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**‘The hot-house of decadent chronicle’:
Michael Field, Nietzsche and the Dance of Modern Poetic Drama**

‘One must have chaos within to enable one to give birth to a dancing star’

Friedrich Nietzsche

Reading the poetic dramas of ‘Michael Field’ [pseud. of Katharine H. Bradley (1846-1914) and her niece Edith Cooper (1862-1913)] one is continuously astonished by the extravagant plots, the audacity of their verse, and the uncontained character of their plays. Each of the 27 poetic dramas they published during their lifetime feels like the work of an intoxicated reveller. The breadth of history and scholarship is bewildering, with plays rooted formally and thematically in the traditions of Classical Greek, Latin, Medieval, Renaissance, and Romantic poetic drama. And the geography of the plays is just as varied, with the action happening in countries as diverse as England, Ireland, Scotland, France, Judea, Ethiopia, or the vast territories of the Roman Empire. Inevitably the modern reader asks oneself: What am I reading? What are these plays *really* about? Why are they so intellectual, so international, and why do they feel so antiquated?

We have lost the palate for poetic drama, today a dead genre, and this may explain why Michael Field’s tragedies still remain in the closet of modern scholarship.¹ It may be argued that Bradley and Cooper were the most important, certainly the most prolific, verse dramatists of their time. Their plays were exceptionally experimental at the level of versification and radically theoretical at the level of content. It is however one of those ironies

¹ There is a small number of published works on Michael Field’s plays. These include: Taft, Vickie L. "The Tragic Mary: A Case Study in Michael Field's Understanding of Sexual Politics". *Nineteenth-Century Contexts* 23:2 (2001): 265-95. Sharon Bickle, ‘Kick(ing) Against the Pricks’: Michael Field's Brutus Ultor as Manifesto for the ‘New Woman’. *Nineteenth Century Theatre & Film* 33:2 (Winter 2006), pp. 12-40. Sharon Bickle, ‘Victorian Mænads: On Michael Field’s *Callirrhoë* and Being Driven Mad’. *The Michaelian* 2 (December 2010) <http://www.oscholars.com/Field/MF2/bicklearticle.htm>; and Tracy Olverson, ‘Michael Field’s Dramatically Queer Family Dynamics’, *Queer Victorian Families: Curious Relations in Literature* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2015), pp. 57-76.

of history that, like many of the characters of their plays, Bradley and Cooper found themselves at a difficult crossroad, when poetic drama, the genre that had made them famous, was fast becoming, and at the peak of their careers, an anachronistic poetic model. In the 1880s the name of Michael Field had been a byword for poetry for poetic dramas such as *Callirrhoë* (1884), *Fair Rosamund* (1884), *The Father's Tragedy* (1885), *William Rufus* (1885), *Loyalty or Love?* (1885), *Brutus Ultor* (1886), *Canute the Great* (1887), and *The Cup of Water* (1887). The Renaissance play *The Tragic Mary* (1890) however marked the turning point in the reception of their dramas. From 1890 onwards, and coinciding with a seismic turn to the lyrical at the expense of the dramatic, their plays began to receive punitive, excruciatingly vicious reviews. Bradley and Cooper were stunned by this reversal. The decadent 1890s brought to this avant-garde poet a difficult battle: to make the genre matter again or disappear.

I want to focus here on what I see as a reflexive moment in their careers as dramatists, from 1895 to 1903, when they produced the extraordinary Roman Trilogy *The World at Auction* (1898), *The Race of Leaves* (1901) and *Julia Domna* (1903), which the women began to write in 1895. In those years Michael Field re-interpreted and re-invented their dramatic production by returning archeologically and philologically to Greek drama and to their own authorial debut in *Callirrhoë* (1884), a play based on the arrival of the cult of Dionysus. This was, in more ways than one, a return to origins and the origin of a new turn. During this period, Michael Field reconceptualised the genre in more productive and intricate ways in relation to two critical movements: decadence (particularly Latin decadence, under heavy scrutiny and attack after the trials of Oscar Wilde) and the philological criticism coming from Europe, most notably Nietzsche, whose seminal work *The Birth of Tragedy* (first published in 1872 as *The Birth of Tragedy from the Spirit of Music* and reissued in 1886 as *The Birth of Tragedy, or: Hellenism and Pessimism*) was used by Michael Field to situate their new writing and philosophy of Art in the context of modernity. My point in this essay is that Michael Field's Roman Trilogy plants the seed for a new wave of thinking about the future of this genre.

I. Re: Turn to Latin

Michael Field's Roman Trilogy (1898-1903) sits right at the heart of a series of verse plays concerned with Latin decadence. It is commonplace to note that with his 1893 essay 'The Decadent Movement in Literature', Arthur Symons gave visibility and prominence to the Latin strand of English decadent writing. 'After a fashion', Symons notoriously claimed, 'it is no doubt a decadence; it has all the qualities that mark the end of great periods, the qualities that we find in the Greek, the Latin, decadence: an intense self-consciousness, a restless curiosity in research, an over-subtilizing refinement upon refinement, a spiritual and moral perversity.'² One of the underlying texts in Symons' theorisation of decadence was Walter Pater's *Marius the Epicurean* (1885). Set in 161-177 AD in the Rome of the Antonines and dealing with the intellectual growth of a young Roman aesthete, the novel rapidly became the central text for British aesthetes and decadents, including Michael Field. As Bradley confessed to John Miller Gray in 1889, director of the National Gallery of Scotland and author of the most important review of *Marius the Epicurean*: 'It is a book for trouble – one of our dear books now.'³

Symons left Michael Field out of his manifesto. (He included only one woman writer, the Spanish naturalist novelist Emilia Pardo Bazán). But by 1893 Bradley and Cooper were well into their own Latin decadent project, which had begun in 1886 with the verse play *Brutus Ultor*, aptly based on the founding of the Roman Republic by Lucius Junius Brutus (509 BC). The history of the Roman Republic, the Roman Empire, its division into Eastern and Western Empire, and its final days as the Holy Roman Empire would ultimately become the most dominant subject in Michael Field's dramatic production. This includes plays such as the experimental *Stephania: A Trialogue* (1892), which dramatizes the story of Stephania, a Roman courtesan, who poisoned the Holy Roman Emperor Otto III to revenge the death of

² Arthur Symons, 'The Decadent Movement in Literature', *Harper's New Monthly Magazine* (November 1893) 858.

³ Ana Parejo Vadillo, 'Walter Pater and Michael Field: The Correspondence, with Other Unpublished Manuscript Material', *The Pater Newsletter* 65 (Spring 2014): 41.

her husband; *Attila, My Attila!* (1895) focusing on the passion of Roman Princess Honoria ('the *New Woman* of the fifth century') for the Hun hero Attila; the one-act play in blank verse *Equal Love* (1896), dramatizing the Empress Theodora's killing of her own son to keep the stability of the Empire; or the Roman Trilogy (*The World at Auction* [1898], *The Race of Leaves* [1901]) and *Julia Domna* [1903]), which dramatizes the decline of the Roman Empire from 182 to 212 AD as it follows the last days of emperors Lucius Aurelius Commodus (182-192AD) [*Race of Leaves*], Didius Julianus (193AD) [*World at Auction*, published first but historically the second volume of the Trilogy], and the co-emperors and brothers Caracalla and Geta (212AD) [*Julia Domna*].⁴

There are many reasons why those 'enchanted centuries of decadence', as they wrote to their friend Professor Ward in 1896, were of such interest to Michael Field.⁵ To begin with, like most decadents, Michael Field identified the fall of the Roman Empire with that of the British Empire. 'Curious', Cooper notes in their diary for 1895 as she was reading Ludwig Friedländer's *Roman Life and Manners Under the Early Empire* in preparation for *The World at Auction*, 'how close the resemblance between Imperial Rome & London of Today – not in customs, but in tendencies due to laxity – wealth – degeneration! It is a mirror – a review of our Times.'⁶ The period represented decay, also understood as literary decay. And, of course, following Pater and later Nietzsche, Michael Field conceptualised Roman decadence as the twilight of (Pagan) history. Until their conversion to Roman Catholicism in 1906, Bradley and Cooper considered themselves Pagan poets. It is thus no surprise that, as they wrote to Richard Garnett thanking him for the gift of his *Twilight of the Gods and Other Tales*, the period exemplified for them 'the mystery of Twilight under wh. the world lay between the

⁴ Michael Field dates the action of the play in 212AD, current scholarship suggest that the killing of Geta occurred in December 211AD.

