

Michael Field's Ekphrasis in *Sight and Songs*

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Abstract

This paper explores ekphrastic poetry written by “Michael Field,” the joint male pseudonym of two women poets, Katharine Bradley and Edith Cooper. It discusses *Sight and Song* (1892), Michael Field's first collection of lyrics, which contains thirty-one ekphrastic poems written during their visit to several major museums and galleries of Europe in the early 1890s. Michael Field in *Sight and Song* demonstrate their passion for art, responding in writing to paintings by Leonardo da Vinci, Botticelli, Giorgione, and many other “old masters.” Their work epitomized the importance of ekphrasis, as practiced by John Keats, D. G. Rossetti, A. C. Swinburne, and Walter Pater. Yet their independent spirit leads them to new ways of expressing and reflecting on aesthetic ideas. My discussion begins with Pater's aesthetic discourses about sight, to examine Michael Field's relationship with Victorian ways of seeing and their subversion of them. What characterizes Michael Field's work is an inclination to explore their own poetic language without giving up the possibility of engaging with the aesthetic project of their male counterparts. On the surface, Michael Field's poetry appears to fit the pattern of Aesthetic poetry, and constantly resorting to ekphrasis as a mode of self-reflection. Yet, if we examine their poetry in the context of its allusions or borrowings from their male counterparts, a rather different picture emerges, one which suggests their familiarity with the Aesthetic tradition, but also their resistance to some of its assumptions. The paper situates their innovative, revisionary work between British Aesthetic tradition and subversion.

Keywords: Michael Field, ekphrasis, Aestheticism, poetry, *Sight and Songs*

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Introduction: The Poets' Backgrounds

Katharine Bradley and her niece Edith Emma Cooper were a lesbian couple who published eight volumes of poetry and twenty-seven verse plays under the joint male pseudonym of "Michael Field." Mary Sturgeon, Michael Field's biographer, explains the derivation of the pseudonym: "[It] was chosen somewhat arbitrarily, 'Michael' because they liked the name and its associations, 'Field' because it went well with 'Michael.' But it is true also that they had a great admiration for the work of William Michael Rossetti... and it is true, too, that 'Field' had been an old nickname of Edith" (27). Marion Thain and Ana Parejo Vadillo, the editors of Michael Field's work, argue that the distinction between Michael Field, Bradley and Cooper needs to be made in a more nuanced way than has been the case in recent critical studies: "The name Michael Field signifies in itself two writers: Michael was Bradley and Field was Cooper. We chose to be very precise: if we discussed the published poet we use 'Michael Field.' When we discuss the writers' private lives, or refer specifically to one of the women, then we use the women's names" (72). Following the lead of Thain and Vadillo, throughout the paper, whenever I discuss "Michael Field," I use the third-person plural "they;" whenever I mention Bradley or Cooper, I use the third-person feminine pronoun.¹

Michael Field reject the use of fictional narrative, a form typically associated with much of Victorian women's writing. Instead, they embrace verse drama and lyric poetry, employing a poetic tone and lyrical complexity that reflect the style of notable male writers from the nineteenth century. There is little to surprise us in Michael Field's preference for verse, or in their antagonism towards so-called "New Woman" writers of the 1890s; much space in their diaries is taken up by a reproachful analysis of emerging female novelists of the decade. In 1894, they wrote to Henry Harland, the editor of *The Yellow Book*, withdrawing their prose-poem "Rhythm" from the magazine's second volume. Cooper in a diary entry (Wednesday, April 17, 1894) dissociates "Michael Field" from other women

¹ All references to Michael Field's poetry, diary entries, and Victorian critics' reviews are here from Thain and Vadillo's edition (hereafter Thain and Vadillo), unless otherwise stated.

writing under male pseudonyms: “We think of changing our name to Messalina Garden to escape from the company of George Egerton! These George Egertons, George Flemings &c. We are threatened with a fresh Hanoverian curse!” (Thain and Vadillo 262).² In the same year, in her letter to Mary Costelloe, the wife of the American art historian Bernard Berenson, Bradley especially emphasizes her complaint against George Egerton (Mary Chavelita Dunne Bright) by alluding to Ruskin’s essay on “George Eliot.”³ She puts it: “I must speak out concerning George Egerton – that shameless creature – whose pages are really ‘the sweepings of a Pentonville omnibus’... They should never be admitted into the society of good books – who sin such sins. I am sick and ashamed of belonging to the corruptors of my own language” (Thain and Vadillo 330).⁴ It might be argued that Michael Field aim to create a lyric presentation that is both linguistically accurate and aesthetically refined, to separate themselves from New Woman novelists.

The aspect of Michael Field that has received the most attention in literary criticism is Bradley and Cooper’s collaboration under a male pseudonym, along with their creation of a lyric voice that intertwines both male and female perspectives.⁵ Michael Field’s interest in art and poetry has also been studied, though to a lesser extent; and some critics have explored Michael Field’s complex relationship with the aesthetic and intellectual circles of

² Like Sappho who precedes her, Messalina is famous for her sexual appetite. Executed by Claudius when her plot against him was discovered, Messalina is the type of the completely corrupt and wicked *femme fatale*. The “Hanoverian” dynasty (George I, George II, George III) supplanted the Stuarts and is used here as an image of the commonplace and the dull usurping the element of romance or beauty.

