Following from Lockean empiricism, works such as Alexander Bain's 1855 *Senses and the Intellect* argue that both thoughts and feelings arise from the rhythmic impress of the physical world on the human body.[3] In Bain's model, our ability to identify sound comes from the "discrimination by the [auditory] nerve of the frequency of the pulses or compressions given to it." The auditory nerve "propagate[s] to the brain a different form of excitement according as the beats are few or many," and depending on "extremely minute differences of pitch [that] impress themselves discriminatively on the fibres" (Bain 206). Hearing, then, results from our experience of rhythm, which tends to be experienced similarly by all similarly structured organisms. Darwin gestures to much the same point in the *Descent*: "The perception, if not the enjoyment, of musical cadences and of rhythm, is probably common to all animals, and no doubt depends on the common physiological nature of their nervous systems" (2: 333). From this perspective, the song of a sparrow will, on average, articulate a comparable message to any other sparrow, and perhaps even to other animals. According to Darwin and his Victorian contemporaries, in other words, particular patterns of stressed and unstressed – or long and short – beats translate necessarily into particular thoughts, ideas, and feelings. The clucking of a hen *will* indicate the very same joy from one hen to another, a concordance of experience made possible by all hens' comparable physiological structures.

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Blind renders Darwin's tacit argument regarding the essential truth of rhythm into a truth of poetic form, and it is to Blind's melding of poetic and evolutionary theory that we now turn. Not merely a facile analogy, the organizing, structuring efforts of poetry stand in Blind's view as crucial work in the evolution of the human race. At the very opening of *The Ascent of Man*, Blind envisions

> a rhythmical chain
> Reaching from chaos and welter of struggle and pain
> Far into vistas empyreal (*PW* 157)

– an image of steady advancement through poetic rhythm that remains an ideal both in the poem and in Blind's work more generally considered. It should be noted before proceeding that Blind diverges from Darwinian theory in her insistence on teleological progress both within the universe and more specifically human development (hence her shift to an "Ascent of Man" in place of Darwin's "Descent").[4] Though a religious skeptic, Blind had great faith in what she calls, in her commonplace book, "the righteousness of the Cosmic Order" (*CB* 36). In so taking the world's "chaos and welter" and rendering it a structured "rhythmical chain," poetry participates in a world-making process, enabling the human individual to access something of "the Cosmic Order." The "ascent of man," as Blind insistently calls it, is a movement toward form facilitated by poetic structure, and made possible by the universality of rhythmic experience.

Appropriately enough, then, the first section of Blind's *Ascent* narrates the earth's chaotic, early formation by means of strictly governed dactylic hexameter lines. Blind the poet exerts her structuring power over nature's pulsating overflow:

> Struck out of dim fluctuant forces and shock of electrical vapour,
> Repelled and attracted the atoms flashed mingling in union primeval
> And over the face of the waters far heaving in limitless twilight
> Auroral pulsations thrilled faintly, and, striking the blank heaving surface,
> The measureless speed of their motion now leaped into light on the waters. (*PW* 158)

Blind's primeval atoms of "measureless speed" fall into highly measured and exacting metrical patterns. "Auroral pulsations" of unpredictable rhythmic impulses fit within the stanza's strict metrical form; when they "strik[e] the blank heaving surface" of the hexameter line, they emerge through Blind's mediation in neatly ordered dactyls. Blind's meter echoes the Greek hexameter line as Homer practiced it (generally five dactyls followed by a spondee), thereby emphasizing the epic nature of the evolutionary scene: STRUCK out of DIM fluctuant FORces and SHOCK of eLECtrical VAPOUR. The narrative continues:

> And lo, from the womb of the waters, upheaved in volcanic convulsion,
> Ribbed and ravaged and rent there rose bald peaks and the rocky
> Heights of confederate mountains compelling the fugitive vapours
> To take a form as they passed them and float as clouds through the azure[.] (*PW* 158)

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Blind has much to say about such convulsive, ravaging phenomena, what she calls in an essay on Darwin and Shelley "the irresponsible forces of Nature." The work of evolution, she argues, involves subjecting unruly instinct, or natural disorder, to disciplined control: "turning these elemental forces, that filled [humankind's] progenitors with fear and terror, into the nimblest of servants," and ultimately allowing for "higher stages of moral and mental development" (*Shelley's View* 19). One sees the possibility for such work in the "fugitive vapours," from the lines quoted above, that by chance "take a form." So too, through a combination of happenstance and conscious labor, Blind imagines the human species evolving toward ever higher levels of moral and intellectual sophistication through the imposition of or accession to formal structure.

