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## INTRODUCTION

# “Axial in the Spin of Life”

### *“Axial.”*

THIS IS A story about two women who had a great deal to say, in a world that was not yet ready to hear them. It is a story about two women who were in love with an idea about life lived so artfully that it became an act of artistry itself, and who worked to translate that vision into something bold and lasting for the world. Yet it is also a story about entangled family ties, ones the two women cherished deeply but that threatened to smother their artistic vision and their most intimate selves.

So, they fought. Their pen was their sword: together, the two women published eight volumes of poetry and twenty-seven plays. Together, for nearly three decades, they kept a diary, where, across twenty-nine volumes and 9,500 handwritten pages, they wove entangled narratives of desire, art, sex, and death; of loves requited and unrequited, of loneliness and joy; of family, celebrities, and deities; of books and bills, carpets, dresses and hats, rings, forks, sugar tongs, plates, trains, wallpapers, mirrors, book-cases and caskets, soup, eggs, and tobacco; of poetry and more poetry, and paintings, and beautiful flowers; and, of course, always, dogs.

One diary, two women. Day by day, year by year, between 1888 and 1914, Katharine Bradley and Edith Cooper spun a narrative of events great and small, public and private, aimed at once outward and inward. Bradley and Cooper called the diary *Works and Days*, and they referred to it within the narrative itself as the “White Book,” reflecting the tall, cream-colored foolscap notebooks they used to write most of this book (fig. 1). Bradley and Cooper intended the text for posthumous publication and secured arrangements for conveying its manuscript to executors and archives, and thus to readers in a future they would never know. What did they imagine

those future readers would make of their narrative? What did they hope to convey to us about the two complex voices they figured? *Works and Days* is a diary that breaks almost every formal convention known to diaries, including presumptions of privacy and singularity in the writing process: that is, the convention of a diary as the vehicle for one person alone to record events and reflections about everyday life. Framed instead by two voices, *Works and Days* stages an extended dialogue internal to a pair of writers and lovers engaging sensitive questions of beauty, desire, and fame. While the diary is certainly full of the stuff of everyday life, it is equally introspective, delving deep into the private thoughts and conflicts of each of the two narrators. For that matter, it is intraspective as well, focused on what happens between the text's two voices when they find each other on the page. The two narrative voices fragment across time, uncannily sensitive to the historical past, intensely anxious about what the future will bring and where they might stand within it. Strung tight between yesterday and tomorrow, Bradley and Cooper write a present pregnant with urgency, from which they feel displaced, unseen, and often out of step. "So every hour is under ideal claim," wrote Cooper in 1907. "[W]hat is simple, what is axial in the spin of life I am training to set my hours to."<sup>1</sup>

How, Cooper wonders, might she put each hour to use on behalf of life's axial principles? As an accounting of works and of days, *Works and Days* presents a reckoning of the two, inviting its readers to contemplate the role of time in doing; in the case of Cooper, doing the work of poetry. The question of time is not incidental to Bradley and Cooper as writers of the English fin de siècle as the nineteenth century, and with it the big themes of change and progress that conceptualize the "Victorian," careened toward the twentieth century and the mystery and promise of modernity. Bradley and Cooper lived and died and wrote their way across the line that linked the nineteenth century and the twentieth, that divided Victorian literature from modernism. Central to my work here is the claim that the massive, multiplot narrative of *Works and Days* negotiates forms of transit between centuries: the channel from past to future routed through a present that seems to the writers as strange as the writers themselves seem to the people around them, relative to the forms and conventions that shape women's identities, sexualities, voices, and stories in the fin de siècle.<sup>2</sup>

*Works and Days* is the subject of this book, and its formal experiments in presenting the lives of its central subjects the focus. I track the narrative Bradley and Cooper built to carry all their stuff and ideas along as they traveled from the familiar Victorian world toward an unknowable

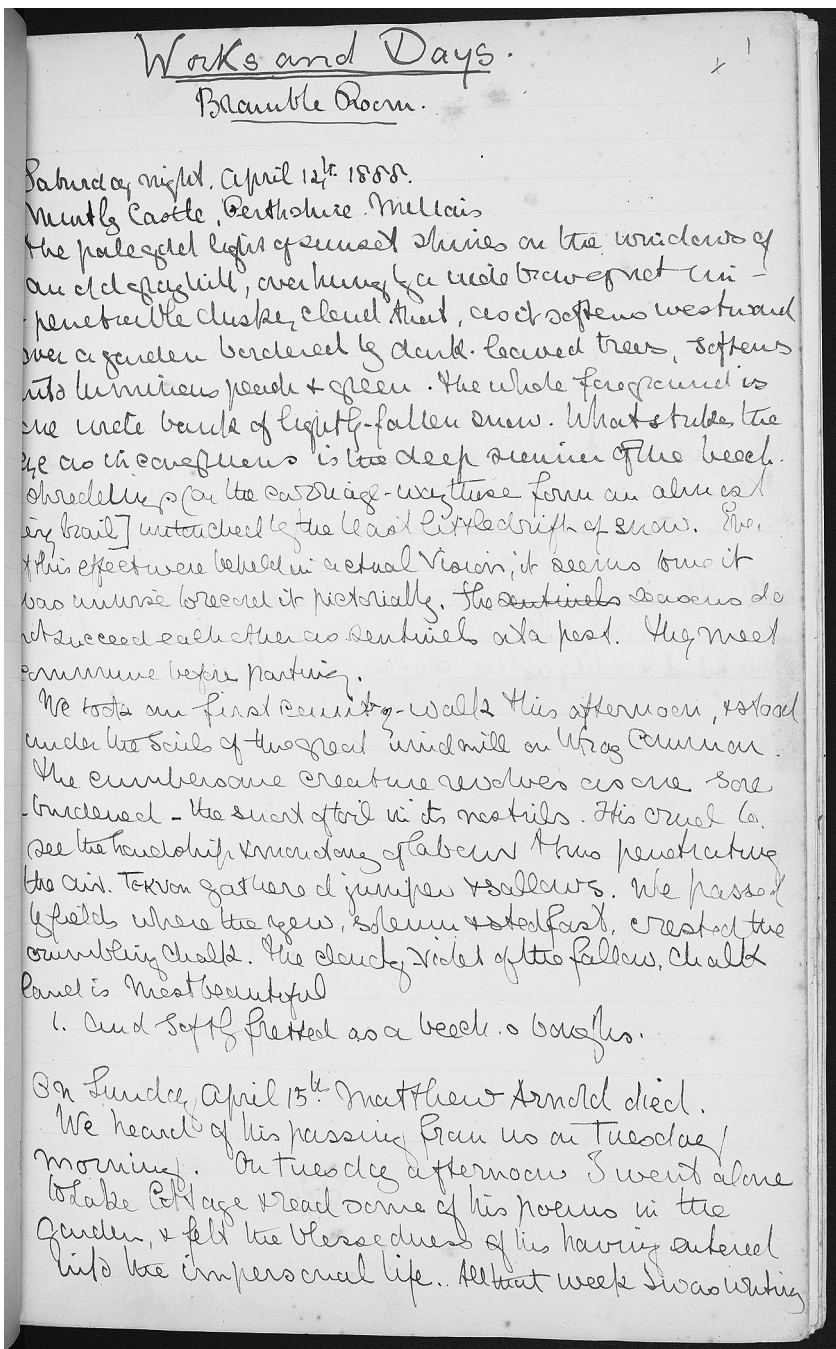


FIGURE 1. Katharine Bradley titles the *Works and Days* project in red ink on the first page of the first volume she kept with Edith Cooper (1888, 1r, KB). © The British Library Board, ADD MS 46777: Vol. 2 (Apr. 1888–Dec. 1889), 1r.

future, from the past that they cherished into a new century that left them by turns apprehensive and ambitious. In the chapters that follow, I link *Works and Days* to another unwieldy, prosy Victorian literary form: the novel. Of the many ways to approach a text such as *Works and Days*, I have chosen to dive deep into six of its volumes—1888, 1892, 1897, 1899, and 1906–7—in order to show Bradley and Cooper at work, shaping the narrative through distinctively novelistic strategies. I have asked *Works and Days* questions, and sought its answers, through methods more typically addressed to Victorian novels, and particularly those written by women such as Bradley and Cooper, who wonder about the standing of ordinary female lives measured against the sweep of history. In the conclusion to *Middlemarch* (1871–72), George Eliot’s narrator has the last word about the novel’s protagonist, Dorothea: “[T]he effect of her being on those around her was incalculably diffusive: for the growing good of the world is partly dependent on unhistoric acts; and that things are not so ill with you and me as they might have been, is half owing to the number who lived faithfully a hidden life, and rest in unvisited tombs.”<sup>3</sup> In *Works and Days*, Bradley and Cooper signal their dissatisfaction with the “hidden life” and “unhistorical acts” to which intelligent women such as Dorothea are consigned. They issue an invitation to us on behalf of a more audacious story: they aspire to heroism, to romance, and, not least, to historical significance.

