Victorian Literature and Culture (2006), **34**, 553–571. Printed in the United States of America.
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A VISUAL FIELD: MICHAEL FIELD AND THE GAZE

By Hilary Fraser

In 1892, Katharine Bradley (1846–1914) and Edith Cooper (1862–1913) published a volume of poetry with the title *Sight and Song* based on their response to a series of paintings in British and Continental public galleries. Bradley and Cooper, aunt and niece, devoted lovers, who over the three decades of their writing lives produced numerous volumes of poetry and plays collaboratively under the authorial signature "Michael Field," had already made their name with a volume published in 1889 entitled *Long Ago*, comprising translations and elaborations of the Sapphic fragments, which has been read as an intriguing and (for the times) audaciously explicit celebration of love between women. The concept of "translation" was as fundamental to the project of *Sight and Song* as it had been to *Long Ago*; however, in the later volume it refers not to the literal translation of poetic fragments written in an ancient and other language (as *Long Ago* ostensibly did) but to the rhetorical act of interpreting visual images. The aim of their new collection of ekphrastic poems was, as they explained in the Preface to *Sight and Song*, "to translate into verse what the lines and colours of certain chosen pictures sing in themselves" (Michael Field, *Sight and Song* v). The synaesthetic complexity of Michael Field's language here suggests the multidimensional sensory experience of looking at and responding to visual art works, something the women try to capture in the various kinds of writing they undertake around the production of this volume – their journal and their letters, as well as the poems themselves – in their attempt to provide such a translation. In this essay I should like to explore how *Sight and Song* continues the project of *Long Ago* in the sense both of articulating their lesbian experience and of locating them in a cultural tradition, only that experience is here specifically associated with visual hermeneutics and with the circulation of the verbal and the visual, and the cultural connections they make are not with a classical lesbian heritage but with recent and contemporary aestheticians and writers on art – most notably, I suggest, with two other couples who wrote art criticism in collaboration: Bernard Berenson and Mary Costelloe, and Vernon Lee and Clementina ("Kit") Anstruther-Thomson.

The double pun in my title is not entirely gratuitous, as I am interested in this volume as an exploration and articulation of lesbian sexuality in the field of vision. The words "field" and "gaze" of course come heavily freighted with meaning, having had a peculiar currency over the past few decades in scholarly work in the area of visuality, especially as it intersects with gender and sexuality. For Martin Jay, for example, the metaphor of a "force

https://doi.org/10.1017/S106015030605131X Published online by Cambridge University Press

field," taken from Walter Benjamin and Theodor Adorno, and suggesting a constellation of "untotalized and sometimes contesting impulses that defy any harmonious integration" (Jay 11), resonates with his interest in visuality and cultural criticism, while for Gillian Beer that of "open fields" designates an arena for interdisciplinary exchange. As for the gaze, whether *le regard* of Sartre in *L'Etre et le Néant* and Lacan in Seminar XI, or the gendered gaze elaborated from Laura Mulvey's seminal essay on "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," it is a concept both fundamental to modern understandings of ways of seeing and instrumental in consolidating binaried oppositions between subject and object, masculine and feminine.

But what if the gaze is not the unified monocular gaze of the heterosexual male, as it is often constructed, but the binocular look of two women, enacting lesbian desire but writing as a man? To what extent may the persona of Michael Field be said to constitute a space, a field indeed, of cultural encounter, enabling creative translations between art forms and the juxtaposition of subjectivities (Bradley and Cooper described their collaborative writing to Robert Browning as "like mosaic work – the mingled, various product of our two brains" [Michael Field, *Works and Days* 3])? How interesting it is to think about looking, in Michael Field's poetry, in relation to the three-dimensional binocular gaze that had so exercised nineteenth-century optical scientists since the 1830s, and is, according to modern cultural analysts, so definitive of the Victorians' wide-ranging preoccupation with optics and visuality.[1] The binocular gaze, that comes from almost, but not quite, one viewpoint, enacts a specular proximity that, I suggest, has particular metaphorical resonance for the shared gaze of same-sex lovers. In this essay, then, I will read the poetry and journals of Michael Field in terms of their articulation of a dynamic stereoscopic gaze intersected by homoerotic desire, a gaze of gays, a way of looking at art – collaboratively, and under a single assumed male name that they share (Katharine is privately "Michael," Edith "Field") – that enables a decentring of the observing subject and a radical destabilisation of the gender binary.

I

Sight and Song was published in an ornamental limited edition in 1892. It comprises 31 poems on 31 pictures (by artists such as Watteau, Correggio, Leonardo Da Vinci, Botticelli, Tintoretto, and Giorgione) located in both British and Continental museums. The book was not illustrated, and although some of the paintings would have been familiar to their readers, others were not widely known, and not easily accessible. Therefore the reader encounters the pictures in these pages, perhaps for the first time, via the medium of the poems. The volume takes its place in a genealogy of ekphrastic writing which goes back to classical times, was strong in the Renaissance and enjoyed a revival in the nineteenth century when the "sister arts" talked to each other with a new dialogic vigour. Whilst each ekphrastic poem speaks to an individual work of art, the entire collection amounts to an imagined gallery, *une musée imaginaire*, a veritable "museum of words" (to invoke James Heffernan's suggestive phrase) (Heffernan 8).

The poem that opens *Sight and Song*, on Watteau's *L'Indifférent* in the Louvre, provides a good introduction to the mode of the volume as a whole. It is a painting of a boy who, gaily costumed, centrally positioned and with arms outstretched, fills the canvas. Martha Vicinus has written about the troublingly "indeterminate" figure of the adolescent boy in *fin-de-siècle*

https://doi.org/10.1017/S106015030605131X Published online by Cambridge University Press

writing, that "handsome, liminal creature [who] could absorb and reflect a variety of sexual desires and emotional needs" and whose "protean nature displayed a double desire," in ways that throw light on its positioning as the first poem in the volume (83–84). Edith Cooper, with her short hair and boyish looks, and her "protean nature," was conscious of her own adolescent appeal. In a journal entry, for example, she likens herself to Antinous, the beautiful boy beloved by the Roman Emperor Hadrian, and Katharine often refers to her "Henry" as a "boy" (Leighton 213–14; Michael Field, BL Add. MS. 46779 f.104v; Berenson Archive). Furthermore, both poets identify with "indifference" itself at the end of their celebrated poetic manifesto, published the following year in 1893, "It was deep April," in which they resolve to be "Poets and lovers evermore," when they proudly proclaim themselves to be "Indifferent to heaven and hell" (Michael Field, *Underneath the Bough* 79).

