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Animating *Sight and Song*: A Meditation on Identity, Fair Use, and Collaboration

Rob Gallagher and Ana Parejo Vadillo

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We have written the queerest little book in the world.
Our teeth chatter with fear.

Michael Field on *Sight and Song*.¹

In producing an [online 'edition'](#) of Michael Field's poem 'Antonello da Messina's *Saint Sebastian*', from their 1892 collection of poetic 'translations' of paintings, *Sight and Song*, this project aims to suggest how digital tools might enable us to 'edit' and present literature in new ways — ways that, in this case, are meant to gesture not just at the process of composition, but also at the extent to which the poetic effects achieved depend on optical, spatial, and kinaesthetic metaphors of transparency and opacity, perspective and orientation, tension and torsion.² The project is also meant as a reflection on the terms upon which we encounter nineteenth-century authors and texts on the Web, whether in official electronic archives or the kinds of personal and crowd-curated digital collections being assembled on online mass platforms like Tumblr, Pinterest, and Flickr. By asking what it means to look backwards via networked tablets, laptops, and smartphones we also hope to raise questions as to how authors and audiences engaged with the 'High Art' of the past in an age of unprecedented growth of mass media (that of *cartes de visite*, stereoscopes, photography, card catalogues, etc.) and to suggest how, by fostering certain modes of collection and display, new media forms also license particular kinds of projection and identification.

¹ Michael Field, 'Works and Days', London, British Library (BL), Add MS 46780, f. 89^v.

² Michael Field, *Sight and Song* (London: Elkin Mathews and John Lane, 1892), pp. 69–74.

Michael Field's *Sight and Song* originated in a series of embodied visual encounters with Art. Katharine Bradley and her niece and lover Edith Cooper (the poets behind the male pseudonym 'Michael Field') first experienced the 'sights', visiting and studying paintings on-site. They would later transform those kinaesthetic sensations into 'songs', into poems. Since the collection was published without any illustrations, nineteenth-century readers only experienced the visuality of the *text*, not the artworks the poems engaged with, even though the book was directed towards a connoisseur readership expected to know most of the paintings. Indeed, their chosen titles for the poems simulate bibliographical citations of the kind one may find on a picture frame in a museum. They included the title of the painting, with the name of the painter inscribed underneath, followed by its provenance, inviting the reader to imagine the painting exhibited on the white wall of the page above the poem (*Fig. 1*). Michael Field's contemporaries, however, may or may not have known the paintings the poems referred to. The authors certainly never considered the possibility of publishing an illustrated book, because their work was based on the primacy of poetry, their chosen medium. And yet the key question they would always ask of these poems, as their preface shows, was whether they had been able to capture, to render these pictures in their songs.

Though selections of poems from *Sight and Song* have been frequently anthologized, only *once* has the book been republished in full since 1892: in a joint 1993 facsimile edition with another of Michael Field's books of poems, *Underneath the Bough* (1893).³ A rare, precious book, of which only 400 copies were printed, and currently only available as a physical book in specialist libraries or in private collections, the book is today read mostly on the Internet.⁴ Inevitably, the Web has transformed any reading of *Sight and Song*. We now read the words and the artworks as two-dimensional hyper-objects in the transparency of our liquid-crystal screens. We read replicas of *Sight and Song* either in digital format or coded (as with the 2015 platform [The Poems of Michael Field](#)). As we read, we are free to open another window or tab and call up an image of the painting described via a search engine. What kind of ontological and hermeneutical existence do Michael Field's poems have today? How does the three-dimensionality of the poem-in-the-book translate into a two-dimensional model that can be played with — at wish — and morphed with its original sighting? How do our eyes do the

³ Michael Field, *Sight and Song* (1892) with *Underneath the Bough* (1893) (Oxford: Woodstock Books, 1993).

⁴ *Sight and Song* can be accessed in electronic form, for example, in ProQuest Literature Online, via subscription. Most readers, however, read it for free either on the *Internet Archive* <<https://archive.org/details/sightandsong0ofielgoog>> or *HathiTrust* <<http://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=hvd.32044011334398;view=1up;seq=9>> [accessed 17 November 2015], both offering a digitized version in colour of the same copy held at Harvard University.

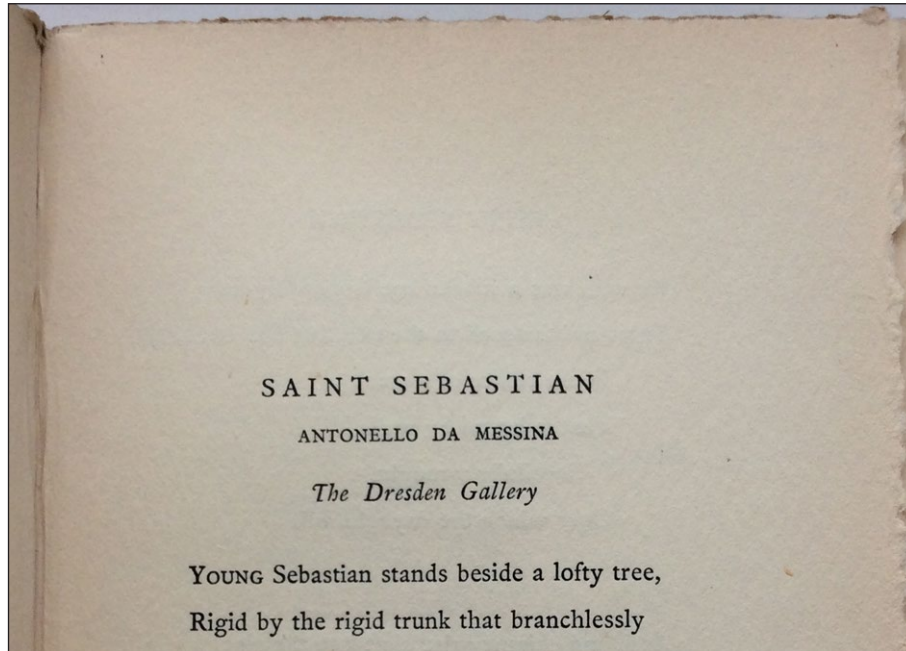


Fig. 1: Michael Field's 'Antonello da Messina's *Saint Sebastian*'. Private Collection. By kind permission of the owner.

work of these poems now that they have been reframed by digital interfaces? How, for example, do our eyes caress the body of a Saint Sebastian now bound to the screen?