⁵ A transcription of this letter appears in Michael Field's unpublished 26 volume diary, 'Works and Days'. See Michael Field, 'Works and Days', BL Add MS 46785, fol. 56 [Entry by Katharine Bradley, hereafter K.B.] 'I am rather anxious you should drive us out of the enchanted centuries of decadence into an age of purer blood'.

⁶ Michael Field, 'Works and Days', BL Add MS 46784, fol. 24v [Entry by Edith Cooper, hereafter E.C.]

Pagan & Christian centuries – a mystery we delight in'.⁷ Indeed their Roman plays were populated with characters living in a Pagan world fast disappearing as an opposing Christian worldview was becoming dominant.

As a subject, Roman decadence could be usefully reclaimed for plots and characters. Those centuries were particularly rich in examples of people who have reached the edge of extremity, people that Michael Field recovered to animate issues such as the idea of 'the rise and fall' (Emperors Pertinax and Didius Julianus were only 3 months in power), the alienation and subjugation of individuals to the state (Brutus sentencing his sons to death to save the Roman Republic), the choice between the personal and the political (Theodora), and, that very decadent theme, the beauty of perversity (Stephania). Character-wise, the Roman Empire was full of heroes and heroines with the power to change history (Theodora, Brutus, Attila) and awash with historical figures involved in bisexual (Commodus, Pylades), incestuous (Theodora's and Julia Domna's passion for their sons), and polyamorous relationships (Marcia with Ecclectus, Pylades and Commodus), subjects always at the heart of their poetics. Fratricides (Caracalla murders his brother Geta), sororicides (Commodus executes his sister) and filicides (Brutus and Theodora kill their offsprings) are abound in this period. Relishing in the spiritual and moral perversity of their characters, Michael Field's Latin dramas acted on the intensity of those histories, clothing them with the intoxicating tragic element of life. Written in a morbid language, their plays, to rephrase Symons's very definition of decadence, were intensely self-conscious, meta-dramatic, full of morbid plots and luxuriate details.

Theoretically speaking however, with their Roman Trilogy Michael Field turned over a new leaf. Written at a moment of personal and intellectual crisis, the Trilogy was conceived with the intent of revalorising verse drama for a modern world. The epigraph that framed *The Race of Leaves*, plot-wise the first, was a quote from *Marius the Epicurean*. The quote highlighted the sense of regeneration and renewal that lay at the core of the Trilogy:

⁷ Michael Field, 'Works and Days' BL Add MS 46784, fol. 4v [E.C.] Richard Garnett, *The Twilight of the Gods and Other Tales* (London: T. Fisher Unwin, 1888).

Leaves! little leaves! – thy children, thy flatterers, thine enemies! Leaves in the wind, those who would devote thee to darkness, who scorn or miscall thee here, even as they also whose great fame shall outlast them. For all these, and the like of them, are born indeed in the spring season – GREEK TEXT – and soon a wind hath scattered them, and thereafter the wood peopleth itself again with another generation of leaves.⁸

To understand the reasons for this change, we need to go back to 1895. Katherine Bradley began the New Year by attending the matinee of Wilde's *An Ideal Husband* (1895), a play she describes in their diary as 'brilliant comments on life by puppets.'⁹ Bradley's comment is noteworthy. It situates Michael Field's thoughts on drama in the context of new dramatic experiments coming from Europe, most notably Maurice Maeterlinck – whose theatre of marionettes in plays such as *La Mort de Tintagiles* (1894) was attracting the praise of symbolists and decadents alike. And it is no coincidence that Michael Field's Roman play *Equal Love* and the first English translation of Maeterlinck's play both got published in the same volume of the journal, *The Pageant*.¹⁰ Bradley's comments also contextualise emergent theories about pantomime and drama, particularly those of Arthur Symons. One might argue that Symons' October 1898 essay on 'Ballet, Pantomime and Poetic Drama' only makes sense in the context of Michael Field's energies in the genre. It is clear that Symons had read *The World at Auction*, which came out in 24 May 1898. His essay, an afterthought on Wagner's opera *Parsifal*, articulated the essence of *The World at Auction*: that the art of dancing symbolised life. More to the point, Symons saw ballet as a new art form, midway between pantomime and poetic drama.¹¹

Bradley and Cooper were putting the final touches to *Attila, My Attila!* (1895), based on Edward Gibbon's account of Honoria in his *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (1776-

⁸ Michael Field, *The Race of Leaves* (London: Vale Press, 1901), p. ii.

⁹ Michael Field, 'Works and Days', BL Add MS 46783, fol. 4 [K.B.].

¹⁰ Maurice Maeterlinck, 'The Death of Tintagiles', trans. Alfred Sutro, *The Pageant* 1 (1896): 47-71; Michael Field, 'Equal Love', *The Pageant* 1 (1896): 189-228.

¹¹ Arthur Symons, 'Ballet, Pantomime, and Poetic Drama', *Dome* 1 (1898): 65-71.

1789).¹² But they could not find a publisher, probably because their last play, *Stephania* (1893), also on a Roman subject, had been a flop. In his review for the *Academy*, for example, Lionel Johnson described it as ‘elusive’, ‘unsatisfactory’, ‘a little confused, monotonous, vague and perplexing’. And commenting on Michael Field’s Latin turn he stated: ‘In the field of northern history, away from the hot South, in the passions of English, Saxon, Scandinavian, Scottish peoples, Michael Field seems more at home than in the sultrier lands.’¹³ Depressed by the lack of interest of any publisher in *Attila*, in April they organised a three-month trip to Italy, staying for a period in Florence with the art critics Bernard Berenson and Mary Costelloe. While in Italy, the arrival of another rejection letter for *Attila, My Attila!* sank them into a deeper crisis. Edith Cooper writes in their diary: ‘No-one wants our work & we can’t make our work sing against the world as we did. [...] Such absolute lack of response nearly kills us – we wonder if we have voices at all, or whether we are only mad & dream we can be heard. [...] My own Love is so unnatural with this void treatment she said she would like to kill herself – She! & then she cried’.¹⁴

This entry is a poignant reminder of the public rejection and publishing difficulties under which Michael Field was writing verse drama in the 1890s and partly explains why the women would turn to privately printed art presses like the Vale Press of Charles Ricketts. The timely visit to Florence gave them the distance they needed and had important consequences in the re-conceptualisation of their poetic dramas. Bradley and Cooper enjoyed long, extended talks with Berenson, Costelloe and their circle. It was during these talks that Michael Field first heard of Nietzsche, and not particularly in a good light: ‘B.’, Cooper writes ‘objected to his work that it is “screeching” there is too much of it – a qualitative “too-much”; not as with

¹² See Michael Field, ‘Preface’ to *Attila, My Attila!*. They proofread *Equal Love* as they were doing the final revisions for *Attila, My Attila!* Michael Field, ‘Works and Days’, BL Add MS 46783, fol.160v [E.C.]. On *Attila, My Attila!* and sexuality see Joseph Bristow’s keynote “‘Unwomanly Audacities’: Michael Field, *Attila, My Attila!* and Sexual Modernity’ for the *Michael Field Centenary Conference: New Directions in Fin-de-Siècle Studies*. 11-12 July 2014. Institute of English Studies, Senate House, University of London

¹³ Lionel Johnson, ‘Rev. of *Stephania: A Trilogy*. By Michael Field. (Elkin Mathews and John Lane.)’ *The Academy* (22 April 1893): 342-3 and *passim*.

