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**Michael Field's Sapphism: A Tiresian Ontology of Openness
between Life and Death in *Long Ago* (1889)**

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*Siempre a mi madre G. Elizabeth,
auténtica σύμμαχος μία*

*A mi tita Lucila y mi madrina Gladys,
mis bases ontológicas*

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Beggar that I am, I am even poor in thanks
Shakespeare's *Hamlet*

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INTRODUCTION

TOWARDS MICHAEL FIELD'S TIRESIAN ONTOLOGY

*These women whose identity recalls
the flesh of Tiresias pushed inside-out*
–Michelle Lee

Michael Field, the joint pseudonym of Katharine Bradley and her niece Edith Cooper, is no longer an unfamiliar name in the canon of Victorian literature. After nearly a century of disregard and virtual oblivion, this literary couple has gained growing prominence amongst *fin de siècle* scholars since the 1990s, mostly due to their idiosyncratic collective identity and partly due to the impressive quality of their work. Angela Leighton, Chris White and Virginia Blain pioneered in rediscovering the figures of Bradley and Cooper, offering critical assessments of their poetic collections, and encouraging further recognition of their original contributions to Victorian letters. As a result of this ground-breaking rediscovery, in 2004 the University of Delaware hosted the first conference on Michael Field that led to the publication of Margaret D. Stetz and Cheryl A. Wilson's *Michael Field and their World* in 2007. In subsequent years, four other scholarly books came out and consolidated the appraisal and reception of Michael

Field as a significant name of late nineteenth-century culture: Marion Thain's *'Michael Field': Poetry, Aestheticism, and the Fin de Siècle*, Jill Ehnenn's *Women's Literary Collaboration, Queerness and Late-Victorian Culture*, Sharon Bickle's *The Fowl and the Pussycat: Love Letters of Michael Field, 1876-1909*, and Marion Thain and Ana Parejo Vadillo's *Michael Field, The Poet. Published and Manuscript Materials*.¹ Between 2009 and 2010, Michelle Lee and Sharon Bickle launched and edited two issues of *The Michaelian*, the first academic journal exclusively devoted to "promoting cross-disciplinary studies of Michael Field and their considerable coterie of literary and artistic friends as well as related aspects of *fin-de-siècle* culture and life" ("Fieldnotes"). Furthermore, in July 2014, it was at the Senate House that The Michael Field Centenary Conference was held with the aim "to acknowledge and celebrate the diversity and vitality of new scholarship surrounding Michael Field and fin de siècle literature generally" (Vadillo et al., "Call for Papers"). The present dissertation seeks to partake of such academic vitality with a new critical look at Bradley and Cooper's early oeuvre, offering the very first in-depth study entirely dedicated to their first joint volume of poems, *Long Ago* (1889).

Nevertheless, the reception of the Michael Fields, as they were usually called in their circle of peers, has not been limited to purely critical studies. In 1996, Isobel Armstrong, Joseph Bristow and Cath Sharrock published one of the first anthologies to focus specifically on nineteenth-century women poets and to include Bradley and Cooper with eight of their poems. In a more recent and general compilation devoted to Victorian literature, Victor Shea and William Whitla have ratified the canonical status of Michael Field with a large total of twenty-eight poems. This significant turn from a specifically gendered anthology to a more general one suggests not only that Bradley and Cooper represent a necessary presence in any contemporary compilation of Victorian authors, but also that theirs is no longer a minor, marginal and peculiar name: 'Michael Field' has instead come to share critical and anthological recognition with such major writers as Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Alfred Tennyson or Oscar Wilde.

Beyond the printed word, Bradley and Cooper have also entered the current field of the digital humanities. In particular, it is their ekphrastic volume of poems entitled *Sight*

¹ Ivor C. Treby could also be included here with his *Michael Field Catalogue* (1998) and three different compilations of poetry, but his voluminous work fails to offer an academically accurate and critically rigorous picture of the Michael Fields.

and Song (1892) that has gained significant virtual ground due to its inherent visual poetics and its evident potential to establish hypertextual dialogues with the paintings described in each lyric. In 2015, Sarah E. Kersh created an academic website named *The Poems of Michael Field* to present a carefully annotated and illustrated edition of *Sight and Song*, as well as more simple editions of *Long Ago* (1889) and *Underneath the Bough* (1893). Similarly and also in 2015, Ana Parejo Vadillo and Rod Gallagher engaged digitally with *Sight and Song* and developed a complex hypertext edition of one of its poems –“Antonello da Messina’s Saint Sebastian.” Combining this poem, the painting it describes, a portrait of Bradley and Cooper and an entry from their common diary *Works and Days*, the hypertext transforms our reading experience completely by revealing “the participative and synaesthetic quality” of Michael Field’s ekphrastic experiment and allowing us to “encounter –and reimagine– the queer past” in an innovative and dynamic fashion (Gallagher and Vadillo). The digitised poem becomes more erotic, more vivid, and more relevant for the contemporary reader’s visual culture. As a result, *Sight and Song* proves significantly valuable in how it “speaks so fruitfully to web users and digital humanists alike” (Gallagher and Vadillo).

Robert P. Fletcher has also experimented with *Sight and Song* in a very promising project of digital ekphrasis and augmented reality. His original experiment focuses on the poem “A Portrait,” which is a lyrical translation of Bartolommeo Veneto’s *Bust of a Courtesan* that Fletcher finds particularly significant for its homoeroticism and gender politics. His multi-media product, available on YouTube, functions as follows:

When one triggers the aura by scanning Bartolomeo Veneto’s *Bust of a Courtesan* with the Aurasma browser –whether on a screen, in a book, or on the wall of the Städel Museum in Frankfurt– a video (created with Garage Band and iMovie) plays that blends audio of a skilled reading of the poem by the poet Anna Evans (recorded for the project) with details from the image and scans of the printed pages from *Sight and Song* [...] When the video ends, a digital facsimile of the book’s title page appears. If one taps it, one is taken to the Project Muse page for an Ana Parejo Vadillo essay on the multimodality of *Sight and Song* and its suitability for new-media presentation (Fletcher).

With Fletcher’s augmentation, the experience of reading Michael Field’s “A Portrait” becomes an enhanced form of artistic reception that combines verbal, audiovisual, kinetic and even academic elements, transforming *Sight and Song* into a reinvented work of interactive multi-media. To this day Fletcher continues to work on his project

and aims to design a website to upload and share the augmentations of the complete volume of Michael Field's ekphrastic poetry that he is currently creating. Undoubtedly, Bradley and Cooper have an auspicious future in the growing field of digital literacy and creativity –if only thanks to a collection of suggestive ekphrases that has even won popular acclaim for its poem on Leonardo da Vinci's *La Gioconda* in the digital edition of *The Guardian*.

Nevertheless, *Sight and Song* is not the only Michael Field work that has appealed to digital humanists. Recently, the *Victorian Lives and Letters Consortium* (University of South Carolina), in collaboration with the British Library and New York University, has digitised the complete diaries of Michael Field for the sake of a future open-access academic edition. As the principle investigator in charge of this project, Marion Thain pursues three general aims: to consolidate the position of the Fields within the canon of Victorian poetry, to disseminate their journals as privileged sources for the study of the British *fin de siècle*, and to use them as “a highly significant historical documentation of the construction of a queer identity, and as a moving personal story of love, literature, and loss” (“Digitizing the Diary” 228). Additionally, from a technical and editorial perspective, Thain approaches the life-writing of Michael Field as a challenging “case study for reflection on the process of digitization” (232). Her idea is to go beyond the mere logic of preservation and dissemination by encoding the diaries with textual mark-up (or TIE tags). This method would enable researchers and general readers to explore the journals in great depth, to search for names in association with the multiple nicknames that the Fields used to make up for themselves and their friends, to account for the relationship between entries and the various inserts that overpopulate the original volumes, to distinguish the parts written by Bradley from those of her niece, to pay attention to particular stylistic and narrative features, and even to draw comparisons with other digitised journals from the same period. All in all, claims Thain, the corpus of Michael Field's life-writing “offers a fascinating experimental field for developing advanced text-encoding strategies and for thinking about how we might use the technology to read in new ways” (240).

Not only are Michael Field's works powerfully appealing to academic cyber-users: their very authorial and actual identity has proven to have significant implications for the so-called semantic web. In a 2013 article, Susan Brown and John Simpson use the specific case of Michael Field as an outlier to illustrate how the bibliographic ontologies most

prevalent nowadays are utterly inefficient in treating ambiguous literary identities, peculiar cases of semantic uniqueness and complex relationships between names and persons, mainly because the dominant mode of codification consists in applying clear-cut, normalising and univocal properties to any kind of outlier. In such ontologies, Michael Field simply becomes a standardised and simplified name that loses its intrinsic complexity and unorthodox authorial status. For this reason, Brown and Simpson argue for the need to develop “new strategies for representing difference across large sets of data” and for better formalising “complex social meanings” on the Web (“The Curious Identity of Michael Field”).

This very thesis, on the other hand, grows from the increasing corpus of Michael Field’s works available on the Web. The exhaustive study I carry out here is predicated on two open-access editions of *Long Ago* (1889), namely: a digitised version on the Dickinson College website above-mentioned and a high-resolution scanned copy belonging to the 19th Century Women Poets Collection of the Armstrong Browning Library (Baylor University).² In using both these digital sources systematically, I feel and prove that the Web serves an invaluable purpose for the humanities today: it provides unprecedented visibility to literary texts that would remain forever neglected in the material confines of their printed pages. Originally published in only a hundred copies, *Long Ago* is now a global text, boundless on the Internet, and more likely now than ever to receive the recognition that it merits in the contemporary study and reception of Victorian poetry.

Beyond the cyberspace, Michael Field has already found a modest although fertile place within the growing contemporary tradition of Neo-Victorian literature. American writer and scholar Michelle Lee has published three short auto/biographical texts and a long closet drama as a result of her doctoral research on Bradley and Cooper. The three separate pieces, written for a theatre course and published in a journal in 2010, represent a fruitful interplay between creativity and scholarly criticism, as well as a very intimate and personal dialogue between the Michael Fields and Michelle Lee. Feeling powerfully seduced, awed and even haunted by the ghosts of Katharine and Edith, Lee pays them tribute with three scripts and their respective solo performances that show a very profound affective response to Michael Field’s life and work by documenting “the exchange between self and other, I and you/they, she and her/they, wind and sun and

² I have also used the copy no. 14 of the first and only edition of *Long Ago*, held as a highly fragile book at the British Library.

bee, fiction and fact, page and stage, words and body” (Lee 189). In the first script, Lee introduces the Fields with biographical data, expresses her deep infatuation with them, quotes from their original letters, interpolates some of their poems, celebrates their initial paganism, and finishes by praising “how they loved each other” (192). The second script becomes less informative and far more personal: Lee shares her passion for the Fields with her pupils, rediscovers herself in light of their works, and even incorporates their words “into my mouth, into my body” (194). This process of affective incorporation reaches its climax in the third text, where Lee declares herself to be fully connected with Bradley and Cooper to such an extent that she recognises part of her own self in their love, becomes aware of her growing new desires, and manifests her gratitude to the Fields: “They made me feel like I could be more than what I had become” (196). For Lee, in short, the encounter with Michael Field transcends the strict confines of academic discourse and ushers in a deep creative process of self-discovery, personal redefinition and growth.

In her closet drama on the Fields, inserted as an appendix to her PhD dissertation and titled *The Angels of the House*, Lee presents a semi-biographical account that relies heavily on direct material in the Michael Field archive in the Bodleian Library (Oxford) and on some of their literary creations. Most of the drama revolves around how the Fields came up with their masculine pseudonym, how their true identity was publically revealed by Robert Browning, how their literary collaboration underwent some major tensions, how their intellectual coterie was divided between fervent supporters and those who deprecated their works, and how they eventually replaced their pseudonym with an anonymous signature. Yet, what prove to be most striking about this neo-Victorian refiguration are three particular details: the presence of Michael Field as a separate spectral and fanciful character reminiscent of the preeminent Judeo-Christian archangel, the explicit erotic romance between Bradley and Cooper, and the portrayal of a minor character named Josephine who works as parlourmaid for the Fields and seems to share with author Michelle Lee equal admiration –or even desire– for the special bond that exists between Bradley and Cooper. Perhaps over and above these details, Lee’s drama shows and announces a significant fact: that the life and work of the Fields has enough potential to lead a highly prosperous *Nachleben* in all manner of artistic revisitations. It seems fairly undeniable that Michael Field is not just a notable Victorian name: it also shows great promise as a neo-Victorian character.

1. Objectives and the Emanated Method: ‘Sapphic Tiresias’

This thesis seeks to be an original contribution to Michael Field’s increasing *Nachleben* in the field of Victorian studies today. The intended originality lies essentially in three aspects and purposes: firstly, this is the very first monograph to offer an in-depth study exclusively devoted to *Long Ago* (1889), which to date has only been examined in journal articles, book chapters or conference papers; secondly, I aim to revise the well-established critical idea of Michael Field as “The Tiresian Poet” by adopting a different perspective on the myth of the Theban prophet and, by extension, on the ontological function that this figure performs in the entire volume of *Long Ago*; thirdly and lastly, the different perspective I propose to apply in this study will signify a turn towards a more philosophical, markedly ontological and particularly anti-dualistic reading of *Long Ago* as a liminal text that is systematically structured around the porous categories of life and death or being and non-being.

The first original aspect implies what, according to Marion Thain, is “so often in danger of taking second place to the fascinating biography” of the Fields (*Michael Field*’ 2). namely: a truly close engagement with their texts. Indeed, both in academic and popular media, much of the fame around the Fields rests on their idiosyncratic relationship, their sexual identity, their personal connections with *fin-de-siècle* artists, their initial pagan spirituality, their fervent devotion to their dog Whym Chow, and their conversion to Roman Catholicism in 1909. More particularly, the Fields seem to represent a very attractive couple for those readers “looking for gay icons capable of giving a face to histories of same-sex desire and queer creativity” (Gallagher and Vadillo). This appropriation, although completely legitimate, has relegated Bradley and Cooper’s literary production to a secondary place. Their texts are explored and quoted in several studies, but frequently as mere illustrations of their personal desires and not as valuable aesthetic products in their own right. In particular, *Long Ago* has been construed as a mirror of the Bradley-Cooper relationship and hence as a possible case of lesbian writing, anti-sexological discourse or queer Sapphism. However, in spite of its full validity, this general construal has been articulated from a biographical perspective with a nearly exclusive emphasis on the complex authorial identity of Michael Field and

without paying due attention to the poems themselves in which such an identity takes shape.³

The very textuality of *Long Ago* takes absolute primacy in this study. I aim to let the text speak for itself and to discover the guiding hermeneutic principles for my reading in the fabric of images, tropes, and myths woven by Michael Field. These text-based principles entail a significant tenet: the text is not debased into a passive, only receptive, and submissive body, waiting to be elucidated and intellectualised without taking its internal epistemological resources into consideration. For, as a matter of fact, *Long Ago* has a complex conceptual structure at its core and includes some valuable motifs with enough potential to become interpretative implements that may be deployed to make sense of the text itself. In this way, the text serves an active purpose in the very process of analysis that it is to undergo here by laying the very conceptual foundations of the analysis per se.

The second and third original aspects of this study point to one of such interpretative implements that emanate from *Long Ago* with transcendental symbolic power, namely: the myth of Tiresias. In a short yet pioneering article, Christine White presents the Fields as ‘The Tiresian Poet’ who appropriates the figure of the Theban prophet “as a model of ambiguous gender identity and the power of women” (149). The Michaelian Tiresias, writes White, unsettles gender polarities, praises the fullness and greatness of the feminine consciousness, and becomes “a representation of the absence of any split between male and female in Michael’s Field utopian vision” (155). In a similar vein, Ed Madden devotes part of his post-doctoral monograph to Michael Field within a critical framework that conceptualises the Tiresian as “a cultural shorthand for sexual and gender variance, usually as a figure of homoerotic potential, frequently aligned with the feminine or the effeminate” (23). For Madden, the Michaelian Tiresias comes to be an embodiment of sexual inversion, a symbol of nonnormative sexuality, “a gender-transitive figure,” and “a transgendered trope” (107).

Both White and Madden base their readings chiefly on a single lyric from *Long Ago*, identified under the heading ‘LII.’ This privileged lyric reworks the myth of Tiresias as transmitted by Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* (3.316-88) in perhaps the most popular account

³ For instance, Marion Thain’s monograph, one of the most ambitious and convincing studies of Michael Field’s poetry, fails to place enough “focus upon the poems and the ways they function both alone and in a sequence” (Mitton, “Review” 323).

of the story.⁴ The plot is simple. One day, while his son Bacchus rested in his cradle, Jupiter averred that it was women who derived greater pleasure from the sexual act than did men, but his wife Juno objected straightaway. Both gods agreed to invoke Tiresias for mediation in their dispute, given that he had known both sexes in his own flesh. Once, tells Ovid, he chanced upon two mating snakes and struck them apart with his staff. In so doing, he immediately transformed into a woman and lived as such for seven falls. Once again, he came across the same pair of serpents,⁵ hit them sharply, and regained his lost manhood. Having undergone those two metamorphoses, Tiresias was considered the most apt to arbitrate between the two deities. He eventually sided with Jupiter and enraged Juno,⁶ who decided to punish him with eternal darkness in his eyes.⁷ Taking pity on him, the supreme god offset his loss of sight with the gift of prophecy.

If Michael Field's reworking of this Ovidian metamorphosis has attracted considerable attention, it is for good reason. The Michaels themselves referred to the attractive lyric as their 'Sapphic Tiresias' perhaps to highlight its centrality and special value (Madden 88). In May 1888, Robert Browning expressed his admiration for the Tiresian poem and declared that, although he was once interested in the myth of the Theban prophet, it was

⁴ For some thorough analyses of this Ovidian metamorphosis, see Coleman, Liveley, Di Rocco (24-31), Balsley, or Fabre-Serris.

