

[Note: This is a pre-copyedited, author-produced PDF of an article published as “A Bounded Field: Situating Victorian Poetry in the Literary Landscape,” *Victorian Poetry* 41 (2003), 465-472.]

A Bounded Field:
Situating Victorian Poetry in the Literary Landscape

Erik Gray

...thy province [is] not large,
A bounded field, nor stretching far.
—Tennyson, *In Memoriam* XLVI

The greatest development in the field of Victorian poetry studies over the past fifteen years has been the renewal of interest in women poets, both those who were already familiar but not yet sufficiently acknowledged, like Christina Rossetti, and those who had been all but forgotten by twentieth-century readers. Among the latter perhaps the most intriguing “newcomer” is Michael Field, the pen-name and poetic persona used by Katherine Bradley and her niece Edith Cooper. Field had already begun to draw the attention of queer criticism in the 1980s,¹ but her life and poetry were brought to the notice of most critics of Victorian poetry only with the publication in 1992 of Angela Leighton’s crucial study *Victorian Women Poets: Writing Against the Heart*.² I wish to look briefly at the decade of criticism that has followed, which shows trends that are typical of the study both of Victorian women’s poetry and of Victorian poetry as a whole, in order to suggest what direction these studies may take in the future.

Leighton dedicates to Field one chapter out of the eight that comprise her book, each concerned with a different woman poet, reaching from Felicia Hemans to Charlotte Mew. Field first broke into the pages of this journal in articles by Holly Laird and Yopie Prins which formed part of a 1995 special issue dedicated to “Women Poets.”³ In both

cases, then, the setting for the discussion of Field's poetry was the same. And yet as Leighton points out, "Michael Field, in many ways, belongs altogether outside the tradition of Victorian women's verse. As poets, they lack both the socio-political commitment of Barrett Browning and Webster and the sentimental attitudes of desire and repression which characterise Hemans, L.E.L. and Rossetti" (p. 204). For all their extensive reading, Bradley and Cooper seem to have paid relatively little attention to these precursors, as they "very rarely mention other women poets in their journal" (p. 211). Nevertheless, Leighton does frequently compare Field's poetry to that of the other authors she discusses in her study, if only to differentiate them. This makes perfect sense: Leighton is introducing this poet to her readers and wishes to explore Field's relation to her immediate context. An investigation of the wider contexts of Field's poetry – a lengthy discussion of Greek poetry, or of Renaissance painting – would clearly have been out of place in Leighton's book.

And yet as much as any poet, Michael Field demands to be read against a large and varied artistic background. The first two books of lyrics to be published under the name "Michael Field"⁴ both parade their participation in age-old traditions. The first, *Long Ago* (1889), consists of translations and expansions of the fragments of Sappho, one of which (in Greek) heads each of the poems. The second volume, *Sight and Song* (1892), consists of a series of ekphrases: each lyric describes a single Old Master painting and is headed by the title of the painting, the name of the painter, and the museum that houses it. Both of these interests, in Sappho and in Renaissance painting, are typically late-Victorian; but they also implicate the work of these Victorian women poets into artistic traditions that are not solely Victorian – nor solely female, nor solely poetic. The

next step in the critical history of Michael Field has therefore been to expand the contexts in which her poetry is discussed. Several writers have pursued the analysis of Field's poetry in the context of queer writing or of literary collaborations over the centuries.⁵ In *Victorian Sappho* (1999), Yopie Prins situates *Long Ago* in an extensive tradition beginning with the Sapphic fragments themselves.⁶ And in a recent article, Ana I. Parejo Vadillo has begun to perform the same service for *Sight and Song*, reminding us that this volume, as much as its predecessor, presents itself as a "translation" of antique artworks.⁷

