Introduction: "Modern" Love and the Proto-Post-Victorian

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ONE EARLY THURSDAY EVENING IN 1892, KATHARINE BRADLEY RETURNED TO HER SUBURBAN HOME AND RECORDED THE FOLLOWING ENtry in the diary she shared with Edith Cooper, her niece, lover, and literary collaborator:

> Thursday evening Oct 6th 1892.
> **Tennyson is dead*. We saw it in the Underground this morning—
>
> Death
> of
> Lord
> Tennyson
> Illustrated biography
> a penny.

The news of Tennyson's death affected Bradley profoundly, propelling her back to a pastoral, "Victorian" past that seems remote from her urban fin de siècle world of the Underground and rapid-cycle tabloid news. Bradley is returned, she writes, to "days when 'The Miller's Daughter' bounded my horizons.—My way of looking at the universe was unquestionably determined by Tennyson" (Field, *Works* 5: 5).

Katharine Bradley and Edith Cooper had by this point established themselves prominently in London's literary world as the poet and playwright "Michael Field." Michael Field was known to be a protégé of Robert Browning, and by 1892 Field's identity as two women writers had become an open secret. Tennyson's death caught Bradley and Cooper at a moment of personal and professional crisis. Cooper, the younger of the two, was increasingly restless in her dyadic romantic and domestic relationship with Bradley, who was at once her aunt, her lover, her mother figure, and her literary partner. Cooper's restlessness peaked in 1892 when she fell deeply in love with the art critic Bernard Berenson; never before had Michael Field been tested as "he" was that year.

Yet 1892 was for Field a time of opportunity as much as crisis. Struggling with the strong sense that their Victorian identities were a

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relic of a past neither complete nor yet understood, the two women found themselves on the cusp of rich new possibilities. They foresaw that in this new, modern world, a woman poet—or perhaps even two women who are together one poet—might replace Tennyson as the nation's poet laureate. Melancholy as Tennyson's passing was, the future for well-regarded woman poets such as Michael Field was suddenly bright.

The six articles that follow in this *PMLA* cluster on British nineteenth-century literature share Bradley's desire to fathom a "Victorian" past in relation to emergent discourses of modernity. Like Bradley, the critics in this cluster are concerned with the dual burdens of the past—the "days when 'The Miller's Daughter' bounded my horizons," in Bradley's words—and of a future in which technology will only continue to challenge expectations of time and space, of social meaning and social roles. Daniel Siegel and Sarah Gates look to the era's future and its past, respectively, in approaching the mid-Victorian desire to mark historical change. For Siegel, Dickens's *A Tale of Two Cities*, in dialogue with D. W. Griffith's film *Orphans of the Storm* (1921), presents historical consciousness as a phenomenon of arrest, hesitation, and entrapment. Gates's Dickens, on the other hand, puts dialogic textual citation to work: Dickens, Gates argues, deploys three intertexts in *Great Expectations*—*Hamlet*, *The London Merchant*, and *Frankenstein*—to undo the stereotypes of gender and power that characterize the figure of Estella.

A third Dickens emerges in this cluster, in the work of Robert E. Lougy, who suggests that Dickens's *David Copperfield* posits a concept of evolutionary memory that shapes psychoanalytic theories of memory well into the twentieth century. Approaching Victorian realist fiction through the anthropological frame of kinship exchanges, Elsie B. Michie argues that wealthy heiresses in novels from Austen to Oliphant, including the novels of Frances Trollope and Anthony Trollope, demonstrate a powerful shift from the domestic to the economic in discourses of marriage: realist novels present and reject their heiresses, Michie asserts, in order to model the ideals of a happy marriage. Anthony Trollope again emerges as a barometer of social change in Lauren M. E. Goodlad's account of his "foreign policy." Goodlad argues that Trollope's travel writing stages a tension between rootedness and cosmopolitanism that challenges present-day theories of globalization. Finally, Andrea Henderson addresses the question of what is "real" in realism itself. The development of non-Euclidean geometry, Henderson writes, disrupts the transparency of representation promised by classical geometry—creating an instability Edwin Abbott proposed to solve through aesthetic pleasure in his 1884 satirical science fiction novel *Flatland*.

Aesthetics similarly provided Katharine Bradley and Edith Cooper a means of negotiating the densely interwoven impasses in which they were trapped in 1892. Gates argues that strategic intertextuality in *Great Expectations* offers Dickens tools for deconstructing tropes of femininity, and I would propose something similar for Michael Field. When Bradley heard of Tennyson's death, her mind leaped immediately to his 1832 poem "The Miller's Daughter." The poem recalls the origins of the speaker's love for his wife, Alice, in a bucolic, pastoral world of lost youth. It posits married love as a fusion of souls that outlasts erotic passion and supersedes worldly claims. Even so, this fantastic ideal of married unity struggles with the prospect of making one of two. The speaker describes his youthful passion in a memorable blazon:

> It is the miller's daughter,
> And she is grown so dear, so dear,
> That I would be the jewel
> That trembles in her ear:
> For hid in ringlets day and night,
> I'd touch her neck so warm and white.