¹⁴ Michael Field, ‘Works and Days’, BL Add MS 46783, fols. 60v-61[E.C.]. ‘My own Love’ is Bradley.

Walt Whitman and Hindoo poetry a mere quantitative “too much.”¹⁵ What Bradley and Cooper did not then know was that Berenson was ventriloquizing Nietzsche.¹⁶

These talks, which Cooper recorded in their diary, were important for Michael Field because they helped them articulate the problem they were dealing with in their verse dramas: how to make historical plays be about life, not history. The talks also validated their theories of art and life. The richest and most influential talk was on the function of art. For Berenson, Cooper writes,

The function of Art is to evoke an emotion so strong it vitalises the whole psychosis of a man into the demand for a cosmos which it immediately supplies. Culture is the preparation for this living emotion by enlarging a man’s whole psychosis so that its demands may be for larger & larger worlds to be created by the art that appeals to it. Art is great in so far as its cosmic creativeness is great.¹⁷

For Berenson, the function of art was the creation of other imagined worlds, which are not replicas of the real, but exist entirely on their own as systems of thought. And the foundation of such creation was emotion. As he put it: ‘The Greeks called art a lie – an imitation: it has nothing to do with nature, but exists [as] a new reality in nature – a psychological system of worlds, built up by creative emotion.’¹⁸

Of particular importance in Michael Field’s own critique of their dramas was a conversation discussing Ibsen’s 1894 play *Little Eyolf*. Berenson critiqued the play for being allegorical and too intellectual. It is perhaps important to note here that this was, as we will see, the central premise of Nietzsche’s *The Birth of Tragedy*: that Greek tragedy died because

¹⁵ Michael Field, ‘Works and Days’, BL Add MS 46783, fol. 74v [E.C.].

¹⁶ But I have read more Ni[e]tzsche ... & what have I discovered!! That every thought, almost, that Bernard presented this spring with the marvellous personality of voice & language that is his, came straight from Ni[e]tzsche without acknowledgement. When I think that B. stood in the way of our reading Ni[e]tzsche [sic], & represented him as a German Whitman, lacking the American’s quality —I recoil against the doer of this infamy. The man is in an asylum ... & another man simply day by day charms people with the madman’s originality, & never even say “all this was suggested by Ni[e]tzsche.” I knew B. to be ungenerous, I never knew he could be such an intellectual scamp as this! Shame on him! Michael Field, ‘Works and Days’, BL Add MS 46784, fol. 4. [E.C.].

¹⁷ Michael Field, ‘Works and Days’, BL Add MS 46783, fols 62-62v [E.C.].

¹⁸ Michael Field, ‘Works and Days’, BL Add MS 46783, fol. 62v [E.C.].

it became an intellectual exercise. Indeed during this particular talk, Berenson discussed and rejected the work of Nietzsche, ‘a mad man’, he noted. Berenson’s point was that allegories were only art by chance, and if they were ever art, they were never good art.¹⁹ During this conversation Bradley asked Berenson the following question: ‘What is the quality that settles if an achievement is a work of art or not?’ He answered: ‘Simply its “vivo-metric” quality – to invent a world for exposition’s sake – simply the measure of life it expresses. It may be perfect or imperfect indifferently, if it is informed with vitality’.²⁰ It is this ‘vivo-metric’, this creative emotion and emotional vitality in verse that Michael Field will aim to recreate in the Roman Trilogy.

On their return to London, the women got some good news: Elkin Matthews had taken up *Attila, My Attila!* But when later in the year the play came out, the reviews were bad. Of the *Daily Chronicle*’s review, in particular, Cooper would talk of ‘defamation.’²¹ The *Chronicle* described the play as an ‘excursus against chastity, obviously written by the most harmless and well-behaved of ladies.’²² In the wake of the Oscar Wilde’s trials, the reviewer used the play to launch a personal attack on the very nature of Michael Field (and on the modernity of New Woman literature): ‘We do not seek to know what personality is veiled under the pseudonym of “Michael Field”, but it is most manifest that it is not that of a man, nor even that of a storm-tossed or passionate woman.’ ‘The writer’s foremost interest’, it went on, ‘is in the cult of the Elizabethan drama. Behind this, but a long way behind, comes a curious remote desire of such modernity as burgeons and blossoms in the immortal pages of Mr. Grant Allen.’ The play was ‘a Byzantine corruption’ yet written by someone with no knowledge of sex: ‘As for the lusts of empresses and the lechery of the Calmucks [...] a schoolgirl would know as much about them’. The reviewer laughed at the plot, the characters and the play’s intellectual links to New Woman literature (‘the world of literature is nearly

¹⁹ Michael Field, ‘Works and Days’, BL Add MS 46783, fol.74v [E.C.].

²⁰ Michael Field, ‘Works and Days’, BL Add MS 46783, fol. 75 [E.C.].

²¹ Michael Field, ‘Works and Days’, BL Add MS 46784, fol.55 [E.C.].

²² [Anon.] ‘The New Woman – And the Old’, *The Daily Chronicle* (20 November 1895): 5, and *passim*.

tired of this eternal sex-problem). It sardonically wondered if Michael Field could perhaps be using irony ‘as a warning to the revolted daughters of another decadence.’ But most of all, the reviewer wanted to send the decadent poet Michael Field back to the category of the poetess: ‘If Michael Field will but write us gentle, gracious, intimate things [...] the pseudonym may achieve a place among the poets of the time.’ Its final demolishing line ran thus: ‘But the man – or woman – who would write tragedies must sing to a mightier music’.

Reading Nietzsche, however, revived their beliefs in poetic drama. Bradley noted in their diary with specific reference to *The World at Auction*: ‘I vow solemnly to hew out for myself a new tract in dramatic lyric.’²³

III – Re: Birth of Tragedy

It is worthwhile recalling the action of the plays to locate Michael Field’s radical intervention in the genre. *The Race of Leaves*, historically the first, begins with Emperor Commodus surviving an assassination attempt schemed by his sister, Lucilla, and her lover, Quadratus. He spares her life but celebrates the thwarting of the plot with an indulging banquet. Blind to the hardships of the Romans, Commodus leads a life of forgetfulness surrounded by luxury. But Romans and army are turning against him. His concubine the Christian Marcia and Ecclectus, an Egyptian freedman and Grand Chamberlain, make him realise that his Empire has been ripped apart by Cleander, the Emperor’s appointed Minister. Cleander has been deceiving Commodus with presents while plotting against him, arming his Guard and stealing from public grains, making the Romans go hungry. Fearing for his life, Commodus sacrifices Cleander. But with him the Romans demand the life of Pylades, the priest-dancer. His young pupil, also called Pylades (dancers took the name of their masters and schools of dance), asks Marcia to save his master’s life. Marcia, who after seeing him dance in pantomime in front of a sculpture of Apollo falls for the boy, appeals to Commodus and convinces the Emperor to free them. In exchange, Pylades, the boy dancer, will serve