⁵ For a close analysis of Tiresias and his connection with the divine, prophetic, and androgynous symbolism of snakes, see Krappe, García Gual, and Brisson (46-56).

⁶ In the Hesiodic *Melampodia*, one of the earliest texts featuring Tiresias, the Theban seer agrees with Zeus and quantifies female pleasure in huge amounts: "in only one portion out of ten portions, a man has delight / but the ten a woman fills out, delighting her senses" (Torres 353).

⁷ Hera's reaction and punishment against Tiresias seems excessive, baseless, and enigmatic enough to raise the question as to why she felt so infuriated and offended at the prophet's resolution. For Brisson, the bone of contention lies in the implicit advocacy of sexual or Aphroditean –as opposed to marital– pleasure that Tiresias shows with his reply:

[La] question porte sur le plaisir qui résulte de l'acte sexuel. De toute évidence, donc, il y est fait référence à l'Aphrodite grecque et à son répondant latin, Vénus. Or, Héra, et son répondant latin, Junon, s'oppose à Aphrodite [...] comme celle qui, dans les rapports de la femme avec l'homme, représente l'épouse, face à celle qui représente l'amante. Dans cette perspective, le jugement de Tirésias constitue, en fait, une reconnaissance éclatante de la part d'Aphrodite dans les rapports de la femme avec l'homme (33-34).

Di Rocco finds another valid reason for Juno's wrath in the plausible fact that the prophet not only assumes a certain degree of superiority over the divinities, who turn to him for help in their dispute due to their unisexual ignorance, but he also leaves Juno in greater humiliation after resolving the contention in Jove's favour:

Chiamando Tiresia ad esprimere un giudizio nella loro lite, Zeus e Era dimostrano di non conoscere tutto e di non essere in grado di trovare una soluzione a un problema apparentemente triviale [...] Zeus e Era ammettono quindi una loro debolezza e, rivolgendosi a Tiresia proprio in virtù della sua esperienza, riconoscono la sua superiorità rispetto loro. Alla luce di ciò, con la sua risposta il giudice dimostra di saperne più degli dèi, di essere a loro superiore per conoscenza e viene così punito da Era, ma non da Zeus il quale, invece, lo ricompensa perché ha dato la risposta giusta, che il dio già conosceva (23).

a figure more suitable for a woman writer (Madden 69). In *The Academy*, John Gray Miller found Bradley and Cooper's Tiresias to be "powerful," "singularly penetrative" and even illustrative of "the bi-sexual make of the true poet" (in Thain and Vadillo 359). For Christine White, lyric LII must be regarded undoubtedly as "the crux of the volume" ("The Tiresian Poet" 155); for Ed Madden, it marks the beginning of a new mythography that associates Tiresias intimately with complex and even "intractable gender and sexual ambiguities" (107).

However, although White and Madden thoroughly analyse the myth, its audacious refiguration and its central value within the Sapphic discourse on which *Long Ago* is predicated, they seem to undermine and reduce the holistic tiresianity, which informs the entire volume, to the textual and particularly sexual confines of the Ovidian lyric, thus participating in a dominant critical narrative of sexuality that reads the Fieldean Sapphic songs and their Tiresian aesthetics almost exclusively in terms of their sexual imagery, gender ambiguities, lesbian undertones, and androgynous transgressions. In view of this general reductive reading, I seek to prove in the present thesis that the Tiresias myth plays, as a matter of fact, a more crucial and transcendental role in *Long Ago*: beyond its explicit presence in lyric LII, it has the potential to become a totalising signifier that reveals how the poems can organise themselves around not only gender and sexual ambiguities, but also around other kinds of images, motifs, and tropes, all integrated within a temporal, spatial, poetic and metaphysical order where the classical logic of binary structuralism proves no longer valid, sinks into crisis, and even fails altogether. In other words, I propose to make an epistemological use of the Tiresias myth to inform my critical perspective and, in so doing, to demonstrate that *Long Ago* is a Tiresian text in that its underlying semantics, imagery and ethics conform to the patterns of ambivalence and paradox behind the experiences, not exclusively sexual, of the Theban seer.

In order to legitimate and reinforce my critical perspective, it is imperative that I raise and answer at least three fundamental questions: (1) to what extent an ancient myth can be appropriated as an interpretative instrument, (2) what sort of theoretical use can be made of Tiresias, and (3) how this Tiresian theory can be applied systematically and holistically to my reading of *Long Ago*. In what follows, I propose to address these questions in depth by rethinking the nature and function of myth, exploring the major

critical studies on Tiresias, prioritising his often neglected Homeric attributes over his Ovidian portrayal, and transforming him into a paradigm of ontological speculation.

2. (The) Myth (of Tiresias) as Hermeneutical Truth

As a mythical figure, Tiresias works not as a mere primitive fable, but as an existential truth. It is traditionally assumed that the genesis of Western thought took place when what the ancient Greeks understood as *mythos* lost its primitive legitimacy and gave way to the enlightened regime of *logos*. This assumption is a myth in itself: it romanticises the foundation of European philosophy as the result of an evolutionary ascent from the dark and primitive cave of fables and legends into the logical system of reason and truth. The idea of primitivism associated with myth is particularly a product of the nineteenth century and its hegemonic discourse of positivistic axioms. It was during this period –especially in the second half of the century– that the concept of myth started to be formalised as the radical opposite of authentic knowledge. As Robert A. Segal puts it:

Myth was typically taken to be the ‘primitive’ counterpart to science, which was assumed to be wholly modern. Science rendered myth not merely redundant but outright incompatible, so that moderns, who by definition are scientific, had to reject myth (3).⁸

Although modern, popular and influential,⁹ this derogatory view of myth rests on two major premises that have been contested with cogent arguments. On the one hand, the teleological fallacy is a major issue behind the story of the birth of Western philosophy: it presupposes an evolutionary order of ideas, a progressive movement towards an ideal scenario of purely rational knowledge, and a Hegelian sense of linearity that simplifies and falsifies the perplexities and ambiguities of human history.¹⁰ As a consequence of this simplification, a duality emerges in the reconstruction of the original moment that saw the genesis of philosophy in classical Greece: *mythos* is polarised against *logos* in a positivistic attitude that regards the former as “the pre-scientific counterpart to science”

⁸ Other critics and historians –such as Lawrence Coupe or Robert L. Fowler – date the construction in myth as the primitive antithesis to rationality further back to the Enlightenment, when a rigid and monolithic discourse of rationalism rose against all previous forms of thinking.

⁹ J. Burnet and, most notably, W. Nestle consolidated the foundational idea of myth as opposed to rational thinking and exerted a long-standing influence on later accounts of the history of Western philosophy.

¹⁰ This evolutionary *mythos* is nothing but a fiction construction or, as Kenneth W. Yu rightly puts it, a “narrative of occidental rationalization” that characterises “the advent of positivist thought in ancient Greece” (4) as the result of a miraculous leap from primitive mythical thinking to pure rationalism with little empirical evidence.

(Segal 13).¹¹ Yet, such polarisation is artificial and inaccurate: for, according to Chiara Bottici, “no sharp dichotomy between *mythos* versus *logos* was stated, at least up to the fourth century BC” (7). What surprises, instead, is that “*mythos* was generally juxtaposed to *logos* simply as a different way to express a similar content” (Bottici 9). Plato is an illustrative case in point: he “can continually move in his dialogues from rational argumentation to the narration of myths” without questioning the latter’s truth value (Bottici 9).

On the other hand, the second premise that underpins the positivistic conception of myth affects its truth value. In the modern era, many preponderant theories have systematically derogated the existence and utility of myth. German philosopher W. F. Hegel thought of it as a form of debased thinking, mental pollution, and sensitive imagery.¹² British anthropologist E. B. Tylor classified it as part and parcel of a “savage biology,” which “served its function, but its time is over” in the modern world (Segal 18). For the German-born Sanskritist F. M. Müller, mythology stemmed from a deficient or diseased type of ancient language whose lack of capacity for abstraction “invariably turned an abstract, impersonal entity into an actual personality” (Segal 20). These –and many other–¹³ theorists coincide in their understanding of myth as a pre-logical, non-philosophical, false, and fanciful construct that serves no purpose for the modern subject. For only science can –and should– be the language of modernity.¹⁴

For the treatment of the Tiresias myth in this thesis, I adhere more closely to post-Victorian exegetists who have propounded more favourable revisions and theories on myth. A unitary view associates them all: rather than forming a stark opposition, myth and rational thinking are empirically compatible even in our time,¹⁵ neither excludes or

¹¹ Myth is reductively understood as an intellectual error or simply an archaic element of “the residual barbarism of the folk imagination” (Coupe 23). Robert L. Fowler ridicules and invalidates this reductive understanding in a straightforward manner: “It is not the case that the whole of Greek society moved majestically from barbarous *mythos* to splendid *logos*; it is as wrong to think of Archaic Greeks as irrational primitives (one of them is Homer, after all), as it is to think of modern humanity as free of *mythos*” (65).

¹² For the Prussian philosopher, mythic thinking equates to nothing but a failed and obscure attempt to express what “philosophy expresses in conceptual thought” (Michelman 203).

¹³ For other Victorian and contemporary thinkers such as J. G. Frazer, Lucien Lévy-Bruhl, Ernest Cassirer or Henri and H. A. Frankfort, myth is no source of useful and valuable knowledge for the modern subject: it is rudimentary, pre-logical, irrational, purely subjective, emotional, concrete, and uncritical.

¹⁴ In this regard, Robert Jewett and John Shelton Lawrence put forward the idea of “the myth of mythlessness,” which refers to the arrogant belief that with the advent of modernity “humanity has successfully transcended the need for mythical forms of thought” (Coupe 13).

¹⁵ The underlying argument here is fairly simple: contrary to all positivistic predictions, myth has not died out in our societies. Rather, it finds no difficulty in co-existing with the most advanced forms of empirical

subordinates the other, and both share the common ground of human knowledge – despite their discursive idiosyncrasies. This view not only holds true of contemporary interpretations and applications of myth. In the ancient world, a vast notion of reason and truth existed and embraced various types of discourses with myth belonging among them in “a plurality of programs of truth” that made it possible and legitimate for the ancient Greeks to “believe in both the legendary world of myth and in the truth of everyday reality” without any significant frictions or conflicts (Bottici 18). As formerly indicated, Plato makes frequent use of such plurality in his dialogues, ascribing a meaningful value to myth and endowing it with the rhetorical status of “a figurative description of a philosophical theory” (Bottici 10). Likewise, for Aristotle, myth has much in common with philosophy itself, since it originates in the experience of wonder, constitutes an essential element of poetry, and possesses “a capacity to catch the universal that is superior to that of history” (Bottici 13).

If Plato and Aristotle seem to regard myth as an allegorical descriptor or constituent of the truths that philosophy investigates, many late-Victorian and contemporary thinkers go so far as to directly equate myth to philosophy, debunking the traditional legend of the passage from *mythos* to *logos* altogether and reappraising the value of myth as a para-rational mode of epistemic expression and a valid interpretative modality. In their mythological studies, fin-de-siècle “mythographers tended to look beyond the facile distinction between mythic thought as concrete and imaginative, and modern thought as abstract and analytical, and to recognize in the mythic mind as wide a range of mental functions as the modern mind possessed” (Burstein 313). In the writings of Walter Pater, Edward Clodd, and John Addington Symonds, all three contemporaries of Michael Field, myth is viewed as “a dense and highly complex mode of thought and expression in which the germs of philosophy, theology, and science, indeed, of all the several productions of the human intellect, inhered” (Burstein 314-15).

In a similar vein, German theologian Rudolph Bultmann understands myth as having no historical bounds, articulating universal truths, and revealing the depths of human existence. In his own words, myth serves “to express man’s understanding of himself in the world in which he lives. Myth should be interpreted not cosmologically, but

and technical rationality. For the Romanian intellectual Mircea Eliade, the reason behind this co-existence resides in a fundamental fact: myth proves to be “ineluctable” and “pan-human” (Segal 57). Such is its prevalence in our time that, when it loses explicitness or religious status, it adopts the pseudo-secular form of mythologies camouflaged in all our cultural products.

anthropologically, or better still, existentially” (Bultmann 10). Likewise, British rhetorician Kenneth Burke construes myth as “the transformation of metaphysics into story” (Segal 85), taking the form of concrete narratives to make sense of the eternal and the substantial, and turning the essence of humanity and the world into symbolic material. Myth is thus “the expression of non-temporal truths” (Segal 85). Partaking of this view, Martin Heidegger, Hans Jonas, Albert Camus or Joseph Campbell, to name but a few, take the mythic narrative to be an autonomous text that, irrespective of its original motivations and historical determinants, harbours a proliferation of existential meanings associated directly with the ultimate truths of human nature. Put more simply, “myth for them is philosophy” (Segal 44).

In the light of the previous theoretical revision, which has been considerably abridged for the purpose of this thesis, I submit that, given its competence for/as metaphysics, existential analysis or epistemological theory, myth can serve as an organising principle or an interpretive model capable of framing and informing a critical study. Far from rudimentary, irrational and hermeneutically useless, myth lends itself to be employed and exploited for intellectual purposes. In this very specific sense, I embrace Paul Ricoeur’s invitation to “go beyond the modern view of myth as false explanation” and develop “a sense of its exploratory significance and its contribution to understanding” (in Coupe 8). It is this intellectual contribution that I most centrally assert in my treatment of myth: for myth does transcend its narrative, diegetic, and literary condition. It is more than a story or a fable with symbolic power and more than a set of motifs or themes underlying a given literary text and waiting passively to be unveiled. As Martin Heidegger would cogently argue, myth constitutes “a fundamental phenomenon for the understanding of the meaning of being” (Schalow and Danker 80). It sheds light on what and how the world, whether real or fictional, means.

The most influential and prominent philosopher of the contemporary era, Heidegger has the final say in my discussion of myth. His notion of the essence of truth incorporates and even elevates what traditional rationalism rejects as mere fiction. He conceives of truth as a vast region of openness, discovery, and exploration that expands across all manner of disciplines and fields with a special place reserved for myth and poetry:

Heidegger’s thinking on the essence of truth relate to all fields of human existence, not only to science and philosophy. This thinking is intimately linked to our accepting myth and great art, and especially poetry, as additional sources of

truth that can be unconcealed. Myth and art can also help Dasein establish an openness in which truth and truths about human existence are unconcealed (Gordon and Gordon 13).¹⁶

As a site of truth and revelation, myth not only condenses philosophical meanings: it organises human experience and even structures the critical gaze. I understand myth in its capacity to lend itself to be transformed into an intellectual framework in its own right, a theoretical template, an interpretative taxonomy, and hence a model of reading. Within this framework, I propose to read Michael Field's *Long Ago* mythically, in general, and *tiresianly*, in particular, i.e., not merely as a work that appropriates the figure of the Theban prophet in one of its lyrics, but chiefly as a rich palimpsest that can be organised, classified and construed within the paradigm of meanings and experiences that Tiresias himself personifies. In short, my primary contention is that Tiresias plays a major part at the heart of this thesis: he functions as a structural organising principle of my reading and understanding of *Long Ago*. Paraphrasing T. S. Eliot's famous footnote to *The Waste Land*, I would say that Tiresias represents "the most important personage" in Michael Field's first poetic work and becomes the very "substance" of this study.¹⁷

¹⁶ Likewise, in his phenomenological study, deeply informed by Nietzsche and Heidegger, J. Hatab argues that myth "can be seen as presenting a form of truth" that challenges traditional rationalism, opposes binary logic, and embraces "various aspects of the world which are *shown* but which resist reduction to other things" (10).

¹⁷ The entire footnote reads:

Tiresias, although a mere spectator and not indeed a "character," is yet the most important personage in the poem, uniting all the rest. Just as the one-eyed merchant, seller of currants, melts into the Phoenician Sailor, and the latter is not wholly distinct from Ferdinand Prince of Naples, so all the women are one woman and the two sexes meet in Tiresias. What Tiresias sees, in fact, is the substance of the poem (in Pericles Lewis 139).

3. Towards a Homeric Tiresias in *Long Ago*

The Tiresian perspective informing this thesis results from a combinatory inquiry that integrates the two major scholarly approaches to the study of the Tiresias myth, namely: textualism and conceptualism. In what follows, I propose a working definition of both methods, followed by a comparative review of the most salient studies that put them to use and a final argumentative *regressus ad initium*: assuming the idea and functioning of myth to be a Heideggerian clearing of truth or disclosure, I reassert the Tiresian as a critical paradigm whose interdependent structures of meaning, deeply inherent in *Long Ago*, systematise my reading of this work.

By the textualist approach, which is the most traditional mode of mythological inquiry, I refer specifically to a type of genealogical research that aims to trace and examine all the instances in which the figure of Tiresias appears as an explicit, patent or textual presence in ancient and modern literature. Four major reference monographs can be identified as undertaking this exploratory task: Luc Brisson's *Le Mythe de Tirésias. Essai d'analyse structurale*, Gherardo Ugolini's *Untersuchungen zur Figur des Sehers Teiresias*, Emilia Di Rocco's *Io Tiresia: metamorfosi di un profeta*, and Ed Madden's *Tiresian Poetics: Modernism, Sexuality, Voice, 1888-2001*.¹⁸

In his seminal study, the very first to offer a systematic analysis of the Tiresias myth,¹⁹ the Canadian structural classicist Luc Brisson carries out an in-depth analysis of the Tiresias myth in the light of the general precepts of structuralism. He initially identifies a total of eighteen classical accounts related to the Theban prophet and then arranges them all into three groups or versions. What Brisson discovers after expounding a systematic interpretation of all the variants and versions is that the myth of Tiresias proves to be a paradigmatic in that it complies with the general conciliatory function that myth serves, according to Lévi-Strauss: it “resolves or, more precisely, tempers a contradiction dialectically by providing either a mediating middle term or an analogous, but more easily resolved, contradiction” (in Segal 114). For Brisson, Tiresias behaves as an ideal mediator between different sexual, ontological, and metaphysical poles: he

¹⁸ Headings' dissertation might well be added to this foursome, but I have not been able to find it in any database and, as Madden attests, it would not make an important contribution to my research if compared to Brisson's study, which “proves to be much more useful” (283).