More than a century after their deaths, Bradley and Cooper have entered the literary canon, but not yet for the magnificent literary achievement *Works and Days* represents, nor for the vivid stories we find on its pages. Bradley and Cooper made their mark in the 1890s as a distinguished poet called Michael Field, author of those published volumes of poetry and verse drama. That “Michael Field” was the pseudonym of two women writers was an open secret after the early, heady days of his career, thanks to an indiscretion on the part of Robert Browning (fig. 2).<sup>4</sup> Yet to this day, Michael Field’s remarkable diary remains largely unpublished. It is widely acknowledged to represent an original literary achievement in its own right, but the diary is still primarily known to the community of scholars who have made their way to the Manuscripts Reading Room of the British Library following a new surge of interest in Michael Field that bracketed the centenary of his deaths in 1913 and 1914, respectively.

Two women writers, twenty-nine volumes, a single narrative. Considered as a landmark literary work, *Works and Days* reads like the great unknown novel of the nineteenth century—or better, the living record of the transition from a Victorian worldview to a modernist one, from



FIGURE 2. A photographic portrait of Michael Field, likely taken in Birmingham in the early 1890s. Mark Samuels Lasner Collection, University of Delaware Library, Museums, and Press.

George Eliot to Virginia Woolf.<sup>5</sup> Viewed as a coherent narrative, *Works and Days* challenges our understanding of women's voices, their passions and their worldly ambitions, and the formidable challenges they navigate as they engage with a rapidly changing world. Behind the curtain that the literary character “Michael Field” provided them, Bradley and Cooper were aunt and niece. They were also an intimate couple through the 1880s and beyond, until Cooper's death in 1913 and Bradley's a few months later in 1914, both from cancer. “Katharine became to Edith everything one woman can be to another: mother, aunt, sister, friend and, eventually, lover,” writes Marion Thain in the first full-length study of Michael Field.<sup>6</sup>



In *Works and Days*, Bradley and Cooper write a narrative for Michael Field across several decades of desire matched with frustration. Keen appreciation for their poetry yields to negative literary reviews, and ultimately to public indifference to their published work. Cooper's passion for her own personal Rochester, the art critic Bernhard Berenson,<sup>7</sup> gives way to humiliation in the wake of his cruelty, and ultimately to his attentions elsewhere. Beloved parents and pets die. Friends drift away. Michael Field become increasingly idiosyncratic and increasingly isolated.

Versions of these and many more expansive narratives find life in *Works and Days*.<sup>8</sup> Exposing the pretense that a diary is a private domestic document, Bradley and Cooper left posthumous instructions to Thomas Sturge Moore, executor of their estate, to deposit the diary—which they describe as an “unpublished manuscript”—in the British Museum.<sup>9</sup> Following the instructions in Bradley's will, Sturge Moore published a volume of excerpts from *Works and Days* in 1933, a book that shaped perceptions of Michael Field as onlookers rather than contributors to late-Victorian literary culture. “With all their conventionality,” Sturge Moore writes in the editor's preface, Michael Field “are simplicity itself, as open as children.”<sup>10</sup>

I disagree. Read on its own merits, *Works and Days* emerges not as the wistful tale of sidelined femininity found in Sturge Moore's framing but as a strong, purposeful intervention into the art world Bradley and Cooper observed so perceptively. Michael Field knew what they were doing when they wrote this book; indeed, they frequently drafted their diary entries elsewhere before writing fair copies in the notebooks themselves. The “craftedness” of the text shows even in its orderly physical appearance.

Angela Leighton characterizes *Works and Days* as full of “gossipy energy and wit.” Thain describes the text as a “well-written and carefully-crafted literary work.”<sup>11</sup> Following their cue, I present *Works and Days* here as a monumental experimental work of late-Victorian and early-modernist British writing: in both formal and thematic terms, *Works and Days* is strong, complex, and literary. Far from the unassuming diary of two spinster “wannabe” poets trapped on the edge of the literary mainstream, Michael Field's massive prose narrative is a time machine engineered to challenge our ideas about women and voice, about family, love, sex, and art in the Victorian fin de siècle. I do believe that Sturge Moore was right to note the writers' “conventionality.” Unlike Sturge Moore, however, I believe that Bradley and Cooper used conventions—social and literary, spatial and temporal—as forms that gave them cover to explore topics and modes of expression that were exceptionally difficult, especially for literary women.<sup>12</sup>

## “Enwombs.”

*My gift from Michael is Placidia—the satinwood chest that enwombs  
Works and Days.*<sup>13</sup>

—EDITH COOPER, *WORKS AND DAYS*, 1904

Well known now as a poet and a verse dramatist, Michael Field are not writers often associated with prose. Yet, “The simple answer to the question ‘What did Michael Field write?’ is—everything,” write Thain and Vadillo.<sup>14</sup> As gifted, energetic Victorian women who had access to education and to an income sufficient to secure them time and private space, Michael Field produced an enormous amount of writing of all sorts. They were doubtless proudest of their published poetry, whether lyric or dramatic. As close and thoughtful followers of the aesthetic movement, for Michael Field poetry was the highest of the literary arts; they quite deliberately styled their shared identity with the signature “poet.” The association with aestheticism provided Bradley and Cooper resources for formal experimentation; as Talia Schaffer has argued, aestheticism offered women writers empowering tools: “[I]ts elaborate language allowed them to write the pretty visual descriptions that critics liked, yet it was also avant-garde enough to permit a new range of daring topics. Aestheticism let women articulate their complex feelings about women’s changing roles, and thus it tended to attract precisely those writers whose gender ideas were in flux.”<sup>15</sup> Michael Field understood formal and linguistic experimentation as one way of achieving such a combination of literary appeal and innovation, of putting new forms (and old language) to work refashioning familiar stories. In an 1892 letter, Bernhard Berenson wrote to Michael Field: “The reasons for not writing Elizabethan verse nowadays are manifold. To begin with, Christ who had a fine palate in wine tells us not to put new wine into old bottles. I need scarcely tell you, that you directly were foreseen in that command, the new wine being the new spirit, and the old bottles being the Elizabethan rhymes, vocabulary and turns of phrase.” Alex Murray and Sarah Parker argue convincingly that Michael Field acted in strong response to Berenson’s judgment, shifting the purpose and intention of their formal experiments: Michael Field deliberately pour their “archaic” language into bottles shaped for—and by—the contemporaneous moment. Michael Field wrote a prose play in 1892, unfortunately lost to us now, titled *Old Wine in New Bottles* (1892, 135r, KB; emphasis in original; see fig. 6).<sup>16</sup> From here forward, form’s the thing for Michael Field, their vehicle to link the past and the present to the future.



Michael Field's legacy of "new bottles" is vast. Within Michael Field's prose archive alone, *Works and Days* itself dominates if we measure by mass alone. Beyond the scope of the diary, thousands of Michael Field's letters—some fraction of what they produced in life—remain on deposit at the Bodleian Library, the British Library, Villa I Tatti, the Houghton Library, the University of Delaware, and elsewhere.<sup>17</sup> In about 1882, Cooper rewrote the conclusion to Hawthorne's *House of the Seven Gables*.<sup>18</sup> A number of Michael Field's short stories survive, cataloged as undated manuscripts among their "miscellaneous papers" in the Bodleian. Bradley and Cooper grouped two batches of those stories formally as collections.<sup>19</sup> As all of this suggests, Michael Field are prolific writers of narrative prose, as well as important and increasingly canonized poets.

Edith Cooper (1862–1913) was born and raised in a household that included her mother's sister, her aunt, Katharine Bradley (1846–1914). The fifteen-year age difference between niece and aunt belied the intense closeness that developed between the girl and the woman as Cooper entered her adolescence.<sup>20</sup> By the time Cooper was in her twenties, the women had invested their primary affective devotion in each other: they were committed within an intense emotional and physical dyad that they described explicitly as a marriage. Indeed, Michael Field were even "closer married" than their fellow poets, Robert and Elizabeth Barrett Browning, by their own reckoning: "those two poets, man and wife, wrote alone; each wrote, but did not bless or quicken one another at their work; we are closer married."<sup>21</sup> Theirs was no ordinary marriage but a partnership that "quickenened" with the figure of Michael Field.