³ John Ruskin criticized George Eliot’s writing technique, saying “the persons of George Eliot’s novels suggested nothing so much as the sweepings of a Pentonville omnibus.” See *The Literary Criticism of John Ruskin*. pp. 384-385.

⁴ George Egerton is the author of *Keynotes* (1893) and *Discords* (1894), mostly known for her description of women’s fantasy of sexual freedom in her short story “A Cross Line,” in which she creates the figure of a gipsy who brings about her female protagonist’s sexual awakening. Egerton’s work has attracted attention from recent feminist critics, as her writing foreshadowed the concerns of contemporary feminism, describing women suffering from domestic and sexual violence, alcoholism, poverty and prostitution. For a re-evaluation of Egerton’s work, see Patricia Stubbs, *Women and Fiction*, especially chapter 7; Sally Ledger, *The New Woman*, especially chapter 7; Kate McCullough, “Mapping the ‘Terra Incognita’ of Woman.”

⁵ See, for example, Angela Leighton, *Victorian Women Poets*. pp. 202-243; Yopie Prins, *Victorian Sappho*. 74-111; Marion Thain, “Michael Field,” especially chapter 2. Jill Ehnenn specifically reads Bradley and Cooper’s collaborative writing from the perspective of queer theory. See *Women’s Literary Collaboration, Queerness, and Late-Victorian Culture*.

the 1890s.⁶ Michael Field's passion for literature, the classics, and the study of art, was influenced by their acquaintanceship with John Ruskin, Robert Browning, Walter Pater, John Miller Gray, Charles Ricketts, Charles Shannon, George Meredith, Oscar Wilde, Arthur Symonds, W. B. Yeats, and many other leading male artists and art critics of fin-de-siècle London.⁷

Michael Field's *Sight and Song*

This paper discusses *Sight and Song*, Michael Field's second collection of lyrics, which contains thirty-one ekphrastic poems written during their visit to several major museums and galleries of Europe in the early 1890s.⁸ One of the volume's epigraphs explains that the title is inspired by a line from Keats's "Ode to Psyche": "I see and sing, by my own eyes inspired" (l. 43). Michael Field in *Sight and Song* demonstrate their passion for art, responding in writing to paintings by Leonardo da Vinci, Botticelli, Giorgione, and many other "old masters," all Italian with the exception of the French Watteau.⁹ *Sight and Song* uses lyric verse to visualize pictorial art on one of Michael Field's favorite themes – the beauty of human form; their poems upon pictures contain subjects on sacrifice (with poems on Saint Sebastian), feminized young boys, and above all, the beauty of women.

⁶ See, for example, Julia F. Saville, "The Poetic Imaging of Michael Field"; Ehnenn, pp. 59-96.

⁷ Most of Michael Field's acquaintances were their male contemporaries. Apart from Christina Rossetti, Amy Levy, George Egerton and Vernon Lee, very few women are mentioned in their journal entries. See Michael Field's *Works and Days*, a 28-volume journal written between 14 April 1888 and 18 September 1914. It includes Bradley and Cooper's notes on paintings, their drafts, and their critical thoughts on some aesthetic issues. Their friendships with several late-Victorian poets and aesthetes are also well documented.

⁸ The poems in this volume derive their subjects from collections in the National Gallery, the Louvre, and the galleries of Florence, Venice, and Dresden. Vadillo in her book has offered valuable insights, arguing that Bradley and Cooper created their poetics of visibility based on travel and displacement. See *Women Poets and Urban Aestheticism*, pp. 154-195. Julia F. Saville in her article also suggests several important factors that enabled Bradley and Cooper to accomplish the enterprise of ekphrasis, including the wide-scale opening of British and European art galleries and museums to the general public, and the extended museum hours in the late Victorian period. See "The Poetic Imaging of Michael Field," pp. 179.

⁹ Twenty-eight poems in *Sight and Song* treat Italian pictures; three treat works by Watteau.

My discussion begins with Pater's aesthetic discourses about sight, to examine Michael Field's relationship with Victorian ways of seeing and their subversion of them. Traveling and writing together, Bradley and Cooper's joint journal *Works and Days* contains many notes taken either during their visits to Pater's lectures or during their study of Pater's aesthetic theory.¹⁰ Michael Field's familiarity with Pater is incontrovertible. One can easily find in the preface to *Sight and Song* some key concepts of Aestheticism derived from Pater's influence; it is a declaration of Michael Field's ambition to "translate" the visual arts into poetry, to make a place for themselves not simply as an aesthetic critic, but a poet.¹¹ Pater wrote in the preface to *The Renaissance*: "to define beauty, not in the most abstract, but in the most concrete terms possible", is "the aim of the true students of aesthetics"; he encouraged the aesthetic critic to "see the object as in itself it really is", and to put aside "unmeaning and useless" abstract theories of art (xxix). Michael Field's preface to *Sight and Song* bears an obvious relation to Pater, as what they aim at is to give attention to the aesthetic object and describe what they have seen through the writing of poetry:

The aim of this little volume is, as far as may be, to translate into verse what the lines and colours of certain chosen pictures sing in themselves; to express not so much what these pictures are to the poet, but rather what poetry they objectively incarnate. Such an attempt demands patient, continuous sight as pure as the gazer can refine it of theory, fancies, or his mere subjective enjoyment.

