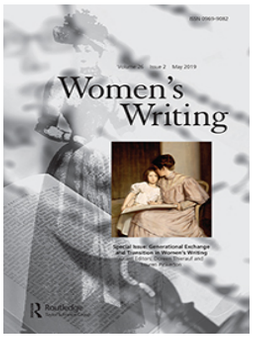

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Queer Social Counting and the Generational Transitions of Michael Field

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ABSTRACT

Katherine Cooper and Edith Bradley, the poets who collaborated as Michael Field, occupied several generational thresholds as they were publishing work at the *fin de siècle*: they were two related women, an aunt and a niece, lesbian partners, writing as one man. Each of those thresholds demanded ontological reorientation from the poets. This paper identifies a pattern of transitions from unification to division and back again throughout Michael Field's work. A series of generational transitions trouble recent critical assertions of Michael Field's "idealized intimacy" by acknowledging that the wholeness of certain relationships necessitates fluidity, separation, and division. What's more, they understood that, for queer couples, "one" and two" demanded a new form of social counting. Cooper and Bradley constructed a distinctly queer model of intimacy in their poetry, one perpetually in transition, "never fully owned, but always and only redeployed, twisted, queered from a prior usage and in the direction of urgent and expanding political purposes." For queer individuals, the ability to leave and return to close relationships enables an individual to assert the integrity both of oneself and one's relationship. By addressing how Michael Field's poetry literally, figuratively, and formally anticipates the lover's incessant departure and return, this article demonstrates the ways in which these queer poets actuate the complexities of generational transition at the turn of the century.

Katherine Bradley and Edith Cooper, the poets who collaboratively wrote as Michael Field, included a sonnet titled "Unity" in their volume *Wild Honey from Various Thyme* (1908). Deploying the form of the Petrarchan sonnet, the poets constructed a model of unity that at once admits separation and forecloses it. Their model does so by rejecting a commitment to singularity or plurality, favoring instead transitions between such ontological states. While its title promises togetherness, the poem offers formal and thematic separation embedded within potential unities:

> They twain by Ostia's gardens, being spent
> With a long journey, feeling need to win
> New strength for a new voyage, far from din

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Of the world's turmoil, in a window leant
Together and alone; and, with the scent
And flower of many roses flowing in,
Perceived the rule of the great peace begin
That has its towers beyond the firmament.[1]

This third-person octave speaks of two, "they twain", who sit "in a window". On the one hand, twain's double valence connotes the adjectival sense of two. On the other hand, as a verb, "They twain" signifies "They divide" or "They split", but also "They are made two" through the action of division. Although both senses of "They twain" suggest separation, its spondee, a double stress, formally maintains unity in opposition to that potential division. Twain, then, involves both unification and division, mirroring the image of two leaning in a window who are "[t]ogether and alone". The poem registers the impossibility of counting people in this fashion: one cannot be simultaneously together – united as a fused entity with a lover – and alone – separated from one's lover as an individual.

The form of the sonnet further troubles and affirms this tension of "together and alone" by joining together the octave in third person to a sestet in first person.

Love, were it possible that thou and I,
Being one day together soul to soul,
At the shore of some wide waters, in the flush
Of roses tinging them, might so draw nigh
That we might feel of our accord the hush,
Binding all creatures, of God's pure control! (lines 9–14)

The third-person octave portrays the lovers formally, as well as thematically, as "twain". But the volta, the "turn" arriving in line 9, positions the sestet's speaker as the only voice for the remainder of the poem. Nonetheless, the speaker is also united with the loved object, "thou and I". The optative mood of the passage, positing "were it possible" that "one day" these lovers would meet "soul to soul", if only ever separated still by "some wide waters", further suggests that division conditions unity. The poem contends with how to occupy a space of transition, ensuring unity in the face of contingency. In these ways, Bradley and Cooper make skilled use of the volta to double the effect of their sonnet's experimentation with unity and division.

Moreover, the sonnet's rhyme scheme enables the poets to construct enjambed lines, which further extend how the poem works through unity and division. The first line is literally "spent" as it runs out and into the "long journey" of the following line. The second line "win[s]" its "new strength" from an enjambment which continues "a new voyage" into the following line. The next enjambed line is held "far from [the] din" by its formal distance from "the world's turmoil". The poem thus achieves continuity and

resolution by allowing lines to bleed into one another. Each of these choices evinces the poets questioning what it is to be "together and alone", thereby highlighting Bradley and Cooper's investment in being neither single nor paired, but interstitial, at every formal level, including stanza, line, and syntax. The poem thus works through the state of never being together or apart; the couple is suspended in semi-permanent arrival and constant leave-taking. The poets do not prefer either condition, but their goal is to remain in transition, forever oscillating between the two options. The forms of their poetry frequently pose such questions about unity and separation through enjambment, the optative, and moments of return. Yet, answering those questions is not the immediate work of the poems. Rather, this article argues that the poets' ideal model for unity is that of transition: a mode of existence valued for its ability to bring about alternatives. Bradley and Cooper also performed transitions in their personal lives and work, abiding in a perpetually questioning, generative space. Transition emerges as a mechanism for making and formation – it is an act of *poiesis*.