In Blind's *Ascent*, the first human enters the scene notably devoid of metrical regularity:

> And lo, 'mid reeking swarms of earth
> Grim struggling in the primal wood,
> A new strange creature hath its birth:
> Wild – stammering – nameless – shameless – nude;
> Spurred on by want, held in by fear,
> He hides his head in caverns drear. (*PW* 163)

Uncoincidentally, the wild and stammering rhythms of Blind's fourth line interrupt an otherwise consistent iambic tetrameter stanza, with graphic dashes highlighting the rhythmic breaks; this "new strange creature" has yet to learn its position within a metrically ordered universe. Only after considerable development – after learning how to manipulate fire and to grow crops of food, for example – does the human race begin to discern structure behind the apparent chaos of nature:

> For Man, from want and pressing hunger freed,
> Begins to feel another kind of need,
> And in his *shaping* brain and through his eyes
> Nature, awakening, sees her blue-arched skies;
> The Sun, his life-begetter, isled in space;
> The Moon, the Measure of his span of days;
> The immemorial stars who pierce his night
> With inklings of things vast and infinite.
> All shows of heaven and earth that move and pass
> *Take form* within his brain as in a glass.
> The tidal thunder of the sea now roars
> And breaks symphonious on a hundred shores;
> The fitful flutings of the vagrant breeze
> Strike gusts of sound from virgin forest trees;
> White leaping waters of wild cataracts fall
> From crag and jag in lapses musical,
> And streams meandering amid daisied leas
> Throb with the pulses of tumultuous seas. (*PW* 169; emphasis mine)

From the sun and the moon humans learn to determine periodicity, through which metrical oscillations the natural world begins to make formal sense. The breaking of the sea on the

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shore, for example, now seems a rhythmic movement within a grander metrical scheme. The throbbing stream echoes the pulsing rhythms of the "tumultuous seas," and an ordered metrical structure governs what had at first appeared fitful rhythmic motions. "Periodicity," writes Alice Meynell in a nearly contemporaneous essay, "rules over the mental experience of man" (*Rhythm* 1). So too for Blind, human life is necessarily a metrical experience.

In Blind's *Ascent*, however, this necessary periodicity does little to save humankind from a history of passion and violence, and the poem proceeds for several hundred lines recounting, among other brutal historical episodes, the fall of Rome and the Reign of Terror. Even with a "shaping brain" and an understanding of natural order, "the spasm of life" still wrests control from the human species (*PW* 182). That is, uncontrolled rhythmic impulses reign supreme, even in the face of persistent resistance from art. Poets in particular, and perhaps inevitably given Blind's metrical predisposition, represent the highest stage of development away from unruly spasm, and it is through their verses that the latent order of the universe ultimately comes into greatest focus:

> But see, he comes, Lord of life's changeful shows,
> To whom the ways of Nature are laid bare,
> Who looks on heaven and makes the heavens more fair,
> And adds new sweetness to the perfumed rose;
> Who can unseal the heart with all its tears,
> Marshal loves, hates, hopes, sorrows, joys, and fears
> In quick procession o'er the passive pages;
> . . . . . .
> The poet, *in whose shaping brain*
> Life is created o'er again
> With loftier raptures, loftier pain;
> Whose mighty potencies of verse
> Move through the plastic Universe,
> And *fashion* to their strenuous will
> The world that is creating still. (*PW* 186; emphasis mine)

In so "fashion[ing]" the universe through metrical order, the poet reconfigures the heavens and the earth. Indeed, Blind's poet assumes messianic proportions as she enables through the work of rhythmic "shaping" an entirely new experience of the world. Shelley, the poet Blind most admired, had of course trumpeted a similar vision of the poet as world-maker in his 1821 *Defense of Poetry*. Not only are poets in Shelley's view the unacknowledged legislators of the world, they work by way of "a certain uniform and harmonious recurrence of sound . . . which is scarcely less indispensable to the communication of its influence, than the words themselves" (Shelley 484). Like Blind, Shelley believes in a necessary "truth of things," and a connection between such "truth" and the "harmonious and rhythmical" nature of poetry (Shelley 485). But Blind, building on Victorian physiological science and evolutionary theory, takes Shelley one step further in her insistence on the physiological, bodily foundations of rhythmic "truth" and experience. Whereas Shelley describes the poet bringing new light to the world – "enlarg[ing] the circumference of the imagination by replenishing it with thoughts of ever new delight" (Shelley 488) – Blind conceives of this poetic enlightenment as a physiological experience enabled by the revitalizing forces of

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rhythm and meter. Through its rhythmic fashioning, poetry will bring about the ultimate "ascent of man," the "loftier raptures, loftier pain" by which humankind will realize its place in the world.