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> And I would be the girdle
> About her dainty waist,
> And her heart would beat against me,
> In sorrow and in rest:
> And I should know if it beat right,
> I'd clasp it round so close and tight.
>
> And I would be the necklace,
> And all day long to fall and rise
> Upon her balmy bosom,
> With her laughter or her sighs,
> And I would lie so light, so light,
> I scarce should be unclasp'd at night.
> (1.169–86)

The beloved's body persistently exceeds its accessories—earring, girdle, necklace—and pulses independently of the lover's clutch, which clasps ever tighter. Thus, the all-encompassing logic of marital union—"True wife, / Round my true heart thine arms entwine / My other dearer life in life, / Look thro' my very soul with thine!" (2.215–18)—is both marked and thwarted by metaphor.

Tennyson's supersaturated approach to married love holds great appeal to Bradley in 1892 because of her anxiety about the threat Bernard Berenson posed to her union with Cooper. The strain nearly caused the end of Michael Field, and Bradley's fight for their union was also a fight for voice, for professional identity: it takes the two women together to give voice to Michael Field.

The year found Bradley and Cooper still reeling from the loss in 1889 of their two most direct formative influences: the "Mother-One"—Lissie Bradley Cooper, who was Bradley's older sister and Cooper's mother—and Robert Browning, their model, mentor, and conduit to the cosmopolitan world of literary culture. As a result of their double loss of mother and mentor, Bradley and Cooper were finally forced to confront each other over the meaning of their partnership. Two in one, the women had to navigate what amounted to a yawning divide between public and private, in which the distinctive private voices of two female subjects were merged publicly into a univocal male persona. Browning, for instance, saw them as two—"his 'two dear, Greek women'"—and also as one, exhorting them, as Bradley reports, to "remember we are Michael Field" (Field, *Works* 2: 4, 5). Indeed, the semantic tension between plural and singular emblematized in the statement "we are Michael Field" was both pleasure and distress to Bradley and Cooper in the early 1890s.

During this period, Cooper struggled with the loss of her mother. This was an ambivalent undertaking for her: she loved her mother but viewed mother worship as a trap imprisoning her in the role of docile Victorian daughter. On 12 January 1892, her birthday, Cooper gives voice to her ambivalence, writing, "[T]his is Field—his Confession":

> After tea my Love [Bradley] & I have a great love & talk of the past & of the Beloved Mother-One—of how we miss the greatness of her nature, the dramatic impulse she gave to our work. . . . Life is so much less worth living since she left us—I would give up Italy, travel, pictures to have her back . . . & yet there is one thing that makes me pause in my passionate desire—she did not understand my need of freedom, she bound & overawed me where I wanted to be free and personal. Such an influence is a crime against me. . . . [The Beloved Mother-One] understood an artist's inspiration—she could not understand an artist's temperament. . . . What a divine blessing it is to me to have my Love, who checks no self-expression, who brings beauty to my eyes, & gladness to my life, who loves me & whom I love with strenuous force, that is half-hidden by our caresses & humorous names, & utter familiarity! (*Works* 5: 12v–13)

This passage is a map of Cooper's efforts toward differentiation, and not just from her mother. Notwithstanding the "Beloved Mother-One," Cooper also struggles to separate from Bradley, who was her mother's sister, and the "utter familiarity" that is the stuff of her everyday life. Aunt, lover, and literary collaborator, Bradley was a grossly overdetermined figure for Cooper.

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Sensing Cooper's restlessness, Bradley sought to squeeze her beloved ever tighter, like the lover in Tennyson's poem. It was Bradley's habit to provide an annual summary of events and circumstances in each year's 31 December entry of the Fields' shared diary and on 1 January, to open a fresh notebook to catalog aspirations for the years ahead. In these entries and elsewhere, Bradley displays a rhetoric of relentless sameness. "Puss and I are knit up into one living soul," she writes on 31 January 1891; returning to her old stomping ground in Cambridge, she muses proudly, "I return a poet and possessing a Poet" (*Works* 4: 15). In September 1892 during a solo trip by Cooper to Scotland, Bradley writes of Cooper, "[It] has been good for [Cooper] to live & breathe alone. . . . But it is most better when we are together. Oh that we may be more & more together, closer, growing into one" (5: 136v).