Rob Gallagher has argued that digital practices of 'reframing' are opening up new 'means of making space signify, of posing questions about nostalgia, fantasy, technology and perception'.⁵ What follows addresses how these technologies might inform our engagement with Michael Field's *Sight and Song*, understood here as at once a text, an aesthetic project, and, in Ana Parejo Vadillo's terms, 'a manifesto for the observer'.⁶ To this end our hypertext edition of the Sebastian poem presents images of journal entries and pages from a first edition of *Sight and Song* alongside a series of GIF animations. The GIF (Graphics Interchange Format) was originally developed by CompuServe in the late 1980s as a universal software standard for exchanging images online. As engineers iterated on the format, they

⁵ Rob Gallagher, 'The Metaphorics of Virtual Depth', *Alluvium*, 2.6 (2013), n. p. <<http://www.alluvium-journal.org/2013/12/04/the-metaphorics-of-virtual-depth/>> [accessed 17 November 2015].

⁶ Ana I. Parejo Vadillo, 'Sight and Song: Transparent Translations and a Manifesto for the Observer', *Victorian Poetry*, 38 (2000), 15–34.

discovered that the nature of the encoding techniques used to compress images allowed for the creation of short looping animations.⁷ A staple of the early Internet (where bandwidth was at a premium, making video files impractical), animated GIFs were lent a new lease of life with the emergence of blogs and social networks, proliferating across MySpace, WordPress, Twitter, and Tumblr. Particularly prevalent today are so-called ‘reaction’ or ‘reply’ GIFs, whereby instead of responding to a post or comment with a written statement of their own, users post a loop. If they think a comment is admirable, they might respond with a GIF of Orson Welles’s Kane defiantly clapping; if they think it is inane, they might opt instead for one of Nicki Minaj derisively rolling her eyes from the *American Idol* judge’s chair. On the title page of the Sebastian site, the GIF format imbues Michael Field with the ‘gift’ of sight. Their portrait blinks back at us and, for the first time, we actually see their eyes looking. It feels uncanny. Familiar, unfamiliar, and, for once, we feel them physically close to us.

By using the GIF format, the project aims to draw parallels between Michael Field’s use of *Saint Sebastian* and web users’ deployment of GIFs as affective shorthand.⁸ The animations align the operations Michael Field perform on the paintings they ‘translate’ with the ways that software allows us to act on images today — from dragging JPEG files off the Web and onto our desktops to the kinds of zooming, cropping, tinting, reorientation, and montage made possible by Photoshop or iPhoto. Through these GIFs, Bradley and Cooper’s poetic gestures are themselves translated into the visual/procedural realm of digital imagery: the ‘reversed’ column lying at Sebastian’s feet — which, in the poem, is invested with associations of castration and ‘inversion’ (‘At his feet a mighty pillar lies reversed; | So the virtue of his sex is shattered, cursed’) — is digitally flipped using Photoshop’s select and rotate tools; text is layered over images (and vice versa) as a reference to what Marion Thain describes as the poets’ ambition for ‘the painting to be present through the very poem that inevitably obscures it’.⁹ The poem’s juxtaposition of taut and tormented olive flesh with cool blue expanses of beyond, meanwhile, is brought to the fore by altering the balance of the image file’s RGB values, so that those blues become still bluer, intensifying thus the feeling the poem expresses. These animations are then placed alongside, over, and under pages from Michael

⁷ Jason Eppink, ‘A Brief History of the GIF (So Far)’, *Journal of Visual Culture*, 13 (2014), 298–306.

⁸ For more on the GIF’s ‘potential for affect’, see James Ash, ‘Sensation, Networks, and the GIF: Toward an Allotropic Account of Affect’, in *Networked Affect*, ed. by Ken Hillis, Susanna Paasonen, and Michael Petit (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2015), pp. 119–33 (p. 120).

⁹ Marion Thain, ‘Michael Field’: *Poetry, Aestheticism and the Fin de Siècle*, Cambridge Studies in Nineteenth-Century Literature and Culture, 58 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), p. 71.

Field's diaries, 'Works and Days', where they related their experience of the paintings. This is done using NewHive, a platform for creating and sharing multimedia collages which also boasts a 'remix' feature, so that others can add to, annotate, or rework the online imagetext, making comments, additions, cuts, or revisions.

That Michael Field's poetry lends itself to this environment is a testament to the very philosophy of their visual poetics and the reason why this particular book speaks so fruitfully to web users and digital humanists alike. One of the book's epigraphs, taken from Keats's 'Ode to Psyche', was 'I see and sing, by my own eyes inspired'. Even more to the point, in a letter to their friend, the art critic Mary Costelloe, dated 2 February 1892 — just as they were finishing and writing the preface to *Sight and Song* — in trying to give writing tips to Costelloe, Bradley laid out Michael Field's methodology and revealed the participative and synaesthetic quality of their poetry. She advises Costelloe to 'Write & write — always from life — I mean before the picture — then go home & transfuse into art'. Bradley also gives away Michael Field's approach to art as a phenomenological experience that has no end and can be entrusted, handed over to others:

At present I feel at the end of one of your studies you leave off thankful it is over. *This must not be*. The impression must be that you are brimful of your subject (as you are) but that you leave your student to look & think for himself, having taught him the use of his eyes.¹⁰

These are the concepts that the NewHive edition of the poem, as an experiment in practice, plays with. This article, meanwhile, begins to raise some of the issues that are emerging out of experiments such as this one.¹¹

One of the most arresting qualities of *Sight and Song* — and one of the things that makes it particularly relevant today — is its concern with the terms upon which the cultural resources of the past can be put to work in the present. It makes the diachronic ubiquitous. Since its publication the book has received strong criticism precisely because of that (W. B. Yeats's 1892 review is a good example: he criticized Michael Field for studying pictures instead of producing 'proper' poetry).¹² Where Yeats's objections to the volume were primarily aesthetic, the questions *Sight and Song* pose as to the terms on which we access and reimagine cultural works

¹⁰ *Michael Field, the Poet: Published and Manuscript Materials*, ed. by Marion Thain and Ana Parejo Vadillo (Peterborough, ON: Broadview Press, 2009), p. 328.