Blind's theory of poetry, and especially the messianic overtures of the *Ascent*, should be seen as part of broader cultural efforts in the nineteenth century to counteract through art the horror many Victorians discovered in evolutionary theory. Grant Allen's 1877 *Physiological Aesthetics*, for example, anticipates Blind's work by locating in aesthetic structure a reasoned space from which to confront the exigencies of a brutal and unpredictable natural world:

> Man stands to-day, as he never stood before, face to face with the naked realities of nature. Solitary in a boundless universe, alone on a little isthmus of historic time between the vast sea of vague geological aeons and the unknown future of cosmic cycles, he finds himself awe-struck and ignorant, ready to fall prostrate before the terrible forces of nature, which work out unswerved their fatal will in apparent disregard of his happiness or misery, of his prayers or imprecations. (277)

Like Blind, Allen looks to physiological experience to concretize a life otherwise "prostrate" to "the terrible forces of nature." Published in the anxious wake of Darwin's *Descent*, Allen's *Aesthetics* avoids poetry offering only "a rambling, disconnected stream of 'spasmodic' images," directing readers instead to works of aesthetic wholeness in which the poet "has gathered together, as in a treasure-house, all that is glorious and beautiful, without and within, in the boundless universe or in the soul of man." It goes nearly without saying that in a study of *physiological* aesthetics, such wholeness relies at least in part on "the spontaneous choice of a metre that harmonises with [the poet's] theme" (Allen 281, 283). Much as Darwin recognizes the importance of "vibratory movement[s]" among peacocks and grouses, and Alexander Bain details the body's reliance on rhythmic patterning for sense perception, Allen and Blind after him concentrate on the centrality of metrical periodicity to human life, and they promote aesthetic works that resonate sympathetically with that necessary periodicity.

Allen and Blind of course were not alone in this endeavor to move beyond rhythmic spasms and toward metrical regularity. From the early 1850s, the height of the so-called Spasmodic movement in poetry, unregulated rhythmic impulses had been associated with cultural instability.[5] Darwin's contributions to late-Victorian cultural thought only aggravated what had already been established as a fundamental tension between spasm and meter, and this tension plays out in poetry and poetic theory across the Victorian *fin de siècle*. For example, Alice Meynell's poetic ideal, which seems very much akin to Blind's, follows the Spasmodic model of seeing poetry as relying for its greatest effects on the physiological experiences of the human body (Sydney Dobell, in a characteristic Spasmodic gesture, had written that poetry "is actually in tune with our material flesh and blood" [Dobell 22, 25]). Meynell idealizes such a Spasmodic "vital union," as she calls it, of "mind and body, where tidal thought and feeling are quick with the blood and various with the breath of life" (Meynell, "Coventry Patmore" 96).[6] And yet Meynell, like Blind, also requires "an explicit code of literary law" to govern these "tidal" thoughts and feelings inspired by poetry (94). Edmund Gosse likewise writes in 1877 of the need to "make immortal art out of transient feeling," to bring a "constructive power" to bear on eccentric and spontaneous human experiences (Gosse 53). This project of emphasizing the "constructive power" of poetry is for Gosse, as for so many of his day, both an aesthetic and a cultural project, and the significance

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of Darwinian evolution to his thinking must not be underestimated. Blind herself ends the *Ascent* contemplating humankind's rhythmic positioning in the universe:

> Moments, years, or ages passed, when, lifting
> Freezing lids, I felt the heavens on high,
> And, innumerable as the sea-sands drifting,
> Stars unnumbered drifted through the sky.
> Rhythmical in luminous rotation,
> In dædalian maze they reel and fly,
> And their rushing light in Time's pulsation
> In his passage through Eternity.
> . . . . . .
> Still new vistas of new stars – far dwindling –
> Through the firmament like dewdrops roll,
> Torches of the Cosmos which enkindling
> Flash their revelation on the soul. (*PW* 215–16)

Most urgent for Blind and her contemporaries seems to be whether such rhythmically inspired revelations will ultimately be made part of human experience, or whether humans will be doomed by and large to wander through fits of irregular, destructive spasms. In the section that follows we shall explore Blind's apprehensions of a world in which rhythmic patterning often fails to fit comfortably within metrical forms. The spasmodic, unpredictable, and often injurious work of rhythm takes on especial weight for Blind with respect to women, who seem in her view not to sympathize as readily with established metrical patterns, and to suffer disproportionately for their lack of metrical synchronicity.