"Il faut, par un effort d'esprit, se transporter dans les personnages et non les attirer à soi."¹² For characters substitute paintings, and this sentence from

¹⁰ For instance, on Monday, 24 November 1890, Bradley and Cooper took the train to London to attend Pater's lecture. Cooper wrote: "In heavy mist Sim & I stepped into a cab & reached the station, two bundles of shawls – but a great pleasure drew us on through the weather to town – Pater's lecture at the London Institution on Prosper Mérimée" (Thain and Vadillo 241).

¹¹ Vadillo proposes to interpret Michael Field's use of the term "translation" through Walter Benjamin's theory of translation as "transparency" pp. 179-183. What I am more interested here is not the question of translation, but the question of the aesthetic poet.

¹² The English translation of the sentence is as follows: "It is necessary, by a mental effort, to transport oneself into the characters and not to draw them to oneself". I am indebted to Daniel Karlin for his translation.

Gustave Flaubert's "Correspondence" resumes the method of art-study from which these poems arose.

Not even "le grand Gustave" could ultimately illude himself as a formative power in his work – not after the pain of a lifetime directed to no other end. Yet the effort to see things from their own centre, by suppressing the habitual centralization of the visible in ourselves, is a process by which we eliminate our idiosyncrasies and obtain an impression clearer, less passive, more intimate. When such effort has been made, honestly and with persistence, even then the inevitable force of individuality must still have play and a temperament mould the purified impression: –

"When your eyes have done their part,
Thought must length it in the heart".

(Thain and Vadillo 85-86)

As Michael Field see every aesthetic object as an independent and autonomous entity, their reference to Flaubert is worth attention. The sense of an affinity between Michael Field and Flaubert is heightened by the verb "transport". In his essay "Flaubert and the Sentence", Roland Barthes argues that "Flaubert's sentence is a *thing*": "it always presents itself as a separate, finite object, which we might almost call *transportable*" (303). Calling Flaubertian writing "an odyssey", Barthes sees Flaubert's "corrections of style" in terms of his "experiencing the structure of the language as a passion" (298). Michael Field's mention of Flaubert reveals their wish to present their ekphrastic poems in a way similar to the project of the Flaubertian sentence; the corrective process Flaubert adopts in revising his prose was put into practice in Michael Field's attitude towards experiencing the aesthetic – their subjectivity can travel, or "transport" to the painting by joining with the depicted characters in the interpretation of an art work.

As Pater in *The Renaissance* empowers the perceiver and allows the critic to be a poet by advocating a passionate response to art in the writing of aesthetic criticism, what Michael Field intends in *Sight and Song* is to create an audience attracted to the perceived object, rather than to the perceiver's words. Isobel Armstrong has observed several key words Pater

used in *The Renaissance* – “Intense, fervent, sharp, enthusiasm, excitement, delight, blitheness, sensuous form, pure form, penetrate, penetrative, restraint, unity”, and described his prose as “nervously subtle arpeggios” (388). For W. B. Yeats, Pater’s style of prose is admirable, as Pater enables the transition between an aesthetic critic and a poet by associating lyric words with passionate feelings. Reading Pater’s prose as poetry, Yeats converted Pater’s Mona Lisa passage into free verse in his *Oxford Book of Modern Verse* (1936).¹³ Yet Yeats was scathing about *Sight and Song*. For Yeats, Michael Field do not apply personal fancies to poetry – they merely put together words of observation, and make no attempt to explore the imaginary realm of vision beyond the picture frame. In his review (*The Bookman*, July 1892), Yeats genders imagination as female, expressing his disappointment at Michael Field: “They seem to have thought it incumbent upon them to do something serious, something worthy of an age of text-books, something that would have uniformity and deliberate intention, and be in no wise given over to that unprincipled daughter of whim and desire whom we call imagination” (Thain and Vadillo 361). For Yeats, imagination is a vital constituent in women’s poetic perception. He further suggests that Michael Field has a genius for poetic reveries, yet in *Sight and Song* there is none of the labor of music to be felt in their choice of lyric words: “None of them have any sustained music, for music is the garment of emotion and passion” (Thain and Vadillo 362). John Stuart Mill’s essay “Thoughts on Poetry and Its Varieties” (1833) prefigures the circumstances that Yeats demands for the composition of poetry. He makes a distinction between poetry and eloquence: poetry is “overheard” while eloquence is “heard”; poetry is unconscious of “a listener” while eloquence is directed to “an audience”; poetry is an end in itself while eloquence is “a means to an end”; poetry is “tinged by emotions” whereas eloquence is “tinged by that desire of making an impression upon another mind” (71-72).