¹⁹ I have only found two significant references prior to this study: Buslepp and Schwenn. However, both are extremely short and generic inquiries.

stands and interacts between gods and humans, between death and life, between past, present and future, between men and women, and even between other subtler and more conceptual boundaries. He finds himself “caught at the crossfire of a multitude of dichotomies, such as male/female, blind/sighted, outer shaper/inner nature, stability/flux” (Michalopoulos 229).²⁰ Inhabiting all these interlocking positions, the Theban prophet seems to provide a whole set of interrelated categories that conform to a fixed pattern of dialectical mediation, counter-dualism, and paradoxical thinking.

In a later book titled *Le sexe incertain. Androgynie et hermaphrodisme dans l'Antiquité gréco-romaine*, Brisson returns to Tiresias again, underscores his role as an archetype of successive bisexuality, and demonstrates his cultural links with different chthonic animals that were thought in ancient Greece to possess divinatory faculties –such as mice, moles, snakes, hyenas, badgers, and weasels. Nevertheless, the focal point that Brisson makes in this renewed inquiry lays stress on the soothsayer’s androgynous essence and, more especially, on his transcendental capacity to act as an intermediary and unifier of the masculine and the feminine. Here and hereafter, Tiresias becomes specifically Ovidianised, i.e., seen fundamentally as a complex sexual figure in most of the critical literature on him.

Italian philologist Gherardo Ugolini presents an extensive and exhaustive map of the Tiresias myth in his *Untersuchungen*. Divided into two parts, the study begins with the sexual version of the story, paying special attention to the prophet’s *Geschlechtswechsel* and his identity instability caused by a tragic sequence of seven metamorphoses, but not without commenting upon his close associations with Athena, Odysseus, Amphitryon, Narcissus, and other myths. In the second part, Ugolini embarks on three endeavours: he first analyses the central topos of the *Streit Teiresias/König* in all the Attic tragedies featuring the old soothsayer, as well as in different fragmentary plays. His study then veers towards a brief account of the post-Hellenic reception of the Tiresias myth in Roman, mediaeval, and modern literature with general yet necessary references to such prominent authors as Seneca, Statius, Ovid, Horace or Dante, and also to distinguished rewriters of Greek tragic plays in French and German –Voltaire, Jean Cocteau, Jean Anouilh, André Gide, and Bertolt Brecht. Within the Anglo-American tradition, Ugolini singles out six canonical poets who made their own Tiresian contributions in the form

²⁰ Torres adds yet another dichotomy to the prophet’s mythic identity: that “between human beings and animals” on account of his “special relationship with snakes and birds” (356).

of mere mentions or sometimes entire lyrics about the Theban prophet: John Milton, Algernon C. Swinburne, Alfred Tennyson, Matthew Arnold, Ezra Pound, and T. S. Eliot. The *Untersuchungen* conclude with a short chapter describing and explaining all the classical iconographic scenes presenting the figure of Tiresias in a total of eleven images in vases, frescos, and mosaics.

For her part, Emilia Di Rocco addresses Tiresias as an archetypal model of great semantic ductility, capable of incarnating and reflecting the historical changes and cultural codifications of any period in which he reappears. What Di Rocco accentuates is the prophet's constitutive ambivalence that fluctuates widely between the human, the divine, the natural, the living, the dead, the feminine, and the masculine. Tiresias must thus be understood "comme mediatore tra i due sessi, tra l'uomo e gli dei così come tra gli esseri umani e la natura, tra il presente, il passato e il futuro, nonché tra la vita e la morte" (11). In keeping with this general characterisation, Di Rocco adopts an original organising strategy, breaking the Tiresias myth down into five figures: Tiresias as a mediator between mortals and gods, a semi-immortal soothsayer, a political counsellor, a poet-prophet and a transsexual hero. Di Rocco explores each role separately, going from classical sources through to contemporary works and encompassing a vast corpus of European literatures with special attention to several writers in English such as John Milton, Andrew Marvell, Matthew Arnold, Alfred Tennyson, Algernon C. Swinburne, Ezra Pound, T. S. Eliot, Virginia Woolf, James Joyce, Austin Clarke, Archibald MacLeish or Jeffrey Eugenides.

Although all the previous studies represent first-rate contributions to the academic history of the Tiresias myth and its literary representations, both ancient and modern, I nevertheless opt to comment more extensively upon Ed Madden's monograph for good reason: as hinted at previously, his is the only study that pays exclusive attention to Anglophone poetry with a complete chapter devoted to Michael Field's Tiresian lyric. In his post-doctoral monograph, Madden adheres methodologically to what I have categorised as a textualist approach, for he centres "only on Tiresias as a primary textual figure" (20). He circumscribes his scope to a very specific body of literary works where the figure of the Theban prophet plays an explicit and crucial role, functioning "as cultural shorthand for sexual and gender variance, usually as a figure of homoerotic potential, frequently aligned with the feminine or the effeminate" (23). In this way,

Madden construes his Tiresian materials from a critical perspective that utilises the key tenets of queer theory and thus pays exclusive heed to the sexological discourses behind identity, gender, epistemic power, and poetic vision. In his corpus, four prominent texts receive special consideration: Michael Field's *Long Ago* (1889), T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* (1922),²¹ Djuna Barnes's *Nightwood* (1936), and Austin Clarke's poem 'Tiresias' (1971). Between them Madden discovers a common thread marked by the gender discourse they seem to condone: "For all the writers I examine, Tiresias is inextricably linked to gender polarities, fundamentally feminine and only strategically masculine" (18). In the cases of Field and Barnes, Madden argues, the Tiresian phenomenon represents "a celebration of homosexual and lesbian difference," whilst for Eliot and Clarke it materialises subtly as a trace of "suppressed homoeroticism" (18).

In the second chapter of *Tiresian Poetics*, Madden puts forward his sexological reading of Michael Field's lyric LII and comes to the significant –yet reductive– conclusion that Bradley and Cooper:

... inaugurate a shift in the cultural mythographies of Tiresias, using Tiresias as a trope for sexual and textual inversion. Tiresias represents the gender inversion of sexological definitions of homosexuality (the female soul in the male body), a feminine interior to a masculine exterior, and a feminine vision behind a masculine voice. The poem disrupts the traditional narrative, refiguring masculinity itself as a form of blindness and offering a revisionary feminist mythography. The poem's consistent emphasis on female experience, muteness, and eyes, and the textual subversion of interior and exterior frames further destabilizes the sexological imperative of reading the interior through the exterior and efficaciously imagines Tiresias as a figure for the feminine within, a rhetorical site through which and within which Bradley and Cooper imagine a lesbian poetics figured as male homo-erotic figure (25-16).

In line with Madden and the other scholars referenced above, I follow a textualist approach in the sense that I centre exclusively on a book of verse which features Tiresias as a textual figure in one of its most powerful and suggestive poems. However, there are at least three notable differences between my own Tiresian inquiry and the type of scholarship categorised as textualist. Firstly, in the four monographs outlined above, Tiresias is the object of a descriptive diachronic heuristics that aims to discover and lay out a large historiography of his figurations and refigurations in classical and

²¹ For a thorough analysis of the Tiresias myth in T. S. Eliot's poem, also see Comley, Di Rocco (364-385), and Madden (108-131).

modern letters with little stress on the overarching and promising implications that the Tiresian may have in each individual aesthetic project where it stands out. In contrast, I interpret the presence of Tiresias in Michael Field's lyric LII from an internally synchronic point of view that places the prophet and his primary ontological and sexual values in direct dialogue with the rest of the poems that make up *Long Ago*. My study is therefore an extensive and intensive close reading that uses Tiresias as its starting point, as much as its theoretical lenses, to thoroughly peruse a closed corpus of lyrics in which the Theban soothsayer can be regarded as the global conceptual symbol of what the Sapphic subject experiences from Michael Field's appropriative viewpoint.

The second difference, and the most salient, resides in the conceptual delimitation of the Tiresias myth: as pointed out above, the textualist scholars –Brisson and Ed Madden, in particular²² overemphasise the sexual dynamics inherent in the myth even to the point of regarding Tiresias “as a primarily Ovidian sexual figure” (Madden 35) or a mere byword for sexual variance or even queerness. Conversely, I prefer to situate the Theban prophet within a different theoretical scheme that seeks to transcend the predominant sexual narrative associated with him and to focus more particularly on his Homeric facet as an ontological figure that destabilises the duality between life and death. For, in *The Odyssey*, Tiresias breaks up with the ontological regime that organises life in conflict with the phenomenon of finitude or mortality. The natural order of life and death falls apart. What distinguishes life from death is not unequivocal anymore. The dialectics between one and the other veers from a logic of opposition to one of porosity, inter-influence or openness. On this account, Luc Brisson cogently views Tiresias as a living dead figure and a life-death mediator:

Tirésias se trouve, chez Hadès, dans un état intermédiaire entre la vie et la mort. Il est, en quelque sorte, un mort-vivant. Cet état particulier lui permet non seulement de continuer sa carrière de devin chez Hadès, et donc de prédire à Ulysse ce qui lui arrivera, mais aussi de savoir et d'enseigner comment évoquer les morts. Puisqu'il transcende l'opposition vivants-morts, Tirésias est en mesure d'établir des relations entre les vivants et les morts. Son statut d'intermédiaire lui permet de jouer un tel rôle de médiateur (44).

²² Madden repeatedly insists that, to his understanding, the Tiresian “posits and performs sexual identities and sexual difference, and thus produces sexual meanings” (25). For this reason, his main critical goal is none other than to “limn and delineate the nature of sexual identity as it is discursively constructed and performed through the figures and narratives of the Tiresian” (25).

A unique mythological character, Tiresias surpasses all human limits, spanning seven generations of rulers –from Cadmus, the founder of Thebes, to Creon–²³ and never reaching the final fullness of death itself. According to Homer’s *Odyssey* (10.494-95), the goddess Persephone grants Tiresias the gift of retaining his memory and identity after his demise.²⁴ For this reason, although the old prophet perishes near the cold fountain of Telphusa,²⁵ he can escape the eschatological fate that, in Greek mythology, befalls all mortals at the time of their death: they all become empty shadows once they are made to drink from the waters of the river Lethe and thereby to completely forget everything they were and did. Unlike his dead fellows in the underworld, Tiresias can perfectly remember the past, live the present consciously, and look into the future. His prophetic powers remain intact and even allow him to receive living visitors and offer them his oracles –as when Homer’s Ithacan hero, on Circe’s advice, carries out his katabasis and *Nekyia* to discover the course of his future with the aid of the Theban soothsayer.²⁶

The third difference entails the very epistemological status or treatment that the Tiresian figure receives. Whilst, in the textualist studies, Tiresias is commonly approached as a

²³ The relationship between the blind prophet and the Theban royal house constitutes a long and well-documented saga that Brisson sums up as follows:

C’est lui [...] que consulte Cadmos, au sujet d’un rêve fait par Sémélé. C’est lui, deuxièmement, qui conseille à Penthée de ne pas s’opposer à l’introduction du culte de Dionysos à Thèbes, et qui lui annonce sa mort. C’est aussi lui qui enjoint à Laïos, à la suite de son aventure avec Chrysippe, de se réconcilier avec Héra γαμοστόλος (celle qui prépare les mariages), tout en cherchant à le détourner de son voyage à Delphes, auprès d’Apollon, et à la convaincre, vainement d’ailleurs, de faire plutôt un sacrifice à Héra. C’est encore lui qui révèle les crimes, dont s’est rendu coupable, à son insu, Œdipe, et qui conseille à Créon de chasser Œdipe, pour délivrer Thèbes de la souillure qu’il lui impose. Par ailleurs, il prophétise à Créon que les fils d’Œdipe se battront l’un contre l’autre. Il lui prédit aussi la chute de Thèbes. Lors de l’expédition des Sept contre Thèbes, il explique que la ville sera épargnée si le fils de Créon, Ménocée, est sacrifié pour apaiser la colère d’Arès. Enfin, au moment de l’expédition des Epigones, il conseille aux Thébains de conclure un armistice avec leurs assaillants, et de quitter secrètement la ville, pendant la nuit, pour éviter un massacre général (41).

²⁴ In a Hellenistic version of the Tiresias myth entitled *Hymn to Pallas* or *The Bath of Pallas*, Callimachus relates that it was Athena that bestowed on the Theban seer the ability to preserve his consciousness after death. For specific studies on this version, see Brisson (78-111), Ugolini (100-110), or O’Hara.

²⁵ There are, in fact, two versions of his anomalous death, according to Brisson:

La mort de Tirésias survient lors de la prise de Thèbes par les Epigones. Selon une première version, Tirésias suivit les Thébains dans leur fuite, et fit halte avec eux, près d’une source nommée Telphousa. Après avoir bu de l’eau de cette source, qui était très froide, il mourut. Selon une autre version, Tirésias, qui était resté dans la ville avec sa fille Mantô, fut fait prisonnier par les Argiens, qui décidèrent d’envoyer le devin et sa fille à Delphes, pour y être consacrés à leur dieu, Apollon. En chemin, en raison de son grand âge, Tirésias mourut de fatigue, près de la source Telphousa (43-44).

²⁶ For some thorough analyses of the Odyssean *Nekyia*, see Merkelbach 185-192, Reinhardt, Nagler, Ballabriga, Ugolini (81-91), Di Rocco (81-149), or Torres (339-56).

literary motif, a thematic subject, a literal figure, or a narrative actant, I instead seek to highlight his theoretical potential and convert his ontological valences into a critical paradigm in its own right. Tiresias becomes an open space of truth, a field of unconcealment, or a Heideggerian clearing in which to discover and approach *Long Ago* as a mythography that re-dramatises the ontological experiences of the old prophet in a new light. As remarked earlier on, I adhere to a second type of approach to Tiresias that might be defined as conceptualist insofar as it converts the myth of the Theban seer into an interpretative strategy, a theoretical principle or a concept in itself. As examples of this modality of Tiresian inquiry, four different studies merit a special mention: Thomas M. Clancy's *The Tiresian Influence in Hemingway, Hard-Boiled Fiction, and Film Noir*, Nicole Loraux's *Les expériences de Tirésias. Le féminin et l'homme grec*, Mikhail Iampolski's *The Memory of Tiresias: Intertextuality and Film*, and Bh. V. N. Lakshmi's *Toni Morrison: A Black Tiresias*.²⁷

Such academic works have at least two points in common: not only do they deploy the Tiresian figure as a notional means to frame and inform their particular analyses, but they also embrace it as a general discursive device to address gender anxieties, identity conflicts, cases of androgyny, and sexual ambiguities –Iampolski's study being the only exception to this predominant sexological tendency. In his PhD dissertation, Clancy develops a Tiresian hermeneutics that crystallises into a persistent “emphasis on the androgynous nature” (3) of all the fictional characters appearing in the novels, stories, and films that make up his vast corpus –particularly focused on Hemingway, Dashiell Hammet, James M. Cain, Raymond Chandler, and film noir productions.

Similarly, the French classicist Nicole Loraux centralises the Tiresias myth around its gender frictions and remodels it into a “paradigme de l'*aner* saisi par la féminité” (17). In this regard, the ancient seer loses the status of literary figure or character in favour of a conceptualisation or theorisation of his main role as an androgyne: he becomes some sort of theoretical principle that guides Loraux's structuralist exploration of how the

²⁷ I am aware of the existence of another critical study that seems to conform strictly to my notion of Tiresian conceptualism, although I have not yet been able to consult it by any means. It is thanks to Ed Madden that I can establish the link between this elusive study and the conceptualist –and also sexological– strand of Tiresian scholarship, for he provides the following information in an endnote:

Tiresias serves as the critical organizing image of an 1973 dissertation by Mary Beth Roth, ‘Tiresias, Their Muse,’ in which she uses the figure diagnostically to analyse “a kind of Tiresias complex” in the works of Charles Dickens, George Meredith, Thomas Hardy, D.H. Lawrence, and James Joyce. Roth insists that ‘like Tiresias, they were compelled (or impelled) to confront sexual stereotypes’ (283).

Greek man, far from relying on pure and monolithic patterns of masculinity, as often as not partook of diverse codes, dogmas, and experiences which were believed to represent the feminine, dismantling the rigid discourse of sexual difference and occupying spaces –real yet mostly representational– of multiple exchanges between the masculine and the feminine.

Once again, the Tiresian dialectic of masculinity and femininity finds another form of notional articulation in Bh. V. N. Lakshmi's study, in which the Theban prophet typifies a model of narratology that argues for a special kind of gender consciousness in fiction. At the heart of this model is the amazement at the extraordinary dexterity that some writers display in their fluid, versatile, and even persuasive creations of both male and female characters. Bh. V. N. Lakshmi regards such dexterity not only as a quality intrinsic to eminent novelist, but also as a narrative strategy that transgresses and transcends the simplicity and rigidity of gender segregationism. The Indian critic singles out African-American Nobel laureate Toni Morrison from among those gifted novelists and proposes to call her a black Tiresias, whose works prove capable of manipulating, reorganising, dismantling, and cutting across the binary structures of masculine and feminine with a plethora of complex and well-rounded characters.

For his part, Mikhail Iampolski formulates yet another conceptual take on the Tiresias myth from a perspective that is particularly original in that it departs from the common over-prominence ascribed to the soothsayer's gender troubles and instead lays stress on his mnemonic power. Privileging, just as I do, the Homeric motif of Tiresias as the only mythic figure who retains his lucidity and memory after death, Iampolski inserts him metaphorically into a cinematic theory of intertextuality and entrusts him with such a salient role, that "[t]he memory of the blind man –Tiresias– becomes the sign, as it were, of intertextuality" itself (253). In his theory, Iampolski characterises the Tiresian memory as the over-determined site where one text evokes others, produces a genealogy of its own, and invites readers and viewers to bring their own recollections and references into a dynamic dialogue with the evocative text. It is in this intertextual negotiation that meaning emerges: it is generated between "a given datum and an image residing in the memory" (250). In other words, what Iampolski claims in essence is that texts signify not merely through themselves, but through the necessary mediation of invisible images and texts stored in one's memory. These mnemonic images know no

bounds: they can interconnect every form of semiosis and “generate an endless intertextual field that can link a given text to human culture as a whole” (252-3).