II. Lyric Spasms

Blind's most explicit delineation of the conflict between individual rhythmic spasm and sympathetic metrical regularity comes not in her poetry, but in her 1885 novel *Tarantella*. It is to this somewhat anomalous work, then, that we turn before addressing the trouble with rhythm in poetry from Blind's later period. It will be immediately apparent that, as suggested in the work of Darwin, Bain, Allen, and others, much of the point of *Tarantella* is to demonstrate that rhythm and meter perform important functions beyond the confines of poetry.

Blind highlights the dangers of unmeasured rhythmic exuberance through the figure of Antonella Mansi, a young woman from Capri who dances the wildly fantastic tarantella that gives the novel its title. Antonella enters her dancing with "a convulsive tremor." The violinist who accompanies the young woman's dance finds himself "almost involuntarily [striking] an impassioned *allegro*," after which Antonella loses all restraint in her performance:

> Fear, love, anguish, and pleasure, seemed alternately to possess her mobile countenance. Her face indicated violent transitions of passion; her hands appeared as if struggling after articulate expression of their own; her limbs were contorted with emotion: in short, every nerve and fibre in her body seemed to translate the music into movement. (*Tarantella* 1: 167–68; ch. 15)[7]

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Another scene of Antonella's dancing points more directly to the spasmodic and uncontrolled nature of her movements. One imagines this dancing could not possibly fit within a standard measure, but instead strikes out haphazardly against the regular flow of metrical beating:

> her limbs, her features, nay, her very eyebrows, seemed convulsed with emotion, then with abrupt, violent gesticulations, with quivering lips, with heaving bosom, with head thrown back in passionate self-abandonment, chaunting fragments of a wildly trilling melody, she treaded the bewildering figures of an intricate and mysterious dance. (1: 32; ch. 3)

Much as Antonella allows her passion to overflow, seemingly, the confines of her physical being, those around Antonella become caught in her web of enthusiasm. The violinist reports in a later scene being "swept away against my better reason by a tumultuous emotion" (1: 186; ch. 16) and transported "by a sudden fit of passion" (1: 193; ch. 17). This rhythmic experience works notably against "better reason" and the kind of shaping, controlling mind Blind celebrates in the *Ascent*. Antonella's dancing seems more a return to the convulsive and chaotic fluctuations of the earth's early formation, before "the righteousness of the Cosmic Order" asserted its governing presence.

Blind offers in her novel a contrary model for rhythmic expression in Mina Lichtenfeld, a young German girl who sings ballads "in a low, sweet voice that had an indefinably plaintive ring" (2: 78; ch. 33). Mina's music inspires communal sentiment much like a performance earlier in the novel that sways "a mass of people . . . by one common emotion" and provokes Mina's townspeople to "realize the solidarity of those human units, each of which, bent on its individual desires, aims, and passions, seems often so indifferent, alas! even so antagonistic, to its fellows" (1: 80; ch. 8). Mina, in other words, stands for the kind of sympathetic rhythmic experience that Darwin describes as part of sexual selection and that Bain finds in basic patterns of sense reception (sound waves striking the ear, for example). Whereas Antonella's spasms promise only estrangement, Mina's ballads intimate a "harmony with universal law" such as that Blind associated with her friend Mazzini ("Personal Recollections" 702).[8] Blind argues throughout her literary career that to succeed evolutionarily requires identifying and articulating those individual rhythmic qualities that fit into the grander metrical form, the "universal law," rather than yielding to spasmodic individualism.

But it is not always easy to resonate with "universal law," and much of Blind's poetry highlights the difficult tensions between rhythm and meter, between individual experience and the ordered structure of the surrounding world. We see this at first in the struggles Blind pictures in the *Ascent* as sonic dissonance:

> Through the unhinged door's discordant slamming
> Ring the gruesome sounds of savage strife –
> Howls of babes, the drunken father's damning,
> Counter-cursing of the shrill-tongued wife. (*PW* 209)

Slamming doors, crying children, and verbal abuse, conjured in part by the stanza's cutting alliterations, all help cast a skeptical eye on the place of rhythmic communication – Darwin's "articulate language" – in modern human civilization. What once appeared as patterns of sympathetic rhythmic beating now manifest as violent interactions, miserable cries,

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aggressive shouting. Blind emphasizes such savage discord even more in her 1891 collection of dramatic monologues, *Dramas in Miniature*, which focuses in particular on the effect of rhythmic spasms on modern women. The poems detail the experiences of destitute women: mothers separated from dying children, girls forced by economic necessity into lives of prostitution, women gone insane and forcibly removed from those they love. The tragedy of these women's lives comes less from their own capitulation to rhythmic individualism, though this is important, than it does from defective social structures, the failure of human communities to provide a sympathetic "world embrace" within "universal law" like that fantasized in the more optimistic moments of the *Ascent*. Whereas Blind's evolutionary narrative found metrical order for the "dim fluctuant forces and shock of electrical vapour" that comprised the earth's earliest moments, the poet seems at a loss to accommodate in regulated meter the spasmodic fluctuations of women in the modern world.

