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for the Observer

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# Sight and Song: Transparent Translations and a Manifesto for the Observer

ANA I. PAREJO VADILLO

WALTER PATER DIED ON JULY 30, 1894. A FEW DAYS LATER, A POETIC tribute by Michael Field (the joint poetic persona of Katharine Bradley and Edith Cooper) appeared in the *Academy* (August 11, 1894):

The freshness of the light, its secrecy,  
Spices, or honey from sweet-smelling bower,  
The harmony of time, love's trembling hour  
Struck on thee with a new felicity.  
Standing, a child, by a red hawthorn-tree,  
Its perishing, small petals' flame had power  
To fill with masses of soft, ruddy flower  
A certain roadside in thy memory:  
And haply when the tragic clouds of night  
Were slowly wrapping round thee, in the cold  
Of which men always die, a sense renewed  
Of the things sweet to touch and breath and sight,  
That thou didst touch and breathe and see of old  
Stole on these with the warmth of gratitude.<sup>1</sup>

In this sonnet Michael Field faithfully presents the “imaginary portrait” of a lover of beauty for whom the aesthetic experience resides in the body, in that infamously italicized “*me*” of the Preface to *The Renaissance*, for he touched, breathed, and saw “things sweet to touch and breath and sight.” Michael Field greatly admired Pater’s work and, in the poem, Field rightly describes Pater’s view of the aesthetic experience as a sensorial and subjective epistemology. The poem is, therefore, a tribute not only to Pater, but to this sensorial epistemology that would become the trademark of modernity. Only two years earlier, in 1892, Michael Field had published *Sight and Song*, a volume which was, in part, a response to Pater’s theories of the aesthetic, and in part a departure from his sensorial epistemology. It is this departure that forms the core of this article. Despite Field’s admiration for and devotion to Pater’s writings and their common interest in the figure of the spectator, Field disagreed with Pater in the way in which the spectator/critic

experienced art. This difference in form was the origin of *Sight and Song*. It was not only a volume of verse, it was also a poetic and aesthetic experiment which aimed at showing the gendered experience of art, both in its production and its perception. To a large extent, Field's experimentation with gender was presented in their earlier work *Long Ago* (1889). There, in the context of Sappho, the Fields—as the poets liked to be called—had delineated a framework of lesbian aesthetics, extending Sappho's poetic fragments into lyrics.<sup>2</sup> In *Sight and Song*, Field went on to produce a volume of verse that assumed a sexualized observer, but in the process of analyzing how gender enters into the aesthetic experience, Field produced a theory of sight (not in vain was the title of the volume *Sight and Song*) which modified the subjective vision that Pater advocated. Indeed, the quotation that starts the volume, "I see and sing, by my own eyes inspired," from Keats's "Ode to Psyche," suggests what Michael Field had in mind when they started the volume, which was to develop an epistemology of sight intrinsically related to poetry.

The first decisive step in making the connection between "sight" and "song" consisted in using the form of translation to understand not the essence of each of these two art forms but rather the processes by which the spectator experiences the aesthetic. This point will be examined in the first part of this essay. In the second part, I will propose to read *Sight and Song* as a manifesto for a sexualized observer, contextualizing Michael Field's aesthetics within the cultural late nineteenth-century discourse on visibility. In conclusion, I will discuss how Michael Field's theory of visibility announces the revolution of the object.

### Transparent Poetics: Translations of the Visual

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.

Michael Field, "Preface" to *Sight and Song*

We realize objects when we perfectly translate them into terms of our own states, our own feelings.

Bernard Berenson, *The Florentine Painters of the Renaissance*<sup>3</sup>

Translation, with its rudiments of such a language, is midway between poetry and theory.

Walter Benjamin, "The Task of the Translator"<sup>4</sup>

Between 1890 and 1892, Michael Field visited the major art galleries of Europe with the idea of publishing a collection of poems that would

analyze the relationship between poems and paintings. The astonishing result of these tours was the publication in 1892 of *Sight and Song*, a book that would become Field's aesthetic manifesto and that would place the poets within the aesthetic debates of the fin de siècle. The volume is a collection of thirty-one poems corresponding to thirty-one paintings that the poets saw in the major art galleries in Europe, mainly Le Louvre (Paris), The Dresden Gallery (Germany), and The National Gallery (London).<sup>5</sup> During these intense years dedicated to the study of art, Field met Bernard Berenson, who quickly became their major source on art history and their guide to Renaissance art.<sup>6</sup> Although Berenson did not quite agree with the art-theory that Michael Field was suggesting (Berenson followed Pater's sensorial epistemology),<sup>7</sup> later in his *Florentine Painters of the Renaissance* (1896) Berenson paid tribute to Michael Field's *Sight and Song* not only, as Paul Barolsky notes (pp. 51-53), by re-creating paintings using some of Field's poems from *Sight and Song*, but by arguing that "we realize objects when we perfectly *translate* them into terms of our own states, our own feelings" (my emphasis).