¹¹ See, in particular, Alan Liu's call for cultural criticism in the digital humanities, 'Where is Cultural Criticism in the Digital Humanities?', in *Debates in the Digital Humanities*, ed. by Matthew K. Gold (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012), pp. 490–509.

¹² W. B. Yeats, Review of *Sight and Song*, *Bookman*, July 1892, pp. 116–17.

have important political, geographical, and legal dimensions too. Thus, while one no longer has to travel to Dresden to see Antonello da Messina's *Saint Sebastian*, which is now accessible in a few keystrokes (though in a mediated fashion; these are electronic reproductions of the original) and while the painting itself is no longer covered by copyright, many of the photographs of it available online remain protected (at least in the UK, which has comparatively stringent intellectual property laws). While the Google Art Project (which has, in partnership with numerous galleries and museums, made ultra-high definition reproductions of artworks available to web users, enabling them to see details it would be difficult to perceive in a gallery with the naked eye) holds an image of the da Messina *Sebastian*, for example, Google's terms and conditions do not allow for that image to be downloaded and manipulated, disqualifying this digital object for use in the current project. Fortunately, there are alternatives: in 2005 the Yorck Project bequeathed the Wikimedia Commons images and metadata from their DVD *10,000 Masterpieces of Painting* under a GNU Free Documentation Licence, intended 'to assure everyone the effective freedom to copy and redistribute [these materials], with or without modifying [them], either commercially or non-commercially'.¹³ Compared to the Google Art Project image of da Messina's *Sebastian*, the images from the Yorck DVD are far less vivid and detailed — but, legally speaking, they are also far more flexible.

Such trade-offs suggest how technology, legislation, and education (to suggest just a few factors) continue to shape access to what Lillian Faderman calls 'a usable past' for subjects in the present.¹⁴ Even when one abides by copyright law, there are other, more nebulous criteria by which a sampling, citation, appropriation, or 'translation' might be judged 'fair' or 'unfair': there is nothing to say that a perfectly legal use of a text or image will not be inelegant, anachronistic, misrepresentative, hagiographic, iconoclastic, offensive, or (to use a key term in UK queer aesthetics) naff, after all. (See, for example, da Messina's *Saint Sebastian* as a Calvin Klein ad on [Pinterest](#).) In this article, then, we want to use Michael Field's animation of da Messina's *Saint Sebastian* to think more deeply about what an expanded conception of 'fair' use might mean when it comes to the images, texts, archives, communications networks, and software applications through which we encounter — and reimagine — the queer past.

Michael Field's Saint Sebastian

¹³ Free Software Foundation, 'GNU Free Documentation License', n. p. <<http://www.gnu.org/licenses/fdl.html>> [accessed 17 November 2015].

¹⁴ Lillian Faderman, 'A Usable Past?', in *The Lesbian Premodern*, ed. by Noreen Giffney, Michelle M. Sauer, and Diane Watt (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), pp. 171–78 (p. 173).

Forgotten for more than a century, Michael Field is today the big discovery of 1890s poetics. If their work's newfound popularity speaks to an increased preoccupation with *fin-de-siècle* culture, women's writing, queer literature, and collaborative authorship in the post-'canon wars' academy, it also reflects the way that digital archives like *Literature Online* (LION), *Internet Archive*, and *HathiTrust* allow students and scholars access to copyright-free works that would once have been difficult to track down and read in paper format. With the digitization of Michael Field's twenty-six volume diary (1896–1914), and their online transcription and edition currently underway under the auspices of the *Victorian Lives and Letters Consortium*, the quality and quantity of Michael Field's writings will continue to reverberate as interest in their life and writings grows further.

In a sense, it is thoroughly appropriate that the Internet should have helped to catalyse a wider interest in Michael Field's oeuvre. For while their focus on classical, Elizabethan, and Renaissance culture has sometimes seen them characterized as outmoded and antiquated, at the *fin de siècle*, theirs was a thoroughly modern writerly practice insofar as it was rooted in archives and networks. Vadillo has written of the importance for Michael Field's poetry of the rail network that connected their suburban sitting room (filled with their books and photographic reproductions of Botticelli's paintings) to the 'libraries, museums, galleries and theatres' of London, and, via Dover, to the continental galleries where they recorded their impressions of the paintings *Sight and Song* would seek to translate.¹⁵ Then there are the social networks (built and maintained via post) by way of which Michael Field made contact with Bernard Berenson, Robert Browning, Mary Costelloe, John M. Gray, Walter Pater, John Ruskin, Charles Ricketts, and Charles Shannon, to name but a few. Despite the traditional image of Bradley and Cooper as isolated lyric poets, they were networked. The community they created was formed by constellations of poets and artists, which enabled them to produce intermedial aesthetics of the kinds exhibited in *Sight and Song*. Berenson's early input, in particular, was instrumental to the production of *Sight and Song*. Procuring photographic reproductions, checking details of paintings, and helping to organize travel itineraries, it is tempting to see Berenson (playfully dubbed 'Doctrine' by Bradley and Cooper) as a kind of Google or Siri *avant la lettre*, as indispensable to their book project as search algorithms have become to writers and researchers today. And, in an age when search engines and wikis have fuelled anxieties over plagiarism, appropriation, misattribution, and fair usage, it is instructive to note that though Berenson became a major figure in art attribution, particularly of Renaissance art and the Old Masters, his attributions, due to conflict of interest — he took a very high

¹⁵ Ana Parejo Vadillo, *Women Poets and Urban Aestheticism: Passengers of Modernity* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), pp. 162–63.

percentage of the dealings — are to this day still controversial. That his theories of art were ‘his’ was and is also in question. In the late 1890s, becoming aware that Berenson was plucking ideas from Nietzsche, Edith Cooper would say of him: ‘I knew B. to be ungenerous, I never knew he could be such an intellectual scamp as this!’¹⁶ Other illuminating moments in the period show the anxiety with which authors experienced the porous transition between oral and printed culture. Berenson himself accused his Florentine neighbour Vernon Lee of plagiarism.