Blind brings into focus the modern deficiency of sympathetic embrace in the first poem of the *Dramas*. "The Russian Student's Tale," a dramatic monologue spoken by the eponymous Russian student, narrates the young man's seduction and betrayal of an impoverished woman. When the woman admits to having turned to prostitution to avoid starvation, the student is distraught and sympathetic: "A sob rose to my throat as dry / As ashes" (*PW* 226–27). And yet the student abandons the woman, refusing to take on the social stigma tied to fallen women. Predictable as it is in terms of Victorian social conventions, Blind's tale distinguishes itself through the song of a nightingale the student overhears at intervals throughout his narrative. The nightingale, it becomes clear, is a figure – as constructed by the student – for the abandoned young woman:

> And through the splendour of the white
> Electrically glowing night,
> Wind-wafted from some perfumed dell,
> Tumultuously there loudly rose
> Above the Neva's surge and swell,
> With amorous ecstasies and throes,
> And lyric spasms of wildest wail,
> The love-song of a nightingale. (*PW* 225)

These lines, the poem's spasmodic refrain, expand or contract rhythmically depending on the number of syllables one accords to words like "Electrically" and "Tumultuously." "The Russian Student's Tale" culminates with a variation of the refrain that marks the death of the lovelorn nightingale:

> With lyric spasms, as from a throat
> Which dying breathes a faltering note,
> There faded o'er the silent vale
> The last sob of a nightingale. (*PW* 229)

The woman thus dies, or at least she dies metaphorically, from having been abandoned by her lover, the result of both the conditions of working-class urban existence and Victorian ideals of feminine propriety.

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But let us consider in more detail the student's vision of the singing nightingale. The night glows "electrically," and the river, the Neva, surges and swells; the physical world itself seems alive with pulsing, rhythmic energy, and it is from out of these pulsing patterns that the nightingale's spasmodic lyric song emerges. If anything, the nightingale's spasms seem at one with the surrounding, pulsating world. The wind carries the song, the ecstasies and throes of which parallel and even sympathize with the surge and swell of the river. Hence the nightingale, and the abandoned woman whom the nightingale represents, embodies a kind of ideal of sympathetic vibration, as though it were connected through "universal law" to the world around it. Such a vision accords with Darwin's view of rhythmic communication, as well as with ideals of rhythm articulated by physiological theorists from Alexander Bain to Grant Allen, in which rhythm is universally understood. But the outcome of Blind's poem demonstrates the ultimate failure of this fantasy. The poor woman is abandoned, after all, not only by the Russian student, but by a culture and social structure with little room for the truly impoverished, and especially not for those who through desperation turn to prostitution. Within this structure, the young woman dies and the nightingale's passionate song "fade[s] o'er the silent vale," unheard by any who truly would sympathize, let alone help. What in earlier times may have facilitated the lyric's rhythmic transmission – its connection, say, to the natural world's surge and swell – now disables its ability to communicate among human individuals. The nightingale's spasms fail to resonate with "universal law" insofar as it now applies to the human community at large, and the lyrical bird dies.

Hard-hearted social values again come head to head with genuine feeling in "A Mother's Dream," a poem from the *Dramas* narrated by a woman who leaves her daughter, who was born out of wedlock, at a nunnery so she will not suffer from the "stain" of illegitimacy (*PW* 259). Too late, the mother repents her decision and attempts to recover the little girl from the nunnery, believing that her daughter is

> calling [out to her] without words,
> Touching her nature's deepest chords[.] (*PW* 260)

The woman reaches the convent only to learn her daughter has died and had indeed been calling for her mother as she lay on her deathbed (*PW* 264). In responding to "nature's deepest chords," the narrator accedes to what Blind calls "universal law," turning belatedly from the artificial social structures that had separated her from her daughter. Like "The Russian Student's Tale," "A Mother's Dream" calls attention to and mourns the disjunction between social forms and genuine feeling. Whereas Blind writes passionately of Shelley's ability to translate "the hidden laws of nature" into art and to communicate "thoughts [that] throb audibly through their solemn rhythms" ("Shelley" 97), *Dramas in Miniature* forcefully shows how the modern world distorts Shelley's pulsing, rhythmic "throb[s]" into destructive movements like the spasmodic jerking of Antonella's tarantella. More often than not, it seems, rhythmic pulses go awry, and women especially suffer the consequences of such failure.