"To translate into verse what the lines and colours of certain chosen pictures sing in themselves" (p. v) was the aim of *Sight and Song*. Michael Field aimed to produce a volume that was a combination of two art forms, visual arts and poetry. However the relation that Michael Field established between these two art forms was not, as one may expect, that of an illustrated book in which the visual serves the poetical (as Bernard Berenson warned against in his *Florentine Painters of the Renaissance* [p. 8]), but rather, a volume of poetry which poeticized paintings. The "original" art form was painting, and the poems were "translations" of what "these paintings incarnate[d]" (p. v), as Field explained in the preface.<sup>8</sup> Using translation as the form of this volume was of critical importance to Michael Field. At first sight, to think of this volume of poetry as a translation and not as a collection of verse may be controversial. *Sight and Song* was produced in a rather exquisite and expensive Bodley Head edition, and, to use the word "translation" to describe this volume could denote a detriment of its "original" value, in favor of its value as a translation, hence altering its essence. This was the view of many readers, among them W. B. Yeats, who in his review of the volume argued that instead of offering "translations," the poets should have written what these paintings suggested to them:

That is to say, the two ladies who hide themselves behind the pen-name of Michael Field have set to work to observe and interpret a number of pictures, instead of singing out of their own hearts and setting to music their own souls. They have poetic feeling and imagination in abundance, and yet they have 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.<sup>9</sup>

Yeats even went as far as to distort, probably unintentionally, the visual appearance of the poem. For Yeats, originality and poetic creativity meant subjective recreation, and he did not understand Michael Field's "objective translations." However, it was precisely this form, translation, that allowed Michael Field to theorize the visual and to bring into question the sensorial epistemology advocated by Pater.

In "The Task of the Translator," Walter Benjamin provides a theoretical model for understanding the value of translation as an art form. Benjamin has astutely observed that a translation, "instead of imitating the sense of the original, must lovingly and in detail incorporate the original's way of meaning, thus making both the original and the translation recognizable as fragments of a greater language just as fragments are part of a vessel" (p. 260). This Benjaminian definition of translation implies a revalorization of translation as something belonging to an a priori, "pure," language to which the original also belongs, this greater language being the source out of which all languages develop. But more important than this revalorization is Benjamin's definition of translation as a "transparent" form. In fact, just as the key to *Sight and Song* is the word "translation," the key to "The Task of the Translator" is the word "transparent." Benjamin is using here the word "transparent" in its generic and primary sense, meaning "capable of transmitting rays of light without diffusion so that bodies behind can be distinctly seen" (OED):

A real translation is 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. This may be achieved, above all, by a literal rendering of the syntax which proves words rather than sentences to be the primary element of the translator. For if the sentence is the wall before the language of the original, literalness is the arcade. (p. 260)

In other words, translations as transparent entities transmit light so that the poetics of a text or picture can clearly be seen through. It is through translations that works of art are shown in their "pure language," and the translation "shine[s] upon the original," bringing it forth. By describing translations as transparent forms, Benjamin is clearly associating the photographic process and its recreation of images with the reproductive quality of translations (in particular the transparent cellulose of photographic films, which, when exposed to light, produces the image on film). This association between transparencies and photography was at the very origin of photography,<sup>10</sup> and a trope which Theodor Adorno famously used, following Benjamin, in his "Transparencies on Film."<sup>11</sup> Hence, for Benjamin, translations are to originals what the photographic film is to the picture. It is that which allows the film, the photograph, or the painting to be seen. I should also note that by "reproductive quality of translations" I do not mean

that translations are reproductions, but that they have a reproductive quality in the sense that they allow the original to be disseminated. But this dissemination takes the form of a refraction, literally, the turning or bending of light when it passes from one medium into another of different density.<sup>12</sup>

Benjamin, thus, argues that on the one hand, translation is an art-form whose identity is similar to the original in so far as both partake of an a priori, "pure," language, and on the other that, translations, unlike originals, function as transparent forms that enlighten the original work of art. This was, in both senses, what Michael Field tried to do in *Sight and Song*. The poems in *Sight and Song* function as translations that aim to depict the poetry of those paintings; in Field's own words, they attempted "to express not so much what these pictures are to the poet, but rather what poetry they objectively incarnate" (Preface, p. v). However, by emphasizing that the poems are translations, what Field is in fact suggesting is that there is an intimate relation between poetry and the visual arts, in so far as poetry can actually, just as a translation, function as a transparent form that enhances the poetics of the visual. This is why Field is using poetry as "translation."

As Benjamin has observed, translation is a "midway form" between "poetry and theory," for only a translation investigates and reproduces that which is poetic in an original piece of work (hence it does both, it investigates into the poetics of the work and recreates it), and, besides, if there is a "true language" out of which the original text and the translation has been created, its "divination and description . . . is concealed in concentrated fashion in translation" (p. 259). In other words, if there is such an a priori true language, this is only theorized in the translation. Hence, by using poetry as translation, Field is suggesting that there is an intrinsic relation between the visual arts and poetry, a relation established by poetics. Just as "translation" brings forth the original work of art, "poetry" brings forth the visual arts. Since translation is a mixture of poetry and theory, translation is the right form for Michael Field to expose their poetics of the visual.

Another reason exists for using translations: the tremendous impact that the culture of looking had at the fin de siècle. This culture is highlighted by Isobel Armstrong's magnificent study of glass and the culture of mass-transparency in the nineteenth century (pp. 123-148) and by Adorno's inspiring essay "Transparencies on Film," which marked Adorno's turn to Benjamin's theory of mass culture. On the one hand, as Armstrong argues, in the nineteenth century the culture of mass-production transparency, of mass-produced glass, marked "the beginnings of an avidly scopic culture—a culture of *looking*" (p. 125). On the other, Adorno's use of the word transparency records a clear and direct debt to Benjamin's "The Task of the

Translator.” According to Miriam B. Hansen, “the trope of ‘transparencies,’ a succession of translucent images or slides, characterizes the format of [Adorno’s] essay as a series of unconnected—though not unrelated—*aperçus*.” Hansen does not compare Adorno’s use of the word with Benjamin’s, but, as she very astutely points out, by seeing this essay as a series of *aperçus*, of translucent images, “as a projectionist of this arrangement, the author himself becomes a viewer, rather than someone more actively involved in the making and criticizing of film; he literally positions himself on the side of the audience. Adorno’s observations do not presume the status of great in-sights—they are presented as something ‘shining through.’”<sup>13</sup> Indeed, Adorno uses this trope to emphasize his position as that of a spectator seeing a series of “transparencies on film” of which he is the author. This is indeed the position of Michael Field: by using translations on the one hand Field focuses on visuality, on the culture of looking, and on the other Field, as a “projectionist of transparent poetics,” emerges as both audience and author of a series of sights and songs.