Yeats’s analogy of imagination between “whim” and “desire” shapes his assessment of Michael Field’s lack of true emotion in their writing for paintings. As McSweeney suggests, Yeats “regarded paintings as of instrumental rather than intrinsic value to the poet – of interest not in themselves but only as a spur to the creative imagination” (34). As a way

¹³ For Pater’s influence on Yeats, see Harold Bloom, *Selected Writings of Walter Pater*, vii-xxxi.

to confirm the association Yeats has drawn between female passion and poetic imagination, I would like to quote a section of Michael Field's diary dated 6 April 1901, in which they clearly enunciate women's tendency to articulate personal feelings in poetic creation and as such fail to gain as high a status as that of male poets:

Lyric poetry is too often content with a mere personal emotion: whereas in all great poetry the object is the source of the emotion. This is why women cannot write love-poetry – they write of their own feelings, not of the power of the beloved as it reaches & develops & draws into its depth. Women are nearly always frothy when they sing love. Sappho is not, because she sings Aphrodite & the passions with which she lures mortals to herself. We were not, in Long Ago because we sang Sappho, sang from the heart of her words. In all the gt. Sonnets Michael has written she has been gained by the passion of the object. Wherever we are perishable we have sung an impression or feeling that is sporadically ours, just sown by chance in our sensibility. Bernard says now all Art is a Dream. It is a floating into a great passion other than our own; we are half-asleep with its power, we see & hear wonderful things, impossible if we stay at home with our own heart-beats (Thain and Vadillo 274).

Here Michael Field acknowledge that women poets are likely to see lyrical poetry as subordinate to their own feelings, as their writing process often moves from an admiration of the object to an unprincipled state of indulgence in emotions. In *Long Ago* Michael Field infuse their representation of Sappho with other models of feminine figuration: Aphrodite, Atthis, and other girls. For Michael Field, Sappho becomes a true subject of poetry because she is the bearer of many different voices. This journal note shows Bradley and Cooper's awareness that in order to become a poet as great as men, Michael Field must depict feeling as belonging to the object and not the perceived, the beloved and not the lover.

Since Michael Field's objective in *Sight and Song* is to “‘translate’ the visual arts into poetry”, the whole volume of poetry involves the art of observing. Michael Field's interest in Victorian theory about sight is easily perceivable in the preface to *Sight and Song* which,

as Jill Ehnenn suggests, “appears to announce their purpose of looking at art with a Ruskinian ‘innocent eye’” (75). The focus on “sight” is what Ruskin constantly emphasizes in his work. Ruskin stresses the importance of seeing, maintaining that aesthetic pleasure is achievable through the exercise of sight. Michael Field appear to have read Ruskin’s *Modern Painters*, in which Ruskin claims that “the greatest thing a human soul ever does in this world is to *see* something, and tell what it *saw* in a plain way... To see clearly is poetry, prophecy, and religion, – all in one” (*The Genius of John Ruskin* 91). *Sight and Song* especially shows a strong interest in what Ruskin terms “the pathetic fallacy”, which is understood as the representation of a scene so influenced by the perceiver’s emotion as to reveal a false notion of the perceived object. According to Ruskin, “the word ‘Blue’ does *not* mean the *sensation* caused by a gentian on the human eye; but it means the *power* of producing that sensation: and this power is always there, in the thing, whether we are there to experience it or not” (*Modern Painters* 162). Ruskin’s exposition of “The Pathetic Fallacy” makes it clear that he does not emphasize personal impression over Nature; rather, he seeks autonomous power in natural objects, which are capable of producing sensation themselves.

Yet, as Ruskin defines poetry as the ability to see and describe a scene “in a plain way”, Browning would argue that the greatest aesthetic poet is not just able to give a detailed account of what he saw, but gives his or her readers the ability to see it as well. We cannot know whether Ruskin ever came across Browning’s poem “Sordello”, though his keen interest in art suggests that he would have known the poem about the categorization of artists. Browning’s attention to different ways of observation used by poets is attested in the following lines:

The office of ourselves nor blind nor dumb
And seeing somewhat of man’s state, has been,
The worst of us, to say they so have seen;
The better, what it was they saw; the best,
Impart the gift of seeing to the rest.

(ll. 838-842).

Browning marks out three levels of artists: the first judges vision according to personal experience; the second shapes vision by interpreting experience; the third makes vision part of his audience's own imagination. Ruskin's method of observing exemplifies Browning's description of the second rank who avoids fallacy by interpreting personal visual experience. It might be argued that *Sight and Song* inhabits Ruskin's ways of seeing, as Michael Field in the preface make it clear that they hope "to express not so much what these pictures are to the poet, but rather what poetry they objectively incarnate". If Michael Field did indeed have Ruskin in their mind then, apart from Pater's essays, they might have owed a debt to a literary source of Browning as well. The importance of these sources need not be dismissed in order to admit Michael Field's attitude towards perception into Victorian ways of looking.

In other words, while both Browning and Pater celebrate subjective response in reading art, instead of encouraging their readers to be creative in recording individual impression, Michael Field express the desire or the will to find the depicted object's own autonomy. For instance, their poem "La Gioconda" suggests Lady Lisa's own power and independence, depicting perhaps the most famous female portrait discussed by Pater in his essay on "Leonardo da Vinci". Michael Field's journal note on the painting indicates that they perceive the picture of Mona Lisa as "no portrait", but "a dream of power and occult influence" (Thain and Vadillo 239). In their poetic rendering of the painting, Michael Field practise the tradition of "Blason", describing the beauty of Lady Lisa by singling out different parts of her body, suggesting that the portrait is a flight of fantasy:

Historic, side-long, implicating eyes;
A smile of velvet's lustre on the cheek;
Calm lips the smile leads upwards; hand that lies
Glowing and soft, the patience in its rest
Of cruelty that waits and doth not seek
For prey; a dusky forehead and a breast
Where twilight touches ripeness amorously:
Behind her, crystal rocks, a sea and skies
Of evanescent blue on cloud and creek;
Landscape that shines suppressive of its zest
For those vicissitudes by which men die.