²³ Michael Field, ‘Works and Days’, BL Add MS 46783, fol. 145v [K.B.].

him. Thirsty for blood Commodus orders the death of his sister. But with her dies his humanity. In an attempt to temper Commodus, Marcia dresses up as Amazon, so that he may see reflected in her his own imperial majesty and recover his commanding sense. But Commodus has lost any sense of the real. He wants to go to the circus to be revered by the people of Rome cross-dressed as an Amazon. No one can dissuade him of the reckless act, not even Marcia, whom he now suspects. Marcia soon discovers that she and Ecclectus are on his death list. With the help of one of their slaves Marcia and Ecclectus kill Commodus.²⁴

The World at Auction starts with the young dancer Pylades's public beating, which had been ordered by Commodus's successor, Emperor Pertinax. The new emperor rejects beauty and art and runs his Empire with stern austerity. But the Praetorian Guard demands more luxury and laxity and conspires to kill him after only three months in power. They set up an auction to sell the Empire to the highest bidder. The wealthy Didius Julianus, an art lover, buys the Empire as if it were the most exquisite piece of jewellery for his spoilt daughter, Clara. As soon as he moves into the palace, where the beheaded body of Pertinax still lays, Emperor Didius Julianus realises his mistake. Pylades consoles him with his art but Clara's voracious passion for Pylades, whom she suspects to be in love with Marcia, leads to the downfall of Marcia and Ecclectus, Didius' only friends and judicious advisers.²⁵ Didius Julianus is not a leader, and soon outside Rome is Severus with a strong army taking the Empire. Didius Julianus' wife, more worried about herself and her possessions than about her husband, annoys Severus who orders his beheading. Pylades remains once again in the Palace, now to dance for the new Emperor, Severus.

The last play, *Julia Domna*, perhaps the most heart-breaking and finest in terms of writing of the three, picks up the narrative seventeen years later. At his death Severus has left the Empire to his two sons, the co-emperors Caracalla and Geta. Caracalla reigns as a soldier.

²⁴ On the day of publication of *Julia Domna*, 9 April 1903, the women would confide in their diaries that they wished to write a revised version of the play. 'We feel profoundly a new Race of Leaves must be written – of Commodus from within, & of Commodus and Marcia – Then the great Trilogy will, by the grace of Heaven be completed.' Michael Field, 'Works and Days', BL Add MS 46792, fol. 47v.

²⁵ Richard Garnett suggested the story of Marcia and Ecclectus. See Michael Field, 'Works and Days', BL Add MS 46784, fol. 11.

Geta is, by contrast, a cultivated Emperor (his closest friend is the dancer Pylades). They loth each other and vie for their mother's affections. Julia Domna cannot bear to live apart from them and persuades them not to divide the Empire into West and East, and this means accepting that her sons may live apart each in a different wing of the palace. It is her love and desire to end their strife that leads to the death of her youngest Geta. She sets up a reconciliation meeting, but Caracalla takes the opportunity to murder Geta. Caracalla kills him as his mother tries madly, desperately to shield Geta's body with her own. Caracalla goes on a killing spree executing everyone on his brother's side, including Geta's closest friend, the pantomime Pylades.

The plays were full of that dusty research that gave decadence the odour of the antique. Though most reviewers noted the plots were based on Gibbon's *The Rise and Fall of the Roman Empire*, Gibbon's narrative played only a part (though no doubt important) in their research. The historical sources they worked with, beginning with the first play, *The World at Auction*, were taken from classical as well as contemporary scholarship, mostly from German philology (not surprising given the women's intellectual affiliations with German cosmopolitan writings and the dearth of poetic drama in England). The most notable of these was Ludwig Friedländer, *Darstellungen aus der Sittengeschichte Roms in der Zeit von August bis zum Ausgang der Antonine* [*Roman Life and Manners Under the Early Empire*], which they read first in German and later in French (they owned a translation by Vogel).²⁶ Other important sources were Cassius Dio's *Roman History* (c. 229AD), Herodian's *History of the Roman Empire since Marcus Aurelius* (c. 244AD), Julius Sommerbrodt's *De Aeschyli Re Scenica* (1848) and Lucian's *De Saltatione* [*On Dancing*] (c.160AD).²⁷ These last two

²⁶ Ludwig Friedländer, *Darstellungen aus der Sittengeschichte Roms in der Zeit von August bis zum Ausgang der Antonine* 3 Vols. (Leipzig, 1862–71; 6th ed., 1889–90); Ludwig Friedländer, *Moeurs Romaines Du Règne D'auguste À La Fin Des Antonins*. 4 Vols. Trans. Charles Vogel (Paris, 1864-74).

²⁷ Herodian, *Herodian's history of his own times, or, Of the Roman Empire after Marcus, translated into English: with large notes, explaining the most remarkable customs, ceremonies, offices, &c. among the Romans. To which is prefix'd, an introduction, giving a short account of the Roman state, from its first origin, to the time where Herodian's history commences; and an appendix added, containing the most memorable transactions under the subsequent emperors to the reign of Constantine the Great. With a chronological table, and a copious index. The whole design'd as a compendium both of the history and antiquities of Rome.* Trans. J. Hart (London, 1749) Books I-IV,

were key for Michael Field's creation of Pylades, the pantomime dancer, the Dionysian character running through the three plays. And it is important to underscore that though they share the same name, they are not the same dancer. Dancers took the names of their masters, which reflected the school of dance they belonged to. In Roman times, Pylades represented the epitome of tragic performance while the comedic performance was represented by the dancer Bathillus.

But the most important influence was Nietzsche's *The Birth of Tragedy*. It often goes unrecognised that Bradley and Cooper were among the very few British writers who recognised Nietzsche's importance for modernity. 'We have met in Nietzsche's works a real Bacchic voice crying in the wilderness', writes Cooper in their diary.²⁸ And perhaps it is worth remembering here that for aesthetes and decadents, Greek drama (the core of *The Birth of Tragedy*) symbolised the modern spirit. Michael Field would for example, defend Nietzsche against the diatribes of dramatists like George Meredith, who favoured Schopenhauer ('Nietzsche', would sermonize Meredith to Michael Field, 'is a wrong-headed madman of morbid tendencies').²⁹ It is no wonder Bradley and Cooper were so passionate about Nietzsche. Even before they had heard of Nietzsche they had arrived to the conclusion of *The Birth of Tragedy*: that the re-introduction of the Dionysian rapturous and ruptured element of life as found in Greek drama would prompt the emergence of a modern spirit. This was the subject of their first verse play, *Callirrhöe*. When they finally read Nietzsche in 1895 they felt invigorated by his thinking, surprised at how his writing mirrored their ideas, their conception of tragedy and their aspirations for the genre. 'I want to say a thousand things of Niet[z]sche,- a thousand', Bradley would write enthusiastically to Berenson.³⁰ 'I am kindled

describing the reigns of Commodus, Pertinax, Severus and Caracalla. Julius Sommerbrodt, *De Aeschylī Re Scenica* (Lignicii: Reisner, 1848). They read John Dryden's translation of Lucian (see Michael Field, 'Works and Days' Add MS 46784, fol. 52v) in John Dryden. *The Works of Lucian, Translated from the Greek by several Eminent Hands. With The Life of Lucian, a Discourse of his Writings, and A Character of some of the present Translators*. (London: printed for Sam. Briscoe, and sold by J. Woodward, and J. Morphew, 1710-1711).

²⁸ Michael Field, 'Works and Days', BL Add MS 46785, fol. 196 [E.C.]

²⁹ Michael Field, 'Works and Days', BL Add MS 46784, fol. 32 [E.C.]

