

“What I’d Sing”: Dollie Radford’s Aesthetic Poetry in Progress

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<1> Dollie Radford—a central member of the socialist literary circle centered in Hampstead in the 1880s and 1890s—published her earliest poems in the radical journal *Progress* in 1883. She was led there by her lifelong friend Eleanor Marx, whose common-law husband Edward Aveling acted as interim editor while its founder G. W. Foote spent a year in prison on blasphemy charges stemming from an article he published in *The Freethinker*. The anti-establishment, anti-capitalist, anti-religious philosophy of *Progress* is literally illustrated on its cover: portraits of Shelley, Mill, Voltaire, and Darwin occupy each corner, and its subtitle is “A Monthly Magazine of Advanced Thought.” Prior to her marriage to Ernest Radford, Dollie Radford published nine poems in volumes one and two (January-June, 1883 and July-December, 1883), as either Caroline Maitland (her maiden name) or under the initials “C.M.” Radford’s poems, which embrace the Romantic tradition and its lyrical impulse, might seem out of place in the radical pages of *Progress*. But their coexistence speaks directly to the poetics and politics of *fin de siècle* aestheticism, especially in regard to female aesthetes.⁽¹⁾ By examining the place of Radford’s poetry in the politics of *Progress*, this essay will re-think the category of aesthetic women’s poetry. A concomitant reassessment of late-century political thought will alert us to the ways in which aesthetic poetry is entirely compatible with progressive politics and is, in fact, participating in similar negotiations of viewpoint, ideology, and principle. Finally, by locating Radford’s *Progress* poems in the arc of her career, this paper will use Radford’s changing poetics as a barometer to measure shifting cultural pressures.

<2> To begin, we should establish the terrain of late-Victorian progressive politics and the journals that represented it. The fact that the front cover of *Progress* depicts a scientist, a poet, a philosopher, and a political economist suggests that “advanced thought” encompassed diverse ideological terrain. Indeed, Sally Ledger and Scott McCracken make this claim about socialism in the 1880s: “it was as yet an unstable category and, apart from its collectivist emphasis, had yet to take on a fixed meaning” (7). And as Deborah Mutch notes, even more than lacking “fixed meaning,” socialism in this period was under active construction within the movement itself, since the late century “was a period of intense political debate on the characterization of social politics. . . . The variations of opinion over what constituted socialism were not just generated between different socialist units, but in longer-running groups these variations were engendered within and either led to a change in direction or to the formation of a new faction” (xi). To modern minds, the resulting mix of socialist forms lacks ideological coherence, yet Terry Eagleton asserts that “*Fin de siècle* intellectuals” were not bothered by this, for they “bled belief

systems with staggering nonchalance, blithely confident of some invisible omega point at which Baudelaire and Kropotkin consort harmoniously together and Emerson lies down with Engels” (12). We could consider a journal like *Progress*—which expresses such editorial “nonchalance” and “confidence,” featuring articles devoted to imaginative literature, as well as to politics, political economy, science, and atheism—as an exemplary progressive journal of the time.

<3> What specific forms of “advanced thought” did the editors of *Progress* embrace? The answer is complicated, since (for example) their argument against the anti-vivisectionists is based in the greatest good for the greatest number, while they elsewhere rejected much Benthamite thinking. The cover figures perhaps provide the best evidence of *Progress*’s ruling passions. From Voltaire, an edict against hypocrisy, a commitment to civil liberties, and to a morality that exists outside religious dogma. From Darwin, the scientific method he represents, in addition to the demystification of humanity’s origins he undertook. From J. S. Mill, freedom of speech and religious liberty, especially because Foote was imprisoned for blasphemy only three months after the journal’s inception. While Mill’s championing of free markets was not part of the *Progress* agenda, *On Liberty* was foundational. As for the fourth figure: if the anti-religious writers who appeared in *Progress* did have a god, that god may well have been Percy Bysshe Shelley.(2) Shelley’s potent and volatile combination of personal freethinking, uncompromising idealism, and rigorous intellectual skepticism echo throughout its pages.(3)

<4> One element of *Progress*’s content not like other pointedly Socialist magazines is its poetry. Based on the example set by contemporary radical journals like *To-day: The Monthly Magazine of Scientific Socialism* (edited by Ernest Belfort Bax and James Leigh Joynes) or the *Commonweal* (the organ of the Socialist League, co-edited by Bax and William Morris), one might expect the literary texts in *Progress* to be politically engaged—meant to move readers to action, to inform their sentiments, to join them in a collective experience that emphasized collective action.(4) But the editors of *Progress* did not conceive of poetry in these terms; they allow art to exist for its own sake and not to be put to use for particular ends—even laudable political ones. The poems in *Progress* are apolitical in their content; they conform more closely to stereotypes of Romantic poetry than many Romantic poems do. While its pages do implicitly articulate aesthetic principles, they were at odds with the aesthetic values of magazines representing “Scientific Socialism.” Earlier “magazines of popular progress” (Easley 265) like *Tait’s Edinburgh Magazine* included works occasionally explicit in their politics but always implicitly political because they were so often written by working-class authors. (*Tait’s* also had an editorial reviewing policy intended “to establish a canon of literature that would serve the interest of British reform and national progress” [Easley 267], something it shares with *Progress*). Nonetheless, the apolitical poems were published alongside articles that consistently undermine and overturn political, social, and religious verities of middle-class Victorian Britain, and it is the poems’ placement in this context that creates their political valence. As Linda K. Hughes notes, poetry in periodicals is “context-dependent, inflected by topicality, marketplace competition, available contributors, and the shifting editorial policies and class register of specific titles, as well as by pressures exerted from within poetic tradition and aesthetic innovation” (91).