In Michael Field's encounter with Watteau's painting, the eroticism of the double viewers' gaze is met by the indifference of the dancing boy: "In vain we woo." The autonomy of the art object is expressed in sexual terms, as this in-between, adolescent boy-man, this "gay youngster" with the round eyes, refuses to respond to the inviting gaze of the man-woman, single-double viewer with a "glance," even though "old enough for manhood's bliss" (Michael Field, *Sight and Song* 1–2). Norman Bryson has written about the way in which the glance subverts the magisterial authority of the gaze, about how "Against the Gaze, the Glance proposes desire, proposes the body, in the *durée* of its practical activity: in the freezing of syntagmatic motion, desire, and the body, the desire of the body, are exactly the terms which the tradition seeks to suppress" (122). The potency of the glance is most forcefully conveyed in Michael Field's poem on Leonardo's *La Gioconda*, which begins with Mona Lisa's iconic "Historic, side-long, implicating eyes" (Michael Field, *Sight and Song* 8), and in which the gaze of the man/women poet/viewers is subverted by the glance of the predatory smiling woman who waits for her prey. Under her sidelong scrutiny, the lips, the sexualised breasts, "where twilight touches ripeness amorously" (8), arrest the eye and disperse the gaze, insisting upon "the desire of the body" that, according to Bryson, "the tradition seeks to suppress." But in the poem on Watteau's boy the dancer withholds his glance, and thereby withholds joy, so absorbed in the rhythms of his dance is he. The gaze of the poets, writing from difference, and themselves inhabiting an interstitial sexual and authorial identity, encounters only indifference.

In the Preface to *Sight and Song*, Michael Field reviews "the method of art-study from which these poems arose," explaining that they aim "to express not so much what these pictures are to the poet, but rather what poetry they objectively incarnate," an attempt that "demands patient, continuous sight as pure as the gazer can refine it of theory, fancies, or his mere subjective enjoyment," before "the inevitable force of individuality" and "temperament" is allowed to "have play" (v, vi). Like some other more prominent Victorian cultural commentators, such as Matthew Arnold (with his injunction to see the object "as in itself it really is" [3: 258]) and John Ruskin (with his insistence on observing "truth" with an "innocent eye"),[2] Michael Field is here stating an objectivist aesthetic based on the idea of a "pure" gaze. Yet of course, as Bryson observes,

> Between the subject and the world is inserted the entire sum of discourses which make up visuality, that cultural construct, and make visuality different from vision, the notion of unmediated visual experience. Between retina and world is inserted a *screen* of signs, a screen consisting of all the multiple discourses on vision built into the social arena. (91–92)

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If a screen of signs intervenes between the "pure" gaze of the observer and the art object – not least the cumulative and canon-forming judgements of Art History, and the construction of galleries and exhibition spaces that conspire to decontextualise and remove the image from the "world" – then for the reader who approaches these paintings by way of Michael Field's "translations" of them into verse, the field of vision is, as it were, doubly mediated. Fieldwork becomes part of the screen. This is of course unavoidably the case whenever our experience of art is "screened" by the art critic or historian in whose commentaries the ironic ambiguities of the term, denoting at once concealment, segregation, and display, seem especially evident. But the particular scenario envisaged for the reader of *Sight and Song* seems to imply an even more complicated form of screen-play than usual because of the critical and erotic dynamic between the two women viewing art through each other that supervenes the aesthetic experience of the viewer of the painting in the gallery.

Michael Field's poem on Giorgione's *The Sleeping Venus* offers an interesting example of this double triangulation, of the two women observing the painting, and of the reader, the poem, and the painting. Venus's body is lovingly described in terms of "the verdant swell/ Of a soft country flanked with mountain domes" (98) that provides the *mise-en-scène* of the painting. The Goddess of Love and Mother Earth are depicted as lying in a same-sex embrace. Like "the Fields," as Bradley and Cooper were affectionately called by their friends, indeed in the very bosom of the fields (and in fact described in a diary entry of August 16, 1891 as "simple as our fields" [Michael Field, *Works and Days* 48]), they are united by the bond of their sex. The body of Venus, who has fallen asleep after pleasuring herself, is appreciatively described by the poet-lovers. "No one watches her," they write (Michael Field, *Works and Days* 48). And yet of course *they* watch her, and through them so do *we*. The operation of the gaze in this poem is problematised still further if we consider how the reader/viewer enters the meaning-making process. Sight and sexuality are metaphorically linked in this poem, as the sleeping Venus's closed eyes are compared to "full buds that stay, / Through the tranquil, summer hours, / Closed although they might be flowers," and aligned with the "red lips" that "shut in / Gracious secrets," the "oval space" of her face, and the "ruddy pomegranate" of her mantle (102–03). Kathy Alexis Psomiades has remarked of eroticised images of women in the late nineteenth century: "We tend to assume, unlike the Victorians themselves, that these images can only be consumed in one way, with the effect of strengthening the structures of heterosexual romance, whereas actually a range of different viewers might consume them in very different ways" (37). Michael Field, as the single male persona of two lesbian spectators/poets, offers such a different model of visual consumption. Under this masculine signature, Venus is appropriated by the desiring lesbian gaze, in a way that seems parodic of the phallocentric observer/observed power dynamic, as a deity for same-sex love. Subverting the conventionally gendered economy of vision, this poem celebrates the scopophilic pleasure of women gazing upon the beauty of a woman's body in a paean to female sexuality. Lesbian sexuality is inscribed in the field of vision.

II

How are we to situate such work in the context of late-nineteenth-century art writing and aesthetics? Both John Ruskin and Walter Pater were known to Michael Field and, as Ana I. Parejo Vadillo has argued in her fine recent article on *Sight and Song*, both the aesthetic manifesto proclaimed in the Preface and the poems themselves engage with their respectively

https://doi.org/10.1017/S106015030605131X Published online by Cambridge University Press

objectivist and impressionist visual aesthetics in fascinating ways. She also mentions that whilst they were most intensely engaged in their art studies Michael Field met Bernard Berenson, at the very time he himself was beginning work on his first book on Renaissance art, *The Venetian Painters of the Renaissance* (1895) (Vadillo 17). It is this connection that I would here like to pursue further, not only because of the parallels and differences noted by Vadillo between their respective aesthetic theories, such as their shared interest in developing and modifying a Paterian sensorial epistemology, but because Berenson and his companion (later wife) Mary Costelloe, who was also beginning to publish her own writing on art, looked at and wrote about art as a couple. They too responded to the tactile, physiological, and psychological qualities of paintings together, as lovers, and together tried to translate their intensely felt experiences into words. Furthermore, they introduced Michael Field to other intellectual and personal networks, most notably their near neighbours on the outskirts of Florence, Vernon Lee and Kit Anstruther-Thomson, who provide a fascinating parallel example of a collaborative engagement with art in which a lesbian erotics is (as it seems to the modern commentator) quite openly performed, and used as the basis for a gendered account of the gallery experience. The record of Michael Field's relations with the Berensons and Lee and Anstruther-Thomson sheds more light, I suggest, on their own ekphrastic project and further confirms their embeddedness in *fin-de-siècle* aesthetic and art historical practice.