³⁰ Michael Field, 'Works and Days', BL Add MS 46784, fol. 17 [K.B.]

to find', Cooper writes, 'that before I read a word of Ni[e]tzsche, before I heard anything, borrowed or really his own from Bernhard, I had reached so many of Ni[e]tzsche's positions'. She goes on to describe how one day she asked herself 'as an ultimatum – what is Beauty? And the answer was Nietzsche's —& my own, in my own words... "Those qualities in the world that attract emotion".' ³¹ While reading *The Birth of Tragedy* alongside the writing of *The World at Auction*, Michael Field wrote in their diary: 'We are reading Die Geburt der Tragödie the only prose statement of the Dionysiac attitude towards Life that Exists. This book is the mirror in wh: we see our naked errors & offences exposed. Our achievements revealed, our hopes tested.' She concluded: 'It is our Review of Reviews.'³²

They started *The World at Auction* in 1895 just as they began to read Nietzsche's *The Birth of Tragedy* and they continued to read Nietzsche through to 1896 and after. It was Cooper's idea was to write a Trilogy from the start. During 1895 they were reading everyday in German *Götzen Dämmerung* (*Twilight of the Idols*): 'I can say nothing about it yet, except this', Cooper intimates, 'that it is of extreme importance for us to master it – as either it follows out the Dionysiac teaching to its extreme conclusions, wh: we must face & justify – or starting on Dionysiac lines it strays from them into the bye-paths of death.' She added: 'I am carefully analysing each chapter that I may understand & then weigh the result. Nietzsche gives one a sense of wine at the heart.'³³ In the year of the first translation into English of *The Works of Friedrich Nietzsche*, 1896, Cooper would confess after reading *The Anti-Christ*: 'I am reading mad Nietzsche in translation – how he whisks up the obvious into suggestiveness, colouring it with rainbow-hues or sulphur according as he is poet or atheist!' Impressed by his writings she writes: 'He stimulates as no logician or exact thinker could – his logic is of

³¹ Michael Field, 'Works and Days', BL Add MS 46784, fol. 5v and *passim* [E.C.]

³² Michael Field, 'Works and Days', British Library, Add MS. 46784, fol. 24v.

³³ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Götzen-Dämmerung, oder, Wie man mit dem Hammer philosophirt* (Leipzig: C.G. Naumann, 1889). First translation into English was by Thomas Common in 1896 (see next footnote). See Michael Field, 'Works and Days', British Library, Add MS. 46784, fol. 3v.

passion'.³⁴ The following quotes from *Thus Spake Zarathustra* were used as epigraphs in their diary for 1899: 'One must have Chaos within to make one give birth to a dancing star', 'A thousand paths there are which have never yet been walked, a thousand healths & hidden islands of life unexhausted & undiscovered ever are man & the human Earth', and 'Verily a place of healing shall earth become, & already a new odour lieth round it, an odour which bringeth salvation & a new life'.³⁵

Nietzsche's theories were energising, but none more directly linked to their new dramatic project than *The Birth of Tragedy*, whose reading would compel Cooper to summarise (quasi translate) sections into English from the original text in German directly into their diary.³⁶ Parts of the section translated/summarised by Cooper correspond to Nietzsche's analysis of the causes that led to the end to the genre in Greek culture. She writes:

Although in the *Bacchae* Euripides confesses the night of Dionysus, Euripides was the God's gt. Enemy; his true divinity was Socrates. In the old Drama (Aeschylus & Sophocles) the dramatic-Epos, or visualised story, was the Apolline [*sic*] element of the play – & the rapture of life, chiefly breaking out in the chorus was the Dionysiac element. Euripides discards both & puts in the place of the epic-Apolline element

³⁴ *The Works of Friedrich Nietzsche, Volume XI: The Case of Wagner; The Twilight of The Idols; Nietzsche Contra Wagner and The Antichrist*. Trans. By Thomas Common (London and New York: Macmillan and Co, 1896). See Michael Field, 'Works and Days', BL Add MS 46785, fol. 99v

³⁵ Michael Field, 'Works and Days', BL Add MS. 46788 fols. 00. Nietzsche, Friedrich. *Thus Spake Zarathustra. A Book for All and None*. Trans. Alexander Tille (London: The Macmillan Company, 1896). A second impression of which was published in 1899 in *The works of Friedrich Nietzsche*, 4 vols., by T. Fisher Unwin. Michael Field's replication differ slightly from the English translation. Tille's reads: 'One must have chaos within to enable one to give birth to a dancing star'; 'A thousand paths there are which have never yet been walked, a thousand healths and hidden islands of life. Unexhausted and undiscovered ever are man and the human earth'; 'Verily, a place of healing shall earth become! And already a new odour lieth round it, an odour which bringeth salvation – and a new hope'.

³⁶ The first translation of the text into English appeared in *The Complete Works of Friedrich Nietzsche*. Volume Three: *The Birth of Tragedy: Or, Hellenism and Pessimism*. Editor: Oscar Levy. Translator: William S. Haussman (Edinburgh: T.N. Foulis, 1909). Michael Field's summary/translation can be found in this first edition between pages 93-145.

paradoxical thought, & in place of the Bacchic rapture of life, the emotions of individuals.³⁷

Michael Field transposed Nietzsche's dissection directly to the Trilogy, which was built upon the interlacing of the Apollonian and the Dionysian. Thematically speaking the plays deal with the role of Beauty in the modern world (i.e. could there be an aesthetic state? What happens to art when beauty becomes a commodified object? How does Beauty imagine the world? What is the role of gender and sex in the aesthetic world? And so on).³⁸ But at a more philosophical level, the Trilogy is a mythical recreation of the unfolding of history: the cyclic strife between the Apollonian (principle of form, unity, rationality, restraint, representing the visual plastic arts) and the Dionysian elements of life (rapture and rupture, the world of dreams, excess and musical arts). Commodus, a Dionysian Emperor, is deposed by an Emperor of the Apollonian type, the austere Pertinax, who is then deposed by Emperor of Dionysian inclinations Didius Julianus, who is then killed by Severus, an Emperor of the Apollonian type. The final play is a deathly game, representing the final battle between Apollo and Dionysus, Caracalla against Geta. Though Julia Domna, the Goddess Vesta, the embodiment of motherhood, origins and earth, tries to achieve the coexistence of both principles, Apollo wins out. Dionysus' execution symbolises the beginning of a darker world order, in which the Dionysian element of life, the core of the tragic world view, has been blocked out. Metaphorically, in other words, the Trilogy is a poetic drama dramatizing Nietzsche's *The Birth of Tragedy*.

We cannot however forget that the purpose of the Trilogy, as again and again Bradley and Cooper would state in their diary, was to re-invent the genre, and this fundamental objective was directly linked to the women's transformative design for their historical verse dramas. To re-iterate: the ultimate and real aim of the Trilogy was to give verse drama the

³⁷ Michael Field, 'Works and Days', British Library, Add MS. 46784 fol. 71 [E.C.].

