MICHAEL FIELD'S "A DANCE OF DEATH"

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Michael Field—pen name of Katherine Bradley and her niece Edith Cooper—were acutely aware of questions of gender, authority, and authorship. Two women writing under a singular male pseudonym, Field continually negotiated and actively formulated their authorial persona. Their well-known correspondence with Robert Browning, in which they plead with him not to reveal their identity, demonstrates this: "the report of lady authorship will dwarf and enfeeble our work at every turn," they write. They give two reasons for this. The first is the self-censorship that would result from writing from a feminine subject position; they claim they write as a man because "we cannot be stifled in drawing room conventionalitites." The second is the reader's reception of "lady" writers; if Browning revealed their gender, he would be "robbing us of real criticism—such as man gives man" (Bradley, 1933, 6-7).

This essay will return to the question of authority and authorship by way of an analysis of Field's Salome poem entitled "A Dance of Death" from the 1912 volume *Poems of Adoration*, which appeared after Bradley and Cooper's conversion to Catholicism.[1] As women and lesbians, and as devout Catholic converts, "Michael Field" troubles the familiar categories of Decadent literary production.[2] This poem enacts a retelling of the Salome story, based on accounts of her death by decapitation: as the legend goes, while ice-skating, Salome falls through and severs her head on a sharp sheet of jagged ice.[3]

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[1] Frederick S. Roden and Marion Thain are the two scholars who address the post-conversion poetry in depth. Roden's chapter on Michael Field's poetry in *Same Sex Desire and Victorian Religious Culture,* Thain's "'Damnable Aestheticism' and the Turn to Rome: John Gray, Michael Field, and a Poetics of Conversion," and Thain's chapter "*Wild Honey from Various Thyme*: Apian Aestheticism and the Lyric Book Collection" in *"Michael Field"* all discuss Field's manipulation of homoerotic desire and Catholic symbolism. Neither critic, however, addresses the poem at the center of this paper, "A Dance of Death." The writers who discuss Field's post-conversion poetry often gravitate toward the question of how Field can accommodate a trinity after the death of their beloved dog Whym Chow (the crisis often cited as leading to their conversion).

[2] Marion Thain's "*Michael Field*" makes a compelling case that Field's poetry is not Decadent but rather aesthetic (14-16); nonetheless, this particular poem, with its perverse and grotesque qualities, most definitely slips into the Decadent mode—even though, as Thain contends, the majority of their writings display aesthetic techniques and characteristics.

[3] Because this story has the status of Gnostic myth, handed down for centuries, Megan Becher-Leckrone looked for the source of this iteration of the Salome story. She did not find any evidence for its existence before the 1890s, in a version recorded in Richard Ellmann's biography *Oscar Wilde*. Ellmann reports: "In its earlier dramatic form, Wilde thought he would call the play *The Decapitation of Salome*. The title seems to have gone with a story he told Maeterlinck and Georgette Leblanc. It was of how Salome eventually became a saint. Herod, incensed at her kissing the decollated head, wanted to have her crushed, but at the pleas of Herodias contented himself with banishing her. She went off into the desert, where for years she lived on, maligned, solitary, clothed in animal skins, and subsisting on locusts and wild honey

René Girard, in discussing the Salome of the gospel of Mark, declares that it is the platter on which Salome requests St. John's head be placed that makes the story so decadent: the juxtaposition of silver server and severed head is key to making the story "scandalous, decadent, so barbarously crude that it is refined" (Girard, 1984, 317). While I don't wish to argue with Mr. Girard, I do suggest that the ice-bound denouement of the Biblical tale—featuring Salome's severed head dancing on the ice—might similarly be described as quintessentially *fin de siècle.*

For one, although Field insistently declared that they were not "decadents," they take up a classic decadent figure, whose popularity among Decadents crossed artistic and national boundaries. (Painter Gustav Moreau, writer J-K Huysmans, playwright Oscar Wilde, composer Richard Strauss—to name only a few of the best-known—make use of Salome to express the heart of decadent transgression.)[4] Field's version, moreover, relies on a vision that queries biblical verity and transforms it into image, narrative, poem. Indeed, their appropriation and representation of Salome constitutes several levels of transgression: first, as women artists authoritatively representing Salome; second, in presenting Salome outside of her usual biblical framework; and third, in depicting Salome outside her usual decadent context (most clearly, that provided by Wilde's significant additions to the Biblical accounts—the invention of the dance of the seven veils, the emphasis on Salome's sexuality, and Herod's execution order at the end of the play). Michael Field, quite literally, make Salome their own.