*And then we buy flowers—and the man looks as if he were entertaining angels that would stay or at least return—four bunches of fresasias, four of anemones, and a love-knot of Neapolitan violets—We have to return ^travel^ part of the way home third-class—and ^to^ know the separate existence of each penny in our purses.*

—EDITH COOPER, *WORKS AND DAYS*, 1899

The name "Michael Field" serves as a new bottle for several serious complexities of gender and voice. Take, for example, a male nom de plume that seems more challenging somehow than those of the Georges, Sand and Eliot, and other transgendering women writers of the time. Michael Field's pen name introduces the familiar gendered pronoun challenge: he or she? But "Michael Field" also goes the transauthorial tradition one better, introducing what Holly Laird calls new "pronomial problems" of singular and plural: Is Michael Field a he? A they? Two shes? Which is less

odious, a singular proper name and plural verbs and pronouns: Michael Field are women writers? Or the plural “Michael Fields” with matching collars and cuffs: the Michael Fields write Sapphic poetry?<sup>22</sup> To approach “Michael Field” as one’s critical subject is to grapple with his/her/their foundational unspeakability, the essential (and I do mean essential) challenge Michael Field pose to language and meaning. Should Michael Field’s reader take the straight and narrow approach of making an inherently imperfect choice and sticking to it? Or capitulate, as I have, to the more playful practice of mixing Michael Field’s pronouns and numbers as the moment seems to warrant?<sup>23</sup>

More serious still than pronomial trickery is the devilish ideological trap Bradley and Cooper set for feminist thinkers a century hence. When we default to “he,” are we participating in the erasure of talented women writers? If we consider Field not as male but as a proxy for two women’s voices, are we erasing those women’s strategic appropriation of male social authority in poetry and beyond? To talk about “Michael Field” at all is to find oneself mired in imperfect, offsetting choices about language and gender, with the recognition that linguistic imprecision—and the brutal ineffability of gender itself—is the point. Even in name only, Michael Field were writers in a fruitfully adverse relationship with the very medium of their artistic practice. Michael Field were also writers who fielded constant criticism that their language did not sound right; that it was archaic or Elizabethan or somehow ill fit to the moment. “You have a tendency to use ‘art’ words, or shall we say ‘slow’ words, when the quick common words would be better, more nimble and more intense.”<sup>24</sup> This uneasiness—relative to language, relative to conventions literary and social, relative to gendered authorship—is central to the most challenging aspects of Michael Field’s work, and to the great artistic experiment they left to us in *Works and Days*.<sup>25</sup>

The diary takes up the complexity of voice differently than literary texts published by Bradley and Cooper as Michael Field. Throughout *Works and Days*, Michael Field looms large. He is everywhere, a figure of and for professional authorship. He is also a token of mutual affection between Bradley, who boasted “Michael” among her many nicknames, and Cooper, often known as “Field,” among her many nicknames.<sup>26</sup> As a signifier of the women’s union, the equation Michael + Field equals the coverture of their “closer married” voice, their married name, with a typical Michael Field twist; as Laird writes, “The pseudonym of Michael Field clearly enabled them to play a game with sexual as well as literary and gender identities. Like Eve’s fig leaf, it became a sign that pointed to even as it concealed their transgressions.” Virginia Blain describes the Michael

Field signature as a “security screen,” protecting private dynamics and contestations behind it. For Ruth Vanita, “The male pseudonym was . . . not just a ruse to forestall male [critical] bias. It was also . . . part of the erotic charge between the two women. They continued to write under this name long after their identity was well-known and used it in private interaction too.”<sup>27</sup>

In contrast to the public and published figure of Michael Field, poet, however, the voices—plural—of Bradley and Cooper are entirely distinct from one another in *Works and Days*.<sup>28</sup> As long as we read *Works and Days* from or in reference to its manuscript, Michael Fields’ very different handwriting makes it entirely clear which of the narrators is “speaking” at any given moment. In their published work, their authorial voices stand as one, and male. In *Works and Days*, they are emphatically two: two voices and two bodies, figured in and by two hands. They are two writers sharing notebooks (and a bed, a life, etc.), rather than one male author standing in for two women writers, that is, two female poets writing about aesthetic subjectivity in a male voice.<sup>29</sup> Two very different people, not one, encountering each other as much in tension as in unity. If the published work of Michael Field is where the poets experiment with the marriage of voices, *Works and Days* instead displays their differences and invites a distinctive approach to understanding the incorporation of those differences under the figure of Michael Field. Blain states the case directly: “They lived together, worked together, wrote together, holidayed together, slept together, were converted together, and almost died together, in what seems a perfect orgy of togetherness; yet they were never simply one person. In fact, they were two quite different people, with quite different poetic talents and impulses.”<sup>30</sup>

And then there is the question of sexuality. As a mostly committed, emotionally codependent, usually bed-sharing couple, Michael Field has long been claimed by feminist, lesbian, and queer critics eager to trace the epistemologies of same-sex desire that survived closets and other masquerades. Bradley and Cooper absolutely belong in this rich, important line of critical inquiry; indeed, Laird takes this suggestion further, writing: “Field in fact anticipates the feminist, historicizing scholar, the scholar who seeks representation of women and gender in the fracturing mirror of past texts in order to put the fragments together in her own documents.”<sup>31</sup>

Less often pondered, however, is the incestuous nature of Michael Field’s lesbian coupledness: two women, aunt and niece; in Thain’s formulation, all that two women can be to each other.<sup>32</sup> This is as important as, if not more important than, Michael Field’s same-sex marriage

to the challenges they faced socially and psychologically, and to the challenges they present as powerful writers. My point has nothing to do with moral judgment about an erotic arrangement. It has to do, rather, with the structural enclosure of both Bradley and Cooper in an endogamous or centripetal marriage plot, depending on whether we borrow a metaphor from anthropology or physics.<sup>33</sup> This is a marriage plot that stays in the domestic sphere of girlhood, and that does not, that will not, that cannot betray a girlhood family by choosing something or someone else. It is orbital to the family of origin, and it is the source of ambivalence—rich passion and poetic inspiration crossed with frustration—expressed by Michael and especially by Field in *Works and Days*: "I am reading Gustave Flaubert's *Correspondance* [*sic*]. He is so like me, he excites by similarity—as two flints make a spark. He gives a sense of space to imagination—language takes deep breaths of air" (1893, EC). "Sameness" was the axle of devotion for Michael Field, almost to the very end. It provides a vocabulary for the narrative of Michael and Field: as women, as lovers, as members of the same family, as one author. Sameness is also the frame that Cooper uses to test the world for affective alternatives. When she falls deeply in love with Bernhard Berenson, for example, Cooper consistently cites Berenson's familiarity—indeed, the twinship of his soul and hers—to define the exceptionalism of her unrequited love. In 1895, she writes, "A kind of recognition of the dearness of identity—that is such a terrible power of attraction in Bernhard" (1895, 54v, EC). In 1901, "the most wonderful day in my life. That exclamation from him and me of *the same, the same*" (1901, 89r, EC; emphasis in original).<sup>34</sup>

Arguing that post-Victorian readers understand endogamous or incestuous plots differently than Victorians did, Mary Jean Corbett makes a case for the importance of "historiciz[ing] and re-theoriz[ing] the intersecting elements of the family-sex-marriage triad, making space within it for alternatives to the dominant story of the exogamous heterosexual plot, the triumph of companionate marriage, and the installation of the nuclear family as a hegemonic institution."<sup>35</sup> *Works and Days* benefits from Corbett's historical project. For in the narrative of Michael and Field, the poets put into play a series of very different affective allegiances that create a marriage plot that both cites and departs from the conventions of the form. For example, as it is expressed in literary conventions of heterosexual marriage, Victorian womanhood is founded on a form of disloyalty, which Ruth Perry describes as the "reassign[ment] of family loyalty from . . . consanguineal kin to a new conjugal family."<sup>36</sup> Michael Field, in contrast, stand firm in his/her/their loyalty to the nuclear family, however

ambivalent. In 1901 on Midsummer's Day, as she reflects on the anniversary of her father's death four years earlier, Cooper strikes the analogy of her own father and Oedipus:

[Michael] has read to me the call of Aedipus at Colonnus—how he heard the Zeus of the Shades and spoke to his heavily-tasked children that ^the^ most magnificent word ^justification^ an old man cd have spoken—that one little word, *Love—his Love*—atoned for all they had had to bear in tending him. What sureness in the quality of what he gave—he, white-headed and pleasurable no more. *We have experienced that ^such^ love; its loss has cast us afar from the race of men, for none they ^of them^ could never ever have that kind of love in their hearts or in their eyes for us, while we live.* (1901, 79v, EC; emphasis mine)

Cooper has experienced the love of her father as second to none: it can be matched by no other love a mortal might offer. The place of love in her life, as in her narrative arc, is thus retrospective, focused on the family of origin; it cannot be prospective. There is no possibility of a new or different or future love for her, for Michael Field.