Blind, however, appears reluctant to forsake entirely the experience of rhythmic spasm. Undoubtedly, she wants structured patterning that will communicate clearly, much as the "vibratory movement[s]" of male peacocks form part of an elaborate mating ritual

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clearly intelligible to their female counterparts. But at the same time, Blind demands lyric spontaneity that will, like Shelley's poetry, "penetrate . . . into the fiery depths of human passion" ("Shelley" 90). Such balanced poetry Blind finds in the works of both Elizabeth Barrett Browning, who offers "a distinctively womanly strain of emotion in the throbbing tides of her high-wrought melodious song" (*George Eliot* 7) and Arthur O'Shaughnessy, of whose volume *Music and Moonlight* (1874) Blind writes glowingly.[9] In the works of both poets, formal structure governs the excesses of lyric spontaneity; Barrett Browning's song is "high-wrought," or finely structured, and O'Shaughnessy is "a master of the formal art of poetry," his work marked by "grace of diction, and an aërial delicacy of rhythm" (Rev. *Music and Moonlight* 320). Blind turns critical when writing of poets who have mastered only one of the requisite components, form or spontaneity. With respect to Frances Kemble, for example, Blind values the poet's "rare emotional force" and "irresistible . . . directness of utterance," but she notes disapprovingly that Kemble does not "carefully and assiduously cultivate . . . [her feelings] by the labour requisite to produce every highest product of art." Kemble does not contain her passion within finely structured meters; she overflows, like the spasmodic nightingale, onto the page with a force that is both "irresistible" and troubling (Rev. *Poetic Works* 50–51). Blind cannot fully endorse Kemble's poetry, even as she also cannot approve of those poets who lose all sense of spontaneity by adhering too stringently to metrical structure. Blind suggests, for example, that George Eliot's *Spanish Gypsy* (1868) suffers from a "ponderousness of metre" (*Correspondence*; letter to Richard Garnett, 15 May 1869); "the work lacks that best and incommunicable gift which comes by nature to the poet . . . . [H]er thoughts, instead of being naturally winged with melody, seem mechanically welded into song" (*George Eliot* 223).

Any number of Victorian poets might have identified with Blind's astringent aesthetic logic, her ideal of balance between form and expression, objective sense and subjective sensibility, meter, and rhythm. Few poets, however, elaborated so compelling a view of poetry as ineluctably intertwined with cultural values, and in particular late-Victorian cultural upheaval anent the shifting landscapes of evolutionary theory. To return for a moment to "The Russian Student's Tale," the lyric spasms of Blind's nightingale suggest powerfully the post-Darwinian human condition, the state of being, in the words of Grant Allen, "[s]olitary in a boundless universe" and "cry[ing] like infants for the light" (Allen 277). At the same time, the poem's formal structure, and especially the ballad-like tetrameter couplets into which the lyric spasms fit, gestures to a cultural structure that fails, as we have seen, to redress the pain of the nightingale's suffering. Many of the *Dramas in Miniature* appear as modified ballads, part of a late-Victorian ballad revival driven especially by women poets, and Blind uses the form to critique British culture at the *fin de siècle*; more than any other poetic form, the ballad seemed to nineteenth-century readers an embodiment, or more likely a fantasy, of a unified British culture.[10] The problem with such unity, of course, rests with the ballad's inability to accommodate individual spasm, the "fiery depths of human passion" that Blind so valued in Shelley and that cannot be restricted to form, whether that form be poetic, cultural, or otherwise. The cultural structure implicit in the ballad's metrical form dooms Blind's young prostitute, even as her "lyric spasms of wildest wail" resonate so thoroughly and unambiguously with the pulsing rhythms of the natural world. "This poor lost child," mourns the Russian student, "we all – yes, all – / Had helped to hurry to her fall" (*PW* 228). Thus results the poet's near-impossible negotiation between nature and culture, spasm and restraint, rhythm and meter: "in the present state of disorganization," writes Blind, to

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quote again the poet's moving judgment of modern life, "one may be chilled to the Soul by . . . complete isolation from the pulse of a collective life." Rhythmic pulses seem not to cohere into reasoned metrical structures, and those structures that do exist seem not to account for individual rhythmic pulses.