Transitional relations take many forms in Bradley and Cooper's work, one of them being historical appropriation. Several scholars note Cooper and Bradley's bi-directional historical investment in thinking past and future simultaneously.[2] As Kate Thomas notes, "Bradley and Cooper stress the creative effects of looking backward and forward and of locating their poetry in a parenthesis in time".[3] The poems in *Wild Honey*, like those in *Sight and Song* (1892), reach to Classical characters for much of their subject matter. Marion Thain and Ana Parejo Vadillo assert that Bradley and Cooper arranged the poems in *Wild Honey* to reveal their shift away from Hellenism toward pressing their "lips" against "the deep-blood crucifix"[4] of Christ, as is evident in the collection's final poem, "Good Friday" (151). The poets acknowledge the breaks in their earlier pagan yearnings and their enduring devotion to each other in their shared Catholicism: "If she should die", the poetic voice writes of her beloved, she would nonetheless remain "As Christ intact before the infidel" (173). Just as Christ remained spiritually whole while his body was deconstructed by physical violence, their work and relationship retained wholeness in spite of time and death. As they chart this journey, the coauthors disclose that they fully understand their "life must be a palimpsest – … Let us write it over", the poetic voice declares, "For the far Time to discover" (180). The poems' interest in straddling time periods, speaking to Dionysus and Pan, addressing a nineteenth-century reader, and gesturing to "the far Time", marks a crucial form of transition in Bradley and Cooper's work.[5]

How, the poets ask, can we be united when we are two people? How can we consider ourselves individuals when the two of us are the halves of an intimate whole? The subtle social math at work in such thinking, eschewing binaries in favor of transition, warrants greater critical attention. Speaking

mathematically, one might say that the poets understood their intimate relationship like rational numbers: as fractions capable of repeating infinitely. I am not suggesting that Bradley and Cooper were familiar with the mathematics of rational numbers, but their poetry employs numerical thinking that can be conceptualized in that way. I term such numerical thinking "queer social counting", and it appears in their work in the form of transitional states between unity and division.

Although there have been several projects on triangulation, binaries, and assertions of merging and likeness in Michael Field's work, Field scholars have not yet focused explicitly on how the poets count. This omission is due in part to poets' own apparent, albeit inconsistent, emphasis on their togetherness. Jill Ehnenn points out how the "women's joint pseudonyms and the logos they designed for themselves are characterized by tropes of merging and fluidity . . . the bramblebough; … the Dionysian thyrsus, interlaced with (wedding) rings" being perhaps the most obvious iconography of their togetherness.[6] Many scholars rely on Bradley's assertion in her letter to Robert Browning from 23 November 1884 in which she asserts the poets' perfect unity: "Spinoza with his fine grasp of unity says: 'If two individuals of exactly the same nature are joined together, they make up a single individual, doubly stronger than each alone,' i.e. Edith and I make a *veritable Michael*".[7] Even here, Bradley employs numerical language of singles and doubles to suggest that she and Edith constitute the truest form of the figure known as Michael. To be a "veritable Michael" is not only to be a unity – one or a combinatory form of oneness – but to be "doubly stronger than each alone".[8] Ehnenn concedes, however, that "Bradley and Cooper generally wrote in separate rooms; and their collections of poetry contain both singularly and jointly authored works, although all bear the dual signature".[9] Also, there is telling evidence in their individual correspondence that the women did not always embrace their collaborative identity. Cooper, in a letter to Robert Browning from 29 May 1884, explains:

> She is my senior, but by fifteen years. She has lived with me, taught me, encouraged me and joined me to her poetic life … Some of the scenes of our play are like mosaic-work—the mingled, various product of our two brains. The Faun scene is mine. I was just nineteen when, with joy mixed with a dreary sense of woe, the conception came to me. *Emathian* is also almost wholly mine and much of *Margery*. I think if our contributions were disentangled and one subtracted from the other, the amount would be almost even. This happy union of two in work and aspiration is sheltered and expressed by "Michael Field." Please regard him as the author.[10]

This fascinating passage exposes Cooper's working through of the Michael Field relationship and collaboration. Cooper says Bradley has "joined me to her poetic life", positioning Bradley's authorship prior to Cooper's. Certainly, Cooper's age makes her secondary in birth chronology, but her phrasing also

subordinates her composition to her aunt's. She then immediately points out which of the work is "mine" and "almost wholly mine" before returning to that well-known depiction of their collaboration as "the happy union of two". In her demarcation of one or another text as her own work, Cooper betrays her desire to be acknowledged individually for her contributions. But the scholarship on Michael Field tends to underscore the assertions of "union" at the expense of their individual desires for recognition. Clinging to the notion that Bradley and Cooper achieved an idealized union risks neglecting their larger project's relevance for queer history.