Sight and Song’s creation, then, points to the importance of social, technological, and discursive networks in mediating access to — and creating — art. The book’s somewhat utopian attempt to offer objective ‘translations’ of paintings from the fifteenth to the eighteenth century, meanwhile, prompts us to consider the degree to which it is possible — and indeed desirable — to attain a perspective on cultural history unalloyed by what the preface calls ‘theory, fancies, or [...] mere subjective enjoyment’ (Field, *Sight and Song*, p. v). For Yeats was mistaken in his belief that *Sight and Song* was only a book about ‘observation and interpretation’; unlike Berenson and others, Bradley and Cooper cared as much about imagination and creativity as about integrity, faithfulness, and academic acknowledgement. In attempting to produce translations that honoured the artworks’ autonomy rather than subordinating them to the subjective biases of the observer, Bradley and Cooper were, as numerous scholars have noted, making a contribution to one of the key debates in nineteenth-century aesthetics: the subjective appreciation of the aesthetic. In selecting works that, with a few exceptions, date from the Renaissance they were both putting their work in dialogue with that of Walter Pater, the leading theorist of subjectivist aesthetics (*Sight and Song* is to *fin-de-siècle* poetry what Pater’s influential *Studies in the History of the Renaissance* (1873) was to prose), and engaging with a historical period romanticized as *the* exemplary instance of how encounters with bygone cultural artefacts might spur great artistic and intellectual leaps ‘forward’.

Sight and Song has much to say to the digital humanities today, as universities, archives, and museums debate how best to levy the ‘collective intelligence’ of online ‘knowledge communities’ and enlist artists to devise innovative means of ‘activating’ archival materials. The poems about Saint Sebastian (of which there are three in *Sight and Song*) are particularly interesting insofar as they address the role of desire and identification in drawing us to the past. These poems see Michael Field writing about — and as — a figure whose passage from religious icon to homosexual icon was, as Dinah Ward and Richard Kaye have observed, well underway by 1892.¹⁷

¹⁶ Field, ‘Works and Days’, BL, Add MS 46784, fol. 4. [E.C.].

¹⁷ Dinah Ward, ‘Michael Field and Saint Sebastian’, in *Michael Field and their World*, ed. by Margaret D. Stetz and Cheryl A. Wilson (High Wycombe: Rivendale Press,

In these poems Ward sees Michael Field exploring the role of avatars and identifications in ‘conceiving of a “homosexual self”’ (p. 169). Drawing on their journals, she argues that Cooper (whose boyish looks were the subject of much comment among the pair and their wider circle) was particularly drawn to da Messina’s *Saint Sebastian* as a work that simultaneously articulated and gave ‘relief’ from what, in ‘Works and Days’, she calls that ‘passion of passions[:] disappointment’.¹⁸ The immediate cause of Cooper’s disappointment was, as Ward records, the fever that prevented her from attending a performance of Richard Wagner’s *Ring* cycle while the pair were in Germany (Ward, p. 168). The words that Cooper puts in Sebastian’s mouth, however, have a much broader relevance. By having Sebastian demand ‘Why am I denied what I was made for?’, Cooper gives voice to a very queer kind of dysphoria while also raising issues of aesthetics and appropriation: how far is it legitimate to turn artworks created for one purpose to other ends; to make them say things other than that which they were made to say?

If this act of ventriloquism demonstrates how late nineteenth-century ‘homosexual literary circles recuperated and refashioned common images and character stereotypes in order to confirm its own culture’,¹⁹ turning saints into bywords for homosexual desire and queer angst, it also resonates today, when Twitter users can proclaim ‘Je suis Charlie’ in solidarity with satirists who insist on their right to mockingly represent figures some hold sacred. And, by speaking her anguish through the ‘firm [...] olive’ body of ‘an Italian shepherd boy’, Cooper prompts us to consider what licenses identification across socio-economic classes, cultures, eras, ages, ethnicities, and genders — to think about how, when a web user posts a reaction GIF of a modern day ‘gay icon’ like Tyra Banks snapping her fingers in dismissal, this citation of contemporary African American femininity might signify differently depending on who is doing the citing.²⁰

Beyond its investment in the dynamics of identification, the Sebastian poem also serves as an example of *Sight and Song*’s concern with space — a subject that is also highly relevant to the digital humanities as we consider how augmented and virtual reality interfaces might enable different kinds of encounter with the cultural past. Jill Ehnenn speculates that the decision to include a poem on da Messina’s *Sebastian* in *Sight and Song* may have had to do with Berenson’s esteem for a painting that he found could ‘satisfy

2007), pp. 163–70; Richard Kaye, ‘Saint Sebastian and the Victorian Discourse of Decadence’, *Victorian Literature and Culture*, 27 (1999), 269–303. The two other Sebastian poems are ‘Correggio’s *Saint Sebastian*’ (*Sight and Song*, pp. 32–33) and ‘A “Sant’ *Imagine*” by Fiorenzo di Lorenzo’ (pp. 34–38).

¹⁸ Field, ‘Works and Days’, BL, Add MS 46779, fol. 99^v.

¹⁹ Martha Vicinus, ‘The Adolescent Boy: Fin de Siècle Femme Fatale?’, *Journal of the History of Sexuality*, 5 (1994), 90–114 (p. 92).