One clear parallel between the aesthetic theories of these three couples is to be found in their mutually held view that, as Berenson wrote, echoing Michael Field in their Preface to *Sight and Song*, "We realise objects when we perfectly translate them into terms of our own states, our own feelings" (*Florentine Painters* 84). Further, all of these writers subscribed to "the theory that a work of art can be criticised by translating it into another artistic form" that, according to Katharine Bradley, was "The Theory of *Sight + Song*" (Michael Field, BL Add. MS 46780, f. 100). Focusing attention on this aspect of Michael Field's aesthetic and poetic undertaking in *Sight and Song*, Vadillo interrogates the deployment of the idea of "translation" in *Sight and Song* with reference to Walter Benjamin's essay "The Task of the Translator," and particularly his description of the activity of translation itself, in strikingly visual terms, as "transparent": "it does not cover the original, does not block its light, but allows the pure language, as though reinforced by its own medium, to shine upon the original all the more fully" (79). However, translation is a practice that raises questions of origin, power, and difference, and I am therefore also interested in the extent to which ekphrastic translations such as Michael Field's, equally with other kinds of translation, are not, as Sarat Maharaj puts it, like "stacking panes of glass one on top of another, a matter of sheer transparency," but mediated by culture, and particularly I am concerned with how they are intersected by gender (28).

Translation has become an eloquent metaphorical concept for cultural studies theorists addressing, like Maharaj, the question of "The Untranslatability of the Other," and the dilemma of those, like migrants and women, who inhabit ambiguous interstitial or marginal spaces in relation to the dominant culture and struggle between two languages. Sherry Simon observes, indeed, that "Translation, as a tangible representation of a secondary or mediated relationship to reality, has come to stand for the difficulty of access to language, of a sense of exclusion from . . . the authoritative codes of Western culture" (134–35). Women such as Katharine Bradley and Edith Cooper, who despite their close engagement with *fin-de-siècle* philosophical and aesthetic preoccupations were very conscious of their amateur status as art critics, spoke from the margins of the emerging art profession. They do in this sense seem well

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placed to undertake the task of translation as Benjamin, writing (albeit metaphorically, here deploying the aural metaphor of an echo and its reverberations) of the actual translinguistic process, suggestively views it, for

> Unlike a work of literature, translation does not find itself in the centre of the language forest but on the outside facing the wooded ridge; it calls into it without entering, aiming at that single spot where the echo is able to give, in its own language, the reverberation of the work in the alien one. (Benjamin 77)

Simon certainly finds that the gendering of translation as a feminine activity is "a persistent historical trope," noting that "'Woman' and 'translator' have been relegated to the same position of discursive inferiority." She points out how often "The hierarchical authority of the original over the reproduction is linked with imagery of masculine and feminine; the original is considered the strong generative male, the translation the weaker and derivative female," and how "the language used to describe translating dips liberally into the vocabulary of sexism, drawing on images of dominance and inferiority, fidelity and libertinage" (1).

There is some evidence of this tendency to feminise and denigrate translation in the critical reception of *Sight and Song* itself. In his review of the volume in the *Bookman*, as Vadillo notes (17), W. B. Yeats criticised "the two ladies who hide themselves behind the pen-name of Michael Field" for merely offering "translations" based on their observation and interpretation of pictures, for having "preferred to work with the studious and interpretive side of the mind and write a guide-book to the picture galleries of Europe, instead of giving us a book full of the emotions and fancies which must be crowding in upon their minds perpetually" (225–26). Yet this seems to miss the very point of their project. Unlike some of those women writing about art earlier in the century, who might have been said to be "hiding behind," if not a pen-name, then the reputation of the authoritative works they were translating or transmitting in the form of guidebooks, Michael Field was in fact attempting something quite original, even radical, in this work of translation. Benjamin describes "translation" as occupying a position "midway between poetry and doctrine," offering an "interlinear version, in which literalness and freedom are united," whose meaning lies, indeed, "between the lines" (78, 82), and this is a formulation that seems remarkably apt for what Michael Field is endeavouring to achieve through the articulation of a lesbian critical gaze, that works "between the lines" of poetry (the "singing out of their own hearts and setting to music their own souls" that Yeats would have preferred) and the orthodoxy of art history ("doctrine").

"Doctrine" was, as it happens, the name by which Michael Field called Bernard Berenson in their hundreds of letters to him and his partner Mary Costelloe. "Dear Doctrine," Katharine Bradley begins a letter to Berenson on October 15, 1892, for example, "We are building a Bacchic altar in the study: we want you to help" (Berenson Archive). She then goes on to regale him with an anecdote about *Sight and Song*, which had been published in April of that year. A few weeks later she writes "lovingly" to Mary with the advice: "when you want to club the Doctrine you will find an excellent diagram of method in Mantegna, Grosvenor Gallery Catalogue drawings . . . we gloat over the fine, free swing of the maenads' clubs!!!" (Berenson Archive) Michael Field had first met Berenson, and through him Mary Costelloe, in 1891, and they quickly developed an intense friendship built around their shared passion for art, notwithstanding their mutual acknowledgement of Berenson's superior expertise. Indeed, they describe *Sight and Song* in their journal as "too wholly due to our friendship

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with Bernard" (BL Add. MS. 46780 f.124); and yet we see in their correspondence a dialogic tension between "the poets," as Michael Field often refers to himself, and "the Doctrine" that reflects the particular nature of their discursively poised aesthetic, and Berenson was later to pay tribute to their work in his own *Florentine Painters of the Renaissance* (1896) (Vadillo 17).