While ample biographical evidence exists to associate the poets' lives with their aesthetic and formal investments, I want to bracket their biographies to some extent, and the question of their sexual involvement, to ask instead how their poems model social counting. The critical gravity of biographical detail has, in this instance, detracted from a sustained engagement with their formal choices. The quantification of sexual identity in Michael Field's poetry recognizes that unity necessitates separation. For two to unite, first "ones" must be separate. Focusing on their biographical assertions that a doubled "single individual" yields "the happy union of two" overlooks the numerical, and decidedly queer, ontological model offered in their poetry's forms.

Scholars often address Bradley and Cooper's numerical references without pausing to discuss those numbers *as numbers* – a way, I show, to conceptualize nineteenth-century queerness itself. Although the poets asserted what Emma Donoghue calls their "intertwined lives", they also crafted many poems that emphasized their complex dual nature through forms of counting.[11] Consider these lines in "From Baudelaire":

> As two vast torches our two hearts shall flare,
> And our two spirits in their double shining
> Reflect the double lights enchanted there. (39)

Bradley and Cooper, allowing the ones and twos to coexist, refuse the logic of binaries, and hence the heteronormative social calculus that demanded "perfect unity" in marriage.[12] There are many kinds of queer counting in Bradley and Cooper's work from the language to the prosody; yet, the bulk of the Field scholarship emphasizes their collaborative authorship or sexuality rather than endeavoring to think those formal numbers with them as a commentary on queer intimacy and history. Although scholars rightly notice Bradley and Cooper's complex engagement with questions of unity and division, they have yet to recognize that the transitions between such ontological states, these messy, nonbinary, middle spaces, do profound ethical and political work by stabilizing the seemingly impossible state of being "together alone". Their transitions thus provide essential commentary on queer intimacy and history.[13]

My contribution builds on Jill Ehnenn's argument that "queer disidentification", a concept originated by Jose Esteban Muñoz, allowed the poets' "ongoing self-fashioning of subjectivity and sexuality" in their long-term personal and professional partnership.[14] I suggest that their thinking about women's bodies in ones and twos conditioned their queer "ongoing self-fashioning", a permanent transitional state between singularity and plurality with the potential to undercut dualistic social norms for intimate relations. Rather than valorizing queer sexuality, I follow Ehnenn in prioritizing Bradley and Cooper's queered representations as "a way of reading and seeing the world … [as] a fluid and self-revisionary mode of … theorizing that breaks up identity categories".[15] Understood in this way, "queer" signals a tradition of troubling heteronormative lines of cultural transmission.[16] Bradley and Cooper's queered representation of transitional states is integral to their thinking about being one or two of something; they are critical components of their queer world-making and rejection of social norms. Queer forms can be broken apart (in this instance into two or one, together and alone, attachment and detachment),[17] so that they might ultimately come back together in alternative configurations. Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner describe queer worlds as "space[s] of entrances, exits, unsystematized lines of acquaintance, projected horizons, typifying examples, alternate routes, blockages, incommensurate geographies".[18] As liminal, projective, disproportionate, or unreliable spaces, queer worlds demand a sustained state of transition and movement to navigate the unanticipated. As demonstrated in my introduction, poems from *Wild Honey* constantly make and remake Bradley and Cooper's relationship with each other, their work, and their identities. The repeated oscillation between absorption and aggregation, unity and division, through which the individuals are preserved without being assimilated into one another, models a queer world-making process of social production and reproduction, a queering of their identities and world.

Initially, I suspected that their forms of queer quantification and transitions might be bound up in some fashion with their generational positionality, and so I want to pause here to tease out the many generational boundaries Bradley and Cooper occupied. First, the intersection of historical generations found the poets transitioning from the Victorian era to the modern era. Second, as an aunt and niece, they were members of two family generations. A third related and potentially problematic generational (incestuous) connection exists between Bradley and Cooper, wherein sexual relations and desire occur between members of different family generations. As poets, though, it is also fair to think about Bradley and Cooper's generation as *poiesis*, an act of making, formation, or engendering, if not actual children, then thought children.