²⁰ Field, ‘Works and Days’, BL, Add MS 46779, fol. 68^v.

one's hunger for seeing in three dimensions in a way that almost no other painters do at all', such that it 'seemed the one entirely complete reconstruction of space in existence'. Whether or not this enthusiasm informed the decision to include the painting, Berenson's account of 'the way you see round and round the Sebastian, the way the Sebastian's arm invites you to glide around it' points to the way that, in this poem as in *Sight and Song* more generally, much of what is being said about temporality, sexuality, and identity is, as Linda K. Hughes notes, being said through a discourse of space and form, haptics and kinaesthetics.²¹

Though there is a clear sense of identification (in nineteenth-century terms) of a Flaubertian type in Cooper with da Messina's *Saint Sebastian* (Saint Sebastian? Oui, c'est moi), the poem also exhibits a clear desire for the male body. And the GIFs accentuate the poem's eroticism, emphasizing his partial nudity and white underwear. In its concern with how images mount an appeal to an embodied spectator (whether as objects of desire or vehicles for identification) *Sight and Song* also resonates with aspects of digital visual culture — in which, many critics hold, conventional forms of signification are being abandoned in favour of nascent expressive vocabularies based on affect, spatial metonymy, kinaesthetics, and 'carnal resonance'. Media, these critics hold, are increasingly addressing audiences at a visceral rather than a reflective level, and coaxing them into more or less complex kinds of interaction.²² Although digital images exist only as fluctuating voltages and fluorescing screens, their amenability to being dragged, scrolled, and tinkered with means that spectators often interact with them on very tactile terms. As Mika Elo quips, contemporary visual culture is 'digital' not just in the computational sense, but also in its emphasis on accessing culture via 'finger-friendly' haptic interfaces.²³

²¹ Jill Ehnenn, 'Looking Strategically: Feminist and Queer Aesthetics in Michael Field's *Sight and Song*', *Victorian Poetry*, 42 (2004), 213–59 (p. 236); Linda K. Hughes, 'Sight and Song and Significant Form', in *The Oxford Handbook of Victorian Poetry*, ed. by Matthew Bevis (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), pp. 563–79 (p. 575).

²² Consider, for example, Eugénie Shinkle's writing on affect, embodiment, and fashion photography; Graeme Kirkpatrick's work on video game aesthetics; Laura Mulvey's account of digital viewing technologies and 'fetishistic' spectatorship; and Susanna Paasonen's work on how pornographic images 'grab' viewers who are in turn compelled to 'grab' files with their cursors and drag them into private digital archives, perhaps to be magnified, cropped, and manipulated. Eugénie Shinkle, 'Uneasy Bodies: Affect, Embodied Perception and Contemporary Fashion Photography', in *Carnal Aesthetics: Transgressive Imagery and Feminist Politics*, ed. by Bettina Papenburg and Marta Zarzycka (London: Tauris, 2013), pp. 73–88; Graeme Kirkpatrick, *Aesthetic Theory and the Video Game* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2011); Laura Mulvey, *Death 24x a Second: Stillness and the Moving Image* (London: Reaktion, 2006); Susanna Paasonen, *Carnal Resonance: Affect and Online Pornography* (London: MIT Press, 2011).

²³ Mika Elo, 'Digital Finger: Beyond Phenomenological Figures of Touch', *Journal of Aesthetics and Culture*, 4 (2012), n. p. <<http://dx.doi.org/10.3402/jac.v4i0.14982>>.

In all of these authors we see a concern with whether images are to be understood as *powerless* (insofar as they are at the mercy of the viewers who grab and edit them) or *powerful* (insofar as they exert a thrall over viewers who seem drawn to them). The figure of Saint Sebastian incarnates this ambiguity, exhibiting a potency grounded in masochistic submission — ‘stricken through by darts, but armed with power’. For this reason, da Messina’s *Saint Sebastian* remains an affecting illustration of the paradox remarked upon by W. J. T. Mitchell: that although we know deep down that images want nothing, that they cannot look back, their very impassivity and indifference drives us to invest them with meaning.²⁴

The impropriety of identification

Having suggested that Michael Field’s approach to Renaissance culture in *Sight and Song* provides some interesting pointers for the digital humanities, and having drawn particular attention to their treatment of the figure of Saint Sebastian, this article also wants to consider how Bradley and Cooper themselves figure as objects of identification and desire in online collections — and, more specifically, to use their representation on blogging and social networking platforms like Tumblr as a way into contemporary debates over, on the one hand, how scholars should engage with the queer literary past, and, on the other, how social media shape our relationship with culture and history — debates that are subject to an intriguing degree of isomorphism and overlap.

As we might expect from a platform that is home to ‘a huge queer ecosystem’ of bloggers, when Michael Field appears on Tumblr the accent is often on sexuality: their poems are quoted on blogs with names like ‘homosexuality and civilization’ or ‘queerliness’, while their image is framed as a representation of ‘Inspiring Historical Lezzies’.²⁵ In one text post the statement ‘on Tuesday we’ll be doing Lesbian incest’ is offered as an example of ‘shit English professors say’, and tagged #michaelfield;²⁶ in another (from a blog, which, at the time of writing, was using a 1912 J. C. Leyendecker illustration of a dapper young man in an Arrow collar as its avatar) the blogger confides ‘on the inside cover of my exam booklet for queer lit I wrote “I

²⁴ W. J. T. Mitchell, *What Do Pictures Want?: The Lives and Loves of Images* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005).

²⁵ Alex Cho, ‘Queer Reverb: Tumblr, Affect, Time’, in *Networked Affect*, ed. by Hillis, Paasonen, and Petit, pp. 43–58 (p. 43); solidlifechoices, Tumblr <<http://solidlifechoices.tumblr.com/post/10671285943/inspiring-historical-lezzies-michael-field>> [accessed 16 November 2015].

²⁶ rory-motherfucking-williams, Tumblr <<http://rory-motherfucking-williams.tumblr.com/post/10019110804/on-tuesday-well-be-doing-lesbian-incest>> [accessed 16 November 2015].

pray to the Holy trinity — Katherine Bradley, Edith Cooper, and Whym Chow — and ask them to give me the strength to do well on this exam”.²⁷ Scanning these accounts, many of which seem to come from students encountering Michael Field via university syllabi, we get a sense not just of the poets’ increasing canonicity, but also of how Bradley and Cooper speak to those looking for ‘gay icons’ capable of giving a face to histories of same-sex desire and queer creativity. The following example is an instance of how such platforms enter academic debates. Recently, a beautiful photograph of two nineteenth-century women in a loving pose was used by a LGBT blogger to discuss Michael Field.²⁸ The photo was lifted up and used by an intern at Baylor as an authentic photograph of Michael Field. The photograph went viral, with many believing that a new photograph of the women had been found. This was not the case (nineteenth-century photography, as historians of nineteenth-century media continuously remind us, can be misleading), but the intensity of the debates shows how easily these boundaries (between professional and amateur, studiously objective and viscerally enthused) break down.