This critical progression is typical of what happens when a new poet swims into our ken. First she must be seen clearly, as in herself she really is, then understood in relation to her contemporaries. Then she can be understood in relation to the many broader traditions in which she participates. From the small body of criticism that has as yet appeared around Michael Field, it appears that this progression is taking place rapidly. But criticism of Victorian women's poetry has for the most part concentrated on the first two steps: it has focused on the individual and on her relation to other Victorian women poets. Vadillo's article appeared in another special issue of *Victorian Poetry*, this one entitled "Women Writers 1890-1918";⁸ as she was in 1995, Michael Field is surrounded by a company of Victorian women poets. Angela Leighton followed up her 1992 critical book with an anthology (1995) and a critical reader (1996) both named *Victorian Women Poets*, making her the only critic I know to have published three separate full-length works with the same title.⁹ I mention this not flippantly, as a curiosity, but seriously, as an indication of the demand that exists in our field. We seem to be more interested in learning how our poets relate to each other than how they relate to other periods of literature or art, and this is true not only of the relatively new field of

Victorian women's poetry – where it is more understandable, since the canon is still being defined – but of Victorian poetry studies in general.

Let me take as an emblem of our way of seeing Michael Field's poem, "The Sleeping Venus: Giorgione, The Dresden Gallery." This is one of the more familiar poems from *Sight and Song*, reprinted in two recent anthologies of nineteenth-century women's poetry.¹⁰ Leighton does not include it in her anthology, but she does discuss it in her chapter on Michael Field, as does Vadillo in her article on *Sight and Sound*. Both critics quote the same stanza, describing the central figure of Venus:

Her left arm remains beside
 The plastic body's lower heaves,
 Controlled by them, as when a river-side
 With its sandy margin weaves
 Deflections in a lenient tide;
 Her hand the thigh's tense surface leaves,
 Falling inward. Not even sleep
 Dare invalidate the deep,
 Universal pleasure sex
 Must unto itself annex—
 Even the stillest sleep; at peace,
 More profound with rest's increase,
 She enjoys the good
 Of delicious womanhood.¹¹

The figure certainly seems self-sufficient. Leighton comments on the “self-delighting physical literalness” of the description (p. 215), and Vadillo notes that “the gaze of the object is directed toward itself” (p. 30). Field presents Giorgione’s Venus as a figure of autoeroticism, an implication that is reinforced by the stanza-form: an inverted and attenuated sonnet, sestet followed by octave, with a quite literal “enjambement” between the two – hand and thigh crossing from one half of the stanza to the other, as the sonnet’s usual dyadic structure becomes resolved into a single, apparently self-sufficient whole.

Leighton and Vadillo are right in suggesting that this poem marks a break away from the main tradition of women’s love poetry. But we would be wrong to view the figure of Venus as entirely solitary and decontextualized. To the contrary, Field insists that Venus is deeply interfused with her background, with the landscape in which she reclines and from which she is inseparable. This “ideal sympathy between woman and the land” was the first thing Bradley and Cooper noted about the painting in their journal,¹² and their poem insists upon it.

And her body has the curves,
 The same extensive smoothness seen
 In yonder breadths of pasture, in the swerves
 Of the grassy mountain-green
 That for her propping pillow serves:
 There is sympathy between
 Her and Earth of largest reach.

(p. 99; ll. 15-21)

There are two overlapping fields of vision presented in the poem, one centering on the woman, the other on the expansive landscape that serves as her context. But they are depicted as perfectly continuous, and to focus too exclusively on one at the expense of the other is to risk not seeing the forest for the trees – or in this case, the field for the knees:

Down to the crossing knees a line descends

Unimpeachable and soft

As the adjacent slope that ends

In chequered plain of hedge and croft.

(p. 100; ll. 31-4)

As these lines descend Venus's body, they pass imperceptibly into a description of the landscape: "the adjacent slope" seems at first to be a part of her anatomy, but it "ends" in the fields in the background.