That Michael Field understand exogamous marriage as a betrayal of existing bonds emerges explicitly when their friend (and later literary executor) Thomas Sturge Moore shares news he believes will “hor-rify” Michael Field: that he is engaged to marry his cousin, Marie Appia. Cooper writes: “It is a shock . . . and for Ricketts! It breaks up the little celebrate [*sic*] company—we lose a friend for no man who is married can be a friend; the old wine is not for new bottles” (1903, 91v, EC). Clearly the “little celebrate company” led by Ricketts has provided a stand-in for another (ostensibly, but not actually) celibate company, the nuclear family, equally betrayed by Tommy's infidelity in the name of heterosexual marriage. Reaching for their familiar aphorism of wine and bottles, Michael Field refuse—for now—flexibility in response to Tommy's betrayal of his queer family of origin.

Michael Field are not ignorant about the implications of their choice: they have opted out of exogamous social and erotic circulation. By opting out, they have foregone a set of transactional conventions available to Victorian women by means of that circulation.<sup>37</sup> Though Bradley and Cooper have made a bonded commitment to each other, that bond remains within the family of origin rather than breaking through its walls to form a new, separate family. In *Works and Days*, Michael Field write about the feedback loop of the family of origin, of a story that begins and ends with that first loyalty, instead of marking its progress through departure. The sustenance

of erotic coupledness within that first family is at the heart of Michael Field's conception of poetic and artistic achievement. But it is also at the heart of what they experience as a deeply gendered sense of stasis and frustration.

*Yesterday I was holding the ^whole^ Times in front of the fire in Michael's bedroom: there was a bright stab at it inside, and the whole mass was flame between my hands. The moment was perilous [. . .] With shovel and tongs and most deliberate movements at last I got the flashing heap on the top of the fire and breathed ^again.^ I even trembled for half an hour after. How near one is to death among common movement. Time, there is no need we should recognize this, Death should be out of sight behind a blood-red curtain, that life may dance and be healthy: but only a gray veil is between us and we always see the menace that should be thickly hidden—therefore we halt or falter ^trip^ in our steps measure and are languid.*

—EDITH COOPER, *WORKS AND DAYS*, 1899

*Works and Days* is a handwritten text featuring not one but two versions of Victorian women's handwriting. The feeling of immanent connection to Bradley and Cooper is inescapable when holding each notebook, reading casual notes and drafts of poems, coming across saved flowers, clippings, postcards, or photos, and reading thousands of entries in the two women's scratchy hands.<sup>38</sup> A contemporary reader cannot help but notice that Cooper and Bradley were not only the authors of this text, but also, given that each presumably read everything the other wrote, they were the text's first reader(s) as well. Here we see Bradley and Cooper navigating the dynamic of two-in-one, or one-in-two, in yet another way. Conventionally, a diary entry might be presumed private to its author. Is the text of *Works and Days* best read as a private dialogue between Michael and Field, between Bradley and Cooper? But—what about me? How do I fit in here? Am I, as the reader of *Works and Days*, an intruder, an interloper? A transgressor into the spaces and pages of the most intimate of relationships? Or a participant in the dialogue, in this marriage of two minds and hands?

A visit to Germany in 1891 shifted Cooper's perspective on the erotic possibilities of triangulation. Michael Field undertook their European adventure as preparation for their book *Sight and Song*, the volume that attempts to realize in poetry "what the lines and colours of certain chosen pictures sing in themselves"; Bernhard Berenson directed these early efforts in connoisseurship.<sup>39</sup> While Michael Field were in Dresden, Cooper became terribly ill with scarlet fever. She was hospitalized and, while separated from Bradley, received care from "Schwester," or "Sister," a nurse



who developed a passionate attachment to Cooper. In a signal of the discombobulation between Michael Field, Cooper later transcribed in the notebook Bradley's contemporaneous impressions: Bradley looks on as "Sister kisses [Cooper] with a kiss that plunged down among the wraps" (1891, 105v, EC). And again, Cooper records Bradley's impression: "Pussie wakes from its 'lye' and rings for Schwester, who comes straight to grasp and kiss. She is like one who has been in a desert, who finds an oasis and simply throws himself down and drinks. The wrinkles of the worn peasant flesh were ^are^ felt by P against her cheek—the kisses are almost too rapid to have an aim; her eyes, over-ful of love, ~~could not~~ ^cannot^ bear to meet [illeg.] her beloved's—she buries her sight in deep anguish against P's face" (1891, 108r, EC).

Note that Cooper has intervened in the diary entry above: as she does frequently throughout this period, she takes a pencil to the page and changes past-tense verbs to present. Here again the diary itself mediates between Michael and Field; on this occasion, Cooper's editorial intervention enhances the felt immediacy of the episode. When Cooper speaks for herself of her own experience, she describes what she calls Schwester's "assault" in rather remote, abstracted terms:

While my Love is, by chance, *fort*, sister assaults me with a gt. love in bed—kissing me on the lips and breast, gathering my limbs in her arms as if veritably I were a child under its Nurse's or Mother's handling. She would embrace "die ganze Edith." In this love there is the fearful passion of mere severance—and the still more fearful passion of unsatisfied senses in a strong nature. Last of all she lay looking into my eyes—"die hello Augen"—as if to learn how long they could be true. (1891, 113v, EC; emphasis in original)<sup>40</sup>

Speaking in her own voice as she speaks in Bradley's, Cooper seamlessly translates Schwester's assault further into the idiom of family: from sister to mother to passionate lover reflects a flexibility familiar within the Bradley-Cooper household.

In the real time of her hospitalization, Cooper was delirious, yet nonetheless narrated her remarkable fever dreams in the pages of the notebook after the fact. And where was Bradley in all of this? Sidelined, to be sure. Frustrated. And yes, jealous to be banished to the remote end of the hypotenuse, the away side of the *fort-da* game. Cooper reports, parenthetically interrupting her transcription of Bradley's perspective: "(My love was a little jealous, standing tearful that Nurse should have forestalled her on my lips. . . . but I know whose kisses were vernal—not received for what had

been, but for what would be. Still the motherliness in the wonderful passion of Nurse's gave me delight)" (1891, 105v, EC). The Dresden episode awakened in Cooper a new sense of her autonomous power to command and repel motherly/sisterly passion. With this awakening came a new dynamic in the relationship of Michael and Field: while Bradley oriented herself toward Cooper, Cooper oriented herself outward toward other social and erotic possibilities. The crisis also produced a new (gender) identity for Cooper; as Bradley writes at year's end: "Illness has made [Cooper] sweeter, younger, more a child. Heinrich has been born" (1891, 161v, KB). Cooper retains the nickname "Henry" or "Heinrich" from the moment her hair was shorn in the Dresden hospital until the end of her life. Along with her new name, Cooper transformed from a woman of twenty-nine to a new role, a beautiful young boy who aged over the decades no more than Dorian Gray. As Martha Vicinus argues, in fin de siècle lesbian culture, and in Michael Field's work in particular, young boys wielded a formidable erotic power, a "protean nature [that] displayed a double desire—to love a boy and be a boy."<sup>41</sup> Like Freud's little grandson in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920), Heinrich masters the dynamics of *fort* and *da* to resolve ambivalence and gain sexual agency relative to mothers, fathers, and others; for Michael Field as for Freud, Eros and Thanatos are never far apart.<sup>42</sup>

As the example of Schwester demonstrates, Michael Field expressed their commitment as a couple, to herself and to each other, through a series of long-term experiments with triangulation. A number of "thirds" commanded their attention over the years. Prominent among them were Bradley's sister/Cooper's mother, known as "the Beloved Mother-One"; Robert Browning, known as "the Old" or "the Old Gentleman"; Bernhard Berenson, known as "the Doctrine"; and their beloved dog, known as Whym Chow, memorialized in a fuzzy russet volume of elegiac poems as the "Flame of Love."<sup>43</sup> We might even think of poetry itself, and *Works and Days* itself, as spaces that bring Cooper and Bradley together to establish perspective on their twoness. And, of course, hidden in plain sight is Michael Field himself/herself/herselves/themselves, the third name that is one speaking for two. Each of these triangles refers back to the drama contained in the Cooper family of origin, and all of them play to the audience of the Father: seeking attention, approval, validation, education, and love from an elusive, intensely powerful, paternal figure.<sup>44</sup>