³⁸ I have dealt with this issues in my 'Outmoded Dramas: History and Modernity in Michael Field's Aesthetic Plays' in Margaret Stetz and Cheryl Wilson, eds., *Michael Field and Their World*. (London: Rivendale Press, 2007), pp. 237-249.

power of breathing life. And what is fascinating is that Michael Field, to make the genre alive again, took a radical approach to its form. The emphasis on intellect and not passion explained for Nietzsche why Greek tragedy had died. Nietzsche blamed Euripides for the intellectualization of tragedies (as noted earlier Berenson had accused Ibsen of the same). That this was a key issue for Michael Field there can be no doubt. When checking the proofs of *The Race of Leaves*, Bradley noted in their diary: ‘Much of the artificial, & too intellectual manner of this play is due to the one Act Scene principle, foreign to the genius of English, creative work. I will yield no more to this species of strait waistcoat.’³⁹ The Act Scene principle *did* prevail in the Trilogy but the way in which Michael Field eliminated intellectuality in their plays was by removing the prologue, a key element in their plays pre-1895.⁴⁰ The reason for this formal change can be found in Cooper’s translation/summary of Nietzsche’s *The Birth of Tragedy*:

So anxious is he [Euripides] to be rational that he sends a Prologue on to explain the whole action – while with the elder dramatists the action was seen taking place in effortless ways conveyed to the interest of the Spectator. But with Euripides, the weaving of the inner vision lies so outside the action of the player that he scarcely remains a player – the Prologue kills the Explosion, the plastic Apolline element.⁴¹

Indeed, the radical changes in place in the Trilogy brought about by their reading of Nietzsche operated at all levels. I will be discussing Michael Field’s poetics in more detail in the next section, but the Trilogy fundamentally broke up with the traditional 5-act structure of Victorian poetic dramas. Both *The World at Auction* and *The Race of Leaves* are four-act plays with no scenes (they had already experimented with this form in *Attila, My Attila!*). This formal transformation made the plays shorter, more alive to the action. From the publication

³⁹ Michael Field, ‘Works and Days’, British Library, Add MS. 46789, fol. 107 [K.B.]. One can also hear here a reference to Lionel Johnson’s critique of *Attila, My Attila!*

⁴⁰ They would however write prologues in later works. See for example, *The Accuser, Tristan De Léonois, A Messiah* (London: Sidgwick and Jackson, 1911). Published anonymously by ‘The author of *Borgia*’.

⁴¹ Michael Field, ‘Works and Days’, BL Add MS 46784, fol. 71 [E.C.].

of *The World at Auction* in 1898 to *Julia Domna* in 1903, the women would continue to receive vicious attacks but with the determination that characterised them, they kept experimenting on the Trilogy to the very end. Advised by Charles Ricketts, the Trilogy's book designer and owner of the Vale Press that published it, and the poetic dramatist Thomas Sturge Moore (co-founder with W.B. Yeats and Ricketts of *The Literary Theatre Society* in 1905), the women went further with *Julia Domna*, cutting it down from their projected 4-Act structure to the final version in 3 Acts. This last play was only 51 pages long, in other words, less than half the size of the other two. When *Julia Domna* arrived in 1903, Cooper wrote thus:

Julia gives one the sense – it cd. not be better & the choking effect of such a judgement. It has no nooks, no vistas - & the verse marches tense with Emotion, like the feet of horses at a funeral or a military Display – never is the tramp, subjugated by the solemn action, relaxed or changed in time or mod. This makes the text very hard to read – it disciplines the chest. But how strict is the power, how steep the Emotion!⁴²

Michael Field's perception (some of their contemporary disagreed) was that formally and thematically they had finally managed to give their poetic dramas the creative emotion preached by Berenson. They had also managed to give their plays the myth-creating power advocated by Nietzsche as the foundation of dramatic art. Seeing the three volumes finally piled up together they wrote: 'We have not felt so strongly excited for years'.⁴³

IV – 'My Beloved Pantomime'

I have discussed earlier how the Trilogy dialectically recreates the myth Apollo and Dionysus. But this dynamic of opposites operates in the plays in another way too. The plays are set up to differentiate the Apollonian poetics of history or epos, and the Dionysian poetics of poetry and music, focalised in the character of the pantomime dancer, Pylades. Lost in the

⁴² Michael Field, 'Works and Days', BL Add MS 46792, fol. 57 [E.C.].

⁴³ Michael Field, 'Works and Days', BL Add MS 46792, fol. 47v [E.C.].

dance, Pylades' performances stir passions in those who see him, as he crystalizes in the rhythm of his movements the joy of existence, the general myth-making impulse, and the tragedy of life. See for example this dialogue between Marcia and Pylades in *The World at Auction*:

MARCIA.

[...]

It is idle, Pylades,

To tell you of our mysteries: your feet

Are rhythmic only to the pulse of life

That Earth herself has prompted, to the passions

She gave to men and they have reared as gods.

PYLADES.

I am the dancer to Olympus. Cease!

You would not have me break the harmony

That is my law; for dancers must have calm,

Unclouded thoughts of all things. As for me,

When once the motion of the music stirs

My questionless response, I have no care

For anything but beauty: all men do

And feel and suffer is unblameable

In that large, beating sway.⁴⁴

Pylades, 'my beloved Pantomime', as Cooper would call him, represents the spirit of Dionysus in the plays.⁴⁵ As they were researching for the Trilogy, Cooper attended a Lecture in the Royal Academy given by the British Museum archaeologist, Alex Stuart Murray. Cooper went up to him to wish him success in the next expedition. He returned the good wishes, hoping their 'Dionysus would be half-done. [I fear he thinks our great Poem for the future is actually in hand – whereas we are only gathering for it & not building.]⁴⁶ It is worth noticing that Michael Field re-phrases here the title of Wagner's manifesto, 'The Artwork of the Future', in which he had argued that 'Drama' was 'the perfected form of the Lyric.'⁴⁷ Pylades incarnates Dionysus. He is the symbol of life and stands in the Trilogy for art and the interweaving of the lyric into the dramatic format: the poem for the future.

⁴⁴ Michael Field, *The World at Auction* (London: Vale Press, 1898), p.xliii.

⁴⁵ Michael Field, 'Works and Days', BL Add MS 46784, fol. 20 [E.C.]

⁴⁶ Michael Field, 'Works and Days', BL Add MS 46785, fol. 34v [E.C.].

⁴⁷ Richard Wagner, 'The Art-Work of the Future' in *Richard Wagner's Prose Works*, trans. W.A. Ellis, 8 vols (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner & Co Ltd, 1895), I, 104. For more on Michael Field and

Michael Field's character is based on the famous Pylades of Cilicia, the creator of the Roman tragic pantomime. According to Suetonius, Pylades was sent to exile temporarily when during a performance, when a noble spectator dared to hiss him, Pylades responded by thrusting his finger at him.⁴⁸ Michael Field reproduces this well-known scene almost literally:

CLARA.
And Pylades?

DIDIUS.
Is in disgrace. One day
While dancing Leda with soft witchery,
Beyond all praise, and sure that anything
Would be permitted to his impudence,
When Marcus Curius the Praetor hissed,
Our fair girl-boy with jeering finger showed
His enemy to all. The Emperor listened
Next morning to complaints, for Pertinax
Was never friend to art, and gave command
That Pylades should be chastised at noon
Upon the public stage; I saw him there,
For once unheralded by music, stripped,
And fronting us the first time in his life
With naked face, one fire and then one snow.
He stood against the rods unflinchingly,
His hum of pain was scarcely audible,
And soon as he was loosed with mocking gesture
He gave salute as if he took applause,
But left the theatre with no golden youth
Of Rome to give him escort. Days and nights
The boy lay sick and inconsolable;⁴⁹

Interestingly, a comment in the women's diary explains the autobiographical nature of this scene: 'Pylades public whipping is very actually what I have suffered from insult in such papers as the *Chronicle*'.⁵⁰ We must also read the scene as Michael Field's commentary on the precarious situation of the Dionysian artist in late-Victorian society. The scene symbolises the fall of decadence and of the decadent artist. As Cooper wrote to Charles Ricketts:

Wagner see my 'Another Renaissance: The Decadent Poetic Drama of A.C. Swinburne and Michael Field' in *Decadent Poetics: Literature and Form at the British Fin de Siècle*, eds. Jason Hall and Alex Murray (Houndmills: Palgrave 2013), pp. 116-140.