The conceptualist approach to Tiresias is central to the present critical project: although the prophet is explicitly and exclusively present in lyric LII, I nonetheless recognise a fertile possibility of capitalising on his dense semantics, forming a compact theoretical framework with his ontological meanings and extrapolating them conceptually to the entirety of Michael Field’s *Long Ago*. In this sense, I pursue a sense of deep internal coherence and harmony between the main text under scrutiny and the notional emanations-instruments elevated to their most theoretical quality and used as such to peruse the text in its fullness. Accordingly, Tiresias is no longer just one myth among many in the symbolic and conceptual fabric of *Long Ago*: the prophet becomes, as Riffaterre would put it, an interpretant that “explains the relations between one sign and another sign” (Allen 118) within the global semiotics of Michael Field’s lyrics, functioning as “the semiotic principle upon which the whole poem depends” (Allen 119). Tiresias develops into a taxonomic category that helps organise and frame the reading of each poem specifically in the light of his Homeric experiences of ontological transcendence and liminality, thereby exercising, as Iampolski would write, “the ability to unite, juxtapose, and make sense of things” (4) –of how the supposed dualism between life and death crumples, exposes its inner fragility, and instead becomes paradoxically juxtaposed.

It is in the above terms that Tiresias takes centre stage here: he serves to enlighten and organise *Long Ago* from within. His Homeric attributes are now the critical criteria for identifying how Michael Field’s Sapphic poems strive to negotiate and redraw the boundary lines between life and death as unstable pieces of a liminal ontology. I claim that, in exploring and remapping the limits of this allegedly antithetical pair, *Long Ago* speaks, as it were, the ontological and paradoxical language of Tiresias on the threshold between being and non-being.

4. The Metaphysical Turn: After the Critical Narrative of Sexuality

Tiresias has a complex metaphysical identity in various senses. In his Homeric version, he reflects the ultimate difference between death and life, existing in a state of life-in-death, preserving his lucidity among mindless shadows, assisting Odysseus with his obscure prophecies, and creating an eschatology of his own that redefines death as a unique experience of continued life with eternal memory –despite the fact that Tiresias is no longer among the living. With his gift of divination, his virtual immortality and his access to the realm of the gods, the Theban seer moves across the human and the divine, the profane and the sacred, or the temporal and the eternal. Not only does he know the workings of fate determined by supernatural forces and the impositions of the deities upon their human creatures: he also experiences time as a divine and immortal figure, following the history of Thebes from its foundation down to its fall, counselling ill-fated governors, exposing Oedipus to his own past, and foretelling what the future holds for Thebes, its royal family, and its inhabitants. Likewise, in this dynamic position of unrestricted temporality, Tiresias mediates readily between tradition and innovation, between old and young generations of Theban kings, and even “between old religious traditions and new manifestations of the divine” (Do Céu 151). No doubt, in his many connections with the dead, the divine and the (a)temporal, Tiresias pertains intrinsically to the philosophical ambit of metaphysics and, more specifically, of ontology.

In the present study, I understand metaphysics in two senses: on the one hand, I restrict the scope of metaphysics to a highly specific definition that joins together the figures of Michael Field and Tiresias. I take metaphysics to mean what the Greek philosopher Andronicus of Rhodes categorised as *τὰ μετὰ τὰ φυσικά* in reference to Aristotle’s fourteen books that were placed after those devoted to physics. Likewise, I place both Tiresias and Michael Field’s *Long Ago* after the physical, the sexual, the erotic, the masculine and the feminine in order to go beyond the sexological discourse that has dominated the studies of both the Theban prophet and the Michaelian Sappho. In my approach to *Long Ago* as a Tiresian text, I propose a metaphysical turn to depart from the critical narrative of sexuality that has primarily emphasised the sexual politics of Michael Field’s Sapphic lyrics and their relationship to the Tiresian at the expense of other, equally grand, narratives. By this metaphysical departure, I do not mean to refute the weighty importance of the physical and the erotic in *Long Ago*: my intention is not

to read *beyond* but *after* (or *μετά*) the physical. By arguing for a metaphysical or post-physical turn, I intend to make an appropriative and ideally ground-breaking movement at once: I appropriate the critical narrative of sexuality that has been constructed around Tiresias and Michael Field with the ultimate aim of opening a new hermeneutic ground in which to unveil how the Tiresian language of *Long Ago* manages to integrate the physical and the fleshly within a larger and more elaborate metaphysics of life and death.

On the other hand, I understand metaphysics in a more technical sense as a global investigation into the ontological structure of the world, the fundamental constitution and nature of reality, the borders between being and non-being, and the first principles and causes of existence. In its intimate filiation with the realm of ontology, metaphysics centres particularly on the meaning of being and its negative correlate: it seeks to inquire into the grounds of being, existence, life, non-being, and death. It is in this sense that I approach metaphysics and its plausible connection with the Homeric version of Tiresias. The Theban prophet may be seen, indeed, to act as a metaphysician or a figuration of metaphysical concerns that explores the ontological limits between being and non-being, existence and finitude or life and death within a compact system of radical paradox and porosity. Tiresias can therefore be regarded as a compressed locus of ontological speculation.

As an ontological figure, Tiresias challenges the general view that imposes a dichotomy between life and death, prescribing that “death is the external endpoint of life and therefore life and death are completely separate” (Carel xiii). On this view, death constitutes a brute fact, a physiological event, and a mere negation of life that, as ancient Geek philosopher Epicurus famously stated, should not trouble us in the slightest due to the empirical fact that while we exist death has no presence and no real impact on our life. However, in stark reaction to this classical positivistic stance, some renowned ontologists have seen the life/death binary not as an absolute dualism, but rather as an interlinked, porous and liminal continuum. Particularly influential and prominent among such thinkers is Martin Heidegger, whose ground-breaking *Being and Time* (1927) presents one of the finest holistic inquiries into human existence, its rootedness in the world, its lived experience, and its relationship to death. This “fundamental ontology,” as Heidegger calls it (34), postulates the notions of being-in-

the-world and being-towards-death as the two most essential structures of Dasein –a byword for human existence.²⁸

In Division One of his magnum opus (67-269), Heidegger conceptualises human life as an immersive, practical and affective being-in-the-world (*In-der-Welt-sein*) that rejects traditional epistemology and replaces it with a phenomenology concerned with life and experience. This experience is characterised at its core by a pre-reflexive sense of familiarity with the world itself, by a spontaneous feeling of engagement with things and people or, in strictly Heideggerian terms, by an essential structure of care (*Sorge*) that accounts for our openness to a lived world that constitutes what Inwood calls “a web of significance” (37) –a global structure that makes full sense to us and thus matters to us at the most pragmatic and affective level.

However, Heidegger’s *Being and Time* not only centres on being itself, its direct appeal to Dasein and its lived dimension. In Division Two (274-488), the German philosopher transforms his phenomenological study of our lived experience in the world into an original and exhaustive thanatology articulated around the concept of *Sein-zum-Tode*. As Mark Wrathall clearly explains, this notion effectively addresses the anti-dualistic question of how “the nature of human life and the nature of human death are tied inextricably together” and how death itself “shapes and guides the way we humans exist, the way we live our lives” (62). For Heidegger, death is a phenomenon of life that has great existential significance mainly “because of Dasein’s unique capacity to anticipate it, a capacity that structures everyday existence by making it an existence moving towards death” (Carel 69.) In this sense, we are always already immersed in the process of dying, in a permanent relation to the certain possibility of death, projecting ourselves constantly towards a future that is “a continuous movement towards extinction” (Carel 79) and sometimes facing death anxiously as a limit situation, an inability to project ourselves into new possibilities or a “condition of being cut off from the world and therefore being incapable of action” (Carel 80).

Through the interrelated notions of being-in-the-world and being-towards-death, Martin Heidegger dismisses the customary ontological dichotomy between life and death, and advances a unitary view that recognises the constant presence of death in life. Tiresias,

²⁸ I will be making a systematic use of John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson’s translation of *Being and Time*, originally published in 1962 and re-edited in 2008.

as already explained, embodies this unitary ontology, represents a mythic form of anti-dualism, lives life and death in a fluent continuum, and possesses full knowledge of the interrelation between life and death. Using Heidegger's terminology, Zygmund Bauman indirectly attributes such unique knowledge to the figure of Tiresias:

We know from Hegel that the Owl of Minerva, the goddess of wisdom, spreads its wings, prudently, at dusk; knowledge, or whatever passes under that name, arrives by the end of the day when the Sun has set and things are no more brightly lit and easily found and handled (long before Hegel coined the tarrying-Owl metaphor, Sophocles made the clarity of sight into the monopoly of blind Teiresias). Martin Heidegger gave a new twist to Hegel's aphorism in his discussion of the priority of *Zuhandenheit* to *Vorhandenheit* and of the 'catastrophic' origin of the second: good lighting is the true blindness –one does not see what is all-too-visible, one does not note what is 'always there', things are noticed when they disappear or go bust, they must fall first out from the routinely 'given' for the search after their essences to start and the questions about their origin, whereabouts, use or value to be asked. In Arland Usher's succinct summary, "the world as world is only revealed to me when things go wrong" (471-2).

Tiresias sees and knows the world as a result of his visual disability. It is his tragedy or his 'catastrophic' impairment that enables him to look at the world in an extra-ordinary and prophetic way. Indeed, in several versions of his legend, after being blinded by Athena or Juno, Tiresias acquires a richer vision or knowledge of life, time, death and destiny. For him, the common world seems to lose its *Zuhandenheit* –or pre-conceptual significance– and becomes clearly revealed through his power to interpret the gods' will, foresee humanity's fate, help Theban tyrants discover calamitous truths, and retain his full consciousness after death. Tiresias has full access to the world in its temporal complexity, in its unconcealment to *Dasein* and in all its possibilities –nothing in life or death escapes what Bauman calls "the clarity of sight" that is "the monopoly of blind Teiresias." So vast is his sight and comprehension of the world that the prophet is greeted by the Sophoclean Oedipus as one "who grasps everything, things that can be taught, and things that are unspeakable, things that are in heaven, and things that walk the earth" (Roisman 2).

Understood as the ontological figure that perceives the world in its fullest actuality and finite potentiality, Tiresias becomes the conceptual paradigm that illuminates *Long Ago* from within not merely as an Ovidian text that challenges any mode of dichotomous sexological thinking, but more broadly and profoundly as an audacious text that rests on

a tacit Tiresian metaphysics in which Michael Field's Sappho shows a deep ontological sense of being-in-the-world and being-towards-death. In this dissertation, I prove that a Tiresian ontology of life and death is fully at work in the background, composition and definite textuality of *Long Ago*. Chapter I explores how Katharine Bradley and Edith Cooper make sense of their lived experiences, develop an ontological or contemplative attitude towards life as an aesthetic phenomenon, and conceptualise their first common encounter with death before and during the composition of *Long Ago* –always with the mediation of self-reflective or autobiographical writing. In Chapter II, I read Michael Field's Sapphic volume as a paradigm of intertextual theory that defines writing itself as a form of revival or galvanism, a transfusion of new blood into nearly dead words, and a (re)lived creation that is diachronically and synchronically collaborative. Chapter III enters into the bulk of lyrics in *Long Ago* and explores a long narrative of female homoerotic being-in-the-world that opposes the traditional ontology of sex and, in its stead, favours a subversive sexual politics of being. In Chapter IV, the primary focus falls on another narrative that reworks the romantic myth of Sappho and Phaon, portrays her in particular as a heroine in the middle of a tragic agon, and replaces her initially utopian being-in-the-world among her maids with a profoundly dramatic being-towards-death. This same narrative of agony and death expands, as I show in Chapters V and VI respectively, into a rich mythography that puts Sappho in close dialogue with other Graeco-Roman myths and into a varied sequence of poems dealing with Phaon and his possible castration or symbolic death at the hands of his Lesbian beloved. Lastly, Chapter VII reveals how *Long Ago* also constitutes an elaborate metapoetic work that discusses the values, possibilities and limitations of poetry mainly through the figures of the Muses and Apollo, and under the general idea that, whilst it serves to sustain life, guarantee immortality and bridge the gap between mortals and gods, poetry can fail too and lead directly to a dramatic encounter with death.

5. Michael Field and German Philosophy: Towards Heidegger

In each of the chapters outlined above, I make a systematic use of Heidegger's ideas in conjunction with other major notions of contemporary thinkers and critics whose works were indebted in one way or another to his philosophy. To state the obvious: Heidegger's first published works, *Frühe Schriften* (1912-16) and *Sein und Zeit* (1927), were published after the death of Michael Field. Cooper died of cancer in 1913 and Bradley in 1914, also of cancer. In other words, they never read Heidegger or knew of him. Chronologically speaking, Heidegger belonged to the next generation. Perhaps the only chronological coincidence, fortuitous and curious at once, was the year of 1889, date of publication of Michael Field's *Long Ago* and the year in which Heidegger was born. And yet, beyond this anecdotal evidence, there are some important points of connections between the writings of Michael Field and Heidegger. As this section will show, Michael Field's engagement with German philosophy stretches far beyond their attested familiarity with Hegel and Nietzsche, and I propose here that their poetics and philosophy are interestingly aligned with Heidegger's anti-Cartesian thought.

Bradley and Cooper studied philosophy at University College in Bristol and deployed this formal knowledge in varied personal and creative ways. Early in their career as Michael Field, the aunt and niece made solemn use of their philosophical education to defend their literary identity. In a reproachful missive to Robert Browning, Bradley appeals to the authority of Baruch Spinoza's *Ethics* in a strategic spirit:

Spinoza with his fine grasp of unity says: "If two individuals of exactly the same nature are joined together, they make up a single individual, doubly stronger than each alone," i.e., Edith and I make a veritable Michael. And we humbly fear you are destroying this philosophic truth: it is said the Athenaeum was taught by you to use the feminine pronoun (Field, *Works and Days* 6).

Interpreting this epistolary excerpt, DeGuzmán contends that the Spinozan rhetoric of unity that Katharine utilises is a way of "claiming both a virtuous and a divine status for the joint collaborative work she was doing with Edith" (77). In other words, the Fields appropriate Spinoza's philosophical truth of diverse oneness to sanctify their intimate and authorial collaboration as a paradoxical unity that involves a plurality of negotiated positions and identities. Here the Fields make a pagan or profane use of Spinoza's view

of the divine: “By God,” he writes in *Ethics*, “I understand a being absolutely infinite, that is, a substance consisting of an infinity of attributes, of which each one expresses an eternal and infinite essence” (85). Just as God manifests himself in multiplicity of forms and attributes and orchestrates the world as a unified essence, so does the fictive identity of Michael Field work as the unitary creator of multiple poems and plays. As a result, for Bradley and Cooper, Spinoza’s theological idiom becomes a profaned philosophic truth that serves the purpose of keeping their true plurality a secret and avoiding all possible stigmas against a feminine pronoun whose authorial identity is doubly problematic, as I will discuss in Chapter II, because of its gender and number.

More consistent, however, than with Spinoza or any other single philosopher was Bradley and Cooper’s engagement with nineteenth-century German thought, so much so that one could place them intellectually within “the English tradition” that “absorbed a great deal, from the 1890s onwards, from the German philosophers” (Thain, *Michael Field*’ 36). In her pioneering study on the Fields, Mary Sturgeon mentions one of such thinkers: “evidence is clear that they appreciated genius so widely diverse as Flaubert and Walt Whitman, Hegel and Bourget, Ibsen and Heine, Dante, Tolstoi, and St. Augustine” (30). Here it is Hegel particularly that stands out for the lasting impact he had on the Fields. Thain and Vadillo include a significant letter from Cooper to Bernhard Berenson that places the philosopher of German idealism as one of the foundations of Michael Field’s writings: “Hegel’s Aesthetic belongs to me, though Michael rightfully claimed it, as all mine is his; but the tiresome marks on every page are by me, in early youth. Try to ignore them” (323).

For the Fields, Hegel was not a sporadic interest. They were ardent Hegelians. Cooper wrote the previous missive to Berenson in 1894, but her appreciation of the Teutonic thinker had begun already in early youth. In proof of this lasting commitment to Hegel, Cooper presented Berenson with her own copy of the philosopher’s treaty on aesthetics, which she had copiously annotated as a very precocious reader. Although the copy bore only Cooper’s notes, her aunt was not less keen on the relationship between Hegel and art. What both Bradley and Cooper found appealing in the German idealist was most probably his central idea that the function of art goes beyond mere recreation and moral instruction. For Hegel, art aspires to “express the profoundest interests of human nature and the most comprehensive truths of the spirit” by clothing them “in sensible form” (in Kedney 4-5). Differently put, art constitutes a creative activity in which “the elements

of intelligence and sensibility are combined, and fused together” (14) in a way that shortens the metaphysical distance between the spiritual and the sensuous, the abstract and the concrete, or the immaterial and the material. In a diary entry, Cooper fully embraces this view: the artist, for her, is a “lost creature between Heaven and Earth, grasping spiritual things with one hand, and with one passionate grasp the things of sense” (Field, *Works and Days* 314). I would claim that, for both Hegel and the Fields, art performs a Tiresian function in the sense that it looks to dismantle and conciliate traditional dualisms –the infinite and the finite, the sacred and the profane, or Heaven and Earth.