And lastly, aestheticism and decadence suggested themselves to me as a way that Bradley and Cooper stood astride generational movements.

Although the poets explicitly rejected decadence in their private correspondence, decadence – thought numerically – underpins Bradley and Cooper's articulation of their queerness. Thain observes that Bradley and Cooper did not affiliate themselves with decadence, although they had submitted work to the second edition of *The Yellow Book* (1894-97). Put off by the "character of the first edition", they retracted their submission and recorded a "sincere prayer" in their journal on 5 April 1891: "From decadence, Good Lord deliver us!"[19] Despite this apparent disavowal of decadence, the movement's hallmarks inflected their work. When considering Paul Bourget's well-known definition of decadence as the breaking up of the whole for the benefit of the parts, the poets' queer counting comes into sharp relief.[20] Havelock Ellis later took up Bourget's part-whole thinking to characterize decadence.[21] Bradley and Cooper, knowing Ellis personally, might have been familiar with his writing on the subject.[22] Consequently, I suggest that the part-whole thinking of decadence motivates the poets' meditation on the perpetual transition between two states.

The poems which have received the lion's share of critical attention – "A Girl" and "A Palimpsest" exemplify the part-whole relations of decadence which these poets valorized. "A Girl", from the collection *Underneath the Bough* (1893) offers a fragment of a poem that remains incomplete until "A Palimpsest", in *Wild Honey*, restores its integrity. Although "A Girl" at first offers a somewhat quotidian blazon, describing the love object's "face flowered for heart's ease" with "a mouth, the lips apart", in closing Bradley and Cooper write:

> our souls so knit,
> I leave a page half-writ—
> The work begun
> Will be to heaven's conception done,
> If she come to it.[23]

Here, the loved object is not present for the speaker. She must "come to" the "page half-writ" for "heaven's conception" to be "done". Certainly, the poets gesture to their collaborative writing here, as one poet would begin a piece and the other would work on it in turn. Ehnenn characterizes Bradley and Cooper's writing as possessing "a rhythm of conversation that finishes each other's sentences".[24] Biographical detail aside, the optative language "will be" and "If" offers no guarantee that the other half of the page will be written. There is an implied transition from one state to another through which the lovers must pass. As in "Unity", the use of the optative enables the poets to construct the queer transitional conditions of being "together alone". At the same time, their "souls [are] so knit" that the speaker is confident the lover will complete the production if she finds the page. The "If" expresses uncertainty about whether the love object will find the page, not

whether she will complete the page when she does. Furthermore, "A Palimpsest" appears to start mid-sentence, a reading indicated by ellipses, as if something had already been said. As others have noted, this poem might be the other half of "A Girl". Virginia Blain argues that we should read this poem as a heuristic for Bradley and Cooper's poems as a whole; indeed, Blain suggests that we need to read all of their work "palimpsestically", as the dialogic work of two authors.[25] The speaker of "A Palimpsest" states that their love will add another layer, as feathers lay one over the other or moonbeams interlace with a cloud. In this way, their love will become part of the "parchment hoary", old in time, but also more "golden" for being worth preserving. This developmental process demands transitions through which the lovers will arrive at a form of intimacy more accurately representative of their unique relationship.

A cursory glance at the titles of other poems in *Wild Honey* drives home the realization that the Fields harbored a fascination with transitions, divisions, and unities. Besides "Unity", poems are called "Apart", "Vale!" (Latin for "farewell"), "Possession" (paired with "Parting"), "Elsewhere", and two poems titled "Absence". But, again, this is more than a merely binary way of thinking about separation and togetherness, or restraint and connection, as Emily Harrington frames the poles of their intimacy.[26] Instead, the poets are invested in the promise of intimacy's transitional nature from division to unity and back again. Attention to the formal elements of these poems reveals the processual mechanisms and moments within which such generative transitions occur.

As noted, the optative mode is one of the formal features by which their poetry establishes its transitions. For instance, in "Unity", the lines syntactically create an interrogative, "were it possible", although the question transforms into a statement or solution, implying a wish in the optative mode (167). As Susan Wolfson details in her study *The Questioning Presence*, the optative expresses desire, hope, possibility, suppositions, or indirect discourse, and is a form of pre- or quasi-interrogative rhetoric.[27] As such, the optative mode involves a plurality of possibility, suggesting a transitional moment in which potential is held out as a field of unknowns. One is transitioning from one state to another, and events may or may not fulfill the desire in question. The optative was a recognized literary mode for Greek texts in Bradley and Cooper's day.[28] Their use of the optative, consequently, has a triple effect of at once multiplying the possible outcomes of the poetic condition, constituting a structure through which the poets experimented with transitional states, and reaching back to historical antecedents.