It is an odd and interesting poem which descriptively narrates the ice dancer's demise. But the first stanza, instead of describing Salome, introduces the setting and, significantly, the speaker. The narrator of the poem, while an absent presence in the greater part of the poem, is embodied (in plural form, no less) in the opening stanza: "How strange this ice, so motionless and still, / Yet calling as with music to our feet" (10-11). The stanza in its entirety reads:

> How lovely is a silver winter-day
> Of sturdy ice,
> That clogs the hidden river's tiniest bay
> With diamond-stone of price
> To make an empress cast her dazzling stones
> Upon its light as hail—
> So little it condones

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like the prophet himself. When Jesus passed by, she recognized him whom the dead voice had heralded and she believed in him. But, feeling unworthy of living in his shadow, she went off again, with the intention of carrying the Word. Having passed over rivers and seas, she encountered, after the fiery deserts, the deserts of snow. One day she was crossing a frozen lake near the Rhone when the ice broke under her feet. She fell into the water and the jagged ice cut into her flesh and decapitated her, though not before she managed to utter the names of Jesus and John. And those who later went by saw, on the silver plate of the re-formed ice, showing like the stamen of a flower with rubies, a severed head on which gleamed the crown of a golden nimbus" (344-345).

[4] See Becker-Leckrone's "Salome: The Fetishization of a Textual Corpus" for a brief history of Salome art and criticism.

> Her diamonds' denser train
> Of radiance on the air!
> How strange this ice, so motionless and still,[5]
> Yet calling as with music to our feet,
> So that they chafe and dare
> Their swiftest motion to repeat
> These harmonies of challenge, sounds that fill
> The floor of ice, as the crystalline sphere
> Around the heavens is filled with such a song
> That, when they hear,
> The stars, each in their heaven, are drawn along! (1-18)[6]

There are several things to note, just in this opening, that are significant to the poem as a whole. First is the form: it is fairly regularly iambic, although the line lengths vary from three to five stresses. The rhyme scheme, too, has the same quality of being nearly regular: there is a significant amount of rhyme, and these rhymes seem often to fall into pattern, but the rhymes are not regular or regularly repeated. (For instance, this first stanza is ABABCDCEFGEGFHIHI; the second is ABABCCDDEFEFGG). There is definitely pattern, but it cannot be predicted in advance, merely recorded after the fact. So, the first important element introduced in the opening stanza is irregular regularity. Second, there is the naturalization of desire: the sounds that draw the listener to dance along the "floor of ice" are compared with the celestial song that draws in the stars in their courses. Indeed, this suggests that the desire that draws the speaker to the ice is not only natural but also (perhaps) divine. The poem represents desire as natural if not sacred.

Last, I want to draw attention to the "as" in line twelve: the poem repeatedly uses this somewhat unusual grammatical structure: the "as" without an "if" (although the meaning of the construction often accords with "as if"). This unusual construction troubles interpretation, for the word "as" is one of those whose meaning and use depends upon context. It can be an adverb, a conjunction, or preposition, and it can indicate a simile or comparison—as well as the more conditional situation suggested by "as if." This wouldn't be worth mentioning, except that this construction recurs, creating an insistent comparative in which nothing "is" but "is *as*." My contention is that understanding the "as" construction is the key to unlocking the poem. Indeed, the speaker in this first stanza is called to dance just "as" Salome does in the rest of the poem. This neutralizes the sexuality of Salome: she is not a unique "femme fatale" who dances to destroy men's will; rather her feet (or, her artistic motivation to dance) are just as "our feet."

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[5] Karl Beckson's anthology *Aesthetes and Decadents of the 1890s* begins the poem here, at line 10. Because *Poems of Adoration* is out of print, Beckson's volume is the place in which most readers encounter this poem.
[6] All quotations from "A Dance of Death" refer to the Sands and Company edition of 1912; the numbers in parentheses indicate the line numbers.

This comparative encapsulates the logic of the poem, the logic of "both/and." The Salome of the poem is both biblical and gnostic, both Christian and pagan, both empowered and punished, icy cold and passionate, beautiful and appalling, still and active, dead and alive.[7] Similarly, the embodied narrator who literally longs for physical artistic expression (but then gives the reader a written/verbal art) is both earthly and divine, both physical and mystical, both real and literary. And while one might consider the "irregular regularity" a classic instance of Wildean paradox, the logic of "both/and" suggests a different way to understand the poem's formal qualities as well.