For Marion Thain, the correlation between the Fields and Hegel lies precisely in those Tiresian ways in which their diaries and poetic volumes articulate themselves around a holistic system of paradox, deconstructing conventional dichotomies and constructing a sense of selfhood unstably “founded upon contradiction” (Thain, *Michael Field* 17). From a less generalising angle, Dustin Friedman sees Hegel at work specifically in *Sight and Song* (1892), a very ingenious volume in which the Fields manifest how they come to experience erotic negativity through special encounters, spiritual and sensuous at once, with art objects that disclose hidden desires and allow for a greater degree of “erotic self-knowledge” (online). In my view, these positions regarding the Field/Hegel connection miss one significant point: both Thain and Friedman fail to notice that, beyond his methodical emphasis on the fluid dialectics of opposition and conciliation, Hegel orients his system of thought, including his philosophy of art, towards the ideal of a definitive order in which all poles and contradictions become synthesised and totalised into a stable structure. For him, as Kedney explains, the ultimate mission of history, thought and art is to fix and reduce all binary oppositions into a final “individuality” or a “unique synthesis” (59) that puts an end to every dialectical confrontation.

Such a final search for absolute fixity does not tally with Bradley and Cooper’s literary identity and production. A fluid, ambiguous and irreducible self, their Michael Field is far from being a totalised, homogenous and “univocal product,” as Blain claims (“Two-headed Nightingale” 239). Their literary identity, although built under the Spinozan truth of unity, rests upon a “dynamic dialogic structure” (239) and never yields to closed totalisations. Their sexuality, questioned and scrutinised by critics time and again, appears to be equally variable and resistant to standard labels. Their works are indeed, as Thain contends, structured by an overarching network of paradoxes, yet these

paradoxes remain continually open and hardly reach the Hegelian ideal of ultimate dialectical resolution. In *Sight and Song*, Michael Field's erotic encounters may, as Friedman contends, occasion a deeper self-awareness of their underlying desires, but again this awareness does not necessarily endow the Fields or their lyric persona with a fixed or univocal sense of desire. In the particular case of *Long Ago*, as I aim to reveal in this study, the Fields articulate a complex Sapphic idiom that addresses radical polarities between life and death or desire and pain in a way that does not adhere to a Hegelian paradigm of ideal closure or totality, but rather from a critical angle that approaches such alleged polarities as porosities, dialogic structures, or open-ended interrelations. It is my contention, in this regard, that the Fields seem to anticipate a line of thought that surpasses Hegelianism and points towards an anti-Cartesian philosophy closer to Heidegger's phenomenology of existence as radical openness –as “a constant lack of totality” or closure (*BT* 286).

Apart from Hegel, however, the other major German thinker that influenced the Fields was Friedrich Nietzsche. In their intellectual career, the aunt and niece developed a precocious understanding of the essential principles of art that they would later discover in Nietzsche's early thought. As Sturgeon sees it, the Fields knew their Nietzsche before their first contact with his actual works in 1895:

...one may think to spy an influence of Nietzsche's *Birth of Tragedy* in their *Callirrhoë*; but it is necessary to walk wearily even here. For the genius of Michael Field, uniting as it does the two principle elements of art, Dionysian and Apolline, is therefor of its nature an illustration of Nietzsche's theory. They needed no tutoring from him to reveal that nature, for they knew themselves (31).

This fragment suggests that Michael Field's proto-Nietzscheanism was their own version of aesthetic theory to which they gave shape in their very Dionysian play *Callirrhoë* (1884). They would later find that their philosophy mirrored Nietzsche's view of Greek attic tragedy as the supremest model of art. As Cooper herself acknowledges: “I am kindled to find that before I read a word of Ni[e]tzsche, before I heard anything, borrowed or really his own from Bernhard, I had reached so many of Ni[e]tzsche's positions” (Vadillo, “This hot-house” 205). The name of American critic Bernhard Berenson stands out here as the first direct link between the Michael Fields and the German philosopher. Their inadvertent Nietzscheanism was increasingly mediated and fuelled “through discussion with Bernhard Berenson” (Thain, *Michael*

Field' 36).’ It was in 1895 that both poets read Nietzsche directly for the first time and realised that he had expressed precisely what they believed in. The poets were furious with Berenson “for not having owned up earlier to the source of the ideas he had been presenting to them” (Thain, ‘*Michael Field*’ 37).

The discovery of Nietzsche was momentous for the Fields. As Cooper says in their diary, they found in him, “a real Bacchic voice crying in the wilderness” (Vadillo, “This hot-house” 204). On reading his opera prima, *The Birth of Tragedy*, the Fields came to the realisation that what was once an accidental mirroring between his philosophy and theirs now became a patent intellectual and even affective symbiosis: “We are reading *Die Geburt der Tragödie* the only prose statement of the Dionysiac attitude towards Life that Exists. This book is the mirror in which we see our naked errors and offences exposed. Our achievements revealed, our hopes tested” (Vadillo, “The hot-house” 205).

As Vadillo has documented with exhaustive archival work on their diaries, the Fields continued to cultivate their self-mirroring in Nietzsche’s thought by discussing *Twilight of the Idols*, delving completely into the first translation into English of *The Works of Friedrich Nietzsche* (1896), and even using their own diary as a forum of philosophical discussion in which they used aphorisms from *Thus Spake Zarathustra* as epigraphs or translated entire passages from *The Birth of Tragedy*. Naturally enough, Bradley and her niece transposed this overinvestment in Nietzscheanism generally to their aesthetics and particularly to their closet dramas, most of which were now articulated around the “strife between the Apollonian (principle of form, unity, rationality, restrain, representing the visual plastic arts) and the Dionysian elements of life (rapture and rupture, the world of dreams, excess and musical arts)” (Vadillo, “The hot-house” 206). Yet, more important than the conceptual debts to Nietzsche was the fact that, as Vadillo rightly proves, the Fields deployed his theory on Greek tragedy for an ambitious purpose: “to re-invent the genre” of poetic drama “with the power of breathing life” (207). Although their contemporaries failed to recognise the originality of their project, the Fields should be duly credited as avant-guard authors that contributed to opening future debates on modernist verse drama. As Nietzscheans and as themselves, they were very much ahead of their time.

As their diary and plays reveal, the links between the Fields’ philosophy and the writings of Nietzsche are clear and diverse. Albeit not in an explicit discussion on this

subject, Snodgrass has identified at least four elements that are common to the poets and the philosopher: a sustained “Classical Dionysian logic that set paradox [...] as a core truth of life” (172); an intellectual commitment “to accept curious differences, to entertain passionately the odd and disparate and unfamiliar, and to embrace what others would exclude” (172); a serious conviction that “form and frenzy, the Apollonian and Dionysian, must coexist, even if human survival dictates that they dare not ever merge” (178), and a vitalistic affirmation of suffering and tragedy as experiences that are “inescapable yet altogether necessary” (178). Undoubtedly and judging solely from this summative account, the Fields can be recognised not just as authentic Nietzscheans, but more fairly as belonging to the earliest generation of British intellectuals who “recognised Nietzsche’s importance for modernity” (Vadillo, “The hot-house” 204).

As I seek to prove in this thesis, notions shared by Nietzsche and the Fields take some shape or another in the lyrics of *Long Ago*, yet their effective conceptualisation runs the risk of becoming rather vexed if one adheres exclusively and strictly to a Nietzschean perspective. Nietzschean ideas can certainly be placed in direct conversation with the Sapphic poems, especially when addressing key themes such as the significance of the Dionysian or the vital value of suffering. However, as I shall show, Nietzsche does not fully accommodate to either *Long Ago* or even my own critical project for two reasons. Firstly, his hammering-thinking unfolds generally without a systematic method, it follows a fluid yet erratic path of anti-metaphysical contestation, and thus makes it extremely hard for any critic to try and appropriate his consistent non-method in an articulate fashion.²⁹ Secondly and more importantly perhaps, Nietzsche puts forward an ultimate idea and ideal of selfhood that hardly fits into Michael Field’s Sapphic vision. Although he inaugurates his thought with a clearly anti-Cartesian notion of the self as a liquid, processual and visceral being, he nevertheless seems to direct this conception towards an ideal version of subjectivity that, after all its becoming and self-overcoming, stands as a heroic, superior, self-made, and hyper-masculinised creature. Nietzsche’s inaugural idiom of ontological fluidity coheres perfectly with Sappho’s indeterminate and amorphous identity in *Long Ago*, as well as with Bradley and Cooper’s discourse of self-plasticity. However, if read in light of Nietzsche’s vision of the *Übermensch*,

²⁹ In this respect, Nietzsche is diametrically opposed to the other German thinker that the Fields so appreciated, Hegel. The difference between both philosophers is strikingly self-evident, as Dudley points out as: “Whereas Hegel’s readers are immediately confronted with the systematic character of his works, Nietzsche’s readers encounter a corpus that is decidedly unsystematic” (123).

Michael Field's Sappho would offer ample resistance, chiefly because her lyrical self-narrative, as this study will detail, follows a highly unstable trajectory of erotic, poetic and ontological conflicts that culminate in the anti-Nietzschean embrace of self-renunciation and ultimate death. In *Long Ago*, Sappho is process, becoming, and struggle, and yet her subjectivity never comes to fully embody the courageous over-humanity that Nietzsche prescribes precisely as the only antidote for such self-defeatism.

If Nietzsche is the German thinker that first puts life itself in the centre of philosophy, debunks the theoretical myths of Western epistemology and sees human existence as a fluid phenomenon inevitably engaged with the world, it is Martin Heidegger who continues such a line of thought, systematising it most adeptly in *Being and Time*. This influential work, as I have formerly explained, presents an exhaustive ontology that deconstructs worn-out dualisms, invalidates Cartesianism altogether, discloses the intimate embeddedness between human existence and the misnamed object-world, and even spells out the vital significance of death as a necessary constituent, and not the opposite, of life. *Long Ago* actually mirrors this original ontology. Just as there was an accidental and retrospective mirroring between Nietzsche and the Fields, so too there is, I contend in this thesis, a prospective mirroring between them and Heidegger.

At its most evident level and as far as *Long Ago* is concerned, the speculative alignment between the Fields and Heidegger lies in the acute interest both the poets and the thinker took in the originary writings of Western philosophical and lyrical thought. Where the Fields rescued the archaic figure of Sappho as a modern heroine, Heidegger engaged with pre-Socratic philosophers such as Heraclitus and, particularly, Parmenides. In both cases, the return to pre-classical Greece seems to be motivated by a modernist spirit grounded on revisiting Western traditions at their very roots to make them new again and to reveal their importance for modernity. At a more profound level, the Fields and Heidegger share a combined understanding of selfhood and/as poetry. For poet and philosopher, human existence is not only an unfinished, futural and hyphenated project that contains in itself a whole world of relations, self-relations, and practices in which, for instance, Bradley-and-Cooper-write-as-Michael-Field-who-writes-as-Sappho, but it also entails a real process of self-creation or self-poiesis that transforms poetry not into a mere artistic activity, but into an aesthetic way of dwelling in the world. *Long Ago*, as I shall demonstrate, is an example of such existential aestheticism or poetic dwelling, as

Heidegger would call it, which accounts not only for the complex authorial signature, but also for the complex Sapphic self-narrative.

Moreover, the Sapphic narrative proves to be an elaborate reflection on the harsh sense of instability and ontological loss that the Victorians and their descendants share within the vast context of a self-questioning and metaphysically precarious modernity. In his *Heidegger's Bicycle: Interfering with Victorian Texts* (2006), Roger Ebbatson proposes original readings of a few “monuments of the Victorian literary heritage from Tennyson to Conan Doyle” (3) through the special lenses of German cultural theory and, more specifically, in the light of some of Heidegger’s major contributions to existential and ecological thinking. For Ebbatson, the German thinker articulates the most accurate diagnosis of modernity –the Victorians and future generations, in particular– as an historical project characterised by its acute self-awareness of being in a fragmentary world of “risk and chance which is uncannily unstable” (4). In this sense, the Fields and Heidegger coincide in a similar position: the modern subject for them is ontologically unfinished, fragmentary, uncertain, and radically open or excessive in that it exists always beyond its alleged Cartesian individuality.

In this study, Heidegger is read not only as the thinker of modernity’s precariousness or homelessness in an existential sense, but more generally –and more fairly– for his anti-dualist ontology. Reading Michael Field with *Being and Time* in mind, I seek to address the tenets of the Tiresian ontology that lies at the core of *Long Ago*, and in so doing, my thesis proposes the following interrelated points: (1) that the Michael Fields exhibited a Tiresian attitude towards life that embraced the phenomenon of death fully and even creatively; (2) that their first volume of lyrical verse can be read as a manifesto in itself of intertextual theory and an exploration into the very ontology of art; (3) that *Long Ago* reinvents the myth of Sappho as a tragic figure torn between homo-erotic vitalism and patriarchal defeatism; (4) that in the Sapphic world the masculine and the feminine become ontologically and respectively associated with death and life; (5) that the Fields develop a coherent narrative of what might be termed hetero-mortality with the implicit assumption that heterosexual desire is fatal; (6) that the consistent reworking of other classical myths contributes both to the dramatisation of Sappho’s portrayal and to the formulation of a universal vision of human emotions particularly in relation to death, and (7) that the value of poetry is ontologically dubious or rather ambivalent in Michael Field’s Sapphic project. In sum, my thesis is that, in its context, composition and final

presentation, *Long Ago* is a highly sophisticated work that articulates an implicit yet elaborate ontological speculation on pleasure, tragedy, myth and art itself, all within the figurative parameters of a transcendental Tiresias that pushes the ontological limits between life and death.

CHAPTER I

TOWARDS MICHAEL FIELD'S SENSE OF ONTOLOGICAL AND POETIC DWELLING

1.1. Origins: 'Daughters of Industry'

Life was highly propitious for the Fields from the outset. Katharine Harris Bradley was born on 27 October 1846 into an affluent family settled in Birmingham, the native city of her mother Emma Harris. Her father Charles Bradley ran a successful tobacco factory and amassed a solid and durable fortune.³⁰ As Dissenters, Emma and Charles “married themselves (in Katharine’s words) by means of public vows” (Donoghue 6) in 1834 despite the conservative opposition of their parents. In 1835 the Bradley marriage had their first daughter, christened Emma. Katharine came into the world later when her elder sister had turned eleven. In 1848, the family lost Charles Bradley to cancer when Katharine was only two years old. In 1860, Emma married James Robert Cooper and moved with him to Kenilworth. On 12 January 1862, the couple had their first daughter, Edith Emma Cooper, who would later become Katharine’s lifemate.

³⁰ As Leighton notes, the “profits from the factory were sufficient to keep the family in reasonable comfort, and provided Katharine with a small private income for life” (204).

Bradley and Cooper knew no economic vicissitudes and grew up in a “highly educated and cultured” environment (Sturgeon 15). In their family, there were “men of intellect as well as business men” with “a leaning to philosophy, a feeling for the arts, and an interest in drama” (13). This synergy of commercial affluence and intellectual curiosity constituted a general phenomenon “connected chiefly with Midland towns” (15), where the boom in industry and commerce not only stimulated and accelerated economic growth, but also brought a sustained increase in the promotion of arts and letters amongst upper-middle-class families.

Coming from such a well-off bourgeois stock, Bradley and Cooper conformed to the profile of those late Victorian aesthetes who “were not born into the literary scene but who infiltrated it from the prosperous merchant class” (Thain, ‘*Michael Field*’ 2). This privileged social position signified a life free of financial concerns and rich with high culture, important literary contacts, aesthetic materialism, and cosmopolitanism. As Donoghue writes, Bradley and Cooper were only affected, in economic terms, by “the tensions and problems of the rich” (Donoghue 48), which often included issues such as “how to afford all the beautiful things they wanted and still spend their summers abroad” (48).

On account of the comfortable and cosmopolitan lives that Bradley and Cooper led and their family background, Marion Thain rightly defines them as “Daughters of Industry” whose aesthetic lifestyle was “only made possible by family fortunes amassed through the industrial expansion of Birmingham and its surrounding conurbation” (37). Although the Fields established themselves near or directly in London and enjoyed all the vanities of the English capital (especially, after moving from Reigate to Richmond), it cannot be understated that their urban *modus vivendi* resulted from “the transformation of Birmingham’s industrial money into London’s aestheticist values” (41). Their personal and public aestheticism was thus a privilege originally forged in a tobacco manufactory.

1.2. Before ‘Michael Field’: Education and First Collaboration

Katharine Bradley received an advanced education. Her mother instructed them at home on general pursuits and hired for them “a series of tutors who taught them French, Italian, German, Classics and painting” (Donoghue 7). Bradley showed an early passion for poetry with “a particular fondness for Scott’s *Lady of the Lake*” (Sturgeon 16). As a small child, she used to write her letters in rhyme and perform plays at New Year in front of her family. As a teenager, she often “caught the train to concerts, lectures, and art galleries in London” (Donoghue 7).

When her mother Emma revealed she had cancer, Bradley underwent serious spiritual and physical failings, felt extreme desolation, and took to writing in a devout manner. She used full notebooks to record “her own fretful days, prayers, worries about the future, and poems” (Donoghue 9). In spite of her pressing concerns, she never ceased to improve and consolidate her education. Between 1863 and 1867 “she attended classes at the Birmingham and Midland Institute” (Bickle xvii). After her classes, in the afternoons, she would read Wordsworth, the Bible, and sermons to her ill mother. In this way, writing and reading on a regular basis, Katharine taught herself “the nuts and bolts of the writing trade” (Donoghue 9).

After her mother’s death in 1868, Katharine travelled to Paris to study at the Collège de France. “During this period, not only did she learn French language and literature, but she was instructed on subjects such as Latin, the Woman Question, and the history of the Roman Empire” (Thain and Vadillo 24). She also fell deeply in love with Alfred Gérente, a forty-seven married artist with “a mass of dark curls, several children, and an obsessive grief for his musical, bad-tempered, late wife” (Donoghue 12). Yet, shortly after Katharine had met him, Alfred was found dead as a result of a stroke. Under these tragic circumstances, Bradley devoted most of her time to penning sentimental poetry. What is more, once she began to co-write her diaries with her niece nearly two decades later, she included “an entry every year on the anniversary of his death, witness to the scar that this tragedy had left on her life” (Field, *Works and Days* xvi).