Returning to "Unity" provides an additional example of how the optative functions as a queer representation of life in transition. Initially, the speaker asks "were it possible" that the lovers, "thou and I", could "one day" be "together soul to soul". At the same time, they are also "[at] the shore of

some wide waters". The pluralized "waters" implies separate shores, where each is on the opposite side of a body of water, otherwise there would be no need for the two to "draw nigh". The desire to "draw nigh" suggests they are not near one another, and the qualifier "might" hints that they might never achieve such unity. They are not currently "together soul to soul", but might "one day" be. The poets imply that incorporeal souls would not need to be in the same space to remain bonded. The speaker hopes to "draw nigh" with the loved object to "feel of our accord the hush, / Binding all creatures" (167). By drawing together across the space of the "wide waters" separating them, they might gain a sense of peace in reconciliation. Yet, the optative mode, "were it possible", "one day", "might so draw nigh", "might feel", compounds the potential for each event to not occur. Although the form of the sonnet achieves the togetherness that the speaker hopes to attain, as it pulls together the third-person omniscient narration of the octave with the first-person point of view of the sestet, the optative mode leaves the possibility of division between the lovers in place.

While the optative suspends division in "Unity", it affirms the spaces between division and reunion as replete with potential in "But if our love be dying". From the first line of the poem, Bradley and Cooper depict intimacy as an ongoing transition, a potential doubling conditioned by the first line's optative "if":

> But if our love be dying let it die
> As the rose shedding secretly,
> Or as a noble music's pause:
> Let it move rhythmic as the laws
> Of the sea's ebb, or the sun's ritual
> When sovereignly he dies:
> Then let a mourner rise and three times call
> Upon our love, and the long echoes fall. (24)

Each image layers forms of separation and return into the poem, so that the question of their dying love exerts the inverse of Elizabeth Barrett Browning's famous sonnet 43. Rather than counting the ways that they love each other, these lovers construct a model of perpetual, incessant division and reunion. Love in this poem is cyclical, even metrical, moving "rhythmic" as the "sea's ebb". As they did in "Unity", the poets here employ optative language to offer transition as an alternative form of intimacy.

For example, possibly separated by death, the lovers ask that it be a temporary separation. Instead of death as an end, they want their love to die as the sun does in his daily "ritual", a repetitive process of leave-taking and reunion. They hope to remain as one for the duration of the sun's daily circuit, part of their love's ritual made habitual through repetition. We must not assume that "a mourner" is another party in addition to those involved in this love. Instead, it might be whichever lover remains alone

during the time of separation. The suggestion that the mourner will "three times call / Upon our love" could be a reference to the practice of Calling Back the Soul practiced in some religions. What's more, as the "long echoes fall" from the mourner calling to the soul of the dead, the temporal gaps of those echoes form the repetition implied by the "sea's ebb" and the "sun's ritual". The "pause" of the music likewise suggests a temporal gap within which the cords of music will continue to resonate just as the mourner's three calls will create "long echoes". The poets recognize that gaps are always full, much like the infinite fractions between two whole numbers.

If this prior poem constructs a model of cyclical return and a plurality of natural forms giving shape to acts of unity and division, Bradley and Cooper's "The Beloved" depicts love as an "infinite Power", uncountable and capable of separating the speaker from the beloved:

> Love only comes to me when thou art gone:
> Then he draws me in his might,
> Sundering with his infinite
> Power, as a far, wide space,
> Till I cannot see thy face;
> And I wonder
> If Love so great will keep us forever asunder. (69)

The "infinite Power" of love adds one to the self, generating an uncountable, infinite sequence. While one lover might be the beginning, the repeated operation of "plus one" creates an endless series of positive numbers. If you have a single plus one, then 2 + 1 can just as easily follow, as can 3 + 1, 4 + 1, *ad infinitum*. Read this way, the poem's final line is less about a division by distance than it is a division along a number line, "as a far, wide space", in which one and one are pushed further and further apart. Intimacy is figured as conditional, an optative in which togetherness is uncertain, a perpetual "if". As is the case of "But if our love be dying", the poets conceptualize the spaces between events as a challenge to intimacy. They focus on the infinite transition in the in-between rather than on the two polar nodes.