Blind's poetic ideal thus appears always beyond reach, except perhaps *as* an ideal to which she turns throughout her literary career. In her essay on Shelley, Blind uses the Pygmalion myth to describe the perfect melding of form and passion, the ideal Shelley and few others come close to achieving:

> As it is fabled that Pygmalion was consumed by so potent a passion for the marble image that, clasping it, he mastered the cold repose of the stone itself, and won a response from its locked lips, even thus every true poet stands in his relation to Nature, and besieges her with prayers, tears, and entreaties, weary watches, and devouring aspirations, *till he feels at last the throb in the stony veins*, hears the murmur of the muffled voice, till, from the sun and the sea, the trees and beasts, yea, the very stones, there burst awful manifestations, opening glimpses, strange and sudden, into the vast dumb mystery. ("Shelley" 92; emphasis mine)

In passionately embracing solid form, the poet accesses the "vast dumb mystery" of nature, through which he converts dead matter into a living, breathing being. The idea is not to abandon form – cultural form, metrical form, the "Cosmic order" – but rather to "w[i]n a response from its locked lips," to bring life to form's "cold repose."

Such yearning for vital structure is very much the crux of the quote with which I opened this essay, Blind's speculation of 1893 that "[t]he poet only truly lives when he feels the rapture of communion; when his soul mirrored in a sister soul is doubled like the moon glassed in the Lake of Nemi." The rapture Blind so values comes by apprehending the wholeness of the moon's form, a phenomenon Blind explores more fully in a poem entitled "The Mirror of Diana" (it is from where the temple of Diana once stood on Lake Nemi's shore that one may best witness the fully doubled image of the moon on the lake's surface):

> She floats into the quiet skies
> Where, in the circle of the hills,
> Her immemorial mirror fills
> With light, as of a virgin's eyes
> When, love a-tremble in their blue,
> They glow twin violets dipped in dew.

As the moon glides into place above the lake, forming its mirror-perfect image,

> In many a burst of sweet delight
> The love throb of the nightingale
> Swells through lush flowering woods and fills
> The circle of the listening hills.

Not only the nightingale, but all of nature – glowworms, fireflies, and "all the wild wind instruments / Of pine and ilex" – seems enthralled, captivated by the moon's perfect image:

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O Beauty, far and far above
    The night moth and the nightingale!
    Far, far above life's narrow pale,
O Unattainable! O Love!
Even as the nightingale we cry
For some Ideal, set on high.

Haunting the deep reflective mind,
    You may surprise its perfect Sphere
    Glassed like the Moon within her mere,
Who at a puff of alien wind
Melts in innumerable rings,
Elusive in the flux of things. (*PW* 367–68)

The moon's rapturous form evaporates into "the flux of things," but not before inspiring an ideal vision of perfect beauty through perfect form.

An importantly similar scene of rapture, and one that further indicates Blind was not alone in her poetic thinking, marks the climax of George Eliot's poem "The Legend of Jubal," first published in May of 1870 (Blind's essay on Shelley came out in July of that year, perhaps responding in part to Eliot's poem; Blind later published the first full-length biography of Eliot, demonstrating among other things the earlier poet's influence on the young Blind). Through the passion of Jubal, the Biblical creator of song, writes Eliot,

    love, hope, rage, and all experience,
Were fused in vaster being, fetching thence
Concords and discords, cadences and cries
That seemed from some world-shrouded soul to rise,
Some rapture more intense, some mightier rage,
Some living sea that burst the bounds of man's brief age. (Eliot 10: 16)

When Jubal at last presents his musical creation to his community, they are all entranced, caught like the townspeople of *Tarantella* in a throbbing universality, an ideal of rhythmic sympathy:

        the rhythmic influence,
Sweetly o'ercharging the delighted sense,
Flowed out in movements, little waves that spread
Enlarging, till in tidal union led
The youths and maidens both alike long-tressed,
By grace-inspiring melody possessed,
Rose in slow dance, with beauteous floating swerve
Of limbs and hair, and many a melting curve
Of ringèd feet swayed by each close-linked palm:
Then Jubal poured more rapture in his psalm,
The dance fired music, music fired the dance,
The glow diffusive lit each countenance,
Till all the gazing elders rose and stood
With glad yet awful shock of that mysterious good. (10: 25)

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Jubal's music casts a "glow diffusive" on his audience, like the light Blind's moon radiates over the natural world. In both poems a rhythmic throb pulses intimately and universally – a noteworthy paradox – through all living creatures. And yet the question remains for Eliot and Blind alike whether any poet in the *modern* world might translate such passionate experience into a poetic form, might bring, as Blind writes of Shelley, "the hidden laws of nature" into art and communicate to others with "thoughts [that] throb audibly through their solemn rhythms" ("Shelley" 97).