### A Manifesto for the Observer/Reader

This is the preface to *Sight and Song*, written in 1892:

#### PREFACE

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”. For *personnages* substitute *peintures*, and this sentence from Gustave Flaubert’s “Correspondance” 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 centralisation 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 lengthen it in the heart”.

M.F.

February 15, 1892.  
(pp. v, vi)

The preface clearly establishes the parameters under which this volume should be discussed. It is first, as we have seen, a “translation into verse,” and thus, the reader should read this volume as a poeticized translation. But Field adds to this statement that these translations are the product of a pure gaze, for Field’s aim was to express not what “these pictures are to the poet, but rather what poetry they objectively incarnate.” In this attempt at bringing to the forefront the poetry of these particular paintings, using another art-form, poetry, Michael Field complicates not only the relation between the visual arts and poetry but, more importantly, the relation between art and the subject that gazes and enjoys it. What Field claims in this preface is that there is an intrinsic “beauty” or “poetry” in any art-form that transcends the subject that gazes. To be able to translate objectively that poetry the viewer, gazer, and translator must, according to Michael Field, eliminate his/her subjectivity and his/her aesthetic positioning, for these may influence the perception of the art object. This was, at any rate, the “method of art-study” in the production of *Sight and Song*. Michael Field was following a Ruskinian model of visibility,<sup>14</sup> one which (1) believed that painting and poetry were “sister arts,”<sup>15</sup> and (2) valued what Ruskin called “the innocence of the eye,” a sort of unadulterated perception of painting, one which saw without consciousness what an object of art may signify:

The whole technical power of painting depends on our recovery of what may be called the *innocence of the eye*; that is to say, of a sort of childish perception of these flat stains of colour, merely as such, without consciousness of what they signify,—as a blind man would see them if suddenly gifted with sight.<sup>16</sup>

According to Jonathan Crary, what Ruskin meant by this expression, “innocence of the eye,” was the possibility and the need for a model of vision which would be “uncluttered by the weight of historical codes and conventions of seeing, a position from which vision can function without the imperative of composing its contents into a reified ‘real’ world.”<sup>17</sup> That is, to be able to see any art object, the gazer must be free of all historical and cultural constructions of the visual. Michael Field’s own starting point in describing the method of art study for *Sight and Song* is actually much the same as that of Ruskin. Compare the above quotation with Michael Field: “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” (p. v). To achieve such a pure gaze, the observer must suppress “the habitual centralisation of the visible in ourselves,” and, with it, his/her own “idiosyncrasies.” What is achieved by freeing the eye is a clearer impression, in so far as the subject’s own consciousness and



idiosyncrasies do not occlude the object of the gaze; a less passive impression, for instead of letting the object impress us, the subject has to actively observe and analyze it; and a more intimate impression, for the spectator is entirely freed from all cultural constraints and hence the subject's appreciation of the object is particular and personal. Only after the observer has tried to see the object in its own terms, can the subject enter and "mould the purified impression" (p. vi).

This approach to the acquisition of art questioned the fin-de-siècle aesthetics led by Walter Pater, who envisioned the aesthetic experience in quite different terms:

"To see the object as in itself it really is," has been justly said to be the aim of all true criticism whatever; and in aesthetic criticism the first step towards seeing one's object as it really is, is to know one's own impression as it really is, to discriminate it, to realise it distinctly. The objects with which aesthetic criticism deals—music, poetry, artistic and accomplished forms of human life—are indeed receptacles of so many powers or forces: they possess, like the products of nature, so many virtues or qualities. What is this song or picture, this engaging personality presented in life or in a book, to me? What effect does it really produce on me? Does it give me pleasure? and if so, what sort or degree of pleasure? How is my nature modified by its presence, and under its influence? The answers to these questions are the original facts with which the aesthetic critic has to do; and, as in the study of light, of morals, of number, one must realise such primary data for one's self or not at all. And he who experiences these impressions strongly, and drives directly at the discrimination and analysis of them, has no need to trouble himself with the abstract question what beauty is in itself, or what its exact relation to truth or experience—metaphysical questions, as unprofitable as metaphysical questions elsewhere.<sup>18</sup>

Pater started his Preface to *The Renaissance* by challenging Matthew Arnold's affirmation that the business of all criticism was "to see the object as in itself it really is."<sup>19</sup> Pater's notion of criticism was closer to Goethe's and Schopenhauer's than to the Arnoldian notion of criticism as a criticism based on the object's own laws. For Pater, the only possible way of knowing an art object was through the impressions the object produced in the subject. According to Jonathan Crary, Goethe's *Theory of Colours* and Schopenhauer's *The World as Will and Representation* were at the core of a nineteenth-century revolution in visual aesthetics which resulted in "subjective vision," which Crary describes as the "embeddedness of aesthetic perception in the empirical edifice of the body" (p. 83). Very briefly, Crary's argument is that early in the nineteenth century, "the corporeal subjectivity of the observer, which was a priori excluded from the concept of the camera obscura, suddenly becomes the site on which an observer is possible. The human body, in all its contingency and specificity, generates 'the spectrum of another colour,' and thus becomes the active producer of optical experience" (p. 69). That is, the human body became the center of the aesthetic experience and this was, precisely, what Goethe tried to prove in

his *Theory of Colour* (published in German in 1810, and first translated into English in 1840). Pater, who was a great admirer of Goethe, was particularly influenced by Goethe's theory of colors, as A. C. Benson points out:

In these years [1860s] Pater's chief interest, apart from his prescribed work, was in philosophy, which naturally led him to the study of German authors; and here he fell under the influence of Goethe. Goethe came to be for Pater the "true illustration of the speculative temper," "one to whom every moment of life brought its contribution of experimental, individual knowledge; by whom no touch of the world of form, colour, and passion was disregarded."<sup>20</sup>

The last lines of the above quotation are particularly interesting if compared with Michael Field's poetic tribute, and show the great influence that Goethe had in Pater's sensorial epistemology. The second important influence in the production of this corporeal and subjective vision was Schopenhauer's *The World as Will and Representation*. As Crary observes, Schopenhauer's aesthetics of perception differed from Goethe's in that for Schopenhauer all vision was subjective (p. 74). Schopenhauer believed in a "pure perception," but unlike Ruskin and Michael Field, he argued that this "pure perception" could only be achieved by the mastery of the senses. For Schopenhauer, the senses of the body take up the motives of the external world and represent them objectively in consciousness. Later the motor system reacts, through an act of will, to that objective representation of the exterior world. Hence the difference between Michael Field's and Ruskin's "pure gaze" on the one hand, and Schopenhauer's "pure perception" on the other: for Schopenhauer, "pure perception" was subjective, whereas for Field and Ruskin it was objective.<sup>21</sup>

For Pater, as the Preface to *The Renaissance* very distinctly shows, the aesthetic experience resides in the body, in what those pictures are "to me." What the aesthetic critic has to do is to analyze those impressions, the pleasure that an object produces, what degree of pleasure arises, and in what way the critic is modified by that pleasurable impression. In short, for Pater the aim of the art critic is to investigate not the art object, but the impressions that the art object produces on the subject. This subjective vision is described further in his famous essay, "The School of Giorgione," where he argues that "art is always striving to be independent of the mere intelligence, to become a matter of pure perception" (p. 108), and art presents itself to the "imaginative reason, that complex faculty for which every thought and feeling is twin-born with its sensible analogue or symbol" (p. 109). This sentence resumes Pater's aesthetic theory. He started by rejecting the possibilities of translating one art into another:

It is the mistake of much popular criticism to regard poetry, music, and painting—all the various products of art—as but translations into different languages of one and the same fixed quantity of imaginative thought, supplemented by certain technical qualities of

colour, in painting; of sound, in music; of rhythmical words, in poetry. (p. 102)

If for Michael Field, translation functioned as a transparent form which allowed light to show into another form of art, Pater clearly rejects such a possibility. There are two reasons for this rejection. On the one hand, Pater claims that the beautiful is not an abstract entity but that it is found in very concrete art objects: "What is important, then, is not that the critic should possess a correct abstract definition of beauty for the intellect, but a certain kind of temperament, the power of being deeply moved by the presence of beautiful objects. He will remember always that beauty exists in many forms" (p. xxi); and on the other, that every form of art has its own special mode of reaching the senses, and hence the body's response to a picture is different from its response to a piece of music: "Each art, therefore, having its own peculiar and untranslatable sensuous charm, has its own special mode of reaching the imagination, its own special responsibilities to its material" (p. 102).

Pater and Field start from the same position in their analyses of the aesthetic experience: "what is this song, this picture." Pater, however, sees "art" through his own "impressions" of it. In other words, subject and object are joined in the interpretation of an art work. Unlike Pater, Field disassociates both: an object of art is contained in itself, and the spectator is a "translator" of the object's own artistic achievement. However, at the end of their preface, Field notes clearly and unambiguously that it is impossible to analyze art without any subjective interference on the part of the critic-poet, but this can only be claimed after the individual has "had a purified impression," that is an objective analysis, of the art object in question. Experiencing the aesthetic is for Field a very complex phenomenon, one which includes both the beautiful object and the sexual subject that experiences it, but both as autonomous entities. In contrast with Pater, Field offers a two-phased aesthetic, one in which objective enjoyment is followed by subjective *jouissance*. The question that immediately arises is in what way would this two-phase aesthetic as practiced in *Sight and Song* differ from the subjective epistemology of Pater, in terms of the reader/spectator? The difference is made particularly clear by Field:

Pater's style is a memorial to Impressions, not the drama of impressions acting on true nature.

When you re-issue the emotion a sight or sound or action has executed in you the chances are that, unless you are endowed with great dramatic gift if you transfer the initial shock to an imaginary character the re-issue will have the dreamness of a memory, not the instantaneousness of an event, & the work of art will be lacking in life, or what is the same thing as life inevitableness.

Of course the things that strike emotionally on a peculiarly susceptible nature cannot be transferred to other less or differently susceptible natures without death. Pater often issues his own emotions, that are very peculiar to himself, as if they were the result of

other individualities—to whom he has not been able to give the value of an I. There's the point of the whole matter. The corner-stone of Art is, because its material is emotion.<sup>22</sup>

For Field the implications (and the danger) of a completely subjective visual epistemology was the erasure of other subjectivities (including the author's) in favor of the unified and mastered subjectivity of the art-critic. Pater's epistemology denies the subjectivity of others by placing his impressions as the center of the aesthetic experience. His art studies do not reproduce the "original" encounter with "Art" but his own encounter. By contrast, Michael Field argues that the I/eye that gazes must allow other "Is" (including the painter's I) to experience the aesthetic, and that the art-critic and the poet have to allow those other subjectivities to experience the aesthetic in their own terms. Field's description of Pater's subjective vision recalls Luce Irigaray's claim that "more than any other sense, the eye objectifies and masters," suggesting a phallocentric economy of vision.<sup>23</sup> It was this phallocentric economy that Field wanted to repudiate. *Sight and Song* was precisely that—an attempt to create an autonomous and sexualized observer. Michael Field proposed a two-phased aesthetics, to allow the autonomy of both the art object and of its gazer.