*I walk round the great weedy garden of nasturtiums, and leave Chow in the garden, the rabbit in his hole. I come in: I look forth—Chow and the rabbit are one—Chow pecks, the rabbit rolls, and Chow pecks again. I run*

*forth, I shriek, and chase. He locks and closes again, and again—Finally  
Edith extracts and exalts the rabbit apparently lifeless. [. . .]*

*Slowly my boiled blood cools; we set set the rabbit up under shelter  
of shavings [. . .] But the Chow! The incident has made a man of him. I  
shall never forget the air with which he dashed in, and drank water, like a  
young hero who flings aside his casque and refreshes himself.*

—KATHARINE BRADLEY, *WORKS AND DAYS*, 1902

*Rudyard Kipling's rabbit died on Monday—slain by Michael Field's  
Chow. He was but a white lump by our flaming little Minister Whym—but  
I am sorry death came so leisurely.*

—EDITH COOPER, *WORKS AND DAYS*, 1902

“Marriage is an eternal triangle,” writes Claude Lévi-Strauss, “not just in vaudeville sketches, but at all times, and in all places, and by definition.”<sup>45</sup> Michael Field triangulate through us as well: in Michael Field math, I or you play an important, even perhaps a constitutive, role. Far from serving an intrusive function, the reader of *Works and Days* is the audience that commands the tension of witnessing, that in turn affirms the coupledness of Michael Field. They need to be seen to be believed, and under those terms they invite us in. Reading Michael Field’s 1892 poem about Giorgione’s *The Sleeping Venus*, Hillary Fraser writes, “The body of Venus, who has fallen asleep after pleasuring herself, is appreciatively described by the poet-lovers. ‘No one watches her,’ they write. And yet of course *they* watch her, and through them so do *we*.”<sup>46</sup> Just as Fraser watches Michael Field watch Venus, I watch Michael Field drafting their readers into the conspiracy of triangulation and desire, implicating “me” or “us” in their ways of looking, wanting, and being. The text models the same pattern of emotional, erotic consolidation that Bradley and Cooper seek in the relationships they explore in its pages. We, as their readers, are as much part of the action as the Beloved Mother-One, the Old, the Doctrine, and the dog.

As each of those visitors to the Michael Field dyad doubtless experienced, Cooper and Bradley were challenging individuals. The passages above describe the poets’ celebration of Whym Chow’s bloody slaying of Rudyard Kipling’s pet rabbit during an afternoon visit in 1902. In 1901, Charles Ricketts wrote in his diary, “To the Michaels. The older one spread about her at times a stifling exhalation of sentimentality, cant and nagging femininity. One is astonished how the younger one has kept her wits and a great measure of perception and delicate response.”<sup>47</sup> Writing about Michael Field in 1936, Logan Pearsall Smith tells a story of the poets’

visit to the home of his sister, Mary Costelloe Berenson. There, Bradley and Cooper admired a picture by Charles Condor: "Michael Field, finding that the forms and movements . . . expressed in a way they felt unique the inspiration of their life, decided that it belonged to them; and when they left the cottage they took it with them and hung it in their Richmond home. They perpetrated this appropriation in pious obedience to that law of possession, which, inscribed in Heaven, if not on earth, decrees that objects of beauty belong to those who love them most."<sup>48</sup> Later in life, Smith regretted his callow insistence that the poets return his picture, that "I had not proved myself a more obsequious courtier of these bewitched Princesses, these inspired, autocratic, incredible old maids."<sup>49</sup>

True to its authors, the diary, too, is challenging. The texts' physicality is equal parts forbidding and enticing, which seems just right for Michael Field. Reading them in manuscript form is by turns thrilling, boring, and impossible; indeed, sometimes all three at once. It can be impossible to decipher a word or phrase. I find Cooper's handwriting—and to be honest, her insights—far more accessible than Bradley's. (I have been known to step out for fortifying coffee before diving into a section of Bradley's pages.) The writers were neither systematic nor predictable in their organization of individual entries nor of the books as a whole. Some volumes are dominated by one narrator's voice, others by a more-or-less equitable division between the two. Some volumes include pages upon pages of thoughts about paintings and sculptures;<sup>50</sup> others delve into deepest private emotions, wants, or needs. Some are funny. Some, inscrutable.<sup>51</sup>

The book is formidable in its format: thirty or more (depending on how we count) tall, thick, bound notebooks filled with page upon page of handwritten reflection. It is thrilling to feel the weight and texture of the paper on which Bradley and Cooper wrote, to see marginal comments or corrections in very light pencil—Cooper might have been in love with Berenson, but it took her a very long time to spell his name as he did—and to notice handwriting grow messy in cases of distress or grief, to come across tearstains on pages describing deaths. A feeling of closeness to the hands and bodies of Bradley and Cooper is inescapable when handling their manuscripts. Reading their words in their own handwriting on their own pages makes the reading process intimate and personal; there is nothing abstract about language nor poetic figuration here. To read *Works and Days* is to be fully implicated in a physical relationship with the writers who are using *Works and Days* to fathom, among other things, their physical relationship; as Simon Reader writes, "reading materials in or close to the hands of these canonical figures involves getting close to their

bodies and how they carried them.”<sup>52</sup> Yet as enthralling as this text is, in both its media and its content, it is also enervating. At times, it requires contortionate physical acts relative to the page to read without provoking the ire of the Manuscripts Room’s watchful librarians. I fully believe that the reader of *Works and Days* has a great deal in common with those who encountered its challenging authors in life.

Temporality is also uniquely complex here, given the diary form of *Works and Days*. Cooper and Bradley usually, though not always, write as they go.<sup>53</sup> Those occasions when they write retrospectively are fairly contemporary to events described, such as when they save up entries about trips or events until their return.<sup>54</sup> Yet the historical reader has some information that the authors lack. For example, when I read the 1889 volume from beginning to end, I was fully aware that the Beloved Mother-One would die on August 20, an event dreaded by, but not unexpected to, our poet. Unlike Michael Field, however, I knew that Robert Browning would die, too, in December; to Michael Field, this was a devastating surprise. Their reader a century on has information about certain landmark events—what happened to Oscar Wilde? What was the outcome of the Boer War, which transfixed the poets for quite some time? When did Queen Victoria die? Did Michael Field ever achieve the fame they sought?—that unfold in the work’s “real time.”

That reader also understands the critical legacy of Michael Field; she understands not only that Michael Field are interesting to readers today but how Michael Field are interesting. I am sure Bradley and Cooper would not have anticipated queer theory; judging from their response to the first edition of *The Yellow Book* (“We have been almost blinded by the glare of hell” [1894, 37v, EC]), they would have been quite horrified by it. Yet Michael Field are important to queer theory, and queer theory is important to them. What would they think of my own efforts to read *Works and Days* in the context of fiction, in order to illuminate something important about the voices and lives of Victorian women? “What if the archive refuses our entreaties for transhistorical communication?” asks Melanie Micir. “What if our would-be subjects turn their backs on us? What if they refuse our touch?”<sup>55</sup> I believe I know Michael Field well enough (at least in my own imagination) to be sure that they would be interested in, and certainly pleased by, the attention I am giving them here. But ultimately, I believe that they would discover me to be missing the point, they would take umbrage over . . . something, and they would move along, because that is what they did with stunning consistency throughout their lives.

The text of *Works and Days* is widely variable in its structure and form, with the exception of an important artifice involving the calendar. Just as the almanac form serves Djuna Barnes in the *Ladies Almanack* (1928), Michael Field's diary mode hangs Michael Field's formal and narrative experiment on the reliable scaffold of the year.<sup>56</sup> As a diary, *Works and Days* is governed by the concept of the one-year cycle: usually, though not universally, Cooper and Bradley open a book on January 1 and close a book on December 31. Typically, they use New Year's Eve entries to reflect back on the year gone by and New Year's Day entries to document their hopes and aspirations for the year to come. Entries for December 31 and January 1 appear in different volumes of the work, and they differ dramatically in tone. Their emotional heat tends to differ as well, with December in the more elegiac mode and the next morning's entry more concerned with beginning the world. In 1902, for example, Cooper expresses the oppressive nature of the year's potential: "The ritual of New Year's Day is the reception of dividends, the burning of rubbish, a raw state of mind, a body lax with vigil—a sense of fetters clanking round a womb with child—the iron of temporal circumstance noisy even around ^above^ the foetus of a year. I hate the day—It is abominable" (1902, 4v, EC). Though only a single night's sleep over the new year divides the tropes of retrospect and prospect, the poets labor to differentiate them as sharply as possible: "How we loved one another then [. . .]—the year before we entered the Catholic Church. Out with thy tablets, truth: we have never loved each other since, as then—" (1914, 7r-7v, KB).