The ideal of rapturous form, what Blind calls "the rapture of communion," fuses emotional affect with structural poetics. In so doing, it seems to access, like the song of Jubal, a physiological experience that is both individual and communal. If such an ideal remains for the most part unattainable in the modern world, much like the lovelorn nightingale's impossible infatuation with the moon, it abides nonetheless as perhaps the only conceivable reconciliation between individual spasm and universal, formal structure. In forms of rapture we may discern tangible shapes among the "dim fluctuant forces" mediating our modern lives. It is for Blind, at last, as Henry Maudsley writes in his 1870 *Body and Mind*: "No, science has not destroyed poetry, nor expelled the Divine from nature, but has furnished the materials, and given the presages, of a higher poetry and a mightier philosophy than the world has yet seen" (111). Blind makes no pretense to having achieved this "higher poetry," but her works look forward in anticipation of it. Through her ideal of rapturous form, Blind imagines a passionate synthesis of individual and community, spasm and structure, that she believes may yet be achieved.

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NOTES

This essay has benefited from comments and queries at both the "Women's Poetry and the *Fin de Siècle*" conference (Institute of English Studies, London; 14 June 2002) and the Victorian division panel on "poetesses" organized by Yopie Prins for the 2002 MLA conference in New York City. I am grateful for the many readers who have urged this project along, including especially Carolyn Williams and Yopie Prins. Thanks go as well to Marion Thain and Ana I. Parejo Vadillo, for their sensitive and insightful comments, and to James Diedrick, author of a forthcoming biography of Blind (*Exile in Bohemia: Mathilde Blind and the Culture of Late-Victorian London*), who shared with me his bibliography of Blind's anonymous publications.

1. On Blind's exposure to revolutionary politics, see Avery and Diedrick.
2. Groth's essay, "Victorian Women Poets and Scientific Narratives," is an exception to this rule insofar as it situates Blind's poetry among other late-nineteenth-century women poets who integrated scientific discourses into their poetry and poetics.
3. For a more thorough discussion of Bain and the role of physiology in nineteenth-century poetics, see my "Rhythmic Intimacy, Spasmodic Epistemology."
4. "We must remember," Darwin writes in *The Descent of Man*, "that progress is no invariable rule. . . . Natural selection acts only in a tentative manner. Individuals and races may have acquired certain indisputable advantages, and yet have perished from failing in other characters" (1: 177–78). My thanks to George Levine for suggesting to me this important – and no doubt intentional – discrepancy between Darwin and Blind.

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5. For more on the Spasmodics, see Buckley, Cronin, and Harrison. See also the special issue on *Spasmodic Poetry and Poetics* I have co-edited with Charles LaPorte.
6. On Meynell's poetic theory, see Frawley.
7. Blind responds to a tradition of women who dance the tarantella, including a scene of de Staël's *Corinne* in which Corinne dances. But Corinne's tarantella, though inspired, is always to some degree calculated and self-conscious, no matter how spontaneous it appears: "Shaking her tambourine in the air she began to dance, and in all her movements there was a graceful litheness, a modesty mingled with sensual delight. . . . Corinne knew so well all the poses . . . that, with a slight movement of the arms . . . she brought to mind the dancing girls of Herculaneum and aroused, one after another, a host of new ideas for drawing and painting" (de Staël 90–91; Book 6, ch. 1). Also calculated is Nora's tarantella in Ibsen's 1879 *Doll's House*. Nora's tarantella seems to represent both her emerging, pent-up passions *and* her conscious use of female sensibility, which she engages to distract her husband from the letter waiting in the letter-box. Antonella's dancing, on the other hand, lacks any suggestion of self-consciousness, and its danger comes precisely from this lack of thoughtful restraint.
8. Antonella's spasmodic and inwardly turned rhythmic impulses clearly represent for Blind the destructive tendency in the Darwinian struggle for existence, the "terrible and sinister side of nature" that horrifies and ultimately kills Mina with its "pitiless indifference." Mina freezes to death on a cold winter night after Antonella attempts to seduce away the violinist to whom Mina is engaged (2: 202; ch. 42).
9. O'Shaughnessy "wing[s] his words by breathing into them the soul of music" (Rev. *Music and Moonlight* 320).
10. On the Victorian ballad, see Friedman and Bratton. See too my discussion of Victorian ballad culture in "On Cultural Neoformalism, Spasmodic Poetry, and the Victorian Ballad."

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