<5> But just as the content of the periodical inflects the interpretation of the poetry, we see that the aestheticism of the poetry implies the politics of the journal. Indeed, an examination of the principles underpinning the ideology of *Progress* suggests that its editors were, in addition to political progressives, *aesthetes*. This would not surprise Linda Dowling, who notes that our stereotypes of the Aesthetic movement are often at odds with actual Aesthetic discourses: Pater's *Renaissance*, for example, carries "over into aesthetic theory the same egalitarian impulses so obviously at work in the movement for Victorian political reform" (2). Anne Janowitz's *Lyric and Labor in the Romantic Tradition* similarly highlights the links between the political and the aesthetic in nineteenth-century discourse. She explores the twin strands of Romanticism: the individualism exemplified by Wordsworth's "Tintern Abbey" and the collectivism that informs poems like Shelley's "Ode to the West Wind." (5) Janowitz argues that our contemporary view of literary history "flattens out" (12) the complex interactions of poetics with politics, and that the Romantic tradition is better seen as a dialectic among individualist and collectivist subjectivities — subjectivities one could also categorize as "capitalist" and "socialist." While *Progress* itself shuns capitalism and advocates socialist policies, its articles refuse to "flatten" the history of capitalism. *Progress* and the poetry it showcased exposes not only the kind of interplay of political and aesthetic modes in the poems that Janowitz identifies with Romantic poetry; a close analysis of the poetry — and its nuanced negotiation between the impulses of individualism and communitarianism — reveals the similar interplay of these impulses in the ideology of the journal as a whole.

<6> In the first article of first issue, setting the tone for the whole of *Progress*, G. W. Foote writes that those who praise "the good old times" while bemoaning the rise of capitalism are mistaken. His analysis of modern times stresses the conditions of the masses, the community:

Modern society is immensely better than the ancient, and every generation sees an improvement in the general condition of the people. We are better situated in almost every respect than our forefathers; better fed, better clothed, better housed, better educated, and better governed. And although, in some aspects of civilization, we must acknowledge our inferiority to the elder world, it is certain that we far excel it in many others; especially in those which involve the welfare of the masses of the people. The people, indeed, can scarcely be said to have existed, in any real sense of the word, until recent times. (1)

In Foote's rendering, the emergence of capitalism has precipitated the end of feudalism, serfdom, and slavery. This is not to deny that capitalism does not entail its own sort of slavery, because "in so far as a man is not absolutely free, he is a slave" (2).

<7> Foote expresses his point of view as one among multiple perspectives and approaches. (He does not always favorably represent the alternatives, however: "We do not mean to echo the foolish rant of some continental Socialists, who are always denouncing the capitalists as such, nor do we desire to enter into an examination of the moral duties which Mr. Ruskin charges them with neglecting" [304]). In so doing, he implicitly acknowledges the ways in which individualism — that key capitalist trait — has melded with communitarian interests for the betterment of the masses. For instance, he demonstrates the ways in which capitalist modes have benefitted workers, noting that Trades Unionists have succeeded to the extent that they have

made laborers into capitalists: unions use general funds to “enable individuals to hold out for the price of their labor, instead of submitting it to a forced sale” (4). Acknowledging the serious inequality and tyranny engendered by a system in which “the man who has nothing must be at the mercy of the man who has something” (4), Foote nonetheless describes a dialectic relationship between capital and labor, much like the one Janowitz sees between elements of Romantic poetry. This sense of a productive dialog between what we now view as competing impulses may well be the defining note of *Progress*, as Ruth Livesey also suggests in relation to socialism: “This inclusiveness, this refusal to divide aesthetics and politics (as well as idealism and materialism) as an either/or, was one of the defining characteristics of British socialism as it gained force in the early 1880s” (“Socialism and Victorian Poetry”). After addressing how this inclusiveness defines the journal *Progress*, this essay will examine this trait as a defining element of aesthetic women’s poetry.

<8> M. M. Strickland’s “Some Conditions of Progress” further demonstrates *Progress*’s political dialectic. Also from the first issue of the journal, this article works to define the word “progress,” but opens with a statement of its multivalence:

If enthusiasm about a word meant the same thing as agreement about its practical meaning, the advocates of social progress at the present day would have reason to rejoice at their prospects. The orthodox and the heterodox, Conservatives and Liberals, the apostles of science, and the champions of letters or art, amidst all the disagreements are agreed in their proclamation of progress as the principle of all their efforts. (24)

Surprisingly—given the journal’s stance on religion—Strickland laments that the “professional assailants of orthodoxy in creed and practice” (25) do not have “an accepted law” (26) to order their ideas and give them consequence. Christianity’s “power over the emotions and imagination, and to a lesser extent over the reason of the past” was “of the highest historical importance” (26). Without this ordering principle, purveyors of the new have contributed nothing but disorganization. Significantly, Strickland does not propose Socialism take the place of Christianity; rather, he asserts that the “intellectual revolt against the authority of the past” has not produced a new system worthy of our devotion. And a new system is needed, because the “hungry affections of men . . . are seeking for some new object on which to fasten themselves” (29). Science is not the answer, for while it can explain facts of the world, it “leave[s] the actual sorrows and perplexities of the world undisturbed” (29).