"Oh, see, a dancer!" (19) opens the second stanza. It records, in joyous description, Salome's movements over the ice. The third stanza reiterates: "she dances . . . she dances . . . she dances. . . As she never had lost, / In lands where there is snow, The Orient's immeasurable glow" (33, 35, 38-41). Here, the "as" recurs, again in a key moment: Salome moves as if she were still in the Orient. Context, it seems, is everything, for this moment marks a turn in the poem—from the sheer joy of the dance and the beauty of both the body and the world to the suggestion of death. The next stanza ends with a question: "Does she not know deeps under ice can drown?" (47). An ice-covered river is a classic example of surface and depth, of "both/and": a solid surface covers but does not eliminate the watery substance beneath.

Salome's power here is *not* sexual, as it is in biblical and secular accounts where the promise of her sexual favors seduces Herod into making his fateful promise. Field shifts Salome from femme fatale to artist figure. She dances, and her power is aesthetic: she is beauty, not sexuality. Nonetheless, Salome does enact a sort of seduction, but it is a seduction by art[8]: "Athwart the ice her dream, her spell she flings; / And Winter [personified with a capital "W"] in a rapture of delight / Flings up and down the spangles of her light" (57-59). Again, desire is naturalized, free from censure or sense of sin. Salome is a described as a "Vision by the snow adored" (66), and there is no stigma attached to that. Compare Herod's lament at having looked at Salome in Wilde's rendering: "I have looked at you all evening. Your beauty troubled me. Your beauty has grievously troubled me, and I have looked at you too much" (Wilde, 1999, 601).[9]

But even though Salome's power is not sexualized in Field's rendering, she still—as in all the other versions—is subject to one more powerful than she. In Field's words, "Will more firm" than the ice and frost deems that the ice must be sundered—and that Salome must suffer:

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[7] The setting is of sun and ice, not only follows the logic of "both/and" but also alludes, I think, to Samuel Taylor Coleridge's "Kubla Khan" (1816), which describes the "sunny dome" and "caves of ice" of Xanadu. As a poem about the power and authority of the poetic voice/visionary poet, this allusion seems apt. Similarly, Kubla is both Eastern and Western, both regular and changing in form, and—as I will argue about "A Dance of Death"—ultimately concerns the poet's artistic vision and power.

[8] Again, this is similar to "Kubla Khan," whose ending records the power of the artist to create a fantastic vision and entrance those to see and hear him.

[9] Indeed, the "Tragedy in one Act" (the subtitle of Wilde's *Salome*) may well be Herod's inability to resist Salome's sexual charge.

> The Vision is no more
> Seen from the noontide shore.
>
> Oh, fearful crash of thunder from the stream,
> As there were thunder-clouds upon its wave!
> Could nothing save
> The dancer in the noontide beam?
> She is engulphed and all the dance is done. (67-73)

But where one expects the final "as" to come in—to make a comparison with John the Baptist and his severed head—instead is a direct address that establishes the connection:

> Oh murdered Baptist of the severed head,
> Her head was caught and girded tight,
> And severed by the ice-brook sword. (78-80)

Without the "as"—a comparison—we get not just *likeness* but *sameness*. Her death, thus, is the same as John the Baptist's death: a Will more firm deems it and it happens. Indeed, Salome's face in death looks just like it looked when she gazed upon John's dead face. ("Eyes fixed as they beheld the silver plate / That they at Macherontis once beheld" [91-92]). Rather, we get the expected "as" in a comparison of Salome with her former self, not a comparison of Salome with John. There are, of course, two possible readings here: one, that they are not similar but rather the same; the other, that they are not compared directly because they are completely unlike. It is this ambiguity—this possibility of "both/and"—that is key.

   To be sure, the final stanza does express a difference, but it is a difference without a moral judgment. These four lines make up the poem's final stanza:

> Salome's head is dancing on the bright
> And silver ice. Oh holy John, how still
> Was laid thy head upon the salver white,
> When thou hadst done God's will! (97-100)

The distinction here is not between the holy and unholy, or between the spiritual and the sensual. The difference is between dancing and stillness, between active and passive. (Note that John is described in the passive voice: his head "was laid"; Salome's head, by contrast, "is dancing.") The other difference is that John dies having done God's will, whereas Salome dies fulfilling her artistic impulse to dance. But because there is no moral distinction drawn between these two deaths, it seems as if both deaths are equally sanctioned.