Over the next twenty years Michael Field and the Berensons (as they were to become) were to exchange hundreds of letters, many of which are preserved in the Berenson Archive at Villa I Tatti and provide a record of the closeness and intensity of their friendship and their mutual communications on the subject of art. The early letters between them are full of references to their work for *Sight and Song*, which was then in preparation. Sometimes the poets have questions for their friends, deferring to their authority in artistic matters, or asking them, as residents in Italy, to check their facts for them. "I do not know Italian flowers," writes Katharine to Mary in a letter of February 2, 1892, and asks her to confirm whether the tree upon which the Madonna is enthroned in Lorenzo di Credi's *Virgin, Child and St. John* is an arbutus, and to identify the flowers in the foreground (Berenson Archive). She subsequently berates her for forgetting to respond to her query about the "Credi blossoms": "They remained half-blocked in . . . until I resolved in my anger that poem shd be of 'imagination all compact' . . . I hope you will always be a little sad when you read that marred + imperfect poem" (Berenson Archive). Her questions quite often relate to the ambiguous territory between fact and "imagination," both evidently gendered concepts. "Can you tell me whether Giorgione's Venus is a noon-tide picture?" she asks her friend: "It seems to MF it is; but out on seeming! 'the male conscience' – exclusion of fancy + all sentiment not truly of the picture as the drop of honey oozing from a plum – is our aim" (Berenson Archive). Here, Michael Field explicitly identifies the stern objectivity promised by the Preface with masculinity, the gender of his *nom de plume*. Berenson himself, as the "Doctrine," or the "Connoisseur," personifies the patriarchal "male conscience" to which the poets ostensibly aspire. Elsewhere, though, we are given a glimpse of the more overtly "feminine" experience – invoking a womb-like space and a birthing – that gave rise to the poems, as when Katharine writes to Mary: "In Frankfurt we had much comfort. Twice we were in the quiet, warm gallery; Michael has written *3* poems on 3 of the pictures there. They are deeply poetic pictures at Frankfurt, nay more there are poems in them + one has only to stare + wait till they give up their secret" (Berenson Archive).

The letters provide fascinating glimpses of the creative process as they worked on their volume. "This has been a full month for poems, + one of peculiarly happy work," writes Katharine to Mary in February 1892:

> MF was determined to get in the Angel's scarlet shoes in the Giovanni Bellini – as the painter has got them in, painting them with great joy – + not feeling them incongruous in the midst of that tragedy + passion. The scarlet shoes are in the poem; indeed I do not think a detail of that Bellini is shirked. (Berenson Archive)

Michael Field's recognition of the *punctum* of the painting in the "bright, scarlet shoes" aligns the poet/spectator with the painter, who "got them in, painting with great joy," suggesting the fluid circulation of the verbal and the visual. In the same letter, Katharine writes: "We have finished the Giorgione Venus. Scarcely a bit that has not been over painted. I mean scarcely

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a verse that is not quite other than it was in its first form." Such word-painting, like the "blocking-in" referred to in the letter about Credi's unidentified blossoms, is a fundamental part of their translation of sight into song.

Their friends were keen to read their work in draft. After thanking Edith Cooper for her "luminous comments" on some work he had sent her, Berenson urges "You must send me your poems about the Frankfurt pictures," adding "If one could only repeat what a picture tells one!" (Berenson Archive, Vienna, November 6). He makes a number of suggestions, always with an eye to how the poems will be read, and the aesthetic tradition with which the poets will be associated. And so, regarding their use of the title *Mona Lisa*, he comments to Michael (Katharine) "For myself I prefer her other name at once more true, + more poetical − *La Gioconda*." "But," he adds, "I can imagine wishing for a definite purpose to avoid this name" (Berenson Archive, Florence, February 28). Notwithstanding its Paterian resonances, Michael Field takes up his suggestion. Berenson responds very positively to the sample of poems he read in advance of publication, writing to Michael: "I read your verses on the St Sebastian with great interest, + I shall read all the others the moment your book is published. I am *very* sure you can write about pictures" (Berenson Archive, Florence, Easter Sunday). He was to be more critical of the published volume later when they were together in Paris, when challenged by the poets "to show how impersonal he can be as a critic, face to face." Katharine records his view that "We have confused the material of poetry which is *feeling* with colour + outline the materials of painting. If we looked on a picture till we were on fire with it, the language we used would be poetic . . . Whenever this burning sensation is maintained there is life in the words we use." He reportedly told them that "some day we shall give the very picture itself, drag the animal from its shell: then we shall write a *great* poem, as Rossetti did on the *Vierge aux Rochers*" (Michael Field, BL Add. MS 46780, f. 124v).

Berenson sent "the Mikes" photographic reproductions of art works, including some of the paintings of which they write in their volume, which provoked a rapturous response, even though they were too late to aid the writing process. Edith writes to Mary in 1892: "the photographs give us most vital pleasure. We look at them continually. We worked our poem on the Magdalen of Timoteo Viti entirely from memory + from the wretched little woodcut in Kugler. We dance with joy to see her again in the soft photograph" (Berenson Archive). In December 1892, Michael Field writes to the "Doctrine" to thank him for "the huge 'Spring'" and to let him know "what she is to us." Looking entirely displaces writing and song: "before her eyes + mouth I am dumb. She really is most terribly alive − herself, herself through every pore of her skin . . . But I am laying down my pen to stare at her" (Berenson Archive). In turn, Michael Field sends suggestions to both Berensons about how to improve their writing, many of which are apparently gratefully taken up. They were robust critics of each others' work, Michael Field commenting at least as frankly on the stylistic shortcomings of the "Doctrine's" writing as Berenson does on the work they send in proof for his perusal.

Of particular interest in this correspondence are the references to the fact that both Michael Field and the Berensons are engaged in collaborative work, both writing, and looking, *à deux*. There is some coyness on both sides about who does the writing in their respective shared enterprises. Berenson writes to Michael, for example, of working on an article on the Venetian School, which he describes as "the introduction to my Hampton Ct. book." "I, or rather *we* are now re-writing it," he explains, but goes on to

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talk unproblematically of "my readers" and "my book" (Berenson Archive, Florence, Easter Monday). He responds rather testily to Michael's challenge to "guess" which parts of which poems in *Sight and Song* each of them wrote, that guessing "simply does not enter into connoisseurship," and that he would need first "to know the work of each separately to venture on finding out what belongs to each" (Berenson Archive, Florence, February 28). Michael and Field, more practised after all in the art of collaboration, are much more assured than their friends, whose intellectual as well, at this point, as their domestic and personal relationship (Mary was still married to another man, and kept a separate house in Florence), was ambiguous, at least in public. Michael writes to Berenson in March 1893:

> Could you not, you and Mary, write a journal something like De Goncourt's, each bringing to it your own sharpest impressions, + most completely felt sensations? In art you have interpretative power that kindles. But you cannot popularise or expound. It is a shame for you to try. If you could for awhile cease to compose together, + be content with severely criticising each other's work, it seems to me you would grow stronger. You know, or do you not know, that in cookery the milk is boiled + the eggs are beaten, *before* both are mixed together in the pudding – I fancy you + Mary are mixing your styles now. Field + I don't do that. (Berenson Archive)

Michael, finding the proof of the pudding in the creative recipe, writes with the confidence and experience of a master chef about the collaborative concoctions of Michael Field.

