

**Research Space**  
Conference paper

**Elizabeth von Arnim ~ The anonymous in poetry**

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**THE ANONYMOUS IN POETRY**

Paper given at

RE-EVALUATING ELIZABETH VON ARNIM

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Among the papers in the Countess Russell Collection held at the Huntington Library is a 5,000-word typescript of an essay entitled ‘The Anonymous in Poetry’<sup>1</sup>. No author’s name is given, and the essay is undated.

In the essay, the writer equates poets to chosen spirits or gods who come down to earth, as the ‘loud uplifted angel-trumpet through which heaven sends its messages to man’ (AP 1), and goes on to protest that the revelation of autobiographical detail sullies and tarnishes the beauty of their poetry: it is the expression of the divine that should concern us, and the divine should remain veiled in mystery. The essay takes as its starting point Matthew Prior’s 1703 poem ‘The Ladle’<sup>2</sup>, a reworking of Ovid’s tale of Baucis and Philomen, in which an elderly couple are visited by Jupiter and Mercury in disguise, and interprets Prior’s opening lines ‘[‘Twas] long ago/since gods came down incognito’ as meaning that there are no more gods to come. On the contrary the writer argues, gods are only human, maintaining that ‘one is quite dazzled by the number and size of gods that did come’ (AP 1), and goes on to rue the fact that they had lost the habit of coming down incognito. After an impassioned argument for poets to retain anonymity, the writer instances the human frailties of several poets, before concluding that it is for the reader to protect himself by shutting his eyes to their weaknesses.

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<sup>1</sup> ‘The Anonymous in Poetry’, undated manuscript in the Countess Russell papers, Huntington Library, San Marino, California. (Subsequent references referred to parenthetically as AP).

<sup>2</sup> Matthew Prior (1664-1721), ‘The Ladle’, 1703

The essay immediately raises three questions. Who wrote it? When was it written? What prompted the author to write it?

We may safely say that it was written by von Arnim. The inclusion in Letters XLVI and XLVII of von Arnim's 1907 epistolary novel *Fräulein Schmidt and Mr Anstruther*<sup>3</sup> of sections which are identical or similar to sections of the essay makes this incontrovertible.

When was it written? From references to the dates of birth and death of Matthew Prior, we may deduce that it was written after 1904 and before 1910. We cannot turn to von Arnim herself for a more precise date, for there are no journals between March 1902 and February 1910. However, I would argue that von Arnim is more likely to have written the essay and drawn on it for her novel than the other way round, particularly as some of her ideas are expanded in the novel. When E.M. Forster arrived at Nassenheide in April 1905, von Arnim was working on *The Princess Priscilla's Fortnight* which was published later that year. We can surmise that the essay was written after she had completed that novel but before she had completed *Fräulein Schmidt and Mr Anstruther*, sometime between the second half of 1905 and the autumn of 1906. Therefore, in this paper, I intend to take into consideration only von Arnim's work up to *Fräulein Schmidt and Mr Anstruther*.

What prompted the author to write it? In *Femininity and Authorship in the Novels of Elizabeth von Arnim*, Juliane Roemhild tells us that in 1900 von Arnim had been discussing with Macmillan, her publishers, the possibility of publication of shorter 'papers' in magazines<sup>4</sup>. This may have been one such attempt. It was certainly sent out to potential publishers, for glued on the title page of the copy in the Huntington Library is a label with the legend 'From A.P. Watt and Son, to whom please address all communications about the MS

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<sup>3</sup> Elizabeth von Arnim, *Fräulein Schmidt and Mr Anstruther* (Leipzig: Bernhard Tauschnitz, 1907), pp.176-188. Subsequent references shown parenthetically as FSAMA.

<sup>4</sup> Juliane Roemhild, *Femininity and Authorship in the Novels of Elizabeth von Arnim: At Her Most Radiant Moment*, (Lanham: Farleigh Dickinson University Press, 2014), p.61

to which this slip is attached.’ However, A.P. Watt have no record of the essay having been published.

What prompted the subject of the essay? We see only Fräulein Schmidt’s letters in *Fräulein Schmidt and Mr Anstruther*, but she is evidently responding to ones from Roger Anstruther. They frequently discuss poets and poetry and in Letter XLVI she describes how she has bought a second-hand volume of a ‘collection of descriptions of what is known of the lives of English poets’. She is especially eager to see their portraits but becomes very disillusioned and eventually throws the book on the kitchen fire. We can only speculate whether something similar happened to von Arnim in reality or whether the episode stemmed from the imagination of her alter ego ‘Elizabeth’. Her remaining library at the Bibliothèque de l’Université de Toulon et du Var contains no such volume. What is indisputable, however, throughout her oeuvre is her great love of English language poetry.

Against that background, let us examine parts of von Arnim’s text. The first pages deal with general ideas.