<9> To address the “sorrows and perplexities of the world,” something other than science and even socialism is needed. While Strickland does not state it outright, the debilities he points to in science and socialism are based in the distinction between Fact and Truth—a notion Virginia Woolf famously brings up in *A Room of One’s Own*. Claiming that Facts can be disputed and are subject to the bias of their bearers, Woolf proposes Fiction as a better avenue to Truth. While not true in a literal sense, literature gives access to larger human Truths, the kind that are “capable at once of satisfying the reason of men and of regulating their lives” (Strickland 29). As Linda K. Hughes notes, “poetry generically signified intimations of the universal, the spiritual, and the permanent” (99). But more than this—more than transcendence necessary for human aspiration—poetry can provide guidance in reason as well as morals. This is the vision of aesthetics that

Isobel Armstrong hopes to recreate in the twenty-first century in order to address “the democratic and radical potential of aesthetic discourse” (2): “artwork as a form of knowledge—which may involve redefining what knowing is” (60).

<10> Aesthetic lyric poetry’s mediation between individual and collective impulses serves as a “form of knowledge” quite different from what the socialist poetry in journals like *Today* offers. To be sure, to some degree both poetic modes similarly invoke both individual and collective: an individual poet writes a poem, and a journal reader experiences it singly. But “socialist songs” suggest communal activity—gathering together, singing together. Moreover, they imply a prescription that all actively join in the song. Aesthetic lyric verse, on the other hand, nuances this relationship. It too is both individual and communal, but with quite a different emphasis. The lyric voice is both personal and universal. It aims at transcendence and Truth—but is highly individuated and subjective at the same time. In the context of *Progress*, this is a significant intervention in their freethinking journal, allowing for a non-dogmatic but nonetheless socialist perspective. In the pages of *Progress*, there is no question that religion is obfuscation, that property is unfairly distributed; but as the abstract noun that comprises its title suggests, there is also no concrete or single way to produce *Progress*. Clearly, things are awry. What, exactly, will put things right is less clear.

<11> But the notion that poetry can help is ever-present within its pages. The pressures of context, topicality, and traditions are evident in Radford’s *Progress* poems, which are significantly different from those in her books *A Light Load* (1891)(6) and *Songs and Other Verses* (1895).(7) The poems in *Progress*, by contrast, eschew what we might call feminist Romanticism in favor of apolitical lyricism, embracing starlight, moonlight, sunlight, green trees, bucolic scenes, and Love.(8) “What I’d Sing” is exemplary:

I’d sing, I’d sing of bright green fields,
Of children filled with gladness;
Of daisies, and of violets sweet,
Of life without its sadness.
I’d sing, I’d sing of deep, dark streams,
Of waters fierce and stormy;
Of flowers wild, and roses red,
Of paths both smooth and thorny. (1-8)

Radford continues with two further stanzas of what she would sing, both equally banal. It is unclear what is at stake when a poet sings of “fierce waters” rather than “violets sweet,” or what conditions make the difference between smooth paths and thorny ones. Missing throughout this poem is the impetus of its conditional sense. The speaker *would* sing . . . if *what*? There is no answer within the poem. While one could argue that its structure implies a future condition or an anticipated change, the conditions of its song remain unsung.

<12> To better understand the interplay of Radford’s poems and *Progress*’s politics, it will be useful to look closely at Radford’s poems in context. Radford’s “What I’d Sing” is bookended by part one of Eleanor Marx’s two-part biography of her father and an article titled “Religion and

Laughter.” There are two possible interpretations of the poem suggested by this context. One is that the condition implied by the poem is one in which humans are free from a system which extracts surplus value out of workers to create wealth for owners, and in which people may laugh without punishment at religion (an especially pressing need for Foote, imprisoned for publishing a parodic rendering of the Christian faith). This reading accords with the kind of individualism that an aesthete like Oscar Wilde imagines in “The Soul of Man Under Socialism” (1891). In this essay, Wilde foresees the freedom that can result only from the elimination of “the peremptory, unreasonable, degrading Tyranny of want” (1175) and a complete upheaval of the capitalist system: “Socialism, Communism, or whatever one chooses to call it, by converting private property into public wealth, and substituting co-operation for competition, will restore society to its proper condition. . . . With the abolition of private property, then, we shall have true, beautiful, healthy Individualism. Nobody will waste his life in accumulating things, and the symbols for things. One will live” (1175, 1178). The other possibility is that “What I’d Sing” is primarily decorative, a series of pleasing images meant to provide enjoyment to advanced thinkers. This is the “pure” aesthetic reading, and it accords with Wilde’s assertion, in the Preface to *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891), that “The artist is the creator of beautiful things. . . . No artist has ethical sympathies. An ethical sympathy in an artist is an unpardonable mannerism of style. . . . All art is quite useless” (17).

<13> While the former explanation is compelling in its ideological coherence with the explicit politics of the journal, the latter is also supported by the context. Eleanor articulates more than Karl Marx’s theory of capital; she also makes an aesthetic statement that values literature *as literature*. Part one in the series is “the briefest sketch of my father’s life” in which Eleanor says I “shall confine myself to a simple statement of facts” (288). (Part two is her analysis of *Capital* “and of the truths set forth in it” [288].) After the introductory paragraph in which she lays out this plan, readers learn Karl Marx’s date and place of birth, his parents’ names, and then this:

Amongst his earliest friends and playmates were Jenny — afterwards his wife — and Edgar von Westphalen. From their father, the Baron von Westphalen . . . Karl Marx imbibed his first love for the “Romantic” School, and while his father read him Voltaire and Racine, Westphalen read him Homer and Shakespeare. These always remained his favorite writers. (288)

While these three sentences may seem insignificant, his parents and birth are accorded only two sentences, and his schooling only one sentence (which focuses on the “satirical verse” he wrote in “lampooning his enemies” [288]). After this, Eleanor devotes the remainder of the paragraph to his professional life as a newspaperman, which coincided with the beginning of his political life. From this point on — two-thirds of the way through the second paragraph — the article discusses Marx’s actions on behalf of the oppressed of Europe, his jobs, his writings, his exiles. It seems that Eleanor, in the brief “personal” section of her father’s biography, saw fit to include only the essential elements of his formative years. In short, the important elements of his life consist of the literature he read and political actions he undertook, suggesting that literature informed his political views rather than existing apart from them.