(1-11)

The term “cruelty” associates Lady Lisa with the type of the *femme fatale* causing pain or suffering to men. Ehnenn argues that Michael Field problematize the aesthetic tradition, which attributes a privileged gaze to men and sees the representation of female images as appropriated by a phallogentric way of looking: “The poem emphasizes her passiveness and silence; if history has told of her infamy, treachery and cruelty, it is a narrative attributed to her, rather than a story of her own telling” (78). However, it might not be right of Ehnenn to say that Michael Field refuse to see Lady Lisa as a “cruel” *femme fatale* seeking for her prey, as the lines – “the patience in its rest / Of cruelty that waits and doth not seek / For prey” – specifically denote the contrast between actively seeking for the prey, and just waiting for it. This poem associates the depicted woman’s power with the passive kind of cruelty.

In addition to suggesting that Mona Lisa embodies a position of aesthetic detachment, Michael Field in their writing for Watteau’s *L’indifférent* (see Figure 1) offers a more prominent example of the way they support the depicted object’s status as autonomous. They suggest that the significance of the painting lies in the dancer’s own self-absorbed image – “the world is his”:

He dances on a toe
As light as Mercury’s:
Sweet herald, give thy message! No,
He dances on; the world is his,
The sunshine and his wingy hat;
His eyes are round
Beneath the brim:
To merely dance where he is found
Is fate to him
And he was born for that.

(ll. 1-10)

In tracing connections between Pater and Michael Field, Vadillo concludes that Michael Field's *Sight and Song* involves "an attempt to create an autonomous and sexualized observer"; she puts it in this way: "Michael Field proposed a two-phased aesthetics (one in which objective enjoyment is followed by subjective *jouissance*): to allow the autonomy of both the art object and of its gazer" (187). Vadillo's argument highlights the gender implication of Aestheticism in *Sight and Song*, or what Regenia Gagnier has termed "'physiological aesthetics' – aesthetics that calculated immediate pleasure", which was pervasive in the culture of the fin de siècle (139). *Sight and Song* takes on the idea of "art for art's sake" popular in Victorian Aestheticism, which associates the autonomy of the aesthetic with woman's body while claiming that the idea of beauty is purged of moral seriousness. For instance, in their ekphrasis of Leonardo Da Vinci's *A Pen-Drawing of Leda* (see Figure 2), Michael Field choose not to represent Leda as a passive and defenseless woman, whose bathing space is invaded by Zeus disguised as a swan; rather, Leda is "drawing her gracious Swan down through the grass" (l. 2). In the second stanza, they stress the beauty of Leda, depicting her as an autonomous woman taking delight in her own body exposed to the sun: "She joys to bend in the live light / Her glistening body toward her love, how much more bright! / Though on her breast the sunshine lies / And spreads its affluence on the wide curves of her waist and thighs" (ll. 8-11).

The theoretical debates surrounding the representation of women in art, particularly in Michael Field's ekphrastic poetry, invite deeper engagement with the ways gender and spectatorship are shaped within visual culture. While the aesthetic tradition, especially within the Victorian Aestheticism movement, often drew upon a male-dominated gaze that objectified women, Michael Field subverts these dynamics, granting autonomy and agency to the female subjects of their works. This tension between the male gaze, female objectification, and the feminist reclamation of visual pleasure plays a pivotal role in the poetic exploration of visual art, which can be more fully understood when analyzed in the context of broader theoretical frameworks.

Feminist Theoretical Perspectives

In considering feminist theoretical perspectives on the visual representation of female nudity, it is crucial to engage with the diverse approaches and debates within the field. Different feminist scholars offer distinct interpretations of the dynamics of gender, spectatorship, and the politics of visual pleasure, especially when analyzing images of the female body. When it comes to reading aesthetic images of female nudity, many cultural critics have remarked on the sexual politics of seeing. Feminist critics in particular have become more sophisticated at analyzing specifically the spectacle of female nudity, protesting that such a visual representation has too often reduced women to the passive object of gaze. For instance, Linda Nochlin criticizes the lack of women's point of view in the visual realm of erotic representation, reading the imagery of the naked woman as "a woman cut to the very pattern of [the artist-creator's] desires" (143). Pointing to "the politics of representation" as "the encounters between constructed images and constructing eyes", Catherine King reacts negatively to the consumption of images of women, and argues that there are "no innocent eyes", just as there are "no innocent images" (132). Griselda Pollock claims that "there is a cultural politics of sexuality in visual form and space itself, as well as in the practices of looking" (80). When the image of femininity becomes the object of aesthetic feelings, especially when visual pleasure is to be derived from a woman's body, most feminist debates are grounded on the notion that aesthetic pleasure is closely related to consumption, rebuking male artists' objectification of women's bodies.