I should make it clear that I am not disagreeing with Leighton's reading or Vadillo's, nor cavilling because they happen to concentrate on one aspect of the poem rather than another; it would be nonsensical to object to a reading because of what it does not try to say. I cite "The Sleeping Venus" merely as an emblem of a critical tendency in Victorian poetry studies: our tendency to focus on a bounded field, often to the exclusion of the adjacent slopes. In this case we might take the foreground and background to represent the sister arts of poetry and painting, a sisterhood of which *Sight and Song* constantly reminds the reader, from its title onwards. The Venus of this poem may legitimately be taken as a representation of her authors' self-sufficiency, a "freeing of the female imagination" (Leighton, p. 215). But she is presented first of all as a figure

emerging, not from the poet's psyche, but from another painting: "She has left her archèd shell, / Has left the barren wave that foams, / Amid earth's fruitful tilths to dwell" (p. 98; ll. 4-6). In other words, Giorgione's Venus has come over from Botticelli's "The Birth of Venus," a painting described in a poem near the beginning of *Sight and Song* (just as "The Sleeping Venus" comes near the end). Field demands that we think of the subjects described in the volume as figures in paint, and even seems to require that we have some familiarity with the particular works so meticulously catalogued by the titles of the poems. (It seems important to know, for instance, that The Sleeping Venus may be a collaborative work: since the sixteenth century it has borne a double attribution, to Giorgione and Titian.)¹³ As time goes on, criticism of Field's poetry will concentrate more and more not only on the immediate context – the work of other Victorian poets – but on works that seem further afield, like the paintings of the Italian Renaissance. Prins's *Victorian Sappho* has already begun this process.

The question is, when will this start to happen consistently? It is one of the peculiarities of our field that, with one major exception, it shies away from studies that relate Victorian poetry to other periods of art. This is a deep-seated aversion, beginning with Tennyson himself, who in the 1880s fumed over John Churton Collins's articles in *Cornhill*, which listed classical precedents for many of Tennyson's phrases. Perhaps the current reticence stems from a consciousness of the old objection to Victorian poetry, that it is a schoolroom art, bookish and full of allusions. One can see why we would wish to combat that stereotype; the difficulty is that the stereotype has a basis in truth. Perhaps it is not possible to say that one period of poetry is more intertextual than another (and it is not clear how one would calculate the comparison in any case), but Victorian poetry

seems to insist more than others on its relation to earlier artworks. For instance: all sonnet-sequences consciously participate in a tradition; but I can think of no example except for Christina Rossetti's *Monna Innominata* that so strenuously displays its debts to precursors as to put a pair of epigraphs at the head of every sonnet, essentially disrupting the economy that defines the sonnet form. Consider how many Victorian poems, from "Mariana" onwards, depend upon epigraphs. Even more striking is the close connection between Victorian poetry and the visual arts. I am referring not only to *Sight and Song* or the many poems by Robert Browning centering on Renaissance painters; I suspect that such poems are more common in the Victorian period than in most others, but again this would be difficult to calculate. Certainly, though, no other period of English poetry can boast the likes of Dante Gabriel Rossetti and William Morris, who were equally accomplished as poets and as graphic artists. The only near equivalent is Blake; but Blake was a one-man show, whereas Pre-Raphaelitism draws dozens of poets and painters into a close relation with each other.

It would not be true to say that these connections have been wholly ignored, that criticism of Victorian poetry never considers other areas of literature and art. But in the main, criticism of Victorian poetry has for decades been more reluctant than criticism of other periods to explore the fields in the background.¹⁴ The one great exception, to which I alluded above, is Romanticism: the debts and intertextualities between Victorian and Romantic poetry have been thoroughly discussed.¹⁵ But the very mention of Romanticism already suggests one major reason for the boundedness of our field: its name. "Romanticism" is a nebulous term, but it is usually taken to refer to a European-wide movement in thought and art – all of the arts, including painting and music as well

as literature – stretching from sometime in the eighteenth century until some indeterminate endpoint.¹⁶ “Victorian poetry,” on the other hand, limits the field it names chronologically, generically, and even nationally. Is it right to refer to Baudelaire as a “Victorian” poet? How about Walt Whitman? They seem to be excluded by the denomination, which implicitly limits itself to the British empire. Likewise, whereas “Romanticism” embraces the visual arts (the same is true of “Modernism”), the very term “Victorian poetry” divides Pre-Raphaelite art against itself.