### Visual Aesthetics

Field's visual aesthetics as delineated in the Preface of *Sight and Song*, was put into practice in the poems that form this astonishing collection. Just as Walter Pater started his *Imaginary Portraits* with a discussion of Watteau, Michael Field's *Sight and Song* started with Watteau's *L'Indifférent*. This was no coincidence. It demonstrated Field's debt to Pater, but it also marked Field's departure from Pater's sensorial epistemology by arguing that the observer, in order to enjoy the "poetry" that these paintings/poems incarnated, had to adopt an "indifferent" attitude in experiencing the aesthetic:

#### L'INDIFFÉRENT

WATTEAU

*The Louvre*

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.

He dances in a cloak  
Of vermeil and of blue:  
*Gay youngster, underneath the oak,*  
*Come, laugh and love!* In vain we woo;  
He is a human butterfly;—  
No soul, no kiss,  
No glance nor joy!  
Though old enough for manhood's bliss,  
He is a boy,  
Who dances and must die. (pp. 1-2)<sup>24</sup>

If Watteau's pre-impressionistic *L'Indifférent* reflected the fleeting and joyful nature of dancing, Michael Field's "L'Indifférent" translated that dance into poetry through a melodious and regular composition (notice the regularity of both rhyme and meter throughout the poem). Indeed the poem is a dance (the phrase is Paul Valéry's).<sup>25</sup> The poem starts by describing Watteau's magic dancer and his intriguing gaze. The spectator enigmatically asks the dancer "*Sweet herald, give thy message!*" There is, however, no answer from the "herald" and the dancer (as if pictorially representing the autonomy of the object) continues immersed in his dance. At this point, Michael Field's subjectivity enters the painting erotically by describing the dancer as "old enough for manhood's bliss." The entering of sexuality challenges the "pure impression" that we had previously obtained from the painting, for now we wonder about the erotic relationship that the dancer establishes with the viewer and gazer. This "indifferent" dancer looks to us the viewers with those "round eyes" and we see not only the dancing figure, but his moment of "bliss" in the dance. Entering the painting subjectively implies the entering of the sexual subject, and the poem becomes an erotic recreation of that view, a teasing dancer flirting with the viewer and the viewer entering this sexual game.

However, Michael Field's poem reveals another condition of the visual, and this is the gaze that the object directs toward the viewer. By allowing the object its own autonomy, and by looking at the art object in *jouissance*, Field recognizes that the subject also becomes the object of the gaze. In his famous *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, Lacan argued that

I am not simply that punctiform being located at the geometrical point from which the perspective is grasped. No doubt, in the depths of my eye, the picture is painted. The picture, certainly, is in my eye. But I, I am not in the picture.<sup>26</sup>

As Hal Foster argues in his reading of the Lacanian gaze, "the subject is also under the regard of the object, photographed by its light, pictured by its gaze" (p. 139). In Field's transparent translations, the poem functions as a

screen in which both subject and object are part of the gaze, a gaze that is constructed through desire and sexuality. In Foster's words, "the screen allows the subject, at the point of the picture, to behold the object, at the point of light" (p. 140).

This entrance of the sexualized observer through the flirting gaze of the object is further explored in several poems in this collection, but in "La Gioconda" Michael Field's visual aesthetics most notably questions Pater's. In this transparent translation, Field is both the observer and the observed, the onlooker and the object of the gaze:

LA GIOCONDA

LEONARDO DA VINCI

*The Louvre*

Historic, side-long, implicating eyes;  
A smile of velvet's lustre on the cheek;  
Calm lips the smile leads upward; 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. (p. 8)

Pater had most famously discussed *La Gioconda* in his essay on "Leonardo da Vinci." In it, Pater, as Richard Dellamora claims, "focuses on Leonardo's position as a subject of desire. Regarding this desire as directed toward males, Pater pushes further the suggestions of sexual perversity that occur already in nineteenth-century French accounts of the painter."<sup>27</sup> For Dellamora, Pater's account of Leonardo can only be understood from Pater's claim of their shared subject position as lovers of men: "He [Pater] and his subject [Leonardo] share the same sexual point of view" (p. 131), veiled under Pater's famous statement, "A lover of strange souls may still analyze for himself the impression made on him by those works." For Dellamora, "Pater's critical persona, identifying with the painter's love of 'strange souls,' describes the erotic character of the critical act" (p. 131). The sexual inversion is produced by Pater's account of *La Gioconda* as a "transvestite self portrait":

Besides, the picture is a portrait. . . . What was the relationship of a living Florentine to this creature of his thought? By what strange affinities had the dream and the person grown up thus apart, and yet so closely together? Present from the first incorporeally in Leonardo's brain, dimly traced in the designs of Verrocchio, she is found present at last

in *Il Giocondo's* house. That there is much of mere portraiture in the picture is attested by the legend that by artificial means, the presence of mimes and flute-players, that subtle expression was protracted on the face. (pp. 97-98)

It is in this sense that Pater and his object (Leonardo-as-La Gioconda) emerge as one, and the object is a product of Pater's own subjectivity. In Field's "La Gioconda" the sexual inversion is rather an inversion of the gaze. Field's poem, as "a transparency on a poem," starts with a visual representation of the painting:

Historic, side-long, implicating eyes;  
A smile of velvet's lustre on the cheek;  
Calm lips the smile leads upward; hand that lies  
Glowing and soft, the patience in its rest  
Of cruelty that waits and doth not seek  
For prey.