Katharine Bradley returned to England before long and settled at her sister’s house near Birmingham. Since her sister had become a permanent invalid after the birth of her second daughter in 1864, Katharine assumed the task of instructing her nieces Emma

and Amy without nevertheless ceasing to produce her own poetry. In 1875, at the age of twenty-nine, she saw the publication of her first book *The New Minnesinger and Other Poems* under the pseudonym Arrah Leigh.³¹ As Donoghue comments, this collection “includes dramatic lyrics to a dead woman, odes to grass, violets, primroses, thrushes and the moon, mildly feminist declarations, religious poems, and translations from Goethe and Schiller” (14).

In 1875, wishing to go much further in her education, Bradley attended a summer course at the Newnham College (Cambridge), which had been recently founded by Henry Sidgwick and Millicent Fawcett with the mission of providing higher education for women at a time when no university institution granted them formal admission. In this progressive setting, Katharine had a remarkable social experience with her fellow students. Donoghue writes:

Newnham girls lived in a whirl of intense female friendship, and Katharine loved it. Kept away from the male undergraduates for the sake of propriety, few Newnhamites pined; they played hockey, gossiped over their work (sewing), sang, read each other’s poems, had daily cocoa parties to make up for the notoriously bad dinners, and held evening dances with one girl in each couple leading, or ‘doing gentleman’ as they called it. This homosocial world had its own titillating rituals; to ‘prop’ another girl meant to propose to her that you should address each other by your first names, a delicious mark of intimacy (14).

While studying at Newnham College, Katharine started a correspondence with John Ruskin, one of the prominent art critics of the Victorian intellectual sphere. He admired some of her early poems and admitted her in his Guild of St George, a Utopian society devoted to causes of social reform, justice, and education. Katharine donated a tenth of her income to the society and kept a frequent contact with Ruskin. However, in 1877, a momentous crisis erupted between the poet and the orthodox critic. In a letter, Katharine confessed she had renounced her faith in God and replaced it with a deep affection for “a Skye Terrier” (Field, *Works and Days* 155). Ruskin reacted furiously, retracted his

³¹ Under this literary identity, Katharine Bradley inscribed her voice within the Victorian tradition of claiming an authorial space of authority for women writers by identifying herself with “the writer heroine of Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s verse novel, *Aurora Leigh*” (Donoghue 14). On account of this identification, Thain and Vadillo (2009) read *The New Minnesinger* partly as “a defence of women’s rights to a poetic career and to the title of poet” (33).

laudatory appraisals of her poetry, and expelled her from the Guild.³² Although they managed to resolve their differences in subsequent letters, their relationship never returned to normal and terminated altogether around 1880.

By the late 1870s, Katharine Bradley had become deeply attached to her niece Edith Cooper, lavishing on her “an eager and rather imperious affection” (Sturgeon 17). A shy and intelligent girl, Edith spent her teen years writing her first works,³³ translating Virgil, studying ancient philosophy, and reaping much from “Katharine’s educational harvest” (17). When aunt and niece were around thirty-four and sixteen respectively, “they were behaving as a couple” (Donoghue 18-19),³⁴ sharing a common social life, addressing each other with terms of profound endearment, and sleeping together at night. In 1878, they relocated to Bristol with their family and attended the local University College together in order to study both classics and philosophy. As Sharon Bickle explains, Bristol offered Bradley and Cooper a vibrant setting for learning,

³² It should be added that, during this period, Ruskin was going through hard times: he “became more and more unpredictable in his behaviour, filling his lectures with accounts of his dreams, attending seances,” and entering an irreversible phase of mental collapse (Leighton 206).

³³ According to Bickle, Edith Cooper’s first juvenilia were ‘The Iwl-Dû’ and ‘Atys and Adrastus’, both of them “unpublished” and “held in the Bodleian Library” (xvii).

³⁴ The type of relationship that united Bradley and Cooper is a question that has elicited all sorts of opinions in Michael Field scholarship. In their common journal, the Michaels define their common lives in matrimonial terms, considering themselves ‘poets and lovers’ at once, comparing themselves to the famous Browning marriage, and declaring themselves to be “closer married” (Madden 74-76). In her pioneering biography, Mary Sturgeon regards their union as a friendship “clearly on the grand scale and in the romantic manner” (23). Similarly, historian Lillian Faderman illustrates her notion of romantic friendship between women with the case of the Michaels, assuming that the couple cannot be understood in light of the post-1900 sexological idiom of lesbianism. For Christine White, the Fieldean poets held a fairly complex relationship that seems to have been not merely romantic, but at least discursively “physical” or “fleshly” (“Poets and Lovers” 207). Likewise, Angela Leighton feels that the kind of love between Bradley and Cooper comes close to “a sexually, rather than romantically, conceived idea” (209). More specifically, Ruth Vanita interprets the role of Katharine Bradley as an example of “the older woman who seduces the younger” (30) in a homoerotic, feminist, and proto-lesbian relationship. More overtly, Virginia Blain contends that the Michaels were “a case of double perversion, since they were not only lesbian lovers, but being aunt and niece, they were incestuous lovers as well” (“Sexual Politics” 139). For her part, Martha Vicinus is also convinced that Katharine’s maternal love for Edith “had become erotic love” (98) by the time her niece was an adolescent. Margaret D. Stetz and Cheryl Wilson deem it completely “appropriate” to make use of “the label lesbian” (7) in reference to the Fields in spite of its controversial connotations. Emma Donoghue prefers to see the Fields as occupying a liminal position within a “transitional lesbian generation, born too late to have full confidence in the innocence of romantic friendship, but too early to feel much need to either hide their love or assert it shamefacedly” (20). By contrast, Ivor C. Treby has his reservations in portraying the Fields as a homosexual couple and warns that their personal and literary collaboration may be just part of a fictional and aesthetic representation. In his view, there is only evidence that “Michael Field indulged on a *verbal fantasy* of husbands and wives” and that “if Michael Field was an ‘item’, it was (to modern eyes) a remarkably chaste one” (*Uncertain Rain* 26-27). For my part, I believe that it is Marion Thain who best understands Bradley and Cooper’s “amorphous sexual identity” (*Michael Field* 45): theirs is an identity characterised by utter ambivalence, “various registers of desire” (48), overtones of homoeroticism, and heterosexual inclinations.

socialisation, and political commitment among fellow women: the city was “an exciting place to be a young woman in the 1880s. In the parlors and drawing rooms gathered women at the forefront of social reform in Britain,” leading “campaigns for temperance, medical reform, the antislavery movement, the antivivisection movement, and women’s suffrage” (Bickle xviii).

Their formal education was only a minor part of their intellectual lives: always together, Katharine and Edith studied ancient literature, improved their knowledge of modern languages, participated in debates in favour of the female suffrage, enrolled in different social campaigns, intimidated young Oxford men with their intellect, and invested most of their domestic time in reading St Augustine, Dante, Shakespeare, Flaubert, Hegel, Heinrich Heine, Paul Bourget, Christina Rossetti, Walt Whitman, Ibsen or Tolstoy. Their reading “was as comprehensive as one would expect of minds so free, curious, and hungry” (Sturgeon 30).

In 1881 Katharine and Edith channeled their indissoluble bond into the publication of *Bellerophôn*, their first common work signed with the dual pen name of Arran and Isla Leigh. Written as a closet drama and accompanied by a collection of poetry on classical themes, *Bellerophôn* established the Shakespearean model of most of their future plays: “at least three acts, blank verse for the important characters, prose dialogue for the lowlier ones, and some stock types such as the mystical Fool and the loyal Page” (Donoghue 26). Nonetheless, this play received no critical attention and this made the couple change their pseudonym to start over as a new masculine and unitary author.

1.3. The Rise and Fall of Michael Field: Before *Long Ago* (1889)

After the failure of *Bellerophôn*, Katharine Bradley and Edith Cooper decided to change their literary identity and rename themselves Michael Field. Both poets were behind this new signature –apparently singular. In their private circles, Katharine was known as Michael and Edith as Field. These nicknames seem to have carried their associations with the archangel and with “nature and open spaces” (Field, *Works and Days* 6).³⁵ However, beyond its private usage, ‘Michael Field’ became a public mask against the stigma attached to female and dual authorship.

By adopting a singular male mask, not only did Bradley and Cooper want to get their “work noticed and to be taken seriously as a speaker on universal themes” (Donoghue 27), but they also concealed the problematic fact that their work was the product not of an individual genius, but of two voices. As Donoghue explains, literary collaboration, despite being a common phenomenon in the late nineteenth century, was believed “to smack of amateurism” (28). To avoid this prejudice, Bradley and Cooper constructed their Fieldean identity and came into a new existence as one poet or, in Katharine’s words, “a single individual, doubly stronger than each alone” (*Works and Days* 6).

In 1884 Michael Field burst on the literary scene with the verse drama *Callirrhoë*, a four-act tragedy that adapted an obscure Greek legend on the origin of the Dionysian cult. Shortly after its publication, the play became a great success, received highly favourable reviews, went to a second edition in the same year, elevated the poets to the status of Shakespeare and Swinburne, and even attracted the attention of none other than Robert Browning, at the time an old widower who “was not just a poet but a cultural institution” (Donoghue 29).

Nevertheless, advantageous and promising though it may have seemed at first, the contact with Robert Browning had unexpected repercussions for Michael Field’s true identity. In an explicit letter Edith Cooper requested the eminent poet to regard Michael Field as the only author of the successful play and to keep the truth secret. Browning

³⁵ The choice of their new pseudonym has prompted different theories: according to Mary Sturgeon, it was “chosen somewhat arbitrarily” (47); in relation to Michael Field’s letters to William Rothenstein, Ivor C. Treby takes note of the religious connotations of the pseudonym, explaining that “Michael connoted the fiery archangel, while Field came from pastures of the blessed” (*Uncertain Rain* 16-17). For further details on the pen name, see also Bickle (xxix-xxx).

seems to have assumed that the secret only concerned the question of dual authorship, and not “the lady authorship” (Field, *Works and Days* 7). After the second edition of *Callirrhoë* came out in November 1884, a critic identified the Fields as a female author. “Only Browning could have spread the gossip” (30), notes Donoghue. Katharine felt utterly disappointed.

The Fields and Browning made amends and cultivated a profound friendship until his death in 1889. However, by the late 1880s, it was an open secret in literary circles that behind Michael Field was not only a woman but two. Some of their admirers sent bitter letters to express their disillusionment, and most of their initial readers seem to have lost all interest in following their work. As Thain and Vadillo have noted, after the sonorous success of *Callirrhoë*, “Michael Field’s dramatic work was never to be so joyously received again” (28).

Despite the adverse circumstances and their continual consternation in the face of any further rumours on their identity, Bradley and Cooper retained their pseudonym for good and went on to make more publications. Only between 1885 and 1890 seven plays appeared signed by Michael Field: *The Father’s Tragedy*, *Loyalty and Love*, *William Rufus*, *Brutus Ultor*, *Canute the Great*, *The Cup of Water*, and *The Tragic Mary*. In her biography and study of the Fields, Mary Sturgeon groups all these plays within one single category named the English period and identifies at least four elements common to them all: a historical theme based on English history and Scottish chronicles, a romantic tone, an Elizabethan style, and a progressive leaning toward realism. Beyond their differences in plot and treatment, the English dramas represent elaborate examples of “intellectual drama” (129) that come fairly close to Ibsen’s perceptive dramaturgy. In Sturgeon’s words, such plays can be read as “a strange pouring of the new wine of modern thought into the old bottles of Elizabethan form” (119).

However, no success came with the English plays. Bradley and Cooper endeavoured to reach the general public –or ‘the Demos’ as Katharine would call it– by having their books printed in an economical format and thereby reducing their purchase cost, but these strategies proved to be fruitless. In an attempt to account for the utter neglect of Michael Field’s dramas, Sturgeon speculates:

Perhaps the poets neglected to attach themselves to a useful little log-rolling coterie, and to pay the proper attentions to the Press. Or it may be that something in the fact of a collaboration was obscurely repellent; or even that their true sex was not revealed with tact to sensitive susceptibilities (29).

Donoghue opts for the last conjecture concerning Michael Field's gender: "it would seem too much of a coincidence if, despite their writing better plays, their reputation just happened to decline around the same time as their gender came to be known" (38). Nevertheless, Bradley and Cooper were far from paralysis and defeatism. Not only did they continue to compose more closet dramas, but they also embarked on a new project altogether: in 1889, Michael Field published an audacious book of lyrics that would bring them immense personal joy, as well as an invigorating wave of acclaim from prominent critics and authors.

1.4. *Long Ago* (1889): Rebirth and the Year of Pain-cum-Pleasure

In 1888 the Bradley and Cooper family left Bristol after having faced a sentimental crisis: Francis Brooks had confessed his love for his cousin Katharine Bradley, but the confession bore no fruit. James Cooper quarreled with the young suitor and put an end to his romantic aspirations. Leaving Brooks heartbroken, the family moved south and settled in Reigate, a small town near London. Katharine and Edith enjoyed their new residence greatly and personalised it with their fervid paganism: they erected an altar to Dionysus in the garden and started to celebrate “good reviews of their work by dancing madly like Bacchic satyrs” (Thain and Vadillo 28).

It would be no exaggeration to say that 1888 was a landmark year in Michael Field’s creative life, for they undertook two major projects: on the one hand, they began to write a monumental joint journal in which to record and share their common and individual experiences and feelings, taking turns to make separate entries, reading each other’s memories, confessing painful incidents, offering comfort to one another, and including all sorts of trivial and significant information –from letters, Biblical quotations and lists of borrowed books to garden reports, newspaper clippings and obituaries. The Michaels gave this journal the Hesiodian title of *Works and Days*, kept it up and running until 1914, and ended up using as many as twenty-nine ledgers for such “a grand narrative” of life writing (Donoghue 27).

On the other hand, after having read and enjoyed Dr. Henry Wharton’s *Sappho, Memoir, Text, Selected Renderings, and a Literal Translation* (1885),³⁶ Bradley and Cooper decided to embark on their first lyrical project, *Long Ago*. In this volume, the Fields wished to transform Sappho’s words into a collection of sixty-eight full-blown poems with a sole and specific aim, according to Mary Sturgeon: “to make short dramatic lyrics out of the scenes suggested to their imagination by the Sapphic fragments” (90). With this goal in mind, Bradley and Cooper worked on *Long Ago* with utmost excitement and “passionate pleasure” (Preface). It was so special a book for them that they turned to Robert Browning and asked him to write the preface, but the ageing poet considered that they did not need his endorsement. When the volume was

³⁶ It needs mentioning that both Henry Wharton and the Michaels base their respective works on Theodor Bergk’s philological reconstruction and compilation of Sappho’s fragments in *Poetae Lyrici Graeci*, first published in 1843.

over, Katharine and Edith awaited its final publication with impatient joy, but this joy commingled soon with the pain of witnessing how Emma Cooper, Bradley's sister and Edith's mother, prepared for her death. In the spring of 1889, Emma's condition became terminal and dispirited the whole family. In the meantime, on 23 May, *Long Ago* was at last published in a hundred copies. Three months later, on 19 August, Emma Cooper died. Inevitably, for the Fields, 1889 became the year of "the pain and the joy –like weft & woof" (Donoghue 39).

Against the backdrop of Emma Cooper's suffering, the Michaels celebrated the publication and successful reception of their first volume of lyric poetry. *Long Ago* sold out in less than a month and convinced many influential critics. The novelist George Meredith commended its "faultless flow" and "classic concision" (Leighton 212), and recognised in its lyrics just "a voice of one heart" (Donoghue 40) despite knowing the actual identity of Michael Field. In token of his admiration for the collection, Robert Browning gave a copy to a young boy "to teach him the uses of Greek learning" (Field, *Works and Days* 31). In *The Academy*, a famous Victorian review of literature, critic John Miller Gray went so far as to express "his conviction that the present book will take a permanent place in our English literature, as one of the most exquisite lyrical productions of the latter half of the nineteenth century" (in Thain and Vadillo 360-61).

However, as commented above, the celebration of Bradley and Cooper's triumph with *Long Ago* did not last for long. Emma Cooper died in August and left her family in pain. The Fields made no entries in their joint journal for the whole month of September. Then, the winter brought them greater affliction: on 12 December 1889, their esteemed Robert Browning also died. In her diary, Edith Cooper justly wrote: "Is this year going to bereave us?" (Field, *Work and Days* 34). Beyond a doubt, the year when *Long Ago* saw the light of publication was an ambivalent one –joyful and successful, yet terribly deathly and painful as well. It seems that the manifold paradoxes and ambiguities pervading the volume were perhaps fortuitous reflections of the *bitter-sweet* experiences that Bradley and Cooper underwent in the eventful year of 1889.

1.5. After *Long Ago*: Productivity, Cosmopolitanism, and Conversion

Bradley and Cooper became very prolific writers co-authoring as many as eight books of poetry, twenty-eight dramas, three posthumous religious plays, and “at least twenty-six further unpublished (and unfinished) dramas” (Thain, ‘*Michael Field*’ 7). The Michaels maintained an incessant artistic productivity, working on their literary projects almost uninterruptedly and publishing at least one play per year. However, in spite of their discipline and ambition, they oftentimes had to cope with unfavourable critiques and editorial refusals.³⁷ When they did receive positive appraisals, these were usually – and ironically– dedicated to their volumes of verse despite the fact that the Michaels saw themselves primarily as dramatists (Donoghue 66).³⁸

From 1890 onwards, Bradley and Cooper established a steadfast tradition of travelling to the Continent nearly every summer for the main purpose of visiting art galleries and museums mainly in France, Germany, and Italy. It was on their very first joint visit to Paris that the aunt and niece met Bernard Berenson, a Lithuanian-American art critic. Both women soon became fascinated by his Bohemian character and profound intellect, so much so that they grew to regard him as a genuine intellectual authority. The Michaels shared with him numerous trips to Europe, cultural visits, eccentric parties, enlightened discussions on French and Italian art, and a frequent correspondence. However, the relationship with him also involved emotional troubles, erotic tensions,³⁹ contradictory feelings of admiration and weariness, harsh critiques, and periods of estrangement.