Given such feminist association of women's images with consumption, the emphasis on men's pleasure in looking, rather than women's, is arguable. Lynne Pearce offers the hope of an alternative to assess the question of visual delight located in the images of women, by focusing on female viewers' own pleasure. The introduction to her book, specifically in the section of "Reading Strategies 4: The Pleasure Factor", is simultaneously shaped by her interest in and reservations about the feminist critique of men's representation of female corporeality in visual arts. Pearce tackles the female spectator's gratification in looking at images of women, examining how feminist theorists have responded to women's

delight in spectatorship (16-22).¹⁴ Discussing Laura Mulvey, Teresa de Lauretis, Mary Anne Doane, and Griselda Pollock's investigations into women's engagement with seeing, Pearce concludes: "explanations of how women relate (take pleasure in) images of themselves, have been divided into two main categories: the first comes under the heading 'Transvestitism'; the second, 'Narcissism'" (17). She suggests that these often-cited feminist critiques share the similar assumption that in order to follow the visual narrative created by men, women viewers are compelled to adopt the male gaze to obtain the satisfaction of looking. Nevertheless, Pearce also observes that although the feminist argument is convincing and compelling, instead of being estranged from images, most women are often tempted by the power of visual enjoyment that images of femininity offer (18).

Following Pearce, one may perceive that Michael Field's reading of paintings by great masters of the Italian Renaissance has affinities with the viewpoint that Pearce proposes. It might be said that more than a century ago, Michael Field foreshadowed the concepts of "transvestitism" and "narcissism" that Pearce categorizes as the foundational factors of visual delight for women. One can examine this process by reading Michael Field's poem "The Sleeping Venus", in which they apply the transgressive gesture of "transvestitism" to their study of Giorgione's *Sleeping Venus* (see Figure 3). Although the representation of sexual politics in the painting seems to relegate women to the status of erotic objects, here Michael Field take advantage of the conventions of ekphrasis to write about women's own desire and passion.

Discussing the complex relationship between visual ideology and the politics of spectatorship in paintings of the female nude from the Renaissance to the mid-nineteenth century, Rozsika Parker and Griselda Pollock in their influential study *Old Mistresses* summarize a long-standing convention of European painting: "The female figures are frequently asleep, unconscious or unconcerned with mortal things, and such devices allow undisturbed and voyeuristic enjoyment of the female form" (116). Practised by male artists to enhance the allure of the depicted woman, such a visual strategy conflates the aims of

¹⁴ In the introduction of her book, Pearce offers a range of theories and methods for reading images of women, and introduces a foundational feminist critique of the visual representation of femininity.

voyeurism, of looking, with those of exhibitionism. Written after Bradley and Cooper's visit to the Dresden Gallery when Giorgione's *Sleeping Venus* was on show, "The Sleeping Venus" represents a familiar scene of female nudity, suggesting that it is the female body that is the embodiment of beauty and desire. As Angela Leighton notes, the poem "shows the extent to which art for art's sake, with its implication of pleasure for pleasure's sake, had freed Michael Field from a female heritage of repressed or displaced eroticism" (215). As the canvas offers the space for Giorgione to realize his artistic passion through the medium of paint, it also offers an avenue for Michael Field to access visual and erotic pleasure.

Fascinated by the image of the beautiful, Michael Field, in a journal note (Monday August 10, 1891) depict the goddess lying underneath the sky in deep unconsciousness: "No-one watches her; there is no figure to be seen: she is closed from the sense of her perfection" (Thain and Vadillo 248). Michael Field then render their impressions of the painting into verse, inviting their readers to appreciate the spectacle of Venus:

And her body has the curves,
 The same extensive smoothness seen
 In yonder breadths of pasture, in the swerves
 Of the grassy mountain-green
 That for her propping pillow serves:
 There is a sympathy between
 Her and Earth's largest reach,
 For the sex that forms the meach
 Is a bond, a holiness,
 That unconsciously must bless
 And unite them, as they lie
 Shameless underneath the sky
 Along, opal cloud
 Doth in noontide haze enshroud.

(ll. 15-28)

Leighton observes, “though forced in its syntax and rhymes, [the poem] none the less has a self-delighting physical literalness which marks an extraordinary freeing of the female imagination” (215). Here Michael Field assert woman’s right to enter the realm of visual delight by articulating Venus’s erotic power, which is fecund and “shameless”. As Ehnenn notes, the poem “clearly depicts [Venus] free from shame and parallels the curves of her beautiful body with the land” (86). Michael Field’s description of the seen gives bodily shape to the (poetic) scene. In its verbal representation of Giorgione’s *Sleeping Venus*, Michael Field’s ekphrastic narrative justifies women’s right to visual pleasure, rescuing women from the marginalized state of spectatorship.