Yet in the third line we can see that the semicolon in the middle of the line disrupts the previous flow, and this rupture announces the rupture of the poet as author and spectator. The abruptness of the verse parallels *La Gioconda's* cruelty and *La Gioconda* becomes a passive predator who "waits" for her prey, the spectator. The adjective "cruel" shows how Michael Field has entered in the poem and "La Gioconda" is not only the painting but Michael Field's impressions of it. If Pater saw the vampiresque quality of *La Gioconda* in the fact that she had been dead many times (p. 99), her vampiresque quality in Field's poem relates to the consumption of the prey. And who is the prey but the observer of this poem/painting? We have then a strange parallel, a "male mask"—Michael Field, in its dual authorship as Katharine Bradley and Edith Cooper—observing a "female mask"—*La Gioconda*. If Pater's subjectivity emerges with the object of his study, in Michael Field's case, the subject disappears in the object, it is consumed by the object. Thus, we can see that, while Pater's subjectivity emerges with da Vinci's (indeed, as we have seen, it was this appropriation of the subject position that Field had rejected), Michael Field's subjectivity is consumed by the object's. If in "L Indifférent," the gaze of the dancer flirted with the observer, in "La Gioconda," the object's gaze consumes the observer. The poem emerges as a reconsideration of the visual in terms of both spectator and object. It even suggests what Lacan would have called the "tame of the gaze," as if Field used this poem as a screen to tame the gaze of *La Gioconda* and hence to prevent the annihilation of the spectator in the murderous and vampiresque gaze of *La Gioconda*.

Are then these translations "taming" the gaze? Or is Michael Field using the poetics of transparency as a screen on which the dynamics of vision and visibility are played out? And if so, what is achieved by using these poems as translations? The answer to these questions seems to me to

be in two fascinating poems on Antonello Da Messina's *Saint Sebastian* and Giorgione's *The Sleeping Venus*. In "Saint Sebastian," Field discusses the inversion of the gaze by discussing the erotics of sado-masochism. As in previous poems, Field starts by describing the painting in detail, avoiding any interference with its object:

Young Sebastian stands beside a lofty tree,  
Rigid by the rigid trunk that branchlessly  
Lifts its column on the blue  
Of a heaven that takes  
Hyacinthine hue  
From a storm what wellnigh breaks. (p. 69, ll.1-6)

In fact, more than half of the poem is a faithful and colorful description of Da Messina's painting. We have to wait until the thirteenth stanza to read about the entrance of Field's subjectivity:

At his feet a mighty pillar lies reversed;  
So the virtue of his sex is shattered, curse:  
Here is martyrdom and not  
In the arrows' string;  
This is the bitter lot  
His soul is questioning.

He, with body fresh for use, for pleasure fit,  
With its energies and needs together knit  
In an able exigence,  
Must endure the strife,  
Final and intense,  
Of necessity with life. (pp. 73-74, ll. 73-84).

Both the description of the pillar as a metaphor of Saint Sebastian's broken masculinity, and the idea of sado-masochistic desire are present in the painting itself. Yet, while the painting presents a view of Saint Sebastian in a moment of pleasure, of bliss, Michael Field describes this moment as a questioning of the soul on the "virtue of his sex." It is interesting to notice how the structure of the poem plays with Michael Field's subjectivity and Da Messina's is replaced by theirs. To show how Michael Field's sexual point of view alters Da Messina's subjectivity, it is very helpful to read Field's account of the painting in their diaries. The following fragment was written in Dresden, in 1891. Michael Field had gone to the Dresden Gallery to see two paintings, Da Messina's "Saint Sebastian" and Giorgione's "Sleeping Venus." During their journey, Edith Cooper caught scarlet fever, and both Bradley and Cooper spent the rest of their visit to Germany in hospital. This is Katherine Bradley's re-creation of "Saint Sebastian" in *Work and Days*:

At last, this morning even the Herr Geheimrath says there is no danger from the fever.



She [Edith Cooper] looks very pretty in her short boy's hair and fresh cotton jacket. . . . During all my life till then I never knew what a passion of passions disappointment can be. I only got relief when I thought of Antonello da Messina's *Saint Sebastian* in the Gallery—his virile, reproachful face reared against the blue heavens—his eyes asking, "Why am I denied what I was made for?" That picture was constantly with me. (p. 59)

This is indeed a tremendous change, from the blissful and erotic martyrdom of Saint Sebastian, as depicted in the painting, to Michael Field's denial of desire. In the diary, Katharine gazes at her "desired object," Edith Cooper, and her comment on how "pretty" Edith "looks" with her "short boy's hair" and "fresh cotton jacket" is encoded in art-terms. The gaze of Saint Sebastian is used to re-establish a link between the desiring subject and the desired object in terms of negation: "Why am I denied what I was made for?" which is rewritten in the poem as "He, with body fresh for use, for pleasure fit, / . . . / Must endure the strife, / Final and intense, / Of necessity with life." In the aesthetic enjoyment of Saint Sebastian there has been a break between the subject that sees and the object that is seen. The division of the subject "Michael Field" into a desiring subject (Katharine Bradley) desiring another subject (Edith Cooper) appears through the transparency of art, and the poem, as a transparent screen, illuminates and represents this negotiation between the object that sees and the subject that is observed.