These posts and exchanges testify to the way that literary texts can implicate readers in empathetic connections that seem to transcend geographical and historical circumstance — perhaps especially when those texts are lyric poems about love, and when author and reader alike are understood to belong to the same sexual minority. It is important, however, to remember that Michael Field’s sexuality was more complex than many of these accounts would suggest. During the writing of *Sight and Song*, for example, Cooper was ‘sick of passion’ for Berenson, who visited her in Dresden as she lay ill in hospital with scarlet fever. She was then suffering the obsessive bouts of passion of a female nurse who baptized her as ‘Heinrich’, while Bradley lovingly stood by her bedside in hospital. Such complexities pose problems for readings based on the presumption that historical sexualities are necessarily legible, stable, or capable of being correlated with contemporary understandings of sexual identity. For this reason, historians of sexuality have traditionally been cautious of readings based on identification, and of work that smacks too much of fandom rather than ‘real’ scholarship. As Stephen Guy-Bray has observed, there has long been a consensus in this field that ‘identification is naïve and unscholarly’.²⁹ In a similar vein, Valerie Rohy notes the emphasis laid on avoiding the ‘hasty

²⁷ sebastian-flyte, Tumblr <<http://sebastian-flyte.tumblr.com/post/69396282308/on-the-inside-cover-of-my-exam-booklet-for-queer>> [accessed 16 November 2015].

²⁸ Elisa, ‘Edith Emma Cooper & Katherine Harris Bradley’, <<http://reviews-and-ramblings.dreamwidth.org/tag/author:+michael+field>> [accessed 18 November 2015].

²⁹ Stephen Guy-Bray, ‘No Present’, in *Sex, Gender and Time in Fiction and Culture*, ed. by Ben Davies and Jana Funke (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), pp. 38–52 (p. 40).

assumption of commonalities between present and past same-sex desire' and vigilantly warding against "ahistorical" or "anachronistic" readings that would project modern concepts back in time' in queer historical scholarship.³⁰ To claim Michael Field as 'historical lezzies' may, then, help contemporary queers seeking to ground themselves in a cultural tradition, but it also risks eliding important differences between the sexual cultures of the 1890s and the 2010s, and significantly underestimates the complexities of sexualities which may prove more radical or more contentious than some bloggers are willing to witness. (Michael Field's case, for example, speaks not just of female–female desire, but also of incest.)

Critiques of identification-based readings of queer literature find an echo in complaints about the terms on which microblogs and image aggregators invite their users to engage with the past. Consider the controversy surrounding designer James Bridle's Tumblr blog 'The New Aesthetic', which sparked a series of debates about digital culture, but was also criticized for its 'lack of rigorous theoretical analysis and comprehension' and its lumping together of 'radically different phenomena and issues', with critics accusing Bridle of cynically using others' work to 'assembl[e] cultural capital [...] capable of being monetized' in a way that foregrounded 'questions of cultural ownership and attribution' in online environments;³¹ or artist Ryan Gerald Nelson's 2010 book *DDDDoomed*, a 'speculative fiction' imagining the impact sites such as FFFFOUND! and Tumblr will have on the image culture of the future. For Nelson, image aggregation blogs impoverish images by stripping them of the 'contextual indicators' that give them meaning, 'devaluing each image's potency as an autonomous object' and reducing it to evidence of the individual blogger's keen eye and impeccable taste, faculties which are understood as innate, intuitive, and ahistorical.³² While Tumblr and Pinterest might frame users' activities in terms of archiving, curation, and creative expression, Nelson sees such descriptions as woefully misleading, especially when these blogs are considered alongside the many artistic and curatorial projects in which unorthodox taxonomical and curatorial rubrics become a means of creating genuinely challenging, insightful, and poetic arrangements of found images and archival materials. Subscribing to museum director Christian Brondle's dictum that it is only once we 'know the background of objects' that those objects can be 'deliberately decontextualized, with the goal of creating new hypotheses', Nelson lambasts image aggregators for being

³⁰ Valerie Rohy, *Anachronism and its Others: Sexuality, Race, Temporality* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2010), p. 126.

³¹ David M. Berry and others, *New Aesthetic, New Anxieties* (Rotterdam: V2_, 2012), pp. 19, 20.

³² Ryan Gerald Nelson, *DDDDoomed, or, Collectors & Curators of the Image: A Brief Future History of the Image Aggregator* (Minneapolis: Edition MK, 2010), pp. 1, 67.

less interested in understanding the past than in shoring up their status as ‘cool’ cultural magpies — a thesis that echoes Liu’s description of online cool as the ‘techno-informatic vanishing point of contemporary aesthetics, psychology, morality, politics, spirituality and everything’, a networked sensibility that rejects theorization and reduces engagement with culture to a matter of the intuitive judgement ‘cool or not cool’.³³

Whether it is a matter of queer history or online image aggregation, then, we encounter a similar opposition, whereby the rigour and objectivity supposedly characteristic of ‘proper’ academic, artistic, curatorial, and archival practice is affirmed via critiques of subjective, intuitive, superficial, and self-aggrandizing approaches which fail to show due respect for the past, approaches disparagingly associated with juvenility, narcissism, and methodological sloppiness. Recently, however, queer and feminist scholars have begun to complicate this binary, rethinking the ‘question of what sorts of identifications scholars in the present can legitimately make with the texts and people of the past’ and re-evaluating the ways in which online archives and image collections mediate history and sexuality (Guy-Bray, p. 40). Stephen Guy-Bray, for example, has argued that queer theory has perhaps been overzealous in its insistence ‘that as sexualities are different now than they were then [...] identification is naïve and unscholarly’, suggesting that rather than seeking to ‘police [...] identification’ it may be more fruitful to acknowledge the fact that ‘to some extent we all look for people like ourselves in the past’ and to address the dynamics of this desire (p. 40). In the last decade, Elizabeth Freeman, Valerie Rohy, Carolyn Dinshaw, Jonathan Goldberg, and Madhavi Menon have all explored the value of adopting ‘ahistorical’, ‘anachronistic’, and ‘unhistorical’ perspectives on the queer literary past in what amounts to a ‘temporal turn’ in queer studies.³⁴ Such studies suggest that the issues with which Michael Field grapples in *Sight and Song* — issues of identification and objectivity, autonomy and (mis)appropriation — continue to animate and divide scholars working on the relationship between cultures and sexualities past and present.