In the course of their travels, visits and literary soirees, Bradley and Cooper established a large network of contacts with influential figures of the late-Victorian period, mostly connected to the Aesthetic Movement. The list is both long and prestigious: George Meredith, Mary Robinson, Walter Pater, Dante Gabriel Rossetti, Lionel Johnson, Arthur Symonds, Mrs. Chandler Moulton, George Moore, Oscar Wilde, Havelock Ellis,

³⁷ By the mid-1890s, according to Donoghue, the Michaels had already gained, among publishers, “the reputation of being arrogant eccentrics who wrote too much and too oddly” (76).

³⁸ As playwrights, Bradley and Cooper only had one opportunity to see the staging of one of their plays, *A Question of Memory*, at Jack Grein’s Independent Theatre in London, on 27 October 1893. However, the experience turned out to be an utter failure not only because the Michaels interfered in every dramaturgical decision and developed an extreme disliking for the director Herman de Lange, but also because the audience reacted with absolute indifference or even with overt displeasure.

³⁹ Donoghue holds that, whilst Katharine looked for intellectual friendship in Berenson, “Edith’s feelings were much more erotic” (58).

William Rothenstein, John Addington Symonds, Herbert Spencer, William Butler Yeats, and many others. Nevertheless, among these men and women of letters, the names that stood out most specially for the Michaels were artists Charles Ricketts and his partner Charles Shannon. “The poets contributed to the artists’ journal *The Dial*, and Ricketts published four of the poets’ plays at his own Vale Press [...] and decorated nearly all of their subsequent books” (Thain and Vadillo 32).

Towards the end of the 1890s, three major events took place in Bradley and Cooper’s lives. In the summer of 1897, James Cooper, Edith’s father and Katharine’s brother-in-law, went missing while mountaineering in the Swiss Alps, and his corpse was found some few months later. On 12 January 1898, Edith Cooper received for her birthday a Chinese chow puppy that was named Whym Chow and whose presence grew soon into a source of immense joy for the poets. In 1899, at the suggestion of their friend Charles Ricketts, Bradley and Cooper left Reigate and moved to a Georgian house at 1, The Paragon, Richmond. On this occasion, the poets relocated only on their own, with no other relatives, and their new resting-place became home not only to Dionysus, with his shrine in the garden, but also to all sorts of soirees, performances, recitals, and pagan rites, usually in the faithful company of Ricketts and Shannon. According to Donoghue, it was not infrequent to see the Fields in the afternoons as “chanting priestesses, Maenads, or witches on broomsticks” (93).

At the beginning of 1906, Bradley and Cooper suffered the painful loss of their beloved dog and fell into a spiritual crisis that led them to embrace the Roman Catholic faith with the guidance of poet and priest John Gray, who had recently befriended Katharine. In 1907, the Michael Fields became officially Catholic and “Dominican tertiaries (like lay nuns)” (Donoghue 112). In subsequent years, their renewed sense of religiosity enabled them to understand and withstand the series of adversities that were to come their way. In 1911 Edith was diagnosed with terminal cancer and died on 13 December 1913. In less than a year, on 26 September 1914, Katharine also died of cancer.

1.6. Aestheticism: Against ‘Drawing-Room Conventionalities’

As mentioned above, Bradley and Cooper were at the very centre of a large cultural movement known as aestheticism. Although it has raised major historiographic problems regarding its chronological demarcation perhaps due to its lack of a unified and organised structure around one doctrinal figure or school, the Aesthetic Movement may be seen to range “broadly from the 1850s through the 1930s, manifesting itself both in high art and in popular culture” (Schaffer and Psomiades 4) and fully covering Michael Field’s lifespan. In this long period, aestheticism maintained a constant focus on the creed of *art for art’s sake*, i.e., the idea that, art is selfishly preoccupied with itself and pursues no didacticism. Drawing on John Ruskin’s claims for the necessity of art in everyday life, the aesthete saw life as a work of art and believed in “art’s ability to make life more beautiful and to allow the beholder to achieve transcendence” (Schaffer and Psomiades 3).

The transcendence the aesthetes sought entailed a political paradox. As a social figure of dissidence, the Victorian aesthete felt “the growing apprehension of the nineteenth-century artist at the vulgarization of values and commercialization of art accompanying the rise of the middle class and the spread of democracy” (Zach 2). In response to this largely vulgarised, industrialised and mechanized reality, the aesthete advocated the primacy of art over life, the emancipation of the art work from moral or utilitarian prerogatives, the most fervent cult of beauty, and “the narrative of withdrawal” –of retreating “into an unreal fantasy at the expense of involvement with real life” (Schaffer and Psomiades 6). However, paradoxically enough, the aesthete participated actively in the grand narrative of commodification that they so abhorred. Beyond its radical politics against cheap productivism and cultural capitalism, the Aesthetic Movement engaged in the voracious economy of consumerism through its direct links with high-art interior design, private presses, and various fads for all things beautiful. As Denisoff puts it, the aesthetes commonly ended up adhering to a “consumptionist” ethos “in which the display of taste and ownership became a key marker of identity” (39).⁴⁰

⁴⁰ Likewise, Regina Gagnier and Jonathan Freedman have demonstrated in their studies that the aesthetic movement was essentially a culture of consumption that deconstructed itself: it was involved deeply in the market dynamics, but with a (self-)critical attitude.

Ana Parejo Vadillo has meticulously demonstrated that Bradley and Cooper were fully immersed in aestheticism's cultural economy. Not only did they devote much money and attention to their sense of fashion under the assumption that "dress was a living form of aesthetic expression" ("Living Art" 244), but they also transposed their aesthetic convictions into their intimate spaces (especially, their Reigate and Richmond houses), embracing the House Beautiful movement, growing to see "the house as an art object in its own right" (Vadillo, "Aestheticism and Decoration" 17), and developing a passionate interest in the decorative arts. Likewise, the Michaels were very fastidious in all that concerned the design of their books: they demanded expensive formats and binding, elaborate ornamentation, and special typography despite the consequent fact that the final price of their volumes was considerably high. The reason for this lay once again in Bradley and Cooper's embeddedness in aestheticism: as Vadillo rightly argues, all of their "books were conceived as art objects where form and content, design and poetry created together the aesthetics of the volume" ("Living Art" 243). It is more than clear, then, that the Michaelian aestheticism constituted not just a philosophy that informed every aspect of the poets' lives, but also a paradigm of the consumerist ethos that characterised the late-Victorian aesthetes in their search for the beautiful.

As a reaction to cultural capitalism (notwithstanding its complicity with it) and beyond its narrative of escapism, the Aesthetic Movement did incorporate a significant social and political discourse inspired, among others, by John Ruskin's belief that "gifts of beauty and culture would civilize and spiritually elevate the poor" (Maltz 2). This form of missionary aestheticism, so denominated by Ian Fletcher and Diana Maltz, was a ramification of the generalised Victorian tradition of philanthropy that aimed particularly to expose the lower classes to all manifestations of beauty, to offer them ways of access to different art forms, to refine and redeem them with culture, to disseminate aesthetic and ethical values among them, and to improve the aesthetic quality of urban public spaces to prevent their degradation. Maltz summarises some of the modes of social activism fostered by the missionary aesthetes in this short passage:

These aesthetes believed that to live an aesthetic life in a practical sense required a commitment to organized movements, so they worked accordingly to provide free concerts, playgrounds, and public gardens in working-class neighborhoods, lobbied for extended museum and gallery opening hours on Sundays, and encouraged artists to open their studios to the poor (2).

Diana Maltz has written elsewhere that Katharine Bradley manifested an early desire to engage in philanthropy. When she was young, she “tried to persuade her family to let her do charity work in the East End” (“Ethical Socialism” 191). Later, in the late 1870s, she joined John Ruskin’s Guild of St. George and started to donate a tenth of her income for the different social programmes implemented by this utopian society, which were mainly destined “to bring beauty to the slums” (912). In her correspondence with the eminent Victorian critic, she also showed her sympathy with Comtean Positivism and its discourse of altruism as the core of a universal humanitarian religion, yet Ruskin strongly disapproved of this sympathy and threatened Katharine with excommunication from the Guild. After she was eventually expelled from Ruskin’s society due to her atheistic inclinations, it seems that her socialist agenda lost its solidity and strength. Maltz speculates that her “personal relationship with Ruskin and his contemptuous dismissal of her may have been enough to sever her ties with social reform altogether” (194). Although in the late 1880s Katharine subscribed to the Fellowship of the New Life, a burgeoning society which preached a spiritual form of socialism, she never became a regular and active member. In a way, her particular mode of missionary aestheticism was not so much an instance of public activism, but rather an “individual mindful activity” (198).

Besides its missionary dimension, aestheticism embraced other social currents of protest and dissidence. In the 1890s, fruitful affiliations emerged between the aesthetes and the New Woman movement. While it is true that some distinguished feminists like Sarah Grand rejected aestheticism in favour of a more realistic, less radical and purely reformist rhetoric, “other New Woman writers entered into dialogue with it, particularly in the pages of *The Yellow Book*” (Ledger 166), which was one of the main forums of Decadent and Aesthetic literature and art. Among the feminist contributors to this periodical were George Egerton, Charlotte Mew, Victoria Cross or Vernon Lee, some of whom made use of the refined and elaborate language of aestheticism in their essays and stories as a strategic medium to transgress gender normativity and legitimise iconoclastic models of female emancipation. Indeed, this spirit of transgression and iconoclasm is central to the alliance between aestheticism and the New Woman. Talia Schaffer writes: “in the lived reality of the 1890s, aesthetes and New Women were intimately connected and strongly allied. For contemporary observers, New Women and

aesthetes constituted the vanguard of radical change by the younger generation, united in their appalling iconoclasm” (18). In unison, both New Women and aesthetes clamoured for moral parity between the sexes, access to higher education for women, voting rights, reform or abolition of marriage, economic autonomy for women, and even rational female fashion.

Yopie Prins claims that Bradley and Cooper belonged to “the generation of unmarried middle-class women that came of age in the 1870s and 1880s [and] played an important role in the transition from mid-Victorian Old Maid to fin-de-siècle New Woman” (“Greek Maenads” 46). As single and independent women, the aunt and niece relied on their own income for economic sustenance, redefined their social and familial relations, rejected conventional domesticity altogether, and execrated the sacred institution of heterosexual matrimony. Their view on marriage, in fact, was fairly radical: they regarded it as “an ancient rite” that should be renewed by “new forms or new freedoms” and accommodated to “open spaces of a relationship untouched by the state” (Donoghue 55). As independent and free-thinking women, Bradley and Cooper often added their voices to different progressive campaigns promoted in Bristol in favour of women’s suffrage, animal rights, and extensive higher education for everyone. On a more personal level, the poets opposed traditional models of fashion and shaped their own style, rejecting suffocating “corsets and crinolines in favour of daringly clinging dresses in arty colours such as peach, gold or green, with hair loosely knotted at the nape of the neck” (Donoghue 24). It is true, as Pionke has pointed out, that the Michaels “preferred to dress in women’s clothes and to act in a feminine manner” and that they never “paraded in the streets in trousers” (26), and yet it remains undeniable that they did challenge, alongside other New Women, Victorian societal codes by freely choosing their own sartorial style, adopting more masculine or boyish roles on some occasions, smoking cigarettes in private places, and refusing to be “stifled by drawing-room conventionalities” (Field, *Work and Days* 6).⁴¹

For Marion Thain, however, the consideration of the Fields as New Women is not clear altogether. In an initial biographical sketch, Thain does claim that the aunt and niece

⁴¹ Elizabeth Primamore captures this dissident spirit in precise terms and comes to identify Bradley and Cooper with the figure of the dandy: “Elegant, rebellious, and talented, the two women poets debunked cultural constructions of Victorian femininity, masculinity, and the middle-classes, against which the dandy deliberately revolted, to create themselves as artists” (142).

“cut the figure of the, so-called, New Woman” in the sense that “they were emancipated women of the post-Darwinian age” (*Poetic Identity* 2). Later on, in her major monograph on the Fields, Thain reconsiders their political affiliations and comes to a different conclusion: “Bradley and Cooper were not New Women” (13) and “their poetic strategy relied on not foregrounding politics in their work” (15). Yet, this very categorical statement is somehow mitigated when Thain herself writes: “Michael Field did feel the injustices committed against women by Victorian society, but in their pre-Michael Field days, they dedicated themselves to art, and aesthetic considerations always came before political ones” (13). All in all, the question remains whether and to what extent the Fields can be associated with the New Woman movement. I would argue that the answer is not a matter of absolute association, but of relative or indirect dialogue. It seems reasonable enough to see aunt and niece as New Women at least to the extent that they subscribed to the emancipatory politics of living outside the core dogmas of Victorian gender ideology.

Indeed, in their refusal to abide by such dogmas, Bradley and Cooper entered readily into aestheticism’s “tendency to celebrate nonnormative sexuality” (Schaffer and Psomiades 9). Grounded in the crucial precedents of Tennyson, the Pre-Raphaelites and Swinburne, the aestheticist discourse shaped a nonconformist gender politics that was radically hospitable to new forms of femininity and masculinity, androgynous fantasies, liminal identities, same-sex desires, castrators, *femmes fatales*, hypersexual vampires, and all manner of carnal perversions and psychoanalytic polymorphisms. It was in line with this diverse discourse that the Michael Fields articulated their own voices and fashioned their “amorphous sexual identity” (Thain, ‘*Michael Field*’ 45), one that defied all neat categories and found no great difficulty in bringing homoeroticism and heterosexual desire into a fluid coexistence.

1.7. Francophilia, Cosmopolitanism and Roman Catholicism

Those who championed aestheticist, proto-feminist, and *queer* ideals did not appear and proliferate all over Britain: their active geography was circumscribed to urban locations and, more particularly, to the city of London. Indeed, aestheticism emerged and thrived in the cosmopolitan English capital, which became the most vibrant and attractive cityscape for the late-Victorian poet-topographer. As Ana Parejo Vadillo has shown in her important study on urban aestheticism, the general “recognition of London as a source of intellectual and aesthetic stimulation became a guiding principle of the *fin de siècle*’s poetics of modernity” (3). The dialogue between the aestheticist poets and London, according to Vadillo, was highly creative, fertile, and diverse:

Poets not only wrote about the city, its people and its streets, but also about everything related to the metropolitan way of life: the conditions of living in London, the world of entertainment and the music hall, prostitution, the new urban technologies, consumer culture, and, of course, the role of the modern poet in the new urban environment (4).

In her corpus of urban aesthetes, Vadillo focuses primarily on Katharine Bradley and Edith Cooper, together with other woman poets such as Amy Levy, Alice Meynell, and Graham R. Tomson. Of the Michael Fields in particular Vadillo writes that both in their lifestyle and their common oeuvre they were radically antithetical to any model of domestic, private, static, and angelic womanhood and that they were instead “passengers travelling on the underground” (2). In actual fact, when she was just a teenager, Katharine often caught the train from Birmingham to London to make the most of the cultural vibrancy of the metropolis with all its theatres, concerts, libraries, public lectures, and art galleries. Much later, after the Bradley-Cooper family relocated to Reigate in 1888, “the Michaels could enjoy quiet country living but reach London easily by rail, especially as some trains went faster in those day than a century earlier” (Donoghue 36). Living near the capital allowed Bradley and Cooper to frequent salons, theatres, museums, libraries, and shops with the added advantage that they could keep up to date with the major high-art trends, take part in the growing culture of consumerism, and establish connections with the London aesthetes.⁴² It was clear that,

⁴² As Thain and Vadillo have noted, “Reigate’s closeness to London ensured the women’s involvement in London’s budding literary and artistic world. The British Museum, the National Gallery, literary “at homes,” musical soirées, lectures at Bernard’s Inn, and visits to the theatre became commonplace” (29).

sooner or later, the Michaelian couple of fervent aesthetes were duty-bound to settle in the grand metropolis for good: in 1899 they moved to 1, The Paragon, Richmond, a suburban town in south-west London. Here Bradley and Cooper continued living their personal aestheticism as a public, urban and consumptionist experience in the close company of their friends Ricketts and Shannon.

In their London experience, Bradley and Cooper became part of a large movement of aesthetes who were closely in touch with the Continental –particularly French– literary scene. Granted that British aestheticism recognised its own precursory figures in Dante Gabriel Rossetti and Charles Algernon Swinburne, it was nevertheless a fact that “the chief influences came from France” (Holbrook 58) and that the English aesthetes and decadents –Oscar Wilde, Ernest Dowson, Lionel Johnson, Aubrey Beardsley and, for that matter, Michael Field– were cosmopolitan apostles of the ideas coined indelibly by Théophile Gautier, Charles Baudelaire, Paul Verlaine or Joris Karl Huysmans. For this reason, in his seminal review of late-Victorian literature and art, Jackson Holbrook claims that British aestheticism and decadence must be understood as “the product not of England but of a cosmopolitan London” (58), where the urban artist witnessed and consumed a massive traffic of art and knowledge that came from across the Channel.

Bradley and Cooper were Francophiles and cosmopolites in their *modus vivendi* and their work. At an early age, Katharine aspired to acquire an excellent education and a solid command of both classical and modern languages. She devoted special attention to French and German with the ultimate goal of reading her most admired Continental writers in their original tongues –Flaubert, Bourget, Verlaine, Heine, Goethe or Schiller, to name but a few. In her early twenties, Bradley travelled to Paris to improve her French, attend some lectures at the prestigious Collège de France, and take some pleasure in the effervescent bohemianism that pervaded the City of Light.⁴³ Back in England, Katharine shared her passion, knowledge, and cosmopolitan education with her cherished niece Edith, who soon manifested her “austere latinity” (Sturgeon 18), her preference for modern languages over ancient Greek, and her interest in continental philosophy. Yet, it was from 1890 onwards that Bradley and Cooper began together to form an intimately close connection with the European continent, travelling across the Channel nearly every summer, visiting some few countries (mainly France, Germany,

⁴³ Such was her immersion in France that Katharine started to write her individual diary in French during this period.

and Italy), often sharing their trips with Bernard Berenson and his lover Mary Costelloe, and going to numerous museums and galleries with a list of specific art works to see. The literary fruit of this intense cultural nomadism was their very cosmopolitan *Sight and Song* (1892), a volume of ekphrastic poetry that focuses upon the paintings that the Michaels most keenly discerned and appreciated on their first tours around Europe.