The friends write to each other consciously as couples, drawing parallels between their amorous and creative partnerships. "What never-to-be-forgotten days we are spending!" exclaims Berenson in a letter to Michael. "Bacchus on his triumph, I am sure was not so drunk with life & beauty as we are," he declares, and signs off "Bacchus Junior" (Berenson Archive, undated fragment, late 1892). Theirs was from the first a four-way relationship built around an erotic aesthetic that was not without its tensions and crosscurrents during this period. At an early stage of their friendship, the two couples went to Paris together, ostensibly so that Berenson could give Michael Field "guidance to an understanding of recent art, + Morellian help in the Louvre," although it quickly became apparent to Katharine Bradley that they were there to provide respectable cover for their friends' affair: "Probably knowing that as Michael + Field we are inseparable they have counted on long absences from our company + refreshing *rencontres* at breakfast, afternoon tea + at night" (Michael Field, BL Add. MS. 46780, ff.114v-115). It was an interlude when, as she wrote, "We seem to live in the air of a French novel" (Michael Field, BL Add. MS. 46780, f. 108v). The poets' journals at this time reveal not only Bradley's increasing indignation at the fact that they had been "induced to visit Paris" under false pretences, "decoyed . . . by Mary's promises of Morellian teaching from Bernhard," but also her growing bewilderment and anxiety about an evident attraction between Berenson and Edith:

> When we joined Mary, at her proposal, in her brother's flat, we had no idea that her life + our lives would be spent entirely with Bernard – we had no idea that he + she were inseparable companions – we had no idea that she cared so much for him – that S [Sim, ie Edith] should sicken of very passion for him . . . We are in a tragic coil, as it is – We cannot go, without breaking all friendship with the only friends who attract us . . . We feel there is much that we cannot grasp in the circumstances we encounter: the magnetic tremble Bernhard + S awake each in each is an incalculable element: + we cannot trust the Sapphic frenzy that forces us, in spite of ourselves, to follow him. (Michael Field, BL Add. MS. 46780, f. 114v)

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The two couples have become a fraught "quartette" (Michael Field, BL Add. MS. 46780, f. 123v) within a week of their arrival in Paris, their relationship further strained by Berenson's willingness to take money from Michael Field for the lessons they had expected him to give freely as their friend. Bradley grimly reports to their journal his easy victory over his conscience: "'But it seems so mean' is the last cry of the friend in him changing to the Master — but like the misery of Lamia's transformation the distress is soon over with him — with *me*! Oh, how much there is to bear!" (Michael Field, BL Add. MS. 46780, f. 126v).

Notwithstanding the evident tensions and complexities of their interaction and their sexuality (letters in the I Tatti archive also hint at a homoerotic attraction between Mary and Michael Field[3]), both couples are clearly exercised by the question of how the viewing experience changes when it is a matter of two people looking at a work of art together. Intriguingly, Berenson articulates the conundrum of dual spectatorship most interestingly when writing of looking at art, not with Mary, but with Edith, whom he was still to address "lovingly" some years later, in 1909, as "Beloved Field," his "sister-soul" (Berenson Archive). He wrote to Edith in 1893:

> There is perhaps no person living whose company before a work of art I covet so much as I do yours. There is something so profound, + earnest in the effort you make to suck out the soul of a picture that it really makes me feel as if my own powers of appreciation had received a new set of feelers. Here more than anywhere else at all I should find your sympathy stimulating. Before the best Bellinis + Carpaccios, the best Tintoretto, + Veroneses you would make me feel as I have felt these days having had the luck to see mirrors throwing a light upon them which revealed in them whole tracts I had not seen before. The mere addition of warmth given by the light was in itself something never to be forgotten when looking again at these pictures. Well, you have in a subtle way, + emotionally, nearly the same effect on a picture, for me, that these mirrors had. (Berenson Archive, Venice, October 11, 1893)

Edith Cooper is given a wholly reflexive role here, as a "mirror" that enables the connoisseur to see more, and more profoundly, what is there in the picture, but it is, notwithstanding, high praise coming from Berenson, the Doctrine. Mirrors, after all, play a not insignificant role in the articulation of his signature theory of the tactile imagination. The child, Berenson writes in *The Florentine Painters of the Renaissance* (1896), "cannot persuade himself of the unreality of Looking-Glass Land until he has touched the back of the mirror (4). "Later," he explains, "we entirely forget the connexion, although it remains true that every time our eyes recognise reality, we are, as a matter of fact, giving tactile values to retinal impressions" (4).

Berenson's appreciation of Edith Cooper's sympathetic presence before the work of art, in the context of his developing physiological and tactile aesthetic, is of particular interest not only because of what it tells us about Michael Field as a spectator and art critic, but because it reminds us that, only a short distance from where the Berensons were living, another couple were experimenting with the idea that "a new set of feelers" could be acquired by viewing art with a close companion. The art historian, aesthetician, and fiction-writer Vernon Lee had first met Kit Anstruther-Thomson in 1887, and they had quickly developed an intense and passionate relationship that intersected their work in fascinating ways. During a visit to a gallery in 1894, Anstruther-Thomson became aware that her breathing was affected by the experience of looking at particular pictures, and, believing her to be a peculiarly sensitive subject, Lee encouraged her to keep a diary monitoring

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the different physiological sensations produced by looking at art. Lee herself brought her reading in contemporary psychology and aesthetics to this raw data, and their collaborative experimental work eventuated in a series of intriguing joint publications in the new area of physiological aesthetics, beginning with the essay "Beauty and Ugliness" which appeared in 1897. In this interestingly eccentric intervention into late nineteenth-century psychology, they elaborate an aesthetic of empathy, arguing that the contemplation of a beautiful thing – a painting, a building, or sculptural form – elicits a motor response in the viewer, who unconsciously imitates the formal properties of the object of vision and, as it were, projects his/her own bodily movements back onto it: "the aesthetic seeing, the 'realisation' of form, was connected" as Lee later wrote, "with bodily conditions and motor phenomena" that included "'muscular strains,'" "'sensations of direction' . . . and sensations of modification in the highly subtle apparatus for equilibrium," and "sensations of altered respiration and circulation sufficient to account for massive conditions of organic well-being and the reverse" (Lee and Anstruther-Thomson 25–26).