Instead of the telos of unity or of division, the poem figures the processes activating – or foreclosing – each, "[t]he terror of a love immeasurable!" (177, line 8). Love, rather than being the emotion or another individual, gains a sublime mathematical quality; love is the property of a series that produces either an arbitrary end or a condition which provokes one's reason to acknowledge the inadequacy of idealized intimate connections. Moreover, while the optative does not take the explicit form of an "if" phrase early in the poem, the conditional phrases "when thou art gone", "Till I cannot see thy face", "And I wonder" multiply the possible outcomes of the amorous scene. Ending with a traditional optative ("If Love so great will keep us forever asunder"), this poem performs the optative's power to multiply possibilities. It thereby occasions questions about the identity of the titular

"Love", the separating force of love, and, finally, the possibility that the unspeakable nature and social danger of homosexual love itself might keep the lovers "forever asunder". Capitalized, masculine Love could be a god, an abstraction, or the male lover of heteronormativity vying for the speaker's attention. The optative mode itself generates a potentially "infinite" number of the love affair's many virtual outcomes.

Another sonnet in the same collection, "Parting", presents Bradley and Cooper in their most ontological mood, raising transitions and queer social counting to the explicit theme of the poem. "Parting" amplifies the aforementioned characteristics of cyclical reunion and eternal separation, defining parting as that which needs division from the past to gain a fresh start:

> Lo, even memory must give up its dead!
> Where he has walked we must not walk again,
> Nor pause by garden borders where he led,
> Nor seek his flowers; we must unknot the pain.
> For, if we look not on our memory's corse,
> Sweet sculpture of our memory will abide;
> The eyes, the lips will take their human force,
> Life's lovely images keep by side.
> Anew in the young sunshine we shall meet,
> By paths, beloved, where thou has not been;
> Thou, being by, shalt make the strangeness sweet
> Of the long, silver river and the green;
> And all our passion grow a child to cling
> About the freshness of thy welcoming. (159)

Much as they do in "Unity", Bradley and Cooper employ the sonnet form in "Parting" to construct a model of intimacy. The quatrain affirms the necessity of letting memories pass away and allowing division to keep love eternally fresh. The volta and its optative arrive early with the second quatrain, multiplying the speakers' futures and the solution to the original division. The sonnet is thus divided into past, present, and future, allowing the transition from one phase of existence to the next. Such formal and thematic divisions, therefore, invigorate the union of two. Letting go of those (presumably negative) memories of "the pain" of separation will ultimately enable only the "Sweet sculpture of our memory to abide".

As the "Sweet sculpture" comes gradually to life, gesturing to the mythical story of Pygmalion, prosopopoeia creates another odd mathematical effect, not unlike the "infinite Power" of Love in "But if our love be dying". The figure's animation doubles it: now there is an active counterpart to an inert figure. Instead of separating, the "Sweet sculpture" adds a "plus one" character of new memories in the form of a child. These Cyprian memories, "the eyes, the lips" coming to life, unite the two, the "we" that is referenced in the optative "if we look not on memory's corse". At this point, memory's reanimated form becomes a third character. Rather than tearing the lovers "forever

asunder" as in "The Beloved", the sculpture's "human force" sustains the pair as a material proxy and creates a fourth member in the form of "a child" generated by their reunion. The pair's desire thus grows by producing offspring, inaugurating a transitional moment through which love expands indefinitely. The birth of a child subsequently begins a new generation and produces the form through which love exercises its "infinite power". "Parting," therefore, offers a meditation on the possibility that love's divisions may multiply the conditions of the relationship through shared memories and progeny. Each case demands a transition – a separation, a birth – to attain the requisite condition for enduring intimacy. Having established this solution, the sestet depicts a future of unity in which the two "shall meet" but under changed conditions that no longer retain aspects of their prior state. The transitions have at once altered and maintained the integrity of their intimacy.

Ultimately, this is a poem of accepting ends that pave the way for rebirth, a truth borne out by the frequency of enjambment. Unlike "Unity", which uses enjambment to suggest continuous oscillation between unity and division, "Parting" includes enjambed lines only when the lovers are reunited. The return to love involves "freshness" by demanding an unequivocal release of memories. They "must not walk again, / Nor pause … / Nor seek". The enjambed lines are each marked by the self-denial of these restrictions and their accompanying "pain". The lines ending with "pain", "corse", "abide", and "force" form a chorus that encourages the lovers to accept the conditions of their separation, one formally instantiated by the enjambment. The "pain" of parting, itself a division, involves memories which the couple must "unknot" to achieve a renewed togetherness.

This untangling of a division exerts a double negative force in the poem, which then turns into a positive. Letting go of past pain enables the possibility in the second quatrain that they will meet "Anew in the young sunshine". By maintaining a division from the corpse of their memories, the two can find new "paths, beloved, where thou has not been". When they reunite, having released the memories of their prior time together, their new togetherness "shalt make the strangeness sweet". Put differently, it will be pleasurable to reunite for the fact of the "strangeness", of all that is new for the two to share. Their memory is intentionally selective, retaining the positive while negating past pain. The poets again choose an image of temporality: children will "grow" and become adults and, eventually, end in the same place at which the poem starts – in death. The optative that conditions the ontological scene, therefore, has extended to something of a paradox, one which will demand that a "corse" will result from the "child" who grows from the "freshness" of their love. Bradley and Cooper were less invested in the binary of unity and division than they were in thinking through poetic models about the transitions that would guarantee the integrity of their intimacy in the face of potential separation.