Meanwhile, Susanna Paasonen and Alexander Cho, working at the intersection of online visual culture and sexuality, have begun using affect theory to reconceptualize the circulation of unattributed images online and the creation of personal archives of downloaded content, challenging the idea that the Internet necessarily cultivates a ‘dumbed down’ and unduly subjective relationship with visual culture. Discussing the traffic in

³³ Nelson, p. 2; Alan Liu, *The Laws of Cool: Knowledge Work and the Culture of Information* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), p. 3.

³⁴ Elizabeth Freeman, *Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), pp. 43, 92; Rohy, *Anachronism and its Others*; Carolyn Dinshaw, *How Soon is Now?: Medieval Texts, Amateur Readers, and the Queerness of Time* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012); Jonathan Goldberg and Madhavi Menon, ‘Queering History’, *PMLA*, 120 (2009), 1608–17.

historical homoerotic images on Tumblr, Cho suggests that the lack of an ‘attribution or caption’ can allow a ‘felt register [...] of intimation, assemblage, intensity and aesthetics’ to take precedence. Where Nelson reads the absence of contextual data in terms of the diminution or subordination of the image, for Cho it can also imbue images with new force, ‘allowing us to fill in the blanks with affective charge by virtue of erasure’ and creating ‘a generative meaning-space of queer temporality [...], a charged vacuum’. As they are shared, reblogged, and moved from one context to another, these images sustain an ‘interplay of cyclical, erotic, and melancholic queer temporalities’ and create affective ‘refrains’ that, for Cho, attest to the ‘stubborn persistence of the past’ — a reading with intriguing implications for *Sight and Song*’s reanimation of early modern images (Cho, pp. 44, 49–50). In a similar vein, Paasonen’s work on online pornography proposes that we think about the relationship between viewers and images in terms of ‘resonance’ rather than ‘identification’ — a concept that, she holds, better equips us to attend to ‘somatic and somewhat involuntary moments of proximity with characters and bodily performances on the screen’ (pp. 185–86). For while these ‘moments of proximity [...] in encounters between the spectator and the depicted [...] may involve recognition in the sense of being able to relate the acts shown to one’s own experiences and sensations’, they should, Paasonen contends, be understood not in terms of identification (which, for her, carries unhelpful connotations of one-to-one correspondence and psychological projection), but of how ‘resonance touches and moves the viewer’s body *without* a need for sameness’ (p. 189). Whether these scholars move to retire the concept of identification or to revise our understanding of it, they suggest that the way we draw parallels with the past is itself worth investigating. As Dinshaw confesses, ostensibly objective academic studies are often underwritten by ‘too-close, anything-but-disinterested [...] connections to [...] [historical] texts’, while identifications are necessarily partial and projective, as capable of disrupting as they are of affirming familiar models of history (p. 33).

Michael Field and the past

In this context it is instructive to revisit the approach Bradley and Cooper took to the problem of poetically animating images from the past while also maintaining a sense of the images’ autonomy and otherness. From one perspective, the notes and journal entries from which *Sight and Song* emerged constitute a valuable record of two ‘queer’ artists engaged in the search for a ‘usable past’. It is hardly coincidental that this search took them to the Renaissance, a period defined by its rediscovery and refunctioning of classical texts which, among other things, furnished authors and artists with a repertoire of mythic episodes and avatars that, as Valerie Traub argues,

proved particularly useful as vehicles for exploring ‘*risqué* or troubling ideas’, including that of same-sex desire. Indeed, Traub contends that ‘it is through, quite literally, a rebirth of classical idioms, rhetorics, tropes, and illustrative examples that female homoeroticism gained intelligibility in early modern England’³⁵ — an argument at the heart of Michael Field’s *Long Ago* (1889) which anticipated the palimpsest writing of *Sight and Song* by using sapphic fragments as the basis for new poems. *Fin-de-siècle* writers like Walter Pater, Oscar Wilde, A. Mary F. Robinson, and Vernon Lee engaged in similar ways with the Renaissance.

But if Bradley and Cooper are interested in using these images, they also manifest a concern with *responsible* use, and with the question of whether their subjective responses should be allowed to override the autonomy of the artworks that their poems seek to ‘translate’. Where some have found it tempting to read *Sight and Song*’s preface as slyly disingenuous — claiming objectivity to provide an alibi for some of the decidedly unorthodox readings that follow — Thain and Vadillo have made convincing cases for *Sight and Song* as a genuine attempt to, as Thain puts it, reconcile ‘objective and subjective responses to painting’: for her the poems are animated by the ‘struggle [...] between letting the painting speak for itself and having it eclipsed by the dominating subjectivity of the critic/poet who speaks for it’, while for Vadillo the collection develops a ‘two-phased aesthetics [...] in which objective enjoyment is followed by subjective *jouissance*’.³⁶

As we have said, similar questions interested many art historians and aesthetic theorists at the time, from Ruskin and Pater to Berenson and Vernon Lee. But discussions about subjectivity and objectivity also had a much wider purchase: as Lorraine Daston and Peter Galison’s account of ‘the emergence of scientific objectivity’ relates, ‘mid-nineteenth-century research in history, anthropology, philology, psychology, and, above all, sensory physiology’ had shocked scholars across the disciplines by demonstrating just ‘how very differently individuals reasoned, described, believed, and even perceived’, and, in so doing, catalysed an aspiration towards objectivity and an intensified suspicion of subjective ‘images, [...] intuitions, [...] [and] mental representations of every kind’.³⁷ If these discoveries and debates were to have profound implications for the arts and visual culture, as Rosalind Krauss and Jonathan Crary have demonstrated, they also played a crucial role in the development of modern ‘logic, mathematics, physics and philosophy’ — and, by extension, the emerging technologies of

³⁵ Valerie Traub, *The Renaissance of Lesbianism in Early Modern England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), p. 8.