   And this near-conflation of religious martyrdom and dying for an artistic cause brings me to my final set of observations about the poem. It is an odd poem—clearly—but even odder in the context of *Poems of Adoration*, whose poems are (as the title suggests)

primarily religious and devotional. "A Dance of Death" is sandwiched between "Looking Upon Jesus as He Walked" and "Obedience." And while "A Dance of Death" does not have an anti-Christian tone or message, it also does not have a particularly Christian one. (It is, indeed, "both/and"). So I return to Salome's head in comparison with John's, particularly this description: "The motion of the head is subjugate / To its own law: yet in the face what fear, / To what excess compelled!" (94-96).

Her head's "own law" is clearly not God's law, or even that "Will more firm" that breaks the ice. Her head's own law made its movements beautiful: "fleet and nice" (93). Despite the beauty compelled by this artistic law, the face is full of fear—the fear, perhaps, that living by own's "own law" necessitates "excess"—or, perhaps, Decadence. Indeed, one might imagine that this could well be the *artist's* law, because to create things utterly new, one must go beyond the usual, the ordinary, and see things in a way that "the normal" person would not. To make art—to transform a biblical tale into an artistic rendering—requires that the poet be subjugate to her own law: that she transgress the boundaries of propriety, of authority, and of expectation. In re-imagining Salome's tale, Michael Field undermines all of these boundaries. They dismiss Wilde's rendering (in which Herod orders her execution in the play's final moment), and they disregard the Word of the Bible (finding it incomplete and adding to it).

As letters and journals indicate, Michael Field was clearly aware of the multivalence of authority (long before Foucault, Derrida and Barthes weighed in). And this is true throughout their career. The letter to Browning I quoted at the beginning of this essay was written when their first text as Michael Field appeared (*Callirrhoë* and *Fair Rosamund*, verse dramas published in 1884). But in an undated letter to John Gray (from 1911 or 1912), Bradley writes concerning the advertising "note" that "Father Silverpoints" has promised to write for *Poems of Adoration*. Bradley requests that they "just see it for technical purposes before you send it to press," although the next paragraph suggests that they want to review the notice in order to control reception of the Michael Field name. It gives a detailed list of instructions for Gray as he writes his notice: "None of the Borgia series . . . are to be mentioned. These are not by Michael Field. . . . Michael Field is always one. This writer-- & he when a pronoun must come in" (Thain and Vadillo, 2009, 347).

"Michael Field" cannot simply be characterized as a pseudonym, or as a dual pseudonym. Rather, as recent essays by Katharine Pionke, Maria DeGuzman, and Holly Laird have demonstrated, it was one of many masks that Bradley and Cooper put on. By writing as "Arran Leigh,"[10] as "Arran and Isla Leigh,"[11] as Michael Field, and as "the author of *Borgia*"—*Borgia* was published anonymously—they radically re-write our notions of authorship. A single author may well be two people. They are both/and: both one author and two women, both a male writer and two female poets. This mode of understanding describes both Field's approach to the Salome story and to their poetry: it is a biblical narrative, it is a decadent narrative—it is their narrative. It is both perverse

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[10] Bradley's first book of poetry in 1975 was published as "Arran Leigh"
[11] Bradley and Cooper's first collaboration in 1881 was published as "Arran and Isla Leigh"

and doctrinal, just as they are both ardent Catholic converts and "subjugate to their own law." Indeed, the first stanza of "A Dance of Death" might exemplify Field's coming to terms with both their writerly authority and priestly authority: they affirm the naturalness of their dual authorship and by extension their personal bond that makes this collaboration possible; they embrace the apparent contradiction of authority and submission, of God's law and man's law, of body and spirit and then demonstrate that no contradiction exists.

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Biographical note

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Summary:

The 1912 poem "A Dance of Death" by Michael Field (pen name of Katherine Bradley and her niece Edith Cooper) depicts Salome in an alternate version of the biblical story: this Salome dances on a frozen river, falls through the ice, and is decapitated on a jagged edge. Nonetheless, her beautiful head continues dancing over the frozen river. This poem is highly unusual, especially in the context of the other poems in the post-conversion volume *Poems of Adoration*, because it questions, rather than submits to, authority. In re-writing a familiar Christian tale, as well as a familiar decadent theme, Field uses the poem to assert the supremacy of their artistic vision, which (despite their ardent Catholicism) cannot be subject to any law outside themselves. Like the continually dancing head of Salome, which continues to create beauty even after nature (and perhaps God) has struck it down, the poet is subjugate only to her own law and creates without boundaries or restrictions on her art. Bradley and Cooper were acutely aware of their authorial persona (actively taking not only a masculine but also a singular poetic identity), and their mode of reconciling the apparent contradictions of this identity are mirrored in their presentation of Salome in a "Dance of Death."