The "Anthropomorphic Aesthetics" developed by Lee and Anstruther-Thomson is, then, strikingly corporeal and subjective, dependent upon a "projection of our inner experience into the forms which we see and realise" (Lee and Anstruther-Thomson 17). Kit's own body, through her performed physiological response, enacts a three-dimensional representation of the artwork that, as it were, replicates the three-dimensional stereoscopic gaze of the two female observers. Their insistence that aesthetic experience "consists in the attribution of an individual and varying complexus of dynamic (and perhaps organic) conditions," and therefore that "it must always, in real experience, bear the character of the individual form by which it is elicited" (Lee and Anstruther-Thomson 31), is close to Berenson's theory of the importance of the tactile imagination and the stimulation of "muscular feelings of varying pressure and strain" in art (Berenson, *Florentine Painters* 50), and indeed he was to accuse them (unjustly) of plagiarising his ideas (Colby 158–65; Wellek 233–51). It is a critical mode that at first appears to run directly counter to what Michael Field is trying to achieve in *Sight and Song* by attempting to "eliminate our idiosyncrasies," only admitting "the inevitable force of individuality" into the aesthetic experience after a sustained "effort to see things from their own centre" (Michael Field, *Sight and Song* vi). And yet there are striking parallels between the aesthetic practice of these two lesbian couples that I would like to explore further, which may shed light on Michael Field's work in this area and, not least, help us to think further about the ostensibly objectivist project of *Sight and Song*.

Katharine Bradley was reading Vernon Lee in 1892, and had seen her once at Pater's, but had not talked with her. She wrote to Mary about her neighbour: "I have read at my club to-day with interest Vernon Lee on Zola. I was curious to see whether any Doctrine had stolen in . . . I think not. But I like what she does about the danger of slackness – of not choosing what to develop in ourselves." She then asks: "Mary, is V.L. the 4th Evangelist, or the unknown author of Revelation with his slightly emphatic style? I am afraid her life has been very sad + full of nursing; + it will do her good to grapple with the Doctrine" (Berenson Archive, 1892). Before it was to become clear just how damaging it would be for Lee to "grapple with" Berenson, Michael Field went to stay in 1895 at Mary's house in Florence, where they were looked after by a young art historian, Maud Cruttwell, whom Mary had, according to Berenson, two years earlier "torn out of the wolf's [Lee's] mouth" (Berenson Archive, Florence, December 11, 1893). They visited "Vernonia" (as Berenson privately called Lee) and Anstruther-Thomson at their home Il Palmerino at the height of

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the Wilde trial (they write to ask Mary "what the best French papers say of the Oscar trouble" [Berenson Archive]) and, at a time when they would have been intensely engaged in their work on physiological aesthetics, it is unimaginable that the poets (who were clearly intrigued by the "*sibyl*, in a tailor-made black dress" and her companion, another "immense tailor-made" woman [Michael Field, *Works and Days* 264–65] would not have talked with their hosts about looking at art.

Indeed, Vernon Lee, who read voraciously, and moved in the same social circles as Michael Field, is quite likely to have read her guests' recently published volume of art poems. The bemused Michael Field ("Oh Mary, these big-jointed inexorables are not Maenads" [Berenson Archive]) in turn may have witnessed one of Anstruther-Thomson's sexually charged aesthetic performances in which, under Lee's direction, she responded physically to art works, with her reputedly magnificent statuesque body, before friends or an eager audience of young women in the British Museum or the National Gallery, or the Vatican or the Uffizi. A friend who was unsympathetic to this mode of art appreciation, Dame Ethel Smyth, records one occasion in the Vatican when Kit, having been solicited by Vernon to "show us that bust!" apparently "ejaculated, 'Look at that Johnny! How he sings! . . . how he sings!'"(Smyth 160). The "singing quality" that Kit, and hence Vernon, were so captivated by offers a suggestive parallel with Michael Field's interest in the translation of sight into song, and their verbalisation of "what the lines and colours of certain chosen pictures sing in themselves (Michael Field, *Sight and Song* v).

III

Diana Maltz has written about the public gallery tours staged by Lee and Anstruther-Thomson as "lesbian exhibition" (221). The museum was, of course, a space for rendezvous and sexual encounter in the nineteenth century. As Barbara J. Black has argued, in Victorian fiction "the marriage plot and museums . . . often intersect," and "the gaze becomes incisive and amorous simultaneously" (109). For Lee and Anstruther-Thomson, clearly, and for Michael Field too, I suggest, the gallery similarly provided a context for the gaze to become at once incisive and amorous. Notwithstanding their differences in style, to read Michael Field's poems and journal entries describing the erotically charged engagement of these two women with the art works they encountered more often invites comparison with the corporeal subjectivity and empathetic aesthetic celebrated by Lee and Anstruther-Thomson than with the objectivist imperative they announce in their Preface.

The journal kept by Katharine Bradley and Edith Cooper during the period of their tour of the Continental galleries that provided the images for *Sight and Song* includes numerous entries recording their empathetic responses before art. Their visits to Charlemagne's tomb, for example, left a great impression, and they responded to it as corporeal visual subjects. Writing of their first visit, Edith comments on the Cupola of the tomb in highly sexualised language: "One thrills as one notes the severe arcades round it + its swelling roof that tell of Italian workmanship in the barbarous north" (Michael Field, BL Add. MS. 46779, f. 63v). On their second visit, their response is more overtly physical: "we kiss – yes, again + again, loverlike – the steps that mount up to it. They are charnel-steps, old, loosening, full of dust, but worth the pressure of one's lips of flesh" (Michael Field, BL Add. MS. 46779, f. 64v). Through kissing, they try to become one with the object, and enjoy a kind of carnal/charnel knowledge, as the fleshly living "lips of flesh" meet the dead "charnel-steps." The tomb

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produces a bodily response that manifests itself in a physical act. Then there is an abrupt transition from the world of the senses to that of the intellect: "Sudden thought! The M.S. of the 1st two acts of Otho wd lack consecration unless laid on the pale astounding marble he trod aforetime" (Michael Field, BL Add. MS. 46779, f. 64v). Katharine runs back and brings the manuscript so that this ritual can be performed.

This episode does represent an elaborate performance ritual, and there are other examples in their journals where they demonstrate an awareness of their own performativity, of their own spectatorship being observed by others, of being the object of someone else's gaze. For example, when they are in Dresden they both fall ill, but go notwithstanding to see a performance of Wagner's *Tannhäuser*, "muffled up to the ears in wraps," and are conscious of being "'the beheld of all beholders'" (Michael Field, BL Add. MS. 46779, f. 90). They enter the artwork empathetically, with the kind of bodily engagement that Lee and Anstruther-Thomson promote in their work. Edith writes: "*Tannhäuser* is in me – its motives flood me. Its hero gives me finer pain than the disease at my throat" (Michael Field, BL Add. MS. 46779, f. 90v). Impressions of art work themselves into their experience of *Tannhäuser* (the figures are described as "veritably Rubenesque"), and their journal entry is full of visual references: "the simple joy of the second scene . . . is such that it goes out in touch + seeking gaze"; "the lust of the eye has a pure world to receive, a green one, with cool white lights" (Michael Field, BL Add. MS. 46779, f. 89, 89v).