Yet there is the possibility in the optative that the lovers will look on "memory's corse" and be unable to let go of "the pain". Their awareness that separation of the two into ones lurks perpetually around the corner and structures the poets' experiments in the social relations between ones and twos. Bradley and Cooper's nontraditional, queer "perfect unity", is characterized by their queer social counting, involving transitions in which two have to divide into "one and one" to maintain both their unbroken state as "ones" and as a pair. As Bradley and Cooper say in their sonnet "The Lone Shepherd", "But we are broken, but we are renewed" (38, line 12). Generating queer unions, be they doubles, triples, or more, their poetry marks the necessity of ongoing transitions between the intimacy of the self and the intimacy of the relationship. They must be "broken" into parts as individuals to become "renewed" as a different sort of cohesive unity. They must dwell in uncertainty between unity and division to generate a new form of intimacy. The other as a part of the self is at once "integral" and "other", requiring that separation be eternally on offer, and transition the route of access between each occasion for being "together and alone".

Notes

1. Michael Field, *Wild Honey from Various Thyme* (London: T. Fisher Unwin, 1908), p. 167, lines 1–8. *Wild Honey* will henceforth be cited parenthetically in the text.
2. Francis O'Gorman, following Yopie Prins's seminal work *Victorian Sappho*, signals how Bradley and Cooper's "ventriloquizing" of Sappho simultaneously involves the "shattered canon" of the Greek poet and a form of "surety in the continuance of her deathless fame" into the modern era. Francis O'Gorman, "Michael Field and Sapphic Fame: 'My Dark-Leaved Laurels Will Endure'", *Victorian Literature and Culture*, 34.2 (2006): 649–61 (649, 655). See also Prins's chapter on Bradley and Cooper in Prins, *Victorian Sappho* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1999), pp. 74–111. Krista Lysack similarly observes that their ekphrastic poems in *Sight and Song* bridge the temporal gap separating the era of a work's creation and the era of the poems. Affinities between historical moments enable the poets to think transitorily, their investments permanently unstable. Lysack, "Aesthetic Consumption and the Cultural Production of Michael Field's Sight and Song", *Studies in English Literature 1500-1900*, 45.4 (Autumn 2005): 935–60. See also Emily Harrington, "Michael Field and the Detachable Lyric", *Victorian Studies*, 50.2 (Winter 2008): 221–32.
3. Kate Thomas, "'What Time We Kiss': Michael Field's Queer Temporalities", *GLQ*, 13.2/3 (2007): 327–51 (348). See Lysack for more on Bradley and Cooper's conception of their multidirectional historical gaze.
4. Mario Thain and Ana Parejo Vadillo, *Michael Field, the Poet: Published and Manuscript Materials* (Petersborough: Broadview Press, 2009).
5. Scholars address Bradley and Cooper's concern with transitional states using various terms. Francis O'Gorman posits that "loss will always be followed by attainment, even if attainment is always followed by loss" (652) in their work, particularly in Field's *Long Ago* (1889). O'Gorman registers a cyclical

relational dynamic in which loss and attainment perpetually supplant each other in an "endless sequence of possession and dispossession, love and departure … as inescapable as the movement from winter to spring" (651). I contend that what O'Gorman pinpoints is a recurrent, transitional, ontological state between singularity and plurality.