⁴⁸ C. Suetonius Tranquillus, *The Lives of the Twelve Caesars*. Trans. Alexander Thomson (New York: R. Worthington, 1883), p. 121. Augustus 45.

⁴⁹ Field, Michael. *The World at Auction* (London: Vale Press, 1898), pp. xii-xiii.

⁵⁰ Cooper is referring here to the review in the *Chronicle* of *Attila, My Attila!*

‘Recollect Pylades speaks for us all, for all who suffer the indignities, who achieve the triumphs of the artist.’⁵¹

Pylades’ presence in the plays goes beyond characterisation. The ecstasy of life that Pylades represents is achieved through poetics. In the plays that more closely follow Nietzsche’s *The Birth of Tragedy*, *The World at Auction* and *The Race of Leaves*, the epos appears in blank verse, while the Dionysian element is in choruses and chants that break out in key moments of the action. Thus, for example, in the *Race of Leaves* the chorus transforms action into mythopoesis. This is a necessarily long extract to show the dramatic transformation of action into myth through the chorus:

COMMODUS (TO CLEANDER.)

You fashion

My dreams to my own liking: that is greatly
And truly to be served. Before to-night
I shall be Paulus the secutor; now
Your Lucius Commodus is Hercules,
The slayer of a lion, such a beast,
And old and brindled sire, whose belly sent
Its hungered bay up that had been a roar
But that I cut it silent. From the conflict
I come to rest. How exquisite a dream!
I breathe Olympus, and, my labours done,
My burning sweat washed off, I am exalted,
As mortals ever must be to enjoy
Things perfectly celestial. Scatter flowers
To fill the air with coolness; fetch a cup
Crowned with dawn-fabbling roses to the brim.
Be goddesses beside me, be as gods;
Let me create my creatures deities,
As I endue myself, my strength, my beauty,
With Herculean honours and the name
Of Jove's unconquered son.

(Pylades slips away among the laurels.)

CLEANDER.

You need a goblet

Worthy divineness of so high a reach.

COMMODUS.

And such you can present? Go, fetch your marvel,
My little, own Cleander.

CLEANDER.

⁵¹ Michael Field, ‘Works and Days’, BL Add MS 46786, fols. 46r-46v [E.C.]

With six pounds
Of the best perfume of Niceros, worthy
The nostrils of a god!

COMMODUS.

Gifts, ever gifts!
And always gold to meet expenditure;
That is the one solidity of dreams.
(Exit Cleander.)

And his last thought, the perfume! Sagana,
Soft as the spray, soft-bosomed as the rose,
Give me your hair for cushion. I am weary;
Fall round me and in concert hymn my toils.
(Closing his eyes.)

How slumbrous in this land of cooler air,
Abounding with the laurel, in the smell
Of the sweet laurels, in the pleasant shadow
To hear each valiant act on women's voices,
As if it donned queen Omphale's attire.

FIRST SEMI CHORUS.

Great Hercules in the Nemaean vale
Threw down his weapon on the sedgy grass,
And strangled the red lion with his hand.

SECOND SEMI CHORUS.

And Lucius Commodus before the world
Struck dead a hundred lions, dart by dart;
Laid them in order on the drunken sod.

FIRST SEMI CHORUS.

Great Hercules from fresh Arcadian woods
Bore the gold-antlered stag to Tiryns home,
The stag of Artemis with feet of brass.

SECOND SEMI CHORUS.

And Lucius Commodus struck down in death
Camelopardalis, the stag with neck
Tall as a fir and spotted as the plane.

FIRST SEMI CHORUS.

Great Hercules through dazzling Psophian snows
Chased the tusked boar, and chasing mid the cold,
Caught him at last o'er-wearied in a net.

SECOND SEMI CHORUS.

But Lucius Commodus had rarer sport,
For with one aim he felled rhinoceros,
Of bulk gigantic, armed with hideous tusk.

FIRST SEMI CHORUS.

Great Hercules slew the Stymphalian birds

Beside the lake's swift-sliding waves; in vain
Were brazen claws and beaks and arrowed plumes.

SECOND SEMI CHORUS.

And Lucius Commodus with crescent darts
Struck Mauritanian ostriches, in flight,
That skim the ground on wings like swelling sails.

COMMODUS.

Five of my dozen Labours! Oh, this chaunt
Rises an odour from those flowers---your lips!⁵²

In this quote we see Michael Field's radical changes to form most clearly at work, even if the chosen form is taken from classical sources (the chorus was the very essence of Greek tragedy but was revived in the nineteenth century by Wagner for his operas). The first part of the quote is engineered to know, to apprehend, Commodus the man; in the second part – the chorus – we see how Michael Field generates a visualised myth of Lucius as Hercules through the use of the two semi choruses. And in doing so, the chorus ironizes Lucius beliefs that he is Hercules.

Finally, the most crucial moments in the plays are when Pylades performs his dithyrambic dances. Just as Nietzsche saw the 'satyric chorus of the dithyramb' as the salvation of Greek art, Michael Field sought the salvation of the lyric spirit in Pylades' dithyrambic dances.⁵³ The dithyramb was a cult song in honour of Dionysus out of which, according to Aristotle in *Poetics*, tragedy developed.⁵⁴ Little is known of the performance and form of the dithyramb; but it appears that each chorus consisted of fifty men who sang and danced in a circle (or circles), while the *aulos*-player who provided the musical accompaniment stood in the middle. According to surviving texts, the narrative of a more or less substantial portion of a myth stood at the centre of the classical dithyramb. As classical scholars have noted, the dithyramb brought an emphasis on metrical and stylistic

⁵² Field, Michael. *The Race of Leaves* (London: Vale Press, 1901), pp., xxxvi-xxxviii.

⁵³ Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, p. 62.

⁵⁴ See Carl Shaw, *Satiric Play: The Evolution of Greek Comedy and Satyr Drama* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), p. 42.

experimentation and musical innovations.⁵⁵ Michael Field's plays are archeological in their uncovering of the dythiramb for a new age, as the following long passage taken from *The World at Auction* shows:

DIDIUS (drinking.)

...

More music, heigh!

Again the wild close of the dithyramb.
(The Flutes sound.)

PYLADES.

And I to make it rush across your sight,
As voice and music bear it to your ears.
I practise the divinest mystery;
Co-equal with creation, it was born,
As love, in oldest days: our holy Mother
Of all things, Rhea, watches silently
With smiles the dance; it saved the life of Zeus
Through Corybantic homage, and the god
Who lives in me to-night, through dancing tamed
The Indians, the Tyrrhenians, and the folk
Of Lydia—savage peoples. By the stars,
I will subdue the curse of Pertinax!

(He catches up his mask and the thyrsus he had dropped at the moment of panic, sweeps aside the curtain and invites his hidden orchestra and chorus to enter. They group themselves behind him and recommence singing and playing to his dance.)

CHORUS.

Evoe! Hark, the word that rouses
Tigers' fierceness,
Women's madness,
Cheers and jubilee of satyrs,
Execration in our foes,
Turbulent felicity
In our ranks and in our hearts.
Evoe!—for the earth is waking
As the sun can never wake it,
As alone victorious passage
Of its life-blood into living
Can arouse and fire its kingdoms.
Evoe! Frantic beat the cymbals.
Satyrs, beat your little drums;
Down with impetus of dances,

⁵⁵ See also A.W. Pickard-Cambridge, *Dithyramb Tragedy and Comedy* (1927; Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997).