<14> Eleanor closes her biographical sketch with this quotation from *Julius Caesar*: “the elements / So mix’d in him that Nature might stand up, / And say to all the world, ‘This was a man!’” (V.v.73-75). Thus Anthony appraises Brutus’s character, because Brutus was the only man among all Caesar’s assassins who was not motivated by envy of Caesar’s power and position; rather, Brutus believed Caesar’s assassination was for the “common good to all.” Thus Eleanor opens and closes her essay with reference to Shakespeare, with special emphasis on how important literature was to Marx throughout his life, how it formed him in childhood, remained with him until death, and is perhaps the best way to memorialize him. Moreover, because the *Julius Caesar* quotation is unattributed in the article, it is clear that the editors of *Progress* expected their audience to not only have read but also readily recognize and identify the works of Shakespeare.⁽⁹⁾ Finally, the quotation itself suggests an intense interplay of the individual and the communal: in Shakespeare’s rendering, Brutus acts for the “common good”; yet Shakespeare as “The Bard,” and as the leading example of unique artistic genius, exemplifies an extreme of individualism.

<15> The laudatory article by “Norman Britton” [William Archer]⁽¹⁰⁾ on Vernon Lee more specifically demonstrates how women aesthetes and political progressives alike negotiate between individual and communitarian impulses. He writes: “Her tolerance is as wide as her knowledge, she is readier at interpretation than demonstration, she seeks to throw light on the principles and tendencies of art so that her readers may form enlightened judgments for themselves, rather than dogmatically to docket and pigeon-hole each separate work and thrust her individual preferences down her readers’ throats” (138). In short, Vernon Lee believes in individual liberty, tolerance, education, and is against dogmatism and autocracy. Moreover, we discover—in his approving quotation of Lee’s summation of Ruskin—that she is also anti-religion; while admiring much of Ruskin’s work, Lee describes him as “the almost isolated champion of creed and ideas which have ceased even to be discussed among the thinking part of our nation” (qtd. in Britton 144-5). And thus Britton endorses her aestheticism, quoting her statement that “people should try and take art more simply than they do” and should give up “all manner of irrelevant fantasticating”—by which she means “seeking in art for hidden psychological meanings or moral values” (qtd. in Britton 140).

<16> Britton/Archer’s frequent appearances in the pages of *Progress* indicate the editor’s stamp of approval and lend editorial authority to his articles. Yet he does not endorse Lee’s every idea, suggesting how complex the relationship between aesthetic thought and “advanced thought”—or, say, between individualism and socialism—could be. He argues against her “Dialogue on Poetic Morality,” writing:

We have not yet by any means reached the stage at which the claim of poetry to continued existence must be vindicated on the ground of its beneficence in creating pure joy out of pure beauty. As yet that is only one of its functions. There is still a place . . . for the poetry of active enthusiasm and indignation. (143)

In this, Britton admits that there is a place for a poetry that creates “pure joy out of pure beauty.” He merely wants to refrain from deprecating poetry—like Socialist hymns and chants—that serve political ends, and keep the door open for a new Elizabeth Barrett Browning or Shelley

who use political verse to intervene in social affairs.(11) Moreover, the trait he admires Lee for most—that “she is not afraid to descend from the pleasant places of aesthetics into the strenuous battle-ground of ethics” (144)—is one that Dollie Radford cultivates in her later poetic career.

<17> Britton’s objections to Lee’s “Dialogue on Poetic Morality,” however, can be seen as an indicator of 1880s attitudes toward aestheticism, because rather than truly engage with the ideas Lee sets forth, he uses her discussion of aesthetic poetry as an occasion to express his own version of aestheticism.(12) Lee’s dialogue takes place between Cyril, a poet who despairs because he is fit only for writing but nonetheless wonders “what moral right a man has to consume his life writing verses, when there is so much evil to remove?” (732), and Baldwin, his practical friend who nonetheless understands aesthetic issues. In his objections to Baldwin’s propositions, Cyril represents two social types within Victorian society: the philanthropic man who wants appreciably to improve the world, and the staid literary conservative who associates recent artistic innovations with effeminacy, morbidity, immorality, and sensuality. Baldwin both provides the corrective to this stereotyped view of aesthetic poetry and defends aesthetic poetry’s role in improving Victorian society. The two are not mutually exclusive because, as Baldwin explains, “when I said that the only true religion was . . . the religion of good, and that the creation of perfect beauty is the highest aim of the artist, I was not contradicting myself, but merely stating two parts—a general and a particular—of the same proposition” (735). Indeed, Baldwin had “always laughed at the Ruskinian idea of morality or immorality in architecture, or painting, or music” saying instead that “morality and immorality were beauty and ugliness” (736). Through her character Baldwin, Lee revises the negative stereotype of the aesthete from the lazy, immoral, mystical, ineffectual and effeminate poet to a true-seeing, truth-seeking, moral force for good in the world. Moreover, he articulates exactly the twin impulses of *Progress* and of women aesthetes and suggests a way to negotiate the “general” and the “particular.” By likening beauty and morality, aesthetic poetry can have a dual function without being didactic or overtly moralizing.