But if in "Saint Sebastian" Field used the poem to show how the gaze of the object is reflected onto the subject that gazes, in "The Sleeping Venus," the gaze of the object is directed toward itself. In fact what is extraordinary about this poem is that the object seems to have completely overtaken the traditional phallogocentric economy of vision (male observer, female object of the gaze). Venus, as "object of the gaze" is completely oblivious of the gaze of the observer; she is only conscious of herself. Besides, the spectator is not a voyeur, and, because of the link between Venus (as object) and Michael Field (as spectator) in terms of gender, the spectator is rather an observer of Venus' gaze. Field thus describes Venus in her full "womanhood," and the poem describes Venus in an act of masturbation. However, instead of a voyeur, the female spectator seems to see in Venus, because of the analogy of gender, the perfect desiring and desired subject:

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. (pp. 101-102, ll.57-70)

Venus is in control of the game of the gaze, becoming a powerful subject in control of her gaze and of the gaze of others. Indeed, in the traditional economy of vision, Venus manages to overcome the masculine division between observer and observed. She is both, and the poem functions as a platform where the spectator is suddenly aware not only of the phallogocentric economy of vision, but also of the power that poems, as translations, have in restoring to the object and to the subject an autonomy of vision, but an autonomy of vision that embraces women's sexuality.

Toward the end of *Sight and Song*, it is clear that Michael Field has completely transformed the visual aesthetics advocated by Pater, and his subjectivity is rejected in favor of a more autonomous aesthetic of the visual. In the figure of Venus, Michael Field finally and openly discusses the autonomy of the object. It is no coincidence that the last poem of the collection is Watteau's *L'Embarquement pour Cythère*. The myth of the island of Cythère is the myth of the quest for love. Watteau's Cythère represents an invitation to delights amid the enchantments of nature. Field's poem, however, presents Venus as the originator of these delights and the force that moves those couples to go and find Cythère. While the painting depicts groups of lovers embarking, the poem focuses on Venus, for it is Venus who drives the wandering figures to her island of Cythère. Venus is the overpowering object and subject of the poem. The poem starts by placing Venus at the center of this quest for love:

Why starts this company so fair arrayed  
 in pomegranate brocade,  
 Blue shoulder-cloak and barley-coloured dress  
 Of flaunting shepherdess  
 from shelter of the full-leaved, summer trees?  
 What vague unease  
 Draws them in couples to a burnished boat?  
 And wherefore from its prow,  
 Borne upward on a spiral, amber swirl  
 Of incense-light, themselves half-rose, half-pearl,  
 So languorously doth float  
 This flock of Loves that in degree  
 Fling their own hues as rainment on the sea;  
 . . .  
 I see it now!  
 'Tis Venus' rose veiled barque  
 And that great company ere dark

Must to Cythera, so the Loves prevail,  
Adventurously sail. (pp. 117-118, ll. 1-26)

In this poem, unlike the rest of the poems of *Sight and Song*, Michael Field enters as author using for the first time “I”: “I see it now!” (p. 118, l. 22) and “Methinks” (p. 119, l. 45). Field also re-creates and re-configures Watteau’s painting giving agency and voice to the couples that are lovingly embarking for Cythera:

‘What, sweet, so slow!’ — ‘But ere I leave the land  
give me more vows; oh, bind thee to me fast;  
speak, speak! I do not crave thy kiss.  
To-morrow ...’ ‘Love, the tide is rising swift;  
Shall we not talk aboard?’ (p. 123; ll. 113-117)

But, even more interesting than Field’s increasing presence as author is Field’s conclusion. The statue of Venus, present through desire in those couples that travel to Cythera, but literally quite invisible (“Methinks none sees / The statue of a Venus set / Mid some fair trellis, in a lovely fret / Of rose” [p. 119]), now becomes the real subject of the poem and of the collection. In this postscript, written in italics, Field goes beyond the painting in an anticlimactic afterthought to the painting:

*Now are they gone: a change is in the light,  
The iridescent ranges wane,  
The waters spread: ere fall of night  
The red-prowed shallop will have passed from sight  
And the stone of Venus by herself remain  
Ironical above that wide, embrowning plane.* (p. 125; ll. 141-146)

In this last stanza, Field rewrites the painting and the collection. Venus is the ironical gazer, the player of the game. The crowd has left, but she, the sculpture of Venus, remains looking ironically at us. Having started this collection with the refusal of the “indifferent” to the call of the subject, Michael Field now finishes the collection with an “afterthought,” where Venus remains once again critical to the subject that perceives her.

Following Michael Field’s aesthetic manifesto in *Sight and Song* results in a complex study of vision and visuality. Using translations, Michael Field has created a poetics of visuality based on transparency. In these “transparencies on poetry” Field has re-presented the economy of the gaze. The achievement of this collection is not only that the subject, the observer, is given sexual agency, but that the object is given agency too, and, thus, powerful images of women such as Venus refuse the gaze of the avid and always consuming subject. *Sight and Song* emerges thus as a series of transparent translations where Field projects a theory of visuality that values the autonomy of the object, foreseeing the avant-garde revolution of the object.<sup>28</sup>