A great poet – and the poets are the first and greatest of the gods – is a chosen spirit, an universal heritage. ... He is the loud uplifted angel-trumpet ... The divinity in a man who has the precious gift of revealing it is a possession that should be handed down the ages very spotless. The world is not so rich in glory that we can afford to let any portion of it be dimmed. It is the fire that keeps us warm, that protects us from the frost-nip of routine. (AP 2)

In this essentially poetic passage, von Arnim introduces several of the senses: sound with ‘loud’, ‘angel-trumpet’, physical feeling with ‘warmth’, ‘frost-nip’, and above all sight with ‘fire’, ‘dimmed’. She goes on to paint an ekphrastic image of the soul of the poet, clothed in a garment the poet has woven for her.

Nothing, if we are to get the greatest amount of warmth from him, should be known of a poet except what he chooses to tell us in his works. There, in those holy moments of insight and communion, he weaves a lovely robe of light for his soul, and dresses her in it, and presents her to the world. She is shown to us as he wishes her to be shown, at her most radiant moment. (AP 3)

Von Arnim urges us to:

... take care not to tear the robe and not to peep through keyholes after it has been laid aside. Yet so inextricably is the god mixed up in his wrappings of humanity that it is he himself ... who invites us to come behind the scenes and see how she, stripped of her robe, is as covered as we are with bruises. (AP 3)

The image created in these passages has similarities to the Arts and Crafts mural by Gerald Moira of the Soul of Music in London's Wigmore Hall, which opened in 1901. Here the Soul of Music holds aloft 'the Genius of Harmony – a ball of eternal fire whose rays are reflected across the world'.<sup>5</sup> Whereas a veil separates us from the soul of the poet, the Soul of Music is naked and separated from other figures in the mural by:

A tangled network of thorns ... because man in this life is too clogged with materialism to be able to approach the spiritual perfection which is music<sup>6</sup>.



This Arts and Crafts mural falls within the wider Aesthetic Movement, whose heyday in England lasted from the 1860s to the 1890s, but continued into the 20<sup>th</sup> century. 'Aesthete' derives from the Greek word meaning 'one who perceives': the Aesthetes not only perceived, but expressed their perceptions through their work, whether art or craft. Always sensuous, these perceptions are often refreshingly individual with original perspectives, qualities to be found in von Arnim's work. As Talia Schaffer writes in *The Forgotten Female Aesthetes*, she was an 'innovative [writer] within a realist tradition who [was] influenced by aesthetic

<sup>5</sup> <http://wigmore-hall.org.uk/about-us/the-cupola>

<sup>6</sup> <http://wigmore-hall.org.uk/about-us/the-cupola>

style',<sup>7</sup> a theme taken up by Juliane Roemhild in her paper 'Beauty's Price'<sup>8</sup>. While there is no indication that she ever associated with that leading figure of the Aesthetic Movement, Oscar Wilde, her essay is in sympathy with the opening lines of his 1890 novel, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*:

The artist is the creator of beautiful things.  
To reveal art and conceal the artist is art's aim.<sup>9</sup>

Yet, despite her affirmation that she would prefer the artist or his naked soul not to be revealed, von Arnim goes on to discuss the weaker points of a selection of poets: Milton, Wordsworth, Coleridge, Keats, Shelley, Burns, and 'one [anonymous] wretched sinner', citing what she has learned from her readings of Carlyle, Pater, Lamb, Hogg and Wilde. But she pretends not to be entirely happy to be doing so, for in a voice that is unmistakably that of 'Elizabeth', she writes:

So long as the masses love gossip, and so long as gods cannot enter life full-fledged with wisdom but are forced to begin by being babies, so long will biographies and personalities continue to be poured into ears pricked up to receive them. (AP 4)

In her descriptions of their shortcomings, von Arnim writes a sensuous prose. She draws on the sense of smell: 'incense is grateful to the nostrils' (AP 4); on the sense of touch: the feel of Wordsworth's 'languid handful of numb unresponsive fingers' (AP 5); of light: Milton's works 'burn with the whitest, purest light' (AP 6); of taste: Coleridge's soul had 'fed on honey-dew, and drunk the milk of Paradise' (AP 11). We have sound, more specifically music, as she considers Milton's relationship with his two daughters:

Does this not jar discordant against the perfect diapason<sup>10</sup> of the poems, and keep us while we read them out of tune with them and with ourselves and with heaven? (AP 8)

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<sup>7</sup> Talia Shaffer, *The Forgotten Female Aesthetes: Literary Culture in Late Victorian England* (The University Press of Virginia, 2000), p.64

<sup>8</sup> Juliane Roemhild, 'Beauty's Price: Femininity as an Aesthetic Commodity in Elizabeth von Arnim's Novels', *Cahiers victoriens et édouardiens* 74: 2011 Female Aestheticism, p 123-140