Edith's condition worsened and became serious, enforcing a period in a hospital. As she becomes more fevered, her physical sensitivity becomes the more pronounced: "my throat beats in time to the clock + the clock is ostentatiously audible. It seems like the systole + diastole of phenomenal life at your ear. Its chipping noise as it throbs is a torture" (Michael Field, BL Add. MS. 46779, f. 90v).[4] In her fevered state, Edith sees her body detached from her mind, like the protagonist of *The Yellow Wallpaper*:

> I become aware of a figure in a short night-dress – a girl almost at the other end of the ward, who has leapt to embrace a hero, a dark, magical man in the corner (a cloak-stand) who does not respond. In horror at his coldness she struggles back and falls across the bed half-fainting. I see that wan creature on the bed (an ocean of gold pouring down). (Michael Field, *Works and Days* 54–55)

If Edith becomes the object of her own fevered gaze, for Katharine the hospital room, with Edith at its centre, assumes the attributes of a painting as her lover begins to recover: "The pallors of the Shades are changed into a Watteau picture, or one might say, the ghastly group brightens into the half-gay, half-ascetic pictures of Fra Angelico" (Michael Field, *Works and Days* 57). The half-gay, half-ascetic tone of this entire episode is enhanced by the figure of a nurse who is smitten by her English charge, and whose clumsy amorous advances and "wolf-kisses" ("Ich bin so hungrig" [Michael Field, *Works and Days* 63]) Edith must fend off. The journal contains a double narrative of triangulated desire in which either the nurse or Katharine is the jealous audience of a sexual scenario with Edith. "While I am away," Katharine writes, " P[ussie]. drinks 'Kaffee' with Sister for an hour. Sister kisses her with a kiss that plunges down among the wraps (Yes, as the wolf did when he sought the child – O Eros! – in Browning's *Ivan Ivanovitch* – a fatal kiss)." Edith adds "My Love was a little jealous, stormily tearful that Nurse should have forstalled her on my lips" (Michael Field, BL Add. MS 46779, f. 105v-106).

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When she ventures back out to a gallery, to see the *Sistine Madonna*, again Edith is somewhat performative – "I lie back in the cushions, feel an invalid for the time being + love *her*" – apparently connecting Katharine and the Madonna (Michael Field, BL Add. MS 46779, f.116). Although the image of the haggard invalid sinking back on her cushions differs from that of the strappingly Amazonian Kit stretching and swaying and throwing out her chest before an ancient Greek urn, for both there is an emphasis on the health-giving properties of art. Here too Edith is conscious of being the object of the gaze as well as the subject:

> The pain in my head is torture – noise seems to pass like a screw down my back + my legs are obstinately averse from movement – yet I enjoy immensely, I savour beauty with new fineness of appreciation. I am watched suspiciously by the people as I lie back under the Sistine Madonna in the black [crossed through] folds of my lace, haggard + half-fainting. Supported by art + sunlight I reach the Hôtel. (Michael Field, BL Add. MS 46779, f. 117)

This response, in the accents and vocabulary of physiological aesthetics, represents a fascinating intervention of the subjective into the experience of art. Immediately before this journal entry is an entry noting Correggio's *St. Sebastian*, "tied to the tree," with "bound hands + liberated face" (Michael Field, BL Add. MS 46779, f.117). There seems to be a strong correlation between Edith's physical experience in the gallery and the interpretation of the painting. Edith, like Sebastian, is "bound," unable to move: "my legs are obstinately averse from movement." She, also, is suffering "torture," and yet she too, like Sebastian, is able to gaze upon beauty; in her case the beauty of art, in his the beauty of the Madonna. The poem on *Saint Sebastian* begins:

> Bound by thy hands, but with respect unto thine eyes how free –
> Fixed on Madonna, seeing all that they were born to see!
> (Michael Field, *Sight and Song* 32)

The poem seems to be all about the erotically charged look.

> The Child thine upward face hath sighted,
> Still and delighted; (32)

The poets write in their journal, rather disconcertingly, about how Sebastian's "face plays with the child" (Michael Field, BL Add. MS 46779, f.117). Here, Sebastian is seductively described as "Caught in the play of Heaven's divine advances" (32):

> While cherubs straggle on the clouds of luminous, curled fire
> The Babe looks through them, far below, on thee with soft desire.
> Most clear of bond must they be reckoned –
> No joy is second
> To theirs whose eyes by other eyes are beckoned. (33)

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Michael Field imaginatively enters the poem, emphasising the enjoyment of the mutual desiring gaze, and identifying with the visual connection between Sebastian and the Christ child – "Oh, bliss when with mute rites two souls are plighted!" (32). The poem concludes by moving out of the pictorial space of the canvas to the first-person voice of the desiring poet/viewer:

> Oh might my eyes, so without measure,
> Feed on their treasure,
> The world with thong and dart might do its pleasure! (33)

It is a complex piece of visual articulation whereby the poet/viewer and, through him/her/them, the reader, in their own visual triangle, are made party to the triangulated desiring gaze of Sebastian, the Madonna, and the Christ child.

Both here and in another poem on Da Messina's *Saint Sebastian*, also in the Dresden Gallery, Michael Field writes in a sexualised way about a well-known contemporary male homosexual icon, and Martha Vicinus remarks more generally on the lesbian poets' fascination with the tropes of male homosexuality (93). But if the poets empathise here with the homoerotic Sebastian, elsewhere we find them identifying with pictorial representations of heterosexual lovers, such as Botticelli's *Venus and Mars* in the National Gallery (Michael Field, *Works and Days* 56–57). In this famous post-coital scene it is, of course, the woman who looks, reversing a "sleepwatching" tradition which more usually depicts a male watcher voyeuristically observing a female sleeper. This is not lost on Michael Field who, in the poem on the painting, describes her posture in phallic terms ("She rears from off the ground/ As if her body grew / Triumphant as a stem / That hath received the rains, / Hath softly sunk with them, / And in an hour regains / Its height and settledness"), and connects her sexual potency with her gaze:

> Yet are her eyes alert; they search and weigh
> The god, supine, who fell from her caress
> When love had had its sway. (Michael Field, *Sight and Song* 43–44)

Hers is a powerful, scrutinising gaze. The poem closes with that look:

> Ironical she sees,
> Without regret, the work her kiss has done
> And lives a cold enchantress doomed to please
> Her victims one by one. (46)