The poets' conversion to Catholicism in 1907 caused them to reflect on the mode of temporality the diary has offered them over the years. On January 1, 1908, for example, Cooper describes the women as newly "free from temporal control" because "one's supernatural year has begun a month earlier than New Year's Day"—even as she marks that freedom by hewing to the tradition of opening the Year Book with anticipation of the worldly year to come (1908, 1r, EC). Much later in the same volume, Cooper writes, "I have left my White Year Book for the Divine Office—my Time has been learning to work in chains" (1908, 195r, EC). Cooper is newly conscious of the claims of the Divine Office to organize Michael Field's time differently: "Now the Office is become sweet as the winning of Daily Bread, and we feel superannuated, like retired bread-winners, if we have been so industrious as to leave nothing to do after breakfast. With the Office one leads the inner life of the Church, even of the Holy Mass itself" (1908, 195v, EC). Yet the "White Year Book" remains the container



for this new “inner life of the Church” that Cooper attempts to embrace. Regardless of variations in their mode of temporality, the diary is remarkably persistent as the tool Michael Field use to give voice and form to their shared reality.

Bradley and Cooper develop a certain cadence to each year’s volume, framed between January 1 and December 31. In any given year, including 1908’s *Divine Office*, they typically mark the seasons, and especially the advent of spring. Michael Field are attentive to birthdays and to the wedding anniversaries of close family members such as Cooper’s parents and Bradley’s parents. Conspicuous within each year is the intensive attention to death anniversaries, with rituals that include altars of flowers, portraits, and artifacts dedicated to the lost loved one—especially Emma Bradley Cooper, who was Cooper’s mother and Bradley’s sister: “the Beloved Mother-One.” Many years Michael Field make note of specific Christmas presents exchanged and silly games played on Christmas Eve with the servants. One year, they underscore with some sadness that such activities are no more than a pretense.

*If, ten years ago, I cd have seen my lovely old rooms, my glowing bits of satin-wood, my darting and lustrous river, my long-bodied hound, and cd have known I had all these things, with the complete fellowship day and night of my Beloved, a joy almost too terrible in bliss would have been over me—and now it is within, ^it is^ of my heart, it is my very life. And My gratitude is commensurate with my joy. And next Census—will it find us by our River? I believe it will find us together and that is enough to satisfy all hope.*

—EDITH COOPER, *WORKS AND DAYS*, 1901

Bradley and Cooper make efforts to be forward-looking, or prospective, in the pages of this text. But both psychologically and formally, they fight a tendency toward retrospection: psychologically as Victorian women attuned to the immanence of loss; formally because a diary tends to operate most vividly as a recording device for what has happened lately. Cooper and Bradley were tethered to the current events around them: they marked significant public deaths, including those of their dear friend Browning, Tennyson, and Queen Victoria. They followed the career and trials of Oscar Wilde, and Wilde’s imprisonment and death. They looked on with envy and some bemusement at the prominence of other women writers such as Olive Schreiner and Vernon Lee. As the 1890s went along and the turn of the century loomed large, Bradley and Cooper became more explicitly thoughtful about the end of the nineteenth century—and

hopeful about their own relationship to "modernity" in the twentieth.<sup>57</sup> "[W]e trust to unite two centuries in our work," Cooper protests to Charles Ricketts when he expressed his intention to remain firmly rooted in the nineteenth century, at a dinner just before the new year 1901 (1901, 5r, EC). The poets proudly filled out their 1901 census form from their own home at 1 Paragon, Richmond. They listed Cooper as head of the household (1901, 45v, KB and 49v, EC). On August 25, 1914, a few months after Cooper's death and days before her own, Bradley wrote: "Europe is seething in blood. On August 5th England de-clared war" (1914, 34r, KB).

Yet, *Works and Days* is not a record of the events and concerns of daily life. To be sure, daily life intrudes, sometimes spectacularly. I went to the journals first in search of quotidian details of housekeeping, finance, transport, planning, and so on—details, in other words, of how a queer couple managed the particulars of the everyday—but did not find much of this at all. Michael Field record some gossip but not a great deal. Rather, the work is psychological and introspective: Who are these women against the great backdrop of poetry in particular and art more broadly? What are the transcendent qualities to which they aspire? How do these aspirations relate to the reality checks of everyday life—including checks to Michael Field's artistic and romantic dreams? And to Cooper's? And Bradley's?

### *"Derogate."*

*What games we have by our bed-room fire at night!*

*We lie in our bed, read proofs and poems, and stick roses in our ears.*

—KATHARINE BRADLEY, *WORKS AND DAYS*, 1897

Henry James once described Victorian novels as "large loose baggy monsters," a description I take seriously to consider what was afforded Michael Field by the vast scope of *Works and Days*.<sup>58</sup> Baggy monsters provided writers such as Charles Dickens and George Eliot with a certain formal capacity—comprising, literally, an enormous swath of cognitive and textual space—to work through complex representational questions.<sup>59</sup> Yet, as internally diverse as vast Victorian multiplot novels are, they remain unified formally by important literary conventions: expectations of narrative voice, of time and space, of authorship. At the most literal level of their materiality, Victorian novels are unified by conventions of publication: a binding or bindings in the case of single- or triple-deckers; authorial signature and mode in the case of serial publications.

"The nineteenth-century novel was one of the most important cultural sites for representing and shaping desire, affect, and ideas about gender

and the family,” Sharon Marcus writes in her pathbreaking book about women’s relationships with women in Victorian England.<sup>60</sup> As one such relationship narrative, *Works and Days* provides Bradley and Cooper with the capacity, realized across thousands of pages over cycle after cycle of years, to work through their exploration of gender, love, and art, of the challenges women face when they attempt to claim voice or sexual agency or both, and of how elusive the plot of one’s own life can seem. *Works and Days* shares many material and formal conventions with Victorian novels. It is massive. It is complex, or, if you will, baggy, albeit in an aesthetic cognitive wrapping. Its volumes appear serially and clad in uniform bindings. The text’s two narrators glide seamlessly between modes of objective observation and those of subjective psychological conflict. *Works and Days* observes internal codes of seriality; each part tracks the familiar narrative arc of beginning-middle-end. The text marks narrative benchmarks of female identity, including love, lust, loss, ambition, authorship, marriage, domesticity, and motherhood—and also puzzles over its uneasy relationship to such powerful concepts. It observes larger, overarching codes of narrative unity: the narrators’ voices are stable, even as the narrators themselves change dramatically over time, independently and in relation to each other. Figures of time and space remain formally constant throughout the text, though variable and wildly complex in their particulars.<sup>61</sup>

To think about *Works and Days* as something like a novel opens up new ways of thinking about how literary forms such as novels afford their readers templates for organizing their perceptions of the world, and making meaning of the patterns they recognize. The experiment also yields a new perspective on Michael Field as an author concerned to participate in this work of “representing and shaping desire, affect, and ideas about gender and the family,” in Marcus’s terms. We also gain a new way of understanding Michael Field as an important figure in the transition from Victorian to modernist literary fiction,<sup>62</sup> even as I note that as a proud and serious poet, they would not thank me for this description. In his own contemplation of the transition from Victorian to modernist narrative forms, Joseph Allen Boone thinks about E. M. Forster’s claim that we read novels in order to experience “[the] secret life each of us lives privately.” He continues: “This interest in the privately lived ‘secret life’—what Woolf calls ‘the privacy of the soul’—is of course a hallmark of the modernist turn to modes of interior representation, . . . [of] those novelistic experiments that have attempted to evoke the flux of consciousness and the erotics of mental activity in new or altered narrative forms.”<sup>63</sup> Through a deft combination

of citation and departure—marking Victorian narrative expectations and adapting them from within—*Works and Days* offers “altered narrative forms” in abundance. Because it is a diary, the text flaunts its claims to privacy, secrecy, and intimacies both emotional and bodily. Yet as a shared diary that voices two versions of privacy, it flouts those claims. In turn, as the shared diary of a female couple, it teases of an eroticism here signaled in the interplay of voices; love speaks its name openly in these pages, even as the diary form marks that candor under the seal of the secret. As the shared diary of female lovers practicing male authorial subjectivity, *Works and Days* exports conventions of male authorship—along with related expectations of privacy, sexuality, intimacy, gender fluidity, voice, form, and even irony—in the name of something else. All of this, but especially that mercurial “something else,” represents the great narrative experiment of *Works and Days*.