<sup>9</sup> Oscar Wilde, *The Works of Oscar Wilde* (London: Spring Books, 1963), p.376

<sup>10</sup> a flue stop which is the "backbone" sound of the organ, 'a grand swelling harmony', COED

She takes us through Shelley's amours, stressing that 'a muse so young and so radiant ought never to have been allowed to wander about unprotected.' (AP 12) In typical 'Elizabeth' fashion, she employs veiled irony when she discloses that Keats loved a woman called Brawne, and asks 'why are we doomed never to forget the letters'. (AP 15)

These five poets, she writes, 'were men good enough to satisfy the codes if not of clergymen yet of other people.' (AP 16) She then turns to Burns: 'that sordid story of steady – or unsteady – going downhill' (AP 17) and after cataloguing his faults, concludes that:

our state would be blessed if all we knew of Burns apart from what he has himself let us see in his poetry were Wordsworth's 'I thought ... of Him who walked in glory and in joy/Following his plough along the mountain side?' (AP 17)

The final poet is anonymous. She writes:

We are all wretched sinners: but with only one wretched sinner are we of a real patience. With him, indeed, our patience is boundless. Yet surely the sinner cursed with a body at variance with his soul, and able in spite of it to hear the music of heaven and to give it exquisite expression, surely he, leading his muse by the hand so carefully that her shining feet, set among the grass and daisies along the roadside, shall in no wise be dimmed by the foulness through which he splashes, surely he, all caked with impurities, should not be identified with what at such great pains he has kept white... A rose is not less lovely because its roots are in corruption. And God Himself was found once in a manger. (AP 18)

And here the essay abruptly ends.



This final ekphrastic paragraph, with its emphasis on the bare feet of the muse, is reminiscent of the work of Burne-Jones, a prominent member of the Aesthetic movement.

His tapestry, *Angeli Laudantes*,<sup>11</sup> shows two angels walking barefoot among flowers. But what is remarkable is the extraordinary change of key, with its sudden shift to Christianity in the final sentence. The tone has changed from one of lightly mocking the failings of the named poets to one of compassion for an anonymous poet. If we turn to *Fräulein Schmidt and Mr Anstruther* we find that Fräulein Schmidt deals with the six named poets in Letter XLVI. Mr Anstruther evidently agrees with her that poets should remain anonymous: she responds in Letter XLVII by raising the subject of the anonymous poet. Of him Fräulein Schmidt writes:

That writer's books you tell me about, the books the virtuous in England will not read because his private life was disgraceful, beautiful books, you say, into which went his best, in which his spirit showed how bright it was, how he had kept it apart and clean, I shall get them all and read them all. (FSAMA, p.187)

I am going to argue that the 'one wretched sinner' is Oscar Wilde, basing my deduction on three facts. Probably best known today for his plays and *bons mots*, Wilde also wrote a substantial body of poetry. Among the books in Von Arnim's remaining library is a second edition of *Sonnets of This Century*.<sup>12</sup> The fly leaf bears in hand-writing Oscar Wilde's 1886 sonnet 'On the Sale by Auction of Keats' Love Letters' with the note 'Omitted from this edition of the Sonnets'. Von Arnim has already alluded to this sonnet in a veiled way when she complains that 'we are doomed never to forget these letters'. The sonnet had been included in the first edition of *Sonnets of This Century* and by copying it into the later edition von Arnim clearly feels that she is putting it back where it belongs.<sup>13</sup> There are references to Christ in both the sestet of Wilde's Sonnet, which likens the sale of the letters to the casting of lots by soldiers for Christ's garments at his Crucifixion, and von Arnim's much shorter closing sentence: 'And God Himself was found once in a manger.' (AP 19)

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<sup>11</sup> © Victoria and Albert Museum

<sup>12</sup> Ed. William Sharp, *Sonnets of this Century*, The Canterbury Poets (London: Walter Scott, ed. après 1896)

<sup>13</sup> Von Arnim was supportive also of Lord Alfred Douglas – his poem 'The Traitor' is copied into Carlyle's Critical Essays given to her by her former organ professor, Sir Walter Parratt.



Secondly, in the octet of the Sonnet we find these lines:

...I think they love not art  
Who break the crystal of a poet's heart  
That small and sickly eyes may glare and gloat.