Bartolomeo Veneto's *A Portrait*, with its Medusan suggestiveness, is a painting that seems to invoke the trope of the "cold enchantress" and her "victims" even more compellingly, but Michael Field rereads the petrifying Medusa look in interesting ways. The poem from the first stresses the autonomy of the art object and of the woman who is its subject. Like the figure in Watteau's *L'Indifférent*, she resists the viewer: "her leftward smile endows / The gazer with no tidings from the face" (Michael Field, *Sight and Song* 27). The viewer is forced to conjecture by imagining, beyond the painting itself, the woman within whose soul "the

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resolution wakes / She will be painted (28).” Michael Field narrativises the woman’s agency, by representing her not merely as the passive model for the painter’s art, but as the active subject, the artist indeed, of her own self-creation. We see the sharp-edged beauty of the face in the glass grow into the illusionism of the painted image – the over-determined language of flowers, the fetishised hair, the bared breast resonating with the signs of sexuality in nineteenth-century painting as well as Renaissance – and we watch the observer of the image in the mirror transfer the labour of vision to the viewer of the painting, who is explicitly envisaged:

> O fearful eyes
> And soft lips of the courtesan who planned
> To give her fragile shapeliness to art, whose reason spanned
> Her doom, who bade her beauty in its cold
> And vacant eminence persist for all men to behold! (29)

She “gave to art a fair, blank form, unverified by life” (29), leaving it to the later viewer and ekphrastic poet, Michael Field, to envoice the image and make a narrative for her, to give the pure image a history and a future. “Her eyes are fresh,” and she is able to “[conquer] death” (29–30), to transcend her mortal condition. However, her portrait signifies, not by its inherent meaning, but rather by its vacancy, an emptying out of meaning that the viewer of the painting must labour to re-inscribe.

The ekphrastic impulse has itself been represented in explicitly gendered terms as a contest between the power of the feminine image which, Medusa-like, can freeze, stupefy, and imprison the male observer, and the controlling interpretative authority of masculine language, in which art criticism speaks for, and regulates, the silent picture (Heffernan, *Museum of Words* 108–10). This model presents an interesting dilemma for women writing about art objects, for it supposes a gender economy in which not only the gaze but also the discourse of art criticism is masculine. The ekphrastic poetry of Michael Field, I suggest, effectively circumvents the masculine prerogative of art criticism, and negotiates the discourses and genres available to Katharine Bradley and Edith Cooper as women, troubling unproblematised notions of the male gaze and the masculine commentator equally with the petrifying look of the Medusan feminine image. For these viewers who are a man only in name, the woman with the bared breast and serpentine hair who looks out from Bartolomeo Veneto’s canvas is neither monstrous nor threatening. She is beautiful, and she has taken control of her own representation. In her essay “The Laugh of the Medusa,” Hélène Cixous argues that the monstrous image of Medusa exists only because it has been directly determined by the male gaze. If women would question these myths, if they would “look at the Medusa straight on,” she maintains, they would find out “she’s not deadly. She’s beautiful and she’s laughing” (255). Cixous endows Medusa with a voice, a laugh even, empowering her to speak back. And she reasserts the female gaze.

“Michael Field,” as a disembodied masculine sign, cannot be turned to stone, and Katharine Bradley and Edith Cooper do look directly at this Medusa figure; but of course not entirely “straight on.” Theirs is, after all, a gaze of gays, and furthermore it is a binocular view. Michael Field explains in the Preface to *Sight and Song* the poets’ “effort to see things from their own centre, by suppressing the habitual centralisation of the visible in

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ourselves," as "a process by which we eliminate our idiosyncrasies and obtain an impression clearer, less passive, more intimate" (Michael Field, *Sight and Song* vi). Their collaborative, triangulated homoerotic gaze involves a negotiation of meaning; their processing of what is seen is a joint enterprise that decentralises visual experience and, whilst still fundamentally impressionistic, and indeed "intimate," reaches towards a kind of objectivity – like Cixous's vision of the figure who "comes in, comes-in-between herself me and you, between the other me where one is always infinitely more than one and more than me" (Cixous 263). Cixous argues that a feminine practice of writing "will always surpass the discourse that regulates the phallocentric system; it does and will take place in areas other than those subordinated to philosophico-theoretical domination. It will be conceived of only by those who are breakers of automatisms" (253). She envisages a poetic, libido-driven *écriture feminine* that celebrates "vertiginous crossings" and "dizzying precipitous flights between knowledge and invention," and that is "precisely working (in) the in-between," "an incessant process of exchange from one subject to another" (Cixous 259, 263, 254). In the "mosaic [Field]work" of *Sight and Song*, I suggest, we encounter an intriguing late-nineteenth-century attempt to write about art that refuses to try to codify the way art is viewed, to regard aesthetic experience as a scientific or "philosophico-theoretical" process, but instead develops a genuinely collaborative creative and critical practice that links the stereoscopic gaze unequivocally to desire between women.

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NOTES

I am very grateful to Sondeep Kandola and Victoria Mills for their assistance with the research for this article, and thank both them and other colleagues at Birkbeck for many helpful discussions. I wish to thank the librarians and archivist at the Berenson Library, Villa I Tatti, for their generous welcome, and the Berenson Archive for making the Berenson letters available to me, and for allowing me to quote from the correspondence between the Berensons and Michael Field. Thanks are also due to the British Library, which holds the manuscript of Michael Field's journal, *Works and Days*. I gratefully acknowledge the AHRC for funding my research for this project.

1. A significant body of scholarship in the area of optics and visuality, much of it focused on nineteenth-century visual culture, has been accumulating in recent years, beginning with Crary's groundbreaking *Techniques of the Observer: On Vision and Modernity in the Nineteenth Century*. See, most notably, Christ and Jordan, eds., *Victorian Literature and the Victorian Visual Imagination*; Crary, *Suspensions of Perception: Attention, Spectacle, and Modern Culture*; and Flint, *The Victorians and the Visual Imagination*.
2. See *The Works of John Ruskin*, ed. Cook and Wedderburn, vol. 3, for his extended discussion of the importance of "truth" and for his view that "The whole technical power of painting depends on our recovery of what may be called the *innocence of the eye*" (15: 17).
3. See, for example, letter to Mary from Michael, February [1895?]. Berenson Archive.
4. The medicalised language of this intensely physical account of contraction and dilation, recalls Lydgate's analogy, in connection with optical metaphor, in *Middlemarch*, when he says "there must be a systole and diastole in all enquiry," and "a man's mind must be continually expanding and shrinking between the whole human horizon and the horizon of an object-glass" (Eliot 690; ch.63). I am grateful

https://doi.org/10.1017/S106015030605131X Published online by Cambridge University Press

to Victoria Mills for drawing my attention to this and the following analogy with Charlotte Perkins Gilman's work.

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https://doi.org/10.1017/S106015030605131X Published online by Cambridge University Press