*We cannot possess what we experience.*

—KATHARINE BRADLEY, *WORKS AND DAYS*, 1888–89

Written continuously by Michael Field from about 1888 until Michael followed Field in death from cancer in 1914, *Works and Days* falls chronologically between Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s *Aurora Leigh* (1856), an autobiographical novel written in the form of an epic poem, and Gertrude Stein’s *Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* (1933), an autobiography written by its subject’s lesbian spouse.<sup>64</sup> Throughout *Works and Days*, Bradley and Cooper conduct experiments with form, voice, and identity that share qualities with both Barrett Browning and Stein. Early in her career Bradley even went so far as to draw a clear line back from herself to Elizabeth Barrett Browning, choosing as her first pre-Michael Field nom de plume “Arran Leigh.”<sup>65</sup> Michael Field always orient toward “the modern,” and in *Works and Days* they model formal practices that will emerge clearly, and canonically, very soon after their deaths: in the Cubists’ (as well as Sappho’s) exploration of the relationship between fragment and whole; in the prominence of the cut or splice in the films of Georges Méliès; in Ezra Pound’s *Cantos*, which similarly challenges concepts of linearity and plot; and in Djuna Barnes’s *Ladies Almanack*, which uses an archaic calendrical form to negotiate female homoerotic networks.

Michael Field frame their particular experiment by rattling the central organizing structure of Victorian narrative: the question of family itself, beginning with the matter of one another: aunt and niece, committed lovers, a writer. Though they maintained a primary loyalty to each other,

Bradley and Cooper wrote their narrative avatars in *Works and Days* as complex protagonists whose lives featured experimentation with alternative allegiances, new possibilities, and different outcomes that felt as deep and painful as compelling.<sup>66</sup> I argue here that Michael Field's marriage narrative works in two important ways to situate *Works and Days*. First, their "marriage plot" adds a compelling model to our sample of Victorian narratives. Second, by commingling marriage and authorship as literally as they do, Michael Field redeploys the codes of temporality—and specifically, of futurity—that heterosexual marriage narratives so often secure.

Like fairy tales, Victorian novels often focused on coming-of-age myths. In the case of female protagonists, childish innocence gives way to curiosity, to a test that results in courtship and, ultimately: "Reader, I married him." Elizabeth Freeman writes, "Literary critics have long described the wedding in terms of aesthetic, social, and psychic closure. In theories of comedy, of which the 'courtship plot' is paradigmatic, narrative itself moves inexorably forward toward a wedding, which situates the characters in their proper social relation to one another and quashes any unstable subplots that the narrative has generated along the way."<sup>67</sup> The marriage plot charts a girl's transfer from childhood to adulthood, from her family of origin to her family of destiny. The transition from one family to another counts as narrative for girls and women in Victorian fiction. Novels that end in marriage suggest a few things about female identity: that marriage is the crowning achievement of a woman's life; that marriage ends the part of a woman's life that is interesting enough for a story.

Talia Shaffer makes an important case for ambivalence at the heart of Victorian marriage plots: in contrast to a linear building toward heterosexual consummation, Shaffer reframes Victorian marriage narratives as a competition between two drives, the romantic and the familial. The first facilitates the development of a modern female subject, "a liberal, autonomous, essential, rights-bearing citizen, with unique individuality and deep psychology." The second, rooted more in rational esteem than in passion, enables "the history of alternative female subjectivity, the motion of selfhood as relational, affective, and networked, governed by feelings and duties instead of rights and reasons." Victorian novels, Shaffer argues, consistently stage and negotiate the rivalry between romantic and familiar desires:

Romantic suitors—those smolderingly charismatic men, their antecedents unknown, their intentions murky—include Wickham, Wilmoughby, Frank Churchill, Henry Crawford, Rochester, M. Paul

Emanuel, Sir Francis Levison, Stephen Guest, Ladislaw, Grandcourt, and Gilbert Osmond. Opposing them are the familiar suitors, those unthreatening and trusted men who offer safe haven: Knightley, Edward Ferrars, Colonel Brandon, Edmund Bertram, St. John, Dr. Graham Bretton, Philip Wakem, Archibald Carlyle, Casaubon, Daniel Deronda, and Ralph Touchett.<sup>68</sup>

The familiar marriage advances a sense of self in relation, mapped against the panorama of the social world and the *longue durée*, as opposed to the short, sharp shock of desire. "Familiar marriage spoke from tradition," writes Shaffer, "while romantic marriage expressed modernity. Familiar marriage promised settled, stable residence, romantic marriage embraced mobility, relocation. . . . Working through the choice between these models, or struggling to adjust, compromise, or alter them, was a way of figuring out how one should be in the world."<sup>69</sup> From their secure perch in the familiar, Michael Field experiment with dynamics of rivalry; indeed, this is a desire constitutive to *Works and Days*.

*Works and Days* challenges Linda Peterson's observation that late-Victorian women's writing collaborations tended to break down in the context of marriage: "[I]t was not simply marriage that ended the collaborative effort of these women artists but, significantly, a disagreement about women's work."<sup>70</sup> In the peculiar case of Michael Field, collaborative authorship *was* the sign of marriage, its artistic and worldly validation. More specifically, their collaborative authorship of the text *Works and Days* afforded Bradley and Cooper the opportunity to emplot narratives of marriage and authorship as one, entwined, inextricable. In the mid-Victorian period, Marcus argues, "marriage was legitimated by activities other than sex": "Women who established longterm relationships with other women . . . saw themselves, and were seen by others, as placid embodiments of the middle-class ideal of marriage: a bond defined by sex that also had the power to sanctify sex."<sup>71</sup> Bradley and Cooper observed such tropes of romance closely. They partook of those tropes to interpret their own "closer married" relationship not as a social scandal but, as Marcus shows, as the epitome of a stable ideal.

Michael Field's structural entrapment involved not their same-sex marriage but the resolutely familial nature of their incestuous union. Michael Field's marriage was far more an original state than a destination; they found it right in the girlhood home, and they were held tightly within a familiar space that they valued and resented, in equal parts. Field's bond provides an important inflection to the gendered archetypes



that sit awkwardly on the horizons of their own experience. They offer a counterpoint to the master narrative of Victorian femininity by situating both the origins and the outcomes of their marriage differently.<sup>72</sup>

After reading an interview with Dr. Alfred Russel Wallace on the topic of “Women and Natural Selection” in December 1893, Cooper spent a sleepless night. In his interview, Wallace vests women with the agency behind natural selection, and the power to ensure that the human species is on a trajectory toward evolutionary improvement. The instrument of a woman’s power is marriage, sought and created outside the family of origin. Education brings the power of choice to women; educated women hold all hope for eugenic “progress” in their soft, slender hands. “In order to cleanse society of the unfit,” Wallace writes, “we must give to woman the power of selection in marriage, and the means by which this most important and desirable end can be attained will be brought about by giving her such training and education as shall render her economically independent.”<sup>73</sup>

Educated women such as Bradley and Cooper can be economically independent, as their own case demonstrates. In turn, economically independent women can afford to be selective when it comes to their marriages. Bradley and Cooper were most concerned with this point, and one can certainly argue that they were selective indeed. What kept Cooper up all night, however, is something else: her contemplation of the social power that Wallace would attribute to her as an educated, economically independent woman. There is no evolution, nor devolution, without reproduction. Cooper is educated. She is economically independent. She has selected a marriage partner carefully. But that marriage will yield forth poetry, not children. So how does Cooper fit into this framework? What power does she have? What can she do with her responsibility for the future of the species? “I thought I am not a dramatist unless I can evolve a plot,” she wrote. “I said to my brain *evolve!*” (1893, 95r, EC; emphasis in original).

Cooper understands the relationship between evolution and plot as one of progress, of amelioration. In a discussion of gender and evolutionary discourses in the fin de siècle, Rita Felski writes: “Darwin’s theory of natural selection, which might appear to indicate the random and purposeless nature of human activity, was frequently refashioned to convey a view of history as purposeful and goal-directed, offering a secularized vision of a Christian redemption narrative.”<sup>74</sup> Cooper, however, feels inhibited from participation in the evolutionary trajectory of redemption, and thus from the possibility of greater artistic achievement as a dramatist and as a poet. In evolutionary theory, development occurs when the species is made

hybrid through exogamy: the necessary combination of different genetic strains to produce a new genetic specimen that shares qualities with, but differs essentially from, its progenitors. Like marriage plots themselves, the species requires the formation of new families through the departure from—the abandonment of, even the betrayal of—the family of origin. Living at the very heart of domestic ideology is a disloyalty in the transition from girl to woman: a girl must betray first love in favor of new love in order to fulfill the destiny of her gendered role.