In particular, in the fifth stanza, through the depiction of Venus absorbed in her self-sufficient posture, Michael Field suggest the auto-eroticism of the female subject. It clearly reveals that “The Sleeping Venus” is more than a poem of aesthetic interpretation; it draws on the possibility of female autoeroticism:

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

(ll. 57-70)

Apparently Venus's closed eyes signify she is oblivious to the gaze of the onlooker. The phrase "delicious womanhood" specifically points to Venus's enjoyment of her own body, representing Venus as a fully self-sufficient woman detached from the realm of heterosexual desire. As Saville suggests, the poem shows "a goddess [lying] absorbed in the pleasure of her own sexualized womanhood for the observation and admiration of other women as much as men", and the erotic power in Venus "is neither conferred on her by a male authority, nor moralized in association with motherhood" (198). In representing Venus's autoerotic pleasure, Michael Field's fleshly narrative seems advocate a new way to nurture and explore woman's way of seeing. Yet, this kind of female gaze is different from that of a male voyeur, as Vadillo observes: "instead of being a voyeur, the passenger seems to see in Venus, because of the analogy of gender, the perfect desiring and desired subject" (192).

For Jacqueline Rose, "if the visual image, in its aesthetically acclaimed form, serves to maintain a particular and oppressive mode of sexual recognition, it nevertheless does so only partially" (232). As Pearce suggests that female spectators face the dilemma of accepting women as consumers of images or resisting the visual territory dominated by patriarchal gaze, is it possible for women viewers to respond positively and differentially to the complex relations between visual pleasure and the gendered implication of looking? If Michael Field wanted readers to assume they were a male author, how did they escape the predicament that Pearce speaks of? I would like to stress that Michael Field fight against the customary objectification of women in visual representation by attributing agency to women in their ekphrasis while encouraging the viewer to take pleasure in such images.

As a way to conclude this section, I would like to discuss "A Portrait", a poem written for Bartolommeo Veneto's *Bust of a Courtesan* (see Figure 4), in which Michael Field suggest woman's way to escape objectification, in a far more confident way.¹⁵ Written from the woman's point of view, the poem expresses a beautiful courtesan's awakening that she must be turned into a picture to preserve her beauty:

¹⁵ My reading of the poem has been influenced by Ehnem.

She saw her beauty often in the glass,
Sharp on the dazzling surface, and she knew
The haughty custom of her grace must pass:
Though more persistent in all charm it grew
As with a desperate joy her hair across her throat she drew
In crinkled locks stiff as dead, yellow snakes ...
Until at last within her soul the resolution wakes.

(ll. 8-14)

Rather than depict the courtesan as a passive model exploited by the male artist, in the third stanza, Michael Field show the courtesan's ability to determine her own look:

She will be painted, she who is so strong
In loveliness, so fugitive in years:
Forth to the field she goes and questions long
Which flowers to choose of those the summer bears;
She plucks a violet larkspur, – then a columbine appears
Of perfect yellow, – daisies choicely wide;
These simple things with finest touch she gathers in her pride.

(ll. 15-21)

As Ehnenn puts it in her reading, “The female figure in this poem is a fetish, a commodity, but in Michael Field’s eyes she is one of her own carefully chosen design – she is both artist and art object” (79). In representing the courtesan’s decision to be painted, Michael Field reveal detailed features of the portrait while showing the courtesan as an independent woman transformed into an immortal aesthetic entity. “Lo, she has conquered death!” (l. 49). The poem ends with Michael Field’s praise for the woman, who “gave to art a fair, blank form, unverified by life” (l. 42). It seems that Michael Field do not consider the supposedly erotic pictures degrade women. As Chris Snodgrass observes, Michael Field’s “women are rarely depicted as melancholy victims” (331). Michael Field show the positive

aspect of the aestheticization of women, which is not necessarily to be seen as the objectification of women.

In sum, Michael Field's poetry offers a complex negotiation of gender, spectatorship, and the politics of representation in art. By foregrounding the autonomy and erotic power of female subjects, they challenge both the male gaze and traditional depictions of women as passive objects. Their work anticipates many of the feminist critiques of visual culture, asserting a more nuanced understanding of the female experience of looking, being looked at, and finding agency in the act of visual pleasure. In doing so, Michael Field pushes against the limitations of the male-dominated aesthetic tradition, advocating for a space where women, both as creators and spectators, can reclaim and redefine their visual and erotic power.

Conclusion: Michael Field's Connection to Contemporary Multimedia Arts

This paper has discussed how Michael Field's *Sight and Song* represents a unique intersection between the visual and the literary arts, reflecting the artists' profound engagement with both Victorian aesthetic theory and their personal interpretations of visual art. The ekphrastic poems in *Sight and Song*, written in response to paintings from Renaissance and Baroque masters, exemplify a sophisticated attempt to translate visual experience into lyrical poetry. This effort connects Michael Field not only to Victorian discourses on art and perception but also to contemporary multimedia arts, where the interplay between different media – such as visual art, music, and literature – continues to be a prominent feature.

The connection to contemporary multimedia arts can be understood by examining the methods and ambitions outlined in *Sight and Song*. Michael Field's aim to "translate" visual art into poetry resonates with the multi-sensory, immersive experiences of contemporary multimedia art, which seeks to break down the boundaries between different artistic forms. Like the artists and curators of today who often use visual, auditory, and performative elements together, Michael Field conceptualized a cross-disciplinary dialogue between art forms, in which the "language" of painting was transmuted into the "language" of poetry.

In doing so, they echoed the practices of modern multimedia artists who engage with visual art not simply as inspiration but as a primary source of content.