Von Arnim echoes the final line in the essay – writing about Wordsworth she says:

he perhaps of them all suffers least from what has been called the glaring and gloating  
of small and sickly eyes. (AP 9)

Thirdly, there are similarities between her penultimate sentence: ‘A rose is not less lovely because its roots are in corruption’ and a sentence in Chapter 8 of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* in which Gray realises that he is responsible for the death of Sibyl Vane: ‘Yet the roses are not less lovely for all that.’<sup>14</sup>

Why was this essay written? She began in a general vein. Indeed, her assertion that ‘Nothing, if we are to get the greatest amount of warmth from him, should be known of a poet except what he chooses to tell us in his works’ anticipates by fourteen years T.S. Eliot’s essay, ‘Tradition and the Individual Talent’<sup>15</sup>, in which he writes ‘Honest criticism and sensitive appreciation is directed not upon the poet, but upon the poetry’. She then performs a volte face, culminating in a spirited defence of Wilde, but she leaves her anonymous subject until the very end, approaching him in a very roundabout way, as if she ‘dare not speak [the] name’. She distracts us by drawing a series of veils around Wilde, formed from her exposition of the weaknesses of the six other poets. She clearly felt strongly about his treatment, but may have found his trial for indecency, which had taken place in May 1895, too recent to refer to explicitly: on the other hand, she may have felt she served her purpose better by dealing with him anonymously. Wilde had died in November 1900, and for a while remained in disgrace. The recovery of his reputation began only when *De Profundis*<sup>16</sup> was published in London in February 1905. Interestingly, an authorised German version had

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<sup>14</sup> Wilde, *Works*, p.432

<sup>15</sup> T.S. Eliot, ‘Tradition and the Individual Talent’, *The Sacred Wood* (London: Faber and Faber Ltd, 1997), p.44

<sup>16</sup> Oscar Wilde, *De Profundis* (London: Methuen, 1905)

appeared a few weeks earlier<sup>17</sup>, no doubt due to what Karl Beckson describes as the ‘extraordinary popularity’<sup>18</sup> of Wilde in Germany at this time: for example, in December the same year Richard Strauss’s opera *Salome*, based on Wilde’s play, was premiered in Dresden to great critical acclaim.

Was this essay, along with her novel, the development of a discussion that von Arnim had been having? If this is the case, the most likely other parties would be E.M. Forster or Charles Edward Stuart, both of them tutors to the von Arnim daughters around this time. Forster had arrived at Nassenheide two months after the publication of *De Profundis*. Might he have talked about this with the Countess? He had been aware of Wilde from the time of his trial onwards and Wilde was to influence his work. Jeffrey M. Heath proposes<sup>19</sup> that certain chapter titles in *A Room with a View*<sup>20</sup> were suggested by Wilde’s dialogue ‘The Decay of Lying’<sup>21</sup> and Forster’s 1931 series of lectures ‘The Creator as Critic’<sup>22</sup> pays homage to another dialogue ‘The Critic as Artist’.<sup>23</sup> Furthermore, in 1925 Forster himself was to address the subject of anonymity in a similar vein to that of his former employer in his essay *Anonymity: An Inquiry*:

While the author wrote he forgot his name; while we read him we forget both his name and our own. ... Now we learn a thousand things, but we have lost the pearl of great price and in the chatter of question and answer, in the torrents of gossip and examination papers we forget the purpose for which creation was performed.<sup>24</sup>

As for Stuart, several of the books of poetry and criticism in her library at Toulon were gifts from him. He had an apparently unrequited passion for von Arnim, and Karen Usborne tells

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<sup>17</sup> The Complete Works of Oscar Wilde: *De profundis*, "Epistola : in carcere et vinculis" Ed. Russell Jackson, Ian Small, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), p.313

<sup>18</sup> Ed. Karl Beckson, *Oscar Wilde: the Critical Heritage* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1970), p.19

<sup>19</sup> Wilde, *Works*, p.825

<sup>20</sup> E.M. Forster, *A Room with a View* (London: Penguin Modern Classics, 2000)

<sup>21</sup> E.M. Forster, *The Creator as Critic and Other Writings by E.M. Forster*, ed. Jeffrey M. Heath (Toronto: Dundurn Press, 2008), p. 418

<sup>22</sup> Forster, *Creator*, p.64

<sup>23</sup> Wilde, *Works*, p.857

<sup>24</sup> Forster, ‘Anonymity’, *Two Cheers for Democracy* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books Ltd, 1974) p.95

us that he had been distressed to recognise himself as Mr Anstruther in the novel.<sup>25</sup> Is it possible he and 'Elizabeth' had had a similar correspondence on which she had based the novel, and that he felt he had been betrayed by its publication?

We began by asking three questions. Two have been answered: who wrote this essay, and when it was written. The third question was: what prompted the author to write it? While we may never know what triggered the subject, we have part of the answer in Oscar Wilde. And with its sensuous prose, imagery and ekphrasis, 'The Anonymous in Poetry' places von Arnim firmly with the Aesthetic Movement and confirms her Aesthetic pedigree.

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<sup>25</sup> Karen Usborne, 'Elizabeth', *The Author of Elizabeth and Her German Garden*, (London: The Bodley Head, 1986), p. 118