6. Jill Ehnenn, *Women's Literary Collaboration, Queerness, and Late-Victorian Culture* (Hampshire: Ashgate, 2008), p. 32.
7. Michael Field, *Works and Days: From the Journal of Michael Field*, eds. T. Sturge Moore and D.C. Sturge Moore (London: John Murray, 1933), p. 6.
8. Field, *Works and Days*, p. 6.
9. Ehnenn, *Women's Literary Collaboration*, p. 32.
10. Field, *Works and Days*, p. 3.
11. E. Donoghue, *We Are Michael Field* (Bath: Absolute Press, 1997), p. 3.
12. Cooper's insistence on being "a happy union of two" leads many critics to collapse biographical affirmations of oneness and the divided work of their poetry. For an excellent extended account of the frequency with which the "perfect unity" of marriage was asserted as a counter to women's reform legislation, see Ben Griffin, *Politics of Gender in Victorian Britain: Masculinity, Political Culture and the Struggle for Women's Rights* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2012).
13. Bette London claims that the shared pseudonym "sheltered and expressed" Bradley and Cooper's unity. London, *Writing Double: Women's Literary Partnerships* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP, 1999), p. 67. Angela Leighton also counts Cooper and Bradley "as one" poet in her study of Victorian women poets. Leighton, *Victorian Women Poets: Writing Against the Heart* (Hertfordshire: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1992), p. 2. Harrington implies that the Fields were not trying to establish intimacy because they already had achieved it. They were "mutually absorbed" into the other. Harrington, *Second Person Singular: Late Victorian Women Poets and the Bonds of Verse* (Charlottesville: U of Virginia P, 2014), p. 5; see Caroline Baylis-Green, "'We Two Are One': Singularity and Duality in the Queer Life Writing of Michael Field and Anne Lister", The Michael Field Centenary Conference: New Directions in Fin de Siècle Studies, University of London, 11–12 July 2014.
14. Jill Ehnenn, "'Our Brains Struck Fire Each from Each': Disidentification, Difference, and Desire in the Collaborative Aesthetics of Michael Field", *Economies of Desire at the Victorian Fin de Siecle*, eds. Jane Ford, Kim Edwards Keates, and Patricia Pulham (London: Routledge, 2015), pp. 180–203 (181).
15. Ehnenn, *Women's Literary Collaboration*, p. 16. Ehnenn further: "they tended to embrace certain kinds of identity politics … , while simultaneously viewing other aspects of identity/Victorian ideology as linked to arbitrary social norms".
16. For a foundational reading of "queer" as that which rejects the regulatory practices of gender norms, see Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"* (New York, NY: Routledge, 1993), esp. pp. 40–3, 228. According to David M. Halperin, queer "acquires its meaning from its oppositional relation to the norm" (62). Halperin, "The Queer Politics of Michel Foucault", *Saint Foucault: Towards a Gay Hagiography* (New York, NY: Oxford UP, 1995), pp. 15–125. Queerness, as I understand it, is an ontological state concerned with quantification. As Butler notes, it is "an interstitial and transitional figure of gender that is not reducible to the normative insistence of one and two" (*Undoing Gender* [New York, NY: Routledge, 2004], p. 43).

17. Detachment is a current critical concept applied to the Fields and queer theory alike. See, for instance, Matthew Burroughs Price, "A Genealogy of Queer Detachment", *PMLA*, 130.3 (May 2015): 648–65. Lysack also observes that images are "detached" from artistic objects of description in Field's *Sight and Song* (936).
18. Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner, "Sex in Public", *Critical Inquiry*, 24.2 (Winter 1998): 547–66 (558).
19. Thain, *Michael Field and Poetic Identity: With a Biography* (London: Eighteen Nineties Society, 2000), p. 12.
20. Paul Bourget, *Essais de psychologie contemporaine* (Paris: Alphonse Lemerre, 1883).
21. Havelock Ellis notes that "a decadent style is only such in relation to a classic style. … The first is beautiful because the parts are subordinated to the whole; the second is beautiful because the whole is subordinated to the parts". Ellis, *Affirmations* (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin, 1916), p. 175.
22. Recently, Matthew Potolsky also located decadent tendencies in Bradley and Cooper's work, identifying "a specifically female decadence" in Michael Field's *Sight and Song*. Potolsky, *A Decadent Republic of Letters: Taste, Politics, and Cosmopolitan Community from Baudelaire to Beardsley* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013), p. 99.
23. Michael Field, *Underneath the Bough* (Portland: Thomas B. Mosher, 1898), p. 51, lines 9–13.
24. Ehnenn, *Women's Literary Collaboration*, p. 2.
25. Virginia Blain, "'Michael Field, the two-headed nightingale': Lesbian Text as Palimpsest". *Women's History Review*, 5.2 (1996): 239–57 (246).
26. Harrington, *Second Person Singular*, p. 2.
27. Susan Wolfson, *The Questioning Presence* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP, 1986), p. 28.
28. See J. B. Sewall, "On the Distinction Between the Subjunctive and Optative Modes in Greek Conditional Sentences", *Transactions of the American Philological Association*, 5 (1874): 77–82; Mortimer Lamson Earle, "A Suggestion on the Development of the Greek Optative", *The Classical Review*, 14.2 (Mar. 1900): 122–3. In 1886, Henry Harman noted that Xenophon's 37-page Book of Anabasis used the optative 103 times. Harman, "The Optative Mode in Hellenistic Greek", *Journal of the Society of Biblical Literature and Exegesis*, 6.2 (Dec. 1886): 3–12 (3).

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