Moreover, Michael Field's approach to ekphrasis – transforming an artwork into a poetic form – resembles the ways in which contemporary multimedia artists often create work that interacts with, critiques, or reinterprets historical art through new technological or performative means. The poems in *Sight and Song* do not merely describe the paintings; they aim to engage with the paintings' "inner lives," attempting to "translate" their essence into poetic expression. This aligns with multimedia art's tendency to reframe or alter the perception of an artwork, often creating new layers of meaning by combining visual elements with technology, sound, or interactive components.

Another aspect that connects Michael Field's work to contemporary practices is the emphasis on process and perception. The poets' attempt to suppress their own subjective interpretation and "see" the artwork as it "truly is" mirrors the way contemporary multimedia artists often emphasize the importance of perception and perspective. In their attempt to experience the painting on its own terms, Michael Field is engaged in a process not dissimilar to that of today's artists who explore perception through multi-sensory experiences – combining visual, auditory, and even haptic feedback to provide an embodied encounter with the art.

Furthermore, the exploration of the autonomy of the "object" (in this case, the painting) and the effort to present the artwork in its own right, independent of the viewer's emotions, also mirrors contemporary approaches in which artists seek to challenge the dominance of the artist's personal expression and instead highlight the materiality and autonomy of the objects or images themselves. Michael Field's insistence on focusing on the painting as an "autonomous entity," as expressed through their engagement with Pater and Ruskin, corresponds to modern multimedia art's tendency to present works that challenge the viewer to engage with the art on its own terms, often without overt direction or narrative imposed by the artist. In addition, the poets' use of lyrical poetry as a medium to "visualize" and recreate the aesthetic experience of the painting is aligned with the way contemporary art practices often blur the lines between different artistic genres. Just as Michael Field employed lyricism to evoke the beauty of the painted human form, contemporary artists

frequently use different media – such as video, performance, and sculpture – to evoke sensory experiences that might traditionally be confined to one medium.

Finally, Michael Field's engagement with their contemporary aesthetic philosophies – Pater's emphasis on subjective and impassioned responses to art, and Ruskin's focus on direct, unclouded perception – can also be seen as a precursor to the analytical and reflexive methods in contemporary art criticism, where the viewer's subjective experience is not ignored, but is integrated with a deeper, often intellectual engagement with the artwork itself. The complex layering of influences and modes of perception in *Sight and Song* points toward a broader tradition that resonates with modern multimedia art's emphasis on multidimensional, immersive encounters with both the art object and the viewer. Therefore, Michael Field's *Sight and Song* exemplifies a sophisticated engagement with art that both challenges and aligns with contemporary multimedia practices. Their use of ekphrasis as a mode of translation between visual and literary arts, along with their keen awareness of the autonomy of the object and the complexities of perception, prefigures the experimental nature of multimedia art, making their work a relevant touchstone for understanding the evolution of artistic expression across multiple forms.



Figure 1. Jean-Antoine Watteau, *L'indifférent* (c. 1717)



Figure 2. Leonardo da Vinci, *A Pen-Drawing of Leda* (c. 1506-08)



Figure 3. Giorgione, *Sleeping Venus* (c. 1501)



Figure 4. Bartolomeo Veneto, *Flora* (c. 1520)

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詩中有畫：論麥可·菲爾德《視覺與詩歌》中的藝作描述

黃瓊瑩 *

摘 要

本論文討論「邁可·菲爾德」的讀畫詩。「邁可·菲爾德」是兩個女詩人「凱瑟琳·布拉德利」和「伊迪絲·庫珀」共用的單一男性筆名。本文探討邁可·菲爾德出版的第一本詩集《視覺與詩歌》(1892)，此書共收錄了兩位女詩人於1890年代初期，到歐洲壯遊、參訪歐洲大陸幾個重要博物館和畫廊時，所創作的三十一首讀畫詩，包含他們對李奧納多·達文西、波提且利、喬久內、和其他古典名作的觀後創作。他們的讀畫詩結合了詩歌藝術與視覺影像的內涵，體現了由浪漫詩人濟慈、前拉斐爾學派詩人但丁·羅塞蒂和史雲朋、以及唯美主義作家佩特所實踐的藝作描述的重要性。本文透過佩特美學理論中關於視覺的論述，來探討邁可·菲爾德如何將他們的讀畫詩置於唯美主義文學的脈絡之間；也分析他們的讀畫詩與維多利亞時代觀察方式的連結，當中如何反映維多利亞視覺文化理論的傳承與流變，以及邁可·菲爾德在唯美主義脈絡裡的獨立性。他們在探索自身的詩歌語言時，又不放棄與維多利亞時代主流的唯美主義男性詩人交流的可能性，並從中修正自我的風格。表面上，邁可·菲爾德的讀畫詩似乎符合十九世紀美學詩歌的模式，他們不斷地利用藝作描述作為唯美主義詩人自我探索省思的模式。然而，若將他們的作品與男性詩人的作品做比較，就會呈現出一個相當不同的畫面，邁可·菲爾德同時表現出對唯美主義傳統的熟悉度與抵抗力。此文分析邁可·菲爾德如何在傳統與顛覆之間闡述他們的美學詩歌，從中帶來自我的修訂性與創新性。

關鍵字：麥可·菲爾德、藝作描述、美學、詩歌、《視覺與詩歌》

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