## Notes

- 1 Repr. in R. M. Seiler, ed., *Walter Pater: The Critical Heritage* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1980), p. 280.
- 2 For a study of Michael Field's lesbian aesthetics in *Long Ago*, see among others, Yopie Prins, "A Metaphorical Field: Katharine Bradley and Edith Cooper," *VP* 33 (1995): 129-148; also by Prins, "Sappho Doubled: Michael Field," *YJC* 8 (1995): 165-186; Christine White, "'Poets and Lovers Evermore': Interpreting Female Love in the Poetry and Journals of Michael Field," *TextP* 4 (1990): 197-212; see also Angela Leighton, *Victorian Women Poets* (Hemel Hempstead: Harvester, 1992), pp. 202-243.
- 3 Bernard Berenson, *The Florentine Painters of the Renaissance* (New York, 1896), p. 84.
- 4 Walter Benjamin, "The Task of the Translator" in *Selected Writings*, Vol. 1, 1913-1926 (Cambridge: Belknap/Harvard Univ. Press, 1996), p. 259. Subsequent citations will appear parenthetically in the text.
- 5 Other galleries were: in Italy, The Accademia of Venice, The Campo Santo at Pisa, The Uffizi in Florence, The Accademia at Bologna, Ducal Palace at Venice, and The Accademia of Florence; in Germany, The Städel'sche Institut Frankfurt, and The Grand Duke's Palace at Weimar; and in England, Hampton Court, Lord Dudley's Collection, and the National Gallery.
- 6 Berenson was at the time beginning to conceive his first book on Renaissance art, *The Venetian Painters of the Renaissance* (New York, 1894). Berenson even read parts of *Sight and Song* (see Bod. Lib. MS. Eng.lett.d.408.f.59) and suggested some changes, among them the alteration of the title of their poem "Mona Lisa" to "La Gioconda." As the Fields wrote in their diaries, the volume was "too wholly due to our friendship with Bernard" (see British Library, Ms. 46780.ff. 124).
- 7 See, for example, Franklin E. Court, "The Matter of Pater's 'Influence' on Bernard Berenson: Setting the Record Straight." *ELT* 26 (1983): 16-22. See also Paul Barolsky, "Walter Pater and Bernard Berenson," *NewC* 2, no. 8 (April 1984): 47-57.
- 8 Michael Field, *Sight and Song* (London: Elkin Mathews and John Lane, 1892). References to this text are hereafter cited in the main text by page numbers.
- 9 W. B. Yeats, "Sight and Song" in W. B. Yeats, *Uncollected Prose*, Vol. 1, ed. John P. Frayne (London: Macmillan, 1970), pp. 225-226.
- 10 See, for example, titles such as *Lantern Reading, Original and Selected, to Accompany Sets of Photographic Transparencies. To be had of all Booksellers and Opticians* (Birmingham, 1875). See also Isobel Armstrong, "Transparency: Towards a Poetics of Glass in the Nineteenth Century," in Francis Spufford and Jenny Uglow, eds., *Cultural Babbage: Technology, Time and Invention* (London: Faber and Faber, 1996), pp. 123-148.
- 11 Theodor W. Adorno, "Transparencies on Film," in *NGC* 24-25 (1981-82): 199-205.
- 12 For a study of refraction in relation to transparency see Goethe's *Theory of Colours*, trans. C. L. Eastlake (1840; Cambridge: MIT Press, 1970), #183 (p. 76).
- 13 Miriam B. Hansen, "Introduction to Adorno, 'Transparencies on Film' (1966)," in *NGC* 24-25 (1981-82): 186-198, 193.
- 14 For five years, between 1875 and 1880, Katharine Bradley corresponded with John Ruskin. Bradley was a fervent admirer of Ruskin's work and a member of the Guild

- of St. George. See Michael Field, *Works and Days*, ed. T. and D. C. Sturge Moore, (London: John Murray, 1933), pp. 143-172.
- 15 For a more detailed analysis, see George P. Landow, *The Aesthetic and Critical Theories of John Ruskin* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1971), especially "Ruskin and the Tradition of *ut pictura poesis*," pp. 43-53. Another interesting study is Elizabeth K. Helsinger, *Ruskin and the Art of the Beholder* (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1982).
- 16 John Ruskin, *The Works of John Ruskin*, ed. E. T. Cook and Alexander Wedderburn (London: George Allen, 1903-12), 15:27.
- 17 Jonathan Crary, *Techniques of the Observer: On Vision and Modernity in the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1992; repr. 1995), p. 96. Subsequent citations will appear parenthetically in the text.
- 18 Walter Pater, *The Renaissance. Studies in Art and Poetry*, ed. Donald L. Hill (California: Univ. of California Press, 1980), pp. xix-xx. References hereafter cited in the main text by page numbers from Hill's edition.
- 19 See Matthew Arnold, "The Function of Criticism at the Present Time," in *The Essential Matthew Arnold*, ed. Lionel Trilling (London: Chatto and Windus, 1949), pp. 234, 238. This point is also made by Donald Hill, "Critical and Explanatory Notes," in Walter Pater, *The Renaissance*, p. 296.
- 20 A. C. Benson, *Walter Pater* (London: Macmillan, 1906; repr. 1907), p. 11.
- 21 For a more detailed study of Schopenhauer's "pure perception" see Crary, *Techniques of the Observer*, pp. 74-85.
- 22 See Michael Field's Miscellaneous papers in the Bodleian Library, MS. Eng. misc.d.333.ff. 68-70.
- 23 Luce Irigaray, interview in *Les femmes, la pornographie et l'erotism*, ed. Marie Françoise Hans and Gilles Lapouge (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1978), p. 50.
- 24 All poems in this collection are named after the painting, followed by the name of the painter and where the painting is located, always in this order, in decreasing size, and the name of the museum italicized. For Michael Field, clearly influenced by Bernard Berenson, it was crucial to identify and locate accurately the paintings.
- 25 Paul Valéry, "Remarks on Poetry" in Denis Walder, ed., *Literature in the Modern World* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1990), p. 140.
- 26 See Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, trans. Alan Sheridan (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1977), p. 96. My account of the Lacanian gaze is deeply indebted to the discussion in Hal Foster, *Return of the Real: The Avant Garde at the End of the Century* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1996), pp. 138-141 and 265 (nn. 32, 33). Sheridan, as Foster notes, mistrusted the last sentence and added a "not": "I am not in the picture."
- 27 Richard Dellamora, *Masculine Desire: The Sexual Politics of Victorian Aestheticism* (Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 1990), p. 130. Subsequent citations will appear parenthetically in the text.
- 28 I would like to acknowledge the support of the European Social Funds and the Comunidad de Extremadura in my research on Michael Field. I also wish to thank Isobel Armstrong, whose work on glass directed my attention to the visual culture of the nineteenth century; and Josephine McDonagh, for directing my attention to translations in the work of Michael Field.