<18> Lee’s “Dialogue on Poetic Morality” points to the unstable category aestheticism had become by the 1880s—a category as multivalent as 1880s socialism.(13) Nonetheless, Radford’s poems are definitely aesthetic, most especially in the ways they accord with the major characteristic Talia Shaffer identifies with female aesthetes: the wider range of “beauty”—including familial and natural beauty—female aesthetes consider suitable for aesthetic celebration. Radford’s poem “Sunshine” quoted in its entirety below, provides an excellent example:

I play upon the waters
And I make the noontide bright;
I dance upon the cloudlets,
And I make their greyness light.
I kiss the fruits and blossoms,
And I make them softly blush;
tinge the trees and hedgerows
With a sweet and tender flush.
I sport upon the meadows,

And I touch the verdant grass,
While the flowers rise up to meet me—
And to greet me as I pass. (1-12)

The lyric “I” in this poem is clearly not a flesh and blood woman, nor even a flesh and blood poet. Indeed, the title tells us that the poem is about “Sunshine.” But clearly it is not merely sunshine, or not the whole of sunshine. Sun, to be sure, can do all that the poem indicates; but it also fails, at times, to make mid-day bright or to lighten storm clouds. Moreover, it can ripen fruit past its first blush and wither it beyond its prime; it can parch the grass and burn the flowers. The poem’s perfect and ideal sunshine is better identified with the spirit of poetry, the ability of art to infuse the natural world with new color, new light, new spirit, new life. But there also seems to be an implied dialectic at work in this poem, between the octave and the quatrain. The first eight lines embody, to borrow Wordsworth’s phrase from “Elegiac Stanzas,” “The light that never was, on sea or land, / The consecration, and the Poet’s dream” (15-16). Radford infuses the first octave with “the gleam” (14) that a poet can shine on the natural world, infusing it with extra- or super-natural beauty. The quatrain, while it follows that the figure “sporting” on the meadows and “touching” the grass is the same as the being who creates sunlight and shadow, might just as easily represent a real person. In the final four lines, the action is in the realm of the humanly possible, suggesting that the supernatural agent of the octave should be identified with the potentially human actor in the quatrain. The logical conclusion is that artistic perception and aesthetic creation gives access to a power beyond what is normally available in the material world. The octave is universal; the quatrain is individual—and the poem suggests that productive dialog is the best relationship between these ostensibly competing impulses. This connection is essential to an understanding of how and why a radical journal of advanced thought would put this poem in its pages.

<19> Radford's poem “Fancies” provides additional evidence. It begins in a mode quite similar to “Sunshine,” describing the “crimson glow” on the “purple heather” (1), the “tinted cloudlets” (3) and “sunset shadows” (4) that inspire the speaker to pick a piece of heather, kiss it, and carry it away while thinking of her lover. The second stanza repeats that “’Twas but an idle fancy” (7, 8, 11) that caused her to do so. She reiterates this in the third stanza—“’Twas but a fancy” (15)—and reveals that her heather-and-light induced reverie on love is nothing but a dream, for she “Know[s] well that mine my love can never be” (16). The final stanza describes the necessity of her fancy:

A sunset glow upon some broken fountain,
To which with joyful songs we gladly fly,
And find on climbing up the rugged mountain,
The sunset ended and the waters dry:
Yet had we known how shattered was the spell
We had not sung our melodies so well. (19-24)

Fancy is not idle or useless; it has the power to impel human action, making people pursue the beauty they imagine is beyond the next horizon, even when it involves struggle (like “climbing up the rugged mountain”). Imagination, then, generates action and becomes a *necessary* fiction to

function, to accomplish tasks, to go on in a world that “Hath really neither joy, nor love, nor light, / Nor certitude, nor peace, nor help for pain” (33-34), as Matthew Arnold's “Dover Beach” so famously phrased it. Fancy and imagination induce action, and with action may come change. *Progress* truly follows Shelley's path, for its editorial policy shows its belief that poets indeed are the unacknowledged legislators of the world, able to imagine a future different and better than the flawed present. That this action can be social and not merely individual is suggested by Radford's use of the plural pronoun “we.”

<20> Clearly, the malleable modes and principles of aestheticism make aestheticism ideal for appropriation to various ends. Moreover, because art is both a product and a process, both tangible and a potential means of transcendence and transformation, it is an essential element of social change. What Chris Waters notes about the “religion of socialism” is true too, of art: the emphasis on “the importance of individual transformation rather than—or hopefully along with—political and economic change” (14) is key. The transcendent element of artistic endeavor—art's ability to take people beyond their immediate world and open new avenues of perception—means it is possible that “politics and deep subjectivity are sides of the same coin” (Eagleton 20). The chicken-and-egg question of political revolution might be phrased: “The paradox of all social transformation is that it requires as one of its prerequisites a changed human subject, yet that such reconstructed subjects are as much the product of social transformation as the precondition of it” (Eagleton 21). This, too, is a version of the dialog Janowitz identifies: changes within the individual are a necessary precondition—as well as a result of—changes in the social structure.