Increasingly, however, Cooper proves a vexingly elusive love object for Bradley, and in 1891 and 1892 Cooper's relationship with Berenson threatened to take the Michael Field dyad into uncharted waters: from the endogamous feminine world of mother/daughter/aunt/niece to masculinized exogamy, from sapphism to heterosexuality, and from the "Victorian" to the "Modern." For Bradley and for Cooper, these new elements were inextricable, the portents of exogamy, heterosexuality, and modernity negotiated all at once. As she prepares to commemorate the Mother-One's deathday in 1892, for example, Bradley worries, "We who are growing close to the Modern are we growing further away from her?" (135v). In July 1892 Bradley and Cooper wrote directly to each other on the same page of their shared diary. Threatened by the loss of love and art at the hands of Berenson, Bradley uses her favorite male nickname for Cooper, pleading, "Oh Henry, Henry, my Boy, let us cleave to art—with a small a, & grow toward life as toward the sun, not rend our path toward it." In response, Edith Cooper moves to reassure Bradley. She does so in profoundly ambivalent terms:

> I am without my Love [Bradley], in the twilight, when at the best one is sad to death. She is in Oxford—I am here a fragment. But I love my Art & will not dare to injure it—I love my own Love & could not do violence to her or myself—so let her not fear. . . . I will never go off to the hills like Agave only to rend my own flesh & blood—my artistic personality. I die in the presence of the force I love—the man's [Berenson's]. There is no fellowship, no caress, no tight winding-together of two natures, no tenderness when [Bradley] is severed from me; and there seems to be no life in people—no life to be got anywhere—if one is withdrawn from [Berenson]. So I sit by my table doubly dead. (134)

Bereft of Berenson, Edith Cooper is condemned to double death in the sepulchre of an Art that is inseparable from her "own Love," Katharine Bradley. Quite unusually, the remainder of the page on which this entry appears is torn out, a fragment lost to history.

The bargain the Michael Fields made in July 1892 preserved their love in homage to their "Art." In exchange for Cooper's double death, Bradley somewhat reluctantly agreed to join Cooper in an attempt to "grow toward life." Bradley makes a pact, in other words, to strive toward the modern and to situate their bond as "lovers and poets evermore" in a newly outward orientation ("It Was"). In October of that year, on the evening of Tennyson's funeral, Bradley writes, "And so closes the Victorian epoch—an epoch of yesterday: it is for us, England's living & yet unspent poets to make all things new. We are for the morning—the nineteenth century thinks it has no poets—nothing to lose—verily it has nothing: for we are not of it—we shake the dust of our feet from it, & pass on into the 20th century" (*Works* 5: 140).

Thus, "The Miller's Daughter," a poem from the epoch of the First Reform Bill, was on Katharine Bradley's mind during this fin de siècle week. Tennyson's poem presents married love as a fusion of souls and marriage as an institution far sturdier than any worldly

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or erotic considerations. Still, the poem's lover struggles with the central metaphor of Victorian marriage: the metaphor of two in one, by which two individuals are merged as a single—and male—subject. This metaphor is significant in every way for Michael Field. And, indeed, Bradley and Cooper retooled their partnership for the twentieth century, exploiting the metaphor by using Michael Field to turn one last great Victorian institution, the institution of marriage, against itself.[1]

In July 1897, alone in a mountainside meadow in Switzerland, near the spot where Edith Cooper's father had plunged to his death in a walking accident just weeks before, Katharine Bradley and Edith Cooper exchanged rings and married each other. Cooper wrote, "We sit down, our feet buried in sweet willow-herb & there plight the troth of our fresh life together—a life that springs from the deep tragedy we have shared from its brim to its hollow" (*Works* 11: 96v). They marked the occasion in their shared journal with a cutting of sweet willow herb plucked from the site. Over the corpse of the dead father, over the corpse of Tennyson and the Victorian epoch, over the corpse of the dead mother, and in repudiation of the threat that Berenson posed to their union, the two women joined themselves in marriage. In the months that followed, they reveled in decorating their first home together, at No. 1, The Paragon, in the suburb of Richmond, and in discovering a new, postdaughterly identity for themselves.

As Michael Field, Bradley and Cooper had always put to use one persistent if contested logic of the Victorian marriage: the subordination of a woman's personhood to a male social identity. Like other woman writers, the two women used their male pseudonym as a Trojan horse, as a passport to an elite circle of cultural production. In the 1890s, however, following their struggle with the singularity and the distinctiveness of their identities, Bradley and Cooper found a new social mobility by realizing, in Michael Field and in the conduct of their domestic and literary lives, the metaphor of marriage. By doing so, they inverted the conventional wisdom about the effects of marital domesticity on women. And even as they bid Tennyson farewell, the Michael Fields appropriated Tennyson's most powerful metaphor in "The Miller's Daughter": in homage to the "true wife," they knowingly marked both the power and the limits of their social and artistic identities as women and as a writer.

Note

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