Michael Field have a different perspective on sexuality and evolution, one that places pleasure at the heart of progress. In 1895, Cooper reports on an opinion held by both Bradley and Berenson: "The best children are those conceived in hot passion . . . illegitimate often and often becoming artists and men of genius. The idea of seeking the healthy mate is not a civilized One. [. . .] Imagine the lovers of Browning visualizing a ^healthy^ child as the end for which they live! If we bother Nature at her work of natural selection we injure her work that in her infinite benignity she does for us—leaving us free to love" (1895, v. 1, 67v–68r, EC). In this view, domestic quietude is the rate-limiting factor in progress. In other words, hot poetry has nothing to do with the production of healthy infants; and "hot passion" is the true engine of social progress.

In her 1922 biography of Michael Field, Mary Sturgeon reads the poets' outwardly placid existence as a lack of experience that shows up in their writing: "It may be that this seclusion from life will be felt in Michael Field's poetry as a limitation; that the final conviction imposed upon the mind by the authority of experience is wanting; and that the work lacks a certain dry wisdom of which difficult living is a necessary condition."<sup>75</sup> Yet Bradley and Cooper both work hard to try to "evolve a plot" by intervening in the world, by seeking friendship, fame, and worldly respect; simply by seeking. In *Works and Days*, the narrative of seeking, in and by "hot passion," is experience itself. The narrators fight against stasis, against the built-in quietude of affluent daughterly existence. Michael Field write the open struggle to balance loyalty and plot, to respect the anchor of the family of origin while also drinking of the excitement of modernity, mobility, and the new. Viewed over the long narrative arc of this text, Bradley and Cooper repeatedly encounter outside forces—third terms—that would offer them the chance to expand or even terminate their private relationship of two. This happens over and over again; it is the central structural feature of *Works and Days*. Not coincidentally, it is also the central structural feature of many British nineteenth-century novels. Those novels find narrative resolution in the plot of exogamy: the substitution of a new

domestic sphere for an old one, and with that substitution the promise of a procreative future. The pulse from three to two to three to two tracks the creation of new families from families of origin, and it provides a mechanism for the transgenerational evolution of the species.<sup>76</sup>

In light of the episodic cadence of *Works and Days*, what does it mean, then, to read *Works and Days* as a unified literary work? The text is organized in one-year, loosely autobiographical chunks. Cooper and Bradley channel its narrative through plot devices familiar to us from Victorian fiction. They borrow from an important, and accessible, literary tool, using long-form, complex narratives to explore women's inner lives against the background of social constraints and expectations. Novels provided Victorian writers with powerful tools for making meaning in the context of tectonic shifts in the social order. A certain kind of novel—specifically, the massive, multiplot novel familiar from the mid-Victorian period and associated with certain forms of realism—affords Michael Field space to negotiate the unusual domestic narrative at the heart of their experience. Bradley and Cooper were unconventional in many ways, but not so very unconventional that they bypassed the most powerful literary codes available to women such as they were, attempting to make their way in the world.

Perhaps it makes no sense to talk about Michael Field (or Cooper and Bradley) in relation to the Victorian novel. They do not write novels, and in fact as a poet, they felt vaguely sorry for acquaintances such as George Meredith, whose serious poetry writing was interfered with by his occasional novel, in Michael Fields' view anyway. As a faithful reader of *Works and Days*, I can testify that Bradley and Cooper did not report reading many novels, and those few that they did read they selected from European ranks—Flaubert, Tolstoy, Turgenev, Huysmans—rather than English. They had a subscription to Mudie's Lending Library, and they knew the work of the Brontës, Dickens, and Eliot well enough to mention them in passing. They disliked the fiction of Thomas Hardy. I would love to know what they thought about Henry James, and what he thought about them. But compared to their intense engagement with poetry, painting, sculpture, and aesthetic philosophy, the novel was not particularly on their radar.<sup>77</sup>

Of course it was not on their radar: novels were not art in the eyes of this aesthetic poet, for whom art was the pinnacle of all striving and poetry the pinnacle of its realization. But *Works and Days* is the product not of Michael Field but of Bradley and Cooper, together as individuals. And as a document of works and a document of days, this text orients itself toward the material world in a dramatically different way from the worlds created in Michael Field's poetry. *Works and Days* gives its authors

a repository for all those elements of the here and now that do not belong in their published poetry and plays. It is not aesthetic. Although it is not generally descriptive of the writers' everyday lives, nor attentive to quotidian details, the text is prosaic, in all senses of the term. Robert Browning was disturbed to hear that his "dear, Greek women" were writing prose, not poetry. Bradley reports, "When he heard we were writing prose, he said—'*take care you do not derogate*'" (1888, 13r, KB; emphasis in original). But derogate they did. The diary is the closest thing to "realism" that Michael Field ever produced. Insofar as it was not easy for Michael Field as female aesthetes to leave the world out of their writing altogether, it is important to read the diary in dialogue with the poetry—but as an important work in its own right, not as a glossary for the poems and verse dramas.

*Works and Days* presents a double narrative, emplotting female marriage on one hand and rejecting on the other follow-on conventions of time, space, and futurity, including reproductive futurity. In refusing the transactional power of heterosexual narrative, Michael Field refuse the narratives of temporality that predicate future stability on female reproduction: the metonymic relationship between babies, and futures, the orientation that ultimately gives selective, educated women social power. Note that to Wallace, women's transformative power inheres not in women themselves but in their capacity to ameliorate the species through their offspring, the serial progress of generations marching forward like the serial numbers of a Victorian novel.

Michael Field have full confidence in their transformative powers as women, but the nature of their plot has nothing at all to do with reproduction. Theirs is akin to what Lee Edelman has described as "*Sinthomosexuality* . . . —denying the appeal of fantasy, refusing the promise of futurity that mends each tear, however mean, in reality's dress with threads of meaning (attached as they are to the eye-catching lure we might see as the sequins of sequence, which dazzle our vision by producing the constant illusion of *consequence*)—offers us fantasy turned inside out."<sup>78</sup> In *Works and Days*, Michael Field do indeed present a logic of future consequence, but theirs differs entirely from the reproductive futurity that endows heterosexual marriage plots with their stabilizing force. In Dustin Friedman's powerful formulation, their literary practice offered late-Victorian queer writers such as Michael Field a space for their otherness, a marriage realized in and as poetry: art, Friedman writes, is "a realm where queers can resist a hostile social world by developing an autonomous sense of self, one that is inspired by their sexual difference and grounded in the ability to resist dominant power relations."<sup>79</sup> Together, Edelman and Friedman

suggest the importance of looking hard at the “Michael Field” union not as a naive simulacrum of marriage but as a vehicle that afforded the writers truly radical social, psychological, and temporal perspectives.

“For Victorians,” Marcus argues, “marriage meant the union of sexual and spiritual impulses, the reconciliation of sexuality with propriety. Marriage was a socially acceptable exhibition of sexual intimacy because it was predicated on fidelity and thus advertised not only the sexuality of the spouses but also their acceptance of restraints and limits. For this reason, female marriage was not associated with a savage state of sexual license but instead was readily integrated into even the most restrictive ideas of social order.”<sup>80</sup> To that point, *Works and Days* presents the story of two women, intimate family members, married to each other but always, from within their dyad, peering outward at the external world in search of something and someone else. Female marriage in Michael Field’s case signaled fidelity’s ambivalent heart: a public claim to the virtuous constraints of marriage—while the marriage itself is a blind, enabling the women to keep an eye out for more worldly alternatives. Those alternatives—of something and someone else, of qualities of mobility and modernity, of sensation and worldliness, of romance and family—represented for Michael Field the tantalizing prospect of “plot.”

*I have just signed the Census-Paper, as Father signed it ten years ago. I can see his silver hair outspread over the blue document—I can hear our laughter and discussion, and the sudden anguish of silence when he wrote himself down as a widower.*

*And now, [. . .] I write myself as head of a house, and [. . .] entertain as guest or lodger the choicest of my sex—the Beloved One, Single and F.—even as I am. We, dramatic writers, living on our own means, with our two servants, both single—what a quaint household! [. . .]*

*And as I write the Thames runs by [illeg.] cloudy and energetic with the South Wind—the River that binds our days together with its influence of light and tide.*

—EDITH COOPER, *WORKS AND DAYS*, 1901

“For me the noise of Time is not sad,” writes Roland Barthes synesthetically. “I love bells, clocks, watches—and I recall that at first photographic implements were related to techniques of cabinetmaking and the machinery of precision: cameras, in short, were clocks for seeing, and perhaps in me someone very old still hears in the photographic mechanism the living sound of the wood.”<sup>81</sup> Recalling us to Placidia, the cabinet that “enwombs” this text *Works and Days*, Barthes writes of the ontological

(continued...)

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