³⁶ Thain, ‘*Michael Field*’, p. 74; Vadillo, *Women Poets*, p. 187.

³⁷ Lorraine Daston and Peter Galison, *Objectivity* (New York: Zone Books, 2010), pp. 9, 254–56.

computation, simulation, and artificial intelligence that underpin today's digital image culture (Daston and Galison, p. 254).

Queer optics

Sight and Song can, then, be said to participate in various concerns that are central to the culture of 'new media'. And, as Vadillo has argued, it also bears the influence of various then new technological developments, from the railway and photographic reproduction to the advent of mass-produced glass and the scopically oriented 'culture of mass transparency' and 'translucent images' it inaugurated (*Women Poets*, p. 182).

Michael Field's use of these models and metaphors locates them in a continuum of artists and theorists who have employed lenses, panes, projections and mirrors, perspectival effects, and optical illusions to figure queer encounters with the cultural past: in her discussion of the dynamics of identification, Rohy, for example, develops a conception of queer reading as anamorphosis, so that particular meanings only become available to those reading from a particular angle. Reading Poe's 'Ligeia', she is struck by a description of a tapestry whose design seems to shift depending on the viewer's position — and by how this description chimes with her experience of a text that produces a 'lesbian effect'. It may be no more than 'an optical illusion, visible from only one historical vantage point', but it 'hangs before [her] eyes' nonetheless (Rohy, p. 123). If the association of anamorphosis and sexual nonconformity remains more or less implicit in Poe, it is substantially developed in Proust. His accounts of the painter Elstir's landscapes, which present viewers with visual puzzles that 'bring out certain [...] laws of perspective', mirror the way that the lie of the sexual land seems to shift as readers move through his novel.³⁸ As Rohy notes, the metaphor of anamorphosis is also central to Jacques Lacan's theories of subjectivity and desire (pp. 134–35).

Of course, if glass lets us see through to what lies beyond, it can also reflect, distort, and magnify, creating other kinds of queer optical phenomena. This becomes clear in Elizabeth Freeman's reading of Nguyen Tan Hoang's *K.I.P.* (2002), a video piece in which the artist's face is reflected in the screen of a CRT TV as he watches a tape of two men having sex:

Nguyen's own face hovers over a scene of plenitude he did not witness directly, a time that he never experienced but nevertheless clearly mourns for [...]. By superimposing his own image as a spectator onto a scene already containing a trace of earlier

³⁸ Marcel Proust, *In Search of Lost Time*, trans. by C. K. Scott Moncrieff and Terence Kilmartin, rev. by D. J. Enright, 6 vols (London: Vintage, 2002), II: *Within a Budding Grove*, 483.

spectators, with that trace in turn present only in the negative as gaps and repetitions, Nguyen figuratively joins a community of past- and present-tense viewers. (Freeman, p. 13)

In each of these texts, different cultural forms and technologies — from the *plein-air* landscape to the cathode ray tube television — provide models for thinking about desire, identification, and historicity. This digital edition of Michael Field’s ‘Antonello da Messina’s *Saint Sebastian*’ tries to bring out the semiotic affordances of a different set of cultural technologies: not the train window, but the ‘windows’ that have been a feature of graphical user interfaces since the 1990s; not the translucence of glass, but the capacity of software like Photoshop to arrange images in nested, semi-opaque layers.

Afterword: sites and songs

In an early 2003 article entitled ‘A Note Upon the “Liquid Crystal Screen” and Victorian Poetry’, Vadillo argued that the future of nineteenth-century poetry was the digital world. It is perhaps not surprising that the piece finished with Michael Field’s *Sight and Song*. She argued for the creation of a hypertext that would

include not just digital images of the book itself (drawing attention to its materiality: the book as a work of art), but also of the paintings that these poems speak of. Moreover, the hypertext could include digital images of drafts (allowing the user to see the organic development of this collection), and selections from Michael Field’s diary *Works and Days* that might illuminate this book of poems. This hypertext could set up links to other sites either to examine contemporary reviews or to analyze journals or periodicals in which these poems first appeared.³⁹

Such an ‘act of interpretation’, the piece suggested, will produce poetic installations, in which the written songs will be transfused to possible virtual exhibitions in which the reader will be able to choose how to experience and navigate through the documentation. Words-in-poems in this context as much as the High Art these words were connected to, she noted, would become optic pathways for networked users.

Today, the proliferation of digital tools and platforms (from image editing programs to sites like Tumblr and NewHive to user-friendly game design software like Unity, Twine, and Stencyl) has made it easier than ever to attempt this kind of interpretation. By deploying some of these tools to

³⁹ Ana Parejo Vadillo, ‘A Note Upon the “Liquid Crystal Screen” and Victorian Poetry’, *Victorian Poetry*, 41 (2003), 531–36 (p. 534).

respond to and remediate one of the poems in *Sight and Song*, our project shows that Michael Field's aesthetic project remains acutely relevant today, as humanities scholars ponder the vicissitudes of technological mediation, the role of archives in cultural production, the nature of collaborative and collective authorship, the function of avatars and aliases in identity work, and the changing relationship between art, life, and life writing.

By foregrounding the terms on which we access and make use of the cultural past, and by striking a balance between respect for that past and the desire to reinvent it, this 'queerest' of books continues to elicit interpretation and experimentation.

This piece is an experiment of the entrusted collaboration type envisaged by Michael Field between digital media theorist Rob Gallagher and literary critic Ana Parejo Vadillo.