The name has been a barrier, blocking the view and largely discouraging the next step in the cultivation of our field: criticism that treats Victorian poetry as an integral part of wider traditions. Again, this is not to detract in any way from existing work.

Although I speak of a “progression,” I do not mean that criticism which takes a more inclusive view of the artistic landscape will be “better” in itself than previous criticism. Criticism does not improve, any more than art improves, but like art it develops. A book like Leighton’s does not need to be improved upon; by the same token, it does not need to be repeated. It is not the individual works of criticism that will become more complex and mature, but our field. It is notable that books devoted to a single author have remained a staple of Victorian poetry studies, long after they have ceased to be common in other fields. These works are often our finest pieces of criticism; and yet if the field consists only of such books, it shuts itself off. A single-author monograph presupposes interest in its subject; it does not compel it.

The less attention we pay to other fields, the less attention they will pay to us. But does this matter? Why should we change? In the first place, there are practical reasons. As long as “Victorian poetry” is seen as a strictly bounded field, one concerned

primarily with its own internal economy, it will attract fewer graduate students and young scholars, and those who do enter the field will be at a disadvantage when looking for jobs. Secondly, as I have mentioned, the poetry itself is insistently intertextual. The corpus of Victorian poems is as inextricable from its background, literary and artistic, as Giorgione's Venus is from hers; as critics we have a responsibility to recognize and explore these continuities. Our field will be enriched, not jeopardized, by the time spent looking over the fence at the artists just on the other side. One of the foundational texts of criticism of Victorian women's poetry, the final chapter of Gilbert and Gubar's *The Madwoman in the Attic*, discusses the poetry of Elizabeth Barrett Browning and Christina Rossetti in conjunction with that of Emily Dickinson.¹⁷ If this fruitful comparison has not for the most part been followed up, that is once again due, I believe, to the implicit limitations of the term "Victorian."¹⁸ We do ourselves a disservice by sheltering within such a niche. Rather, we should take our cue once more from Giorgione's Venus: "Thus she slumbers in no grot, / But on open ground, / With the great hill-sides around."

¹ See Lillian Faderman, *Surpassing the Love of Men: Romantic Friendship and Love between Women from the Renaissance to the Present* (New York: William Morrow, 1981), and Christine White, "'Poets and lovers evermore': interpreting female love in the poetry and journals of Michael Field," *Textual Practice* 4 (1990): 197-212.

² Angela Leighton, *Victorian Women Poets: Writing Against the Heart* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1992), hereafter cited parenthetically in the text.

³ *VP* 33, no. 1 (Spring 1995), ed. Linda K. Hughes; including Holly Laird, "Contradictory Legacies: Michael Field and Feminist Restoration" (pp. 111-128) and Yopie Prins, "A Metaphorical Field: Katherine Bradley and Edith Cooper" (pp. 129-148). Laird's article is revised in chapter 3 of her *Women Coauthors* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2000), and Prins's in chapter 2 of her *Victorian Sappho* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999).

⁴ Before the two works I mention, Bradley and Cooper had already published one volume of verse under the pseudonyms Arran and Isla Leigh (1881), and they had begun publishing plays under the name of Michael Field.

⁵ Ruth Vanita, *Sappho and the Virgin Mary: Same-Sex Love and the English Literary Imagination* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), puts Field in surprisingly heterogeneous company; her chapter “The Search for a ‘Likeness’: Shakespeare to Michael Field” includes a reading of Jane Austen. See also Bette London, *Writing Double: Women’s Literary Partnerships* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1999), and Laird, *Women Coauthors* (cited above, note 3).

⁶ See note 3 above. Since Prins’s chapter is largely based on two of her articles, both published in 1995, the chronology of the critical “progression” I trace is not quite as neat as I have made it seem.