<21> And because poetry—especially the aesthetic poetry that made a virtue of its uselessness—was especially fitted to oppose capitalist modes of production by 1883, “aesthetic” poetry indeed was revolutionary. Poetry, Gene H. Bell-Villada notes, was “fundamentally at odds with the new system of literary production and distribution” (45), specifically the new emphasis on speed in both production and consumption, as well as the growth of newspapers and magazines which were not made to last but to be quickly read and discarded. Bell-Villada writes that “*l'art pour l'art* was the position adopted by certain authors whose specific mode of discourse and personal rhythms of production were in conflict with the demands of the newly industrialized literary market. . . . Their kind of art being objectively marginal to the dominant literary discourses, they subjectively transformed the unmarketability of their poetic gifts into what they saw as an aesthetic, spiritual and even moral asset” (50-51). Thus, Bell-Villada identifies a crucial revolutionary element in aesthetic work: it is uninterested in participating or competing in the capitalist marketplace. “Uselessness” was art's virtue in a world consumed by extracting surplus value from workers. Productivity, mechanization, standardization, convention—all support capital, and all are challenged by aestheticism. At the same time, we must recognize that poets were paid for their poems, which were published in quickly read and discarded journals, bought and paid for in the capitalist economy.

<22> Given the serious and significant voices that employ aestheticism for social purposes, it is interesting that “Bunthorne” became the popular image of aestheticism. Nearly every commentator, like William Archer in his discussion of Vernon Lee—wants to dissociate himself from *that* aestheticism, but embrace nonetheless a version of his own. The falseness of the Bunthorne stereotype is borne out in recent work by Diana Maltz, who explores the intertwining

of philanthropy and aestheticism to discover that the religion of beauty was quite often put to social ends. Aestheticism, Maltz finds, has a “comprehensive influence” on philanthropy (2). Far from being an escape from reality, “missionary aesthetes” saw a moral imperative inhering in the idea of beauty: beauty as an ideal, as a goal, requires individuals to make the world more beautiful. Often, this meant improving housing conditions for the poor, increasing public green spaces, organizing free concerts and art exhibitions, and offering art education.(14) For “missionary aesthetes,” like political activists, aestheticism was not the province of effeminate sensualists uninterested in the wider social world; Octavia Hill, activist for tenement reform, held a similar belief. As Maltz explains: “For Hill, a finer aesthetic sensibility does not mean a nervous frenzy of sensations, but a peaceful awakening by Nature's beauty to visions of a better life and ideals” (45).

<23> Ruth Livesey views Radford's *Progress* poetry as responding to the tension produced by “the communal socialist aesthetic, disseminated by writers such as William Morris and Edward Carpenter during the 1880s, [that] laid such an emphasis on productive, manly labor,” which suggested a “gendered aesthetics” (*Socialism, Sex, and the Culture of Aestheticism* 136). This emphasis on “the effortful struggle to create communal subjects for the socialist era” (136) left small space for a gendered female voice, putting Radford's private aesthetics in conflict with her public politics: “Whilst several of Radford's lyrics explore how manly communal socialism overwrites a feminized sphere of individual affect and sympathy, others foreground the inadequacy of beauty and solitary contemplation in the long struggle for social change” (138). Indeed, it is in large part because her lyric voice is self-consciously feminine that Radford was able to write poetry that exploits the tension between public action and private utterance. As Virginia Jackson and Yopie Prins have argued, the female lyric mode is constitutively different from the masculine because the lyric utterance is so closely identified with a woman's “true” voice, whereas the male poetic “I” has more freedom to be merely “the speaker of the poem.” In the “poetess” tradition, the women writer's muse is domestic, and she is therefore always already part of a community, her role defined by her function within the familial group and larger social structure. To be sure, men too occupy predefined social roles, but the ideology of the male poet stresses his unique, individual mind, and his individual genius as the engine of his poetic output. Thus Radford's gender may have uniquely positioned her to write “socialist” aesthetic poetry — poetry that is both “aesthetic” — personal, individual, and autonomous — as well as politically engaged.

<24> By the decade following the publishing run of *Progress*, however, this aestheticism had in many quarters devolved into a self-indulgent decadence. As Talia Shaffer defines it: “Decadence was actually a brief defensive reaction of embattled male elite writers who perceived themselves to be losing status to popular women writers and consequently fetishized their own decay” (6). Regenia Gagnier distinguishes between aesthetes and decadents by suggesting that “The goal of the positive Victorian aesthetics I have been discussing [which is exemplified by the works of Ruskin, Morris, and Wilde] was not to objectify others as art, but to provide the conditions that would allow oneself and others to live with the freedom of art” (147). Decadents, by contrast, see freedom *only* in art, and thus their art closes off possibility for attaining other goals and accounts for the “hysterical and outrageous quality of the writing of a Huysmans, Bram Stoker, Joseph Conrad, or Frederick Rolfe . . .” (147). With the exception of male aesthetes whose temperaments and ideologies were formed in the 1870s and 80s, the “major” male writers of the

1890s were, by Gagnier's definition, decadent. Yet, as Shaffer argues in *The Forgotten Female Aesthetes*, aestheticism was still a major influence on women writers during this same period.

<25> Focusing on this form of aestheticism will answer the question of how Radford's poetry not only aligns with the political ideology of *Progress* but also carried her beyond that cultural moment and allowed her to continue using aestheticism as a political mode into the 1890s. The type of aestheticism adopted by women writers in the 1890s, as Schaffer notes, "gave female aesthetes the freedom to write" (5) about subjects neither embraced nor endorsed by domestic women. Thus, although different in kind, late-century aestheticism retained its power to subvert accepted and acceptable modes. In both cases, the medium— aesthetic poetry—is the message: refusal to conform to arbitrary standards, to authority, to systems of representation fitted to serve the majority. For female aesthetes, however, the aesthetic becomes more gendered as the century drew to a close.