Down on India with your serpents,
With your wine-cups and the garlands
Round your weapons and your brows.
Overwhelm the world with singing,
Light it with one flow of torches,
Laugh across it, clang against it,
Evoe!— for the world is ours.

(After a wild dithyrambic dance, he waves the flutists and singers away.)

DIDIUS.

You only live by movement. Ah, what curves
Of the supple lawn, now spread as wings, and now
As hollow as the chalice of a flower,
And you half-seen among them, apparition
Of deity belonging to the air.
Your dancing as the rod of Mercury
Could waken all that sleep. It is a pleasure
Like music or like love. Wise hands, wise feet,
That can persuade so well! If I could join
The kingdom of your dithyramb, I think
All craving would be filled.⁵⁶

One does not need to scan the chorus to realise that the versification of the play dramatically changes and flows faster through a stream of images and sounds. Like the crowd of revellers, the tempo grows wilder at every new line. More importantly, the revellers are becoming One with music and the dance: they are breathing song and their feet is the dance itself. When Michael Field finished the writing of this Act, they wrote in their diary:

The Bacchic chant has given me joy – it seems like triumph in unrhymed lyrical verse to which I have always felt drawn. It sang itself out of me with no more effort than the spider’s web unravels out of the spider. It has in it the freshest spirits with wh: I face the future. I am in love with Pylades – physically smitten as I always am with my dearest characters – I know in myself just how he looked, how he moved as if I registered a real impression. ⁵⁷

And Michael Field links up Pylades’ dithyramb to Nietzsche’s conceptualisation of Dionysus, as Cooper’s translation/summary of *The Birth of Tragedy* shows:

⁵⁶ Michael Field. *The World at Auction*, p. lxxix-lxxxii.

⁵⁷ Michael Field, ‘Works and Days’, BL Add MS 46784 fol. 54 [E.C.].

This eternal Bacchic joy in existence we must not seek in the world of appearance, but behind it. We are for a moment ourselves Original Being; we are constrained into the horror of Individual Existence, to see how all things must go to a passionate destruction, & yet, through all our fear & pity, we are happy & alive – not as individuals but as the one Life into whose generative-desire we are fused.⁵⁸

Pylades represents this Bacchic joy. Despite the horror of ‘Individual Existence’, Pylades exists poetically, theoretically, to remind us of the joy of existence and the tragedy of life: passion and destruction all in one.

Epilogue: Poetic Drama, Ballet Ruses

The Trilogy was trashed by the press. Only the bindings of Charles Ricketts escaped the wrath of the critics. Perhaps the most vicious was *The Academy*'s review of *The World at Auction*, entitled ‘Gibbon and Water’. It started thus:

Surely he did an ill service to letters who introduced Michael Field to the pages of Gibbon. It might have been foreseen that those lurid and indecent figures of the *Historia Augusta* would have a most unholy fascination for imagination always so weak on the side of sensitivity to the abnormal and the extravagant. And really these parricides and usurpers, these monsters of blood and lust, are not dramatic.⁵⁹

Gibbon was ‘diluted into the waste and chaos of words’. ‘We confess that we have but little patience.’ The reviewer attacked the women for their ‘Elizabethan manners’, the play being a ‘third rate Beaumont and Fletcher.’ The play ‘added’ nothing to ‘Gibbon, save some scenes of sickly amorousness’, scenes that gave Michael Field ‘an excuse for some careful archaeology anent the performances, quite unrealisable by a modern imagination of the pantomimes.’ The

⁵⁸ Michael Field, ‘Works and Days’, BL Add MS 46784 fol. 72v [E.C.].

⁵⁹ [Anon.] “Gibbon And Water”: Review of *The World At Auction*. *The Academy* (30 July 1898), p. 103.

reviewer also claimed that Michael Field had confused pantomimes with mimes. The last sentences were a death sentence for the verse dramatist Michael Field:

Curiously diluted, is it not? Michael Field are two clever ladies, but they will not do much until they get into the open air, and out of this hothouse of decadent chronicle. We are glad to be quit of Julian and Pylades and Didia Clara; they are not tragedy, but a disordered dream.

We do know how Michael Field reacted to the review. In a letter to George Meredith, they noted: 'I am sending you our new play. I do not very clearly know why. For the evil days are come to our books in which the world is trying to force us to say "we have no pleasure in them." Nor apparently has anyone else.'⁶⁰ They fiercely claimed that 'this Elizabethan crackle' was 'pure nonsense'. 'None of the laws underlying the grown of Elizabethan tragedy are at work in the *World at Auction*.' 'Wagner', they added, 'is most unconcealedly at its base.' They also told Meredith how some critics had pointed them out how 'essentially Latin' the plays were. Bradley and Cooper ended their letter hoping that at least Meredith would find 'poetry' 'in the [great] Bacchic dithyramb, if you don't like that...'

The plays were not a failure: they were simply too avant-guard for their time. Complex, dynamic and full of poetry we should instead integrate them into two new trajectories of the stage that were emerging and would be at the centre of intense debates during the first two decades of the twentieth century: 'modernist' verse drama and ballet. We cannot understand the rise of *The Literary Theatre Society* (co-founded in 1905 by Laurence Binyon, Gwendolyn Bishop, Florence Farr, William Pye, Thomas Sturge Moore, and W. B. Yeats) or, the verse drama of Yeats and of T.S. Eliot without paying due to Michael Field's radical invention of the genre. Aspiring to create a 'Theatre of Beauty' and with the aim of restoring to the stage poetic drama, *The Literary Theatre Society* would produce in 1907 Laurence Binyon's *Attila: A Tragedy in Four Acts*.⁶¹ Yeats approached Michael Field asking

⁶⁰ Michael Field, 'Works and Days', BL Add MS 46787, fol.52 [E.C.] and *passim*.

⁶¹ A good account of the history of this Society can be found in Ronald Schuchard, *The Last Minstrels: Yeats and the Revival of the Bardic Arts* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

for their unpublished drama *Deirdre*, written in 1898 and redrafted in 1903, for his newly formed company *The Irish National Theatre Society* (which grew out of the *Irish Literary Theatre*).⁶² He rejected it and would produce his own *Deidre* in 1906.

But perhaps more importantly, by placing Pylades at the heart of the Trilogy, what Michael Field foreshadowed was the artistic revolution in modernist circles that the Ballet Ruses would represent. When discussing the design for the *World at Auction*, Cooper was keen to have an image of Pylades:

Let your title-page be as it is, but opposite to it there must be Pylades. His is the one figure that appears in each play of the Trilogy. So – if you would have us kind to those vengeful doves – by all that is slim & fleet & long & supple, dream that dream of Fortune & the dancer, just as you saw it, dream it into lines, into existence.⁶³

Ricketts refused, and instead included within the design theatre masks, representing theatre and pantomime. It was only after seeing the Ballet Ruses that Ricketts realized the importance of Pylades. He never missed a performance and in 1910 he wrote thus to Michael Field:

The great male dancer, Nijinski, is only a negro slave whose business is to lift Cleopatra from tall gilt sandals or cothurnes. He is consummate! and one understands the follies of the Romans over Pylades, Paris and the lovely Mnester.⁶⁴

Nijinski embodied the Dionysiac element in culture, theorised by Nietzsche, that Michael Field had sought for in Pylades.

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⁶² Michael Field, 'Works and Days', BL Add MS 46792, fol. 00

⁶³ Michael Field, 'Works and Days', BL Add MS 46786, fols. 46v [E.C.]

⁶⁴ Charles Ricketts, Letter to Michael Field (8 July 1910) BL Add MS 61723, fol. 97.

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