⁷ “*Sight and Song*: Transparent Translations and a Manifesto for the Observer,” *VP* 38 (2000): 15-34; hereafter cited parenthetically in the text. See pp. 16-19 on these poems as “translations.”

⁸ *VP* 38, no. 1 (Spring 2000), ed. Bonnie J. Robinson.

⁹ *Victorian Women Poets: An Anthology*, ed. Angela Leighton and Margaret Reynolds, and *Victorian Women Poets: A Critical Reader*, ed. Angela Leighton, both published by Blackwell (Oxford, England and Cambridge, MA).

¹⁰ *Nineteenth-Century Women Poets: An Oxford Anthology*, ed. Isobel Armstrong and Joseph Bristow, with Cath Sharrock (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), and *British Women Poets of the 19th Century*, ed. Margaret Randolph Higonnet (New York: Meridian, 1996).

¹¹ Pp. 101-2, ll. 57-70; all citations refer to Michael Field, *Sight and Song; with Underneath the bough* (Oxford and New York: Woodstock Books, 1993), hereafter cited parenthetically in the text.

¹² *Works and Days: From the Journal of Michael Field*, ed. T. and D. C. Sturge Moore (London: John Murray, 1933), p. 48. On the day they saw the painting for the second time, Edith Cooper became ill with scarlet fever and had to go to a hospital. As she came out of her delirium, Cooper apparently had Giorgione’s figure in mind: “I lie half-slumbering with deep, blissful breaths and with the sense that corn-fields, harvest meadows, and the great enlightened fruitful Earth, is all around me” (p. 55). The embodiment of landscape features with some regularity in Field’s writings: Yopie Prins notes it in *Long*

Ago LIV (*Victorian Sappho*, p. 103), and Holly Laird in the Preface to *Canute the Great (Women Coauthors*, p. 95).

¹³ Jaynie Anderson, *Giorgione: The Painter of Poetic Brevity* (Paris and New York: Flammarion, 1997), p. 225. Bradley and Cooper would have been aware of this supposed collaboration. According to their diary (British Library Add. MS 46779, folio 69v), early in their stay in Dresden they purchased a copy of Morelli's *Kunstkritische Studien über Italienische Malerei*, which they used as a guide to the gallery. Morelli discusses (and disputes) the claim that Titian had a hand in the painting. See Giovanni Morelli, *Italian Painters: Critical Studies of Their Works. Vol. 2: The Galleries of Munich and Dresden*, tr. Constance Jocelyn Ffoulkes (London: John Murray, 1893), pp. 223-4.

¹⁴ This statement admits of numerous exceptions – as generalizations generally do. A number of recent articles have focused on the classical or medieval backgrounds of Victorian and particularly Pre-Raphaelite poetry. In her 1999 review of the year's work in Tennyson studies (*VP* 37, pp. 420-429), Linda K. Hughes noted "the emergence of a new critical orientation in Tennyson studies" towards greater intertextuality (p. 426). Perhaps the "exceptions" could be seen, then, not as exceptions but as the beginnings of the next stage in the critical progression I describe.

¹⁵ Romantic precedents are most often cited in discussions of the dramatic monologue, but see also such works as Antony H. Harrison, *Victorian Poets and Romantic Poems: Intertextuality and Ideology* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1990).

¹⁶ On the confusions generated by the terms "Romantic" and "Victorian" and the attempts to set their chronological limits, see Susan J. Wolfson, "Our Puny Boundaries: Why the Craving for Carving Up the Nineteenth Century?" *PMLA* 116 (2001): 1432-41, especially pp. 1436-7.

¹⁷ Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1979), pp. 539-650.

¹⁸ The omission seems to be due to Dickinson's nationality, rather than the posthumous (and largely post-Victorian) publication of her work, since the poetry of Hopkins, which involves a similar chronology, is often discussed in conjunction with that of other Victorian poets.