<26> Radford's *Progress* poems are bracketed from her other work due to the change of name that resulted from her marriage to Ernest. Although nicknamed "Dollie" earlier in her life, she never appeared so professionally until she became "Dollie Radford." To be sure, she entered her marriage with a childlike and hyper-feminine nickname. But she did not choose to publish as Dollie—to be publicly a "dolly"—until after her marriage. Moreover, half of her *Progress* poems are identified only by genderless initials. There is no clear editorial statement in *Progress* concerning the signing of pieces, so it is unclear whether Radford even made the decision whether to sign "C. M." or "Caroline Maitland." (15) Her diaries for 1883 do not record any conscious decision, any deliberation, or any choice in the matter. Nonetheless, it does not seem like "progress" for an independent-minded woman poet to entirely change her name, become professionally subordinate to her less-talented husband (who continues to have greater name recognition than she because of his association with the Rhymers' Club), and to disassociate herself from her early career. Dollie Radford's brief incarnation as "C. M." illumines the role of women poets in aesthetic innovation and the culture of reform, but the dissimilarity of her *Progress* poems to her 1890s verses begs the question of Radford's career arc.

<27> The shift in poetic disposition is striking when comparing a poem like "Sunshine" with Radford's later works, which often validate rebellion or deviation from social norms. For example, "Because I Built My Nest So High," from *Songs and Other Verses* (1895), functions to justify—and naturalize—women's ambition and determination. Because the speaker of this poem built her nest higher than all the other birds, hers was the one to suffer when strong winds blew. But because "Mrs. Grundy" does not pass judgment on birds' placement of nests, there are no negative ramifications for ambitious women. And because nest-building is part of a world that is fully natural, the only consequence of striving to go higher than the others is personal disappointment. But for Radford's speaker, present failure leads only to future resolve:

Because I hung it, in my pride
So near the skies,
Higher than other nests abide,
Must I lament if far and wide
It scattered lies?

I shall but build, and build my best,
Till, safely won,
I hang aloft my new-made nest,
High as of old, and see it rest
As near the sun. (6-15)

Clearly there is a dialectic not only between the articles in *Progress* and the poetry that appeared beside them, but also between Radford's early and later work.

<28> Why did C. M. choose to publish later as "Dollie Radford" rather than, say, "Caroline Radford" or "Caroline Maitland Radford"? Radford herself may have wanted to break from the early poetry she wrote, recognizing that her poems lacked political significance when taken out of the context of *Progress*. While five of the poems first published in *Progress* appear in *A Light Load* (1891), Radford's poetry became, throughout her career, more explicitly political, with more complex ideas, and a broader understanding of the world than those early poems encompass. It is impossible to assess Radford's personal motivations with any degree of certainty, but it is quite possible that an increasing awareness of her gendered identity—because she became a wife and mother—influenced her shift from Caroline to Dolly, a change that both embraces and highlights her gendered subjectivity. One thing, however, is apparent: the pure aestheticism of Radford's early years needed a corrective in order for a politically engaged woman's voice to be properly sounded.

<29> Clearly, reform-minded women negotiated their relationships to both the world and their art; and they had to continue to strategize, adjust, and grow as they and their world changed. In her later work, Radford renegotiated the relationship of individual and community familiar from the pages of *Progress*. Like many other New Woman writers of the 1890s, Radford built on her aesthetic foundation, discovering ways to expand her political commitments while maintaining her aesthetic ones. While many of her poems from the 1890s and after eschewed explicit political content, she moved toward a greater social commitment in which her identity as a woman is a key element of her poetic. Though never dogmatic or strident or didactic, her later poems exemplify an evolving aesthetic ideology that often rejects the universal and represents a specifically gendered individual in order to continue using poetry as a medium of advanced thought.

Endnotes

(1) Ruth Livesey discusses Radford's "The Starlight has Gladdened the River," published in volume II of *Progress*, as Radford's first attempt to "shadow[] forth an idea of aesthetic creativity

embedded in the affective heart of human(ist) community. The verse combines conventional feminized lyrical affect with a new secular ethical subjectivity” (*Socialism, Sex, and the Culture of Aestheticism* 142)—an attempt Livesey traces through Radford’s later volumes of poetry.(^)

(2)Radford’s poetry partakes of Shelley’s muse in its embrace of dream states, nature, and love. In her 7 July 1883 journal entry, Radford records her delight in receiving a gift of a volume of Shelley: “How I shall enjoy having it! Shelley is my poet. I feel nearer to him than to any: I understand him I think so clearly.” The following day, she notes that she has read “Alastor” and “Epipsychidion”—poems that explore love, transcendence, and truths found in nature. Radford adds, “How I delight in his nature dreams!” (8 July 1883). The articles that appeared in *Progress*, however, tended to single out Shelley’s overtly political poems like *Queen Mab*. “PhD” writes in “The Elimination of the God Idea from Higher Modern Literature” that Byron, Shelly, and Swinburne most exemplify the poets who have eliminated the “God-Idea” (which he defines as “the immoral teaching that they should do right for the sake of reward and avoid evil for fear of punishment” [296]). And while “Alastor” does not deliver its readers into “intellectual bondage” (297) by its insistence on orthodoxy, it is the political poetry which PhD applauds.(^)

(3)Matthew Arnold is continually an object of criticism in the pages of *Progress*, despite the fact that, as Norman Britton [William Archer] notes in his three-part article “The Gospel of St. Matthew Arnold,” Arnold is for the most part a kindred spirit, and criticizing him “has almost the appearance of that gravest of crimes against military discipline, dueling in the face of the foe. We seem to be fostering dissensions in the ranks” (328). Moreover, as PhD notes in “The Elimination of the God-Idea,” G. W. Foote defended himself to the jury during his blasphemy trial with reference to the words of Arnold in *Literature and Dogma*, indicating yet again that Arnold and *Progress* essentially agree on matters of religious belief. There are two reasons, then, for the animus against Arnold. First, he remained unpunished for his irreligious views. (As it was put in the monthly “Gossip” column for November 1883: “To blaspheme in the *Freethinker* means a year’s imprisonment. To blaspheme in ‘Literature and Dogma’ means half a year’s salary for doing nothing” [319], a reference to Arnold’s paid leave of absence as Inspector of Schools.) But perhaps more significantly, Arnold had more seriously blasphemed by having called Shelley a “beautiful but ineffectual angel.”(^)

(4)Critics have tended to focus on the role of fiction in the Socialist movement more than that of poetry; see especially Mutch, Mitchell, Hapgood, and Heywood.(^)

(5)Janowitz elaborates: “Romantic poetry models experience in two distinct forms, the extremes of which I am calling the individualist and the communitarian. At one end are situated those lyrics whose voice is singular, most often masculine, and voluntaristic; at the other end are those which produce a lyric ‘we.’ But between these extremes, much romantic poetry engages with and ambiguates the two positions. For the Wordsworth of the aesthetic ideology is also the poet of the explicitly political” (16). Indeed for Janowitz, the “contestation of communitarian and individualist identities” defines Romantic poetry. From this ground, she can claim that “as we articulate the links between romanticism and individualism, we see more clearly the complicity between, on the one hand, that individualist aspect of romanticism and liberalism as it developed

in the nineteenth century and socialism as it developed out of an encounter between residual plebeian communitarianism and emergent democratic liberalism” (22-3).(^)

(6)While five of these *Progress* poems do appear in *A Light Load*, the context of new poems alters the way a reader interprets them, just as the context of the articles in *Progress* influenced their original interpretation.(^)

(7)While grounded in nature imagery and seeming to embrace Romantic individualism, Radford’s poems in her later volumes tend to subvert the stereotype of “feminine” domestic nature writing and implicitly engage political themes. See my article “Naturally Radical” for an examination of how Radford achieves this dual embrace.(^)

(8)Hughes notes the ubiquity of Love in all its forms in periodical verse, explaining that “Love was a strategic topic. It invoked the feelings associated with sympathy, universality, and piety but avoided the pitfalls of religious doctrine in an era of religious dispute” (100).(^)

(9)But before even reading Eleanor Marx, the presence of J. S. Mill on the front cover would alert readers that *Progress* too would reject the idea that “the game of push-pin is of equal value with the arts and sciences of music and poetry” (Bentham 206). Famously, the fifth chapter of Mill’s *Autobiography* (“A Crisis in my Mental History”) relates his discovery of literature’s central importance to human well-being. For Mill, art is “useful” because it is a necessary element of life, like water and air. He discovers that beauty is necessary, and (tautologically) that makes art useful. In short, Mill’s *Autobiography* articulates a submerged aestheticism.(^)

(10)William Archer chose to write under the pseudonym “Norman Britton,” according to biographer Peter Whitebrook, because he feared his family would find out he was “a vociferous freethinker” (46): “And so Archer assumed a double life. At Dulwich, he accompanied his family to observances, while in London he revealed his true self as a radical and freethinker” (46). “Norman Britton” appears quite often in *Progress*; approximately every ninth article in 1883 is signed “Norman Britton.” My thanks to Ruth Livesey for alerting me to the true identity of “Norman Britton.”(^)

(11)Here, Britton is responding directly to this statement by Cyril, one of the speakers in Lee’s dialogue: “In Shelley’s time, things were rather different from what they are now. There was a religion of progress to preach and be stoned for; there was a cause of liberty to fight for--there were Bourbons and Lord Eldons, and there was Greece and Spain and Italy. There was Italy still when Mrs. Browning wrote: had she looked out of the Casa Guidi windows now, on to the humdrum, shoulder-shrugging, penny-haggling, professorial, municipal-councillor-ish Italy of to-day, she could scarcely have felt in the vein. The heroic has been done----” (733). It is important to note, however, that Cyril’s role in the dialogue is to express conventional—and wrongheaded—views, only to be corrected and taught the right way of seeing things.(^)

(12)Lee’s “Dialogue” originally appeared in *The Contemporary Review*, but was reprinted later in 1881 in *Littell’s Living Age*, demonstrating that it reached a wide audience and was deemed culturally significant and authoritative enough to merit wider circulation.(^)

(13) Ian Fletcher begins his overview of the aesthetic movement by noting how difficult it is to define because the terms associated with aestheticism “seem to derive from no center” (1); rather, the movement is “[e]ssentially centrifugal” (33) and swirls around related terms and attitudes instead of emanating from a solid core of beliefs or ideas.(^)

(14) As Ian Fletcher notes, organs like *Punch* satirized organizations like Kyrle Society for “offering beauty to the poor in place of bread” (25). One must assume, however, that these programs did indeed foment political unrest, for Fletcher adds that *Punch* “feared the unsettling of those whose labor sustained the social order” (25).(^)

(15) *Progress* evinces a variety of identifications. Edward Aveling and G. W. Foote, for instance, signed their full names to their articles. But initials are quite common, as are articles signed by obvious pseudonyms (“PhD”; “A Renegade”).(^)

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