Furthermore, the cosmopolitanism that Bradley and Cooper espoused and practiced with economic comfort and aesthetic devotion entailed significant religious repercussions. In the late nineteenth century, it became common among French and British aesthetes and decadents to renounce their atheistic or pagan beliefs and embrace the Roman Catholic faith. In France, the group of converts included “Léon Bloy (1871), Paul Verlaine (1874–1875), Paul Claudel (1886), J. K. Huysmans (1892), Francis Jammes (1905), and Charles Péguy (1908)” (Masurel-Murray). In Britain, the list is remarkably more extensive, according to Claire Masurel-Murray:

Frederick Rolfe (1860–1913), also known as “Baron Corvo,” who wrote novels, short stories and poems, and converted in 1886; the poets John Gray (1866–1934), who was received into the Church in 1890 and ordained into the priesthood in 1901, Lionel Johnson (1867–1902, converted in 1891), and Ernest Dowson (1867–1900, converted in 1891); Pearl Mary Teresa Craigie (1867–1906), who wrote novels under the pseudonym “John Oliver Hobbes” and converted in 1892; Wilde’s friend Robert Ross (1869–1918), an art critic and essay writer who converted in 1894; André Raffalovich (1864–1934), a friend of John Gray and Aubrey Beardsley, a minor poet and theoretician of homosexuality, who became a Catholic in 1896; the illustrator Aubrey Beardsley (1872–1898, converted in 1897); Henry Harland (1861–1905), the literary editor of *The Yellow Book*, who converted in 1898; Oscar Wilde (1856–1900), who received the sacraments of the Church on his deathbed in 1900; Katharine Bradley (1846–1914) and Edith Cooper (1862–1913), who wrote poetry under the shared pseudonym “Michael Field” and converted in 1907; and finally Wilde’s lover Lord Alfred Douglas (1870–1945, converted in 1911).

Beyond a doubt, it was the cosmopolitan spirit of aestheticism that permitted and fueled the constant exchange of commodities, trends, fads, ideas, and even religious sentiments between Paris and London. What may strike us as bizarre, however, is why the aesthetes became members of the Roman Catholic Church and how they made their newly found faith compatible with their cult of beauty. For Claire Masurel-Murray, the answer lies precisely in their devotion to all things beautiful: the aesthetes were magnetised, in Pater’s words, by the “the aesthetic charm of the Catholic Church, her evocative power

over all that is eloquent and expressive in the outer mind of man, her outward comeliness” (123). Roman Catholicism appealed to the *fin-de-siècle* poet not as a dull body of dogmas, doctrines and theological quandaries, but as an exotic locus of old ritualistic spectacles, liturgical splendours, mystic fantasies, and even erotic ceremonies. Masurel-Murray captures all these aesthetic values in a concise enumeration:

The fascination for the macabre, the combination of sensuousness and mysticism, the search for refined sensations, the desire to create compensatory worlds in order to flee a reality that is perceived as unbearable—all these elements are indeed echoed in a certain kind of fin de siècle Catholic devotion that focuses on the cult of martyrs, of Christ as Homo Dolorosus and of the Virgin of the Seven Sorrows, as well as on the formal beauty of the liturgy, on legends, on miracles and on apparitions.

From the aestheticist perspective, such attractive elements fused with an intrinsic spirit of dissidence against industrialism, positivism, materialism, scientism, and any other creed that disenchanting, demythologised, and reduced human existence to empirical and measurable data. For the British aesthete, moreover, Catholicism not only served as a counter-discourse against the hegemonic axioms of austere objectivism, but also as an overt act of opposition to the national Church of England. By adopting the Catholic faith, the aesthete became a foreigner in his own nation and inhabited a space that was “alien, exotic, and hence uncorrupted by Victorianism” (Masurel-Murray). In this way, British aestheticism reinforced its fundamental ideology of non-conformism with an irrational, strange, and even perverse passion for the dogmatic and aesthetic excesses of the Mater Ecclesia.

Nonetheless, it must be made clear that Catholicism was not merely a charming and rebellious idea for the aesthete. In Bradley and Cooper’s case, their conversion did not happen overnight, and nor did it respond merely to a cosmopolitan call. As Roden has claimed, the Michaels went through a personal, gradual, and thoughtful process of spiritual renewal and transformation: they “wrote extensively in their journals about the sacraments, composed unambiguously religious poetry, converted several years before their deaths, and provided justification for doing so” (155). Certainly, although influenced by the public narrative of magnetism between aestheticism and Catholicism, Bradley and Cooper’s conversion assumed an intrinsically personal character: they marked and dramatised the death of their beloved pet Whym Chow in 1906 as a turning

point in their lives. It was from this tragic experience onwards that they transformed their serial autobiography into a spiritual narrative aimed at reconstructing their common identity around a hybrid and synthetic congress between their paganism and their rediscovered Christianity. To this same end, the Michaels counted upon the theological orientation of such spiritual advisors as John Gray, a Catholic priest and Decadent poet himself. He provided Bradley and Cooper with “the theological tools and framework they used in their poetry to accomplish their own reconciliation of their perverse, pagan poetic past (and their desire for each other) with their newly found Catholic faith” (Thain, ‘*Michael Field*’ 171). As a result of this process of spiritual renegotiation, the Michaels inaugurated a new phase in their poetic career with a special volume of verse titled *Wild Honey from Various Thyme*, which represented a landmark publication in itself, according to Marion Thain: for it established the pattern of integration of pagan and Catholic motifs that would characterise their next volumes – *Poems of Adoration*, *Mystic Trees*, and *Whym Chow: Flame of Love* (169). Nearly seven years after their personal and poetic conversion, Bradley and Cooper died as Catholics in London.

It goes without saying that, in view of the foregoing, the intimate dialogue that Bradley and Cooper held with the Aesthetic Movement informed every facet of their lives: they lived aestheticism devoutly as a hedonistic, consumerist, socialist, feminist, urban, cosmopolitan, religious, and wayward phenomenon. The Michaels behaved as staunch aesthetes in their *modus vivendi*, their autobiographical accounts, their pagan and Catholic poems, and their verse tragedies. They created, as Evangelista concludes, their “highly individual version of the aesthetic life, characterised by self-staging and the performance of a flamboyant aestheticism” (Evangelista, *British Aestheticism* 124). It becomes clear, then, that their lives and works constitute a monumental paradigm of the most representative, as well as the most idiosyncratic, literature of *fin-de-siècle* Britain.

1.8. Late-Victorian Hellenism and Dionysianism: ‘Bacchic Maenads’

In addition to its social and spiritual connections, the Aesthetic Movement participated in a long-standing Victorian tradition of intimate communion with the ancient world – more especially, with Greece.⁴⁴ In the long course of the nineteenth century, the Greek past was transformed into the greatest model of civilisation, political order, and erudition under the implicit assumption that the Victorians were heirs to such greatness. For the ruling classes and elites, the study of the ancient Greek language and culture formed an integral part of their formal education and became “a crucial status marker” (Stray 27).⁴⁵ For the Victorian gentleman, the ancient Greeks exemplified the highest ideals of citizenship, patriotism, and Herculean masculinity. For the ideologues and agents of Britain’s imperial expansion, “the political, military and cultural achievements of the ancient Greeks provided a particularly rich point of comparison” (Olverson, *Women Writers* 2-3). For some reactionary women of letters, motherhood constituted the most elevated female role in that it fulfilled the civic function it had in ancient Athens: the procreation of a powerful race of men. More than just a mere academic discipline, Victorian Hellenism was an essential part of a hegemonic system of genteel values, classism, gender dogmatism, and imperialism.

Nevertheless, as the century wore on, the ideologies ascribed to the Hellenic past diversified into new and even transgressive positions. By and large, a clear divergence divided the discourse of Hellenism into two appropriative attitudes: for the mid-Victorian intellectual mindset, influenced by German classicism and represented at its best by John Ruskin or Matthew Arnold in Britain, ancient Greece was the very epitome of Olympian order, Apollonian clarity, moral purity, whiteness, sweetness and light, whereas the late-Victorian imagination inclined towards a more primitive, irrational, affective, grotesque, Dionysian, and Chthonic Greece under the chief influences of Walter Pater and Jane Harrison. This significant shift also brought about a radical change in the gender politics of Victorian Hellenism, which went on to serve “more

⁴⁴ The vast bibliography on the reception of antiquity in the Victorian period includes such major critics and historians as Jenkyns, Turner, Goldhill, Fiske, or Richardson. However, perhaps the most important study that examines the particular connection between aestheticism and Hellenism is Evangelista’s *British Aestheticism and the Ancient Greece*.

⁴⁵ This does not mean, however, that the lower and middle classes had no contact with classical tradition and Hellenism. In fact, the visual arts, drama, music, literature, periodicals, newspapers, or even fables for children offered a far-reaching popular culture that appropriated and revived the ancient Greeks in the most multifarious and creative ways. For recent studies on the relationship between the Classics and the Victorian demos, see especially Hall and Macintosh, Monros-Gaspar, or Bryant Davies.

socially seditious purposes” (Olverson 9) towards the end of the nineteenth century. In Oxford, Benjamin Jowett, Walter Pater, Algernon Swinburne, John Addington Symonds, and Oscar Wilde contributed in their scholarly and literary works to shaping an aestheticist, decadent, and politically legitimising discourse based around the association between ancient Greece and same-sex desire between men. In like manner, in Cambridge, the openings of the all-female Girton College and Newnham College enabled women like Katharine Bradley or Jane Ellen Harrison to acquire an advanced classical education within a university setting, to counter the common “gendering of Hellenism and classical scholarship as unequivocally masculine discourses” (Olverson 12), to produce a feminist revision of ancient Greek literature and culture, and to form a community of women “who imagined Greece on their own terms and within a female homosocial context” (Prins, “Greek Maenads” 46).

In late-Victorian Oxford and Cambridge, the seditious appropriations of the Greek past were in essence the result of the radical conversion that Walter Pater performed of “Classical learning into a queer philology” (Prins 47). By queer in this context Yopie Prins refers to a sensual, wayward, and even perverse epistemology that approached Greek culture and religion with a special predilection for its darkest, most paradoxical and tragic figures. Marion Thain spells out with special historical accuracy that this kind of unorthodox Hellenism was understood by its very proponents as a form of paganism that covered “not only the Graeco-Roman non-Christian realm,” but also “the perverse sexuality (liberal heterosexuality and any homosexually inclined behaviour)” that was inherently associated with aestheticism (Thain, *Michael Field*’ 4).

No wonder, Tracy Olverson argues, that at the heart of such queer philology was the figure of Dionysus, who became so attractive:

...because he represented multiple paradoxes and possibilities. On a psychological and emotional level Dionysus signifies the free flow of emotional life, untouched by the restrictions of family, society or conventional morality and religion. On a cultural level Dionysus confuses distinctions between city and wild, mortal and immortal, man and beast, male and female, Greek and barbarian, heaven and earth. Dionysus is, therefore, a complex, protean and provocative god, who opens up a world of new experiences, for those brave enough to embrace him (*Women Writers* 19).

The queer Dionysian Hellenism flourished greatly at the *fin de siècle* and served its most seditious purposes in masculine and feminine counter-discourses. To the Paterian male aesthete, Dionysus turned into a byword for “an unalienated masculine selfhood,” for a natural, sensual, and liberated masculinity, “for fantasies of male-male desire,” but also for “the self-hatred induced in men conscious of sexual and emotional attraction to other men” (Dellamora 176-77). Among the late-Victorian “Daughters of Dionysus,” as Olverson calls them (18), it is perhaps Jane Ellen Harrison who best expressed the general preference for the chthonic god and similar deities over the Olympian pantheon:

I have often wondered why the Olympians, Apollo, Athena, and even Zeus, always vaguely irritated me and why the mystery gods, their shapes and ritual, Demeter, Dionysus, the cosmic Eros drew and drew me. I see it now. It is just that those mystery gods represent the supreme golden moment achieved by the Greek, and the Greek only, in his incomparable way. The mystery gods are eikonic, caught in lovely human shapes –but they are life-spirits barely held. Dionysus is a human youth, lovely, with curled hair, but in a moment he is a Wild Bull and a Burning Flame. The beauty and the thrill of it! (in Prins, “Greek Maenads” 68).

Like Harrison, other women writers such as Augusta Webster, Amy Levy, Katharine Bradley, Edith Cooper, Vernon Lee, Emily Pfeiffer or Mona Caird felt ‘the thrill’ of Dionysus and developed their own versions of Dionysian Hellenism. Cogently, Yopie Prins puts forward the term *maenadism* to designate this feminine tradition of aestheticist and Decadent mythography particularly interested in ancient female figures “with the power to create and destroy, dedicated not only to sing and dance in honor of Dionysus, but to darker acts of destruction” (Prins 49). In political terms, what the Victorian maenads promoted with their idiosyncratic Hellenisms was a new radical model of womanhood that laid stress on rebellion, anarchy, madness, and even sexual savagery to the detriment of the Christian ideals of female selflessness and decorum.

Katharine Bradley and Edith Cooper’s case is highly illustrative of the aesthetics and politics underlying late-Victorian Hellenism. Their personal and literary engagement with antiquity started early on in their lives and lasted until their very last projects, thus consolidating not just a long poetic career as philhellenists but even “a relationship that [was] heavily mediated by the experience of Greece” (Evangelista, *British Aestheticism* 96). At a young age, Katharine Bradley received private instruction in Classics, studied Latin and Roman history at the Collège de France, and attended a summer course at

Newnham to enlarge and formalise her knowledge and of the classical languages and cultures while acquiring a collective female consciousness of Hellenism as a plural discourse open to feminist revisions. As a teenager, Edith Cooper spent most of her time reading ancient philosophy, writing pagan poetry, and translating Virgil. Together and completely inseparable, Bradley and Cooper enrolled in the University College Bristol in 1878 to further their classical studies.

As explained earlier on, Bradley and Cooper adopted the respective pseudonyms of Arrah and Isla Leigh and co-published *Bellerophôn* in 1881. This collection presented two different sections, a closet drama and a sequence of verses, both unified by “their affiliation to Victorian and Aesthetic Hellenism, most notably Pater’s suggestion that Greek mythology (the foundation of the Romantic imagination), was a part of the modern spirit” (Than and Vadillo 35). Despite the fact that it failed to win the public’s favour mainly due to its lack of rigorous classicism, Bradley and Cooper’s first volume nevertheless served to promulgate their identity as Hellenic aesthetes and to attract the interest of the reputed critic and academic John Addington Symonds, who offered the Michaels “intellectual guidance” (Evangelista, *British Aestheticism* 98) on classical culture for a short period of time.

In *Callirrhoë* (1884), the first work to be published under the name of Michael Field, the poets proposed their own version of Dionysian Hellenism, drawing upon Euripides’s *Bacchae*, appropriating the theme of a city-state in crisis for its disrespect of Dionysus, and promoting a Paterian or Nietzschean “gospel of ecstasy” (Evangelista 99). The play received high notoriety and led the Michaels to go on exploring further possibilities of their own “Bacchic aestheticism” (111). Later, in *Underneath the Bough* (1893), Bradley and Cooper composed a pagan poetics focused on nature, Thanatos, Dionysus, ecstasy, transgressive eroticism, and morbidity, all revolving around “two central principles of Greek culture, the Apollonian and the Dionysian, as defined by Nietzsche in *The Birth of Tragedy*” (Thain and Vadillo 39). Later on, in *For that Moment Only*, an unpublished collection of Paterian prose pieces penned after the publication of *Underneath the Bough*, the Michaels made their particular contributions to the gods-in-exile tradition, reviving ancient deities in post-classical settings, celebrating the return of a transgressive Dionysus, transforming Victorian women into genuine maenads, and

thereby fashioning a Bacchic-Aesthetic “epistemology of the senses, buried in the remote past of Greece” (Evangelista 121).

In the mid-1890s Michael Field ratified and consolidated their profound affiliation with Dionysianism by reading Frederick Nietzsche for the first time and electing him “as their new intellectual guide” (Evangelista 123) especially after their relationship with Bernard Berenson lost its initial influence. For the poets, both Pater and Nietzsche became their chief philosophical referents in respect of their common understanding of the Dionysian as the vital, dark, irrational, and ecstatic force beneath the Apollonian veils of Greek thought and art. In special connection with the German thinker, “Bradley and Cooper embraced the total claim of the Dionysian cult with its glorification of sexuality and intoxication, its revolutionary energy, radical aestheticism, and virulent hostility towards protestant Christianity” (Evangelista 123). This full embrace of the Dionysian not only found an implicit and explicit expression in their poems and dramas, but also in their daily lives: the Michaels erected an altar to Bacchus in their own garden, celebrated their literary successes with dances around it, and formed a Bacchic library with books that manifested a Dionysian spirit. Unsurprisingly, the poet and critic Logan Pearsall Smith thought that Bradley and Cooper lived as authentic “Bacchic Maenads” (in Prins, “Greek Maenads” 55).

1.9. Victorian Sapphism and *Long Ago*: ‘Two Dear Greek Women’

As with Dionysus, Sappho was absolutely central to the development of Victorian Hellenisms, so much so that today what we understand by Sapphism constitutes nothing but ‘an artifact of Victorian poetics’ (Prins, *Victorian Sappho* 3). Distinguished as the tenth muse and the mother of the Western lyric tradition, Sappho fascinated the nineteenth-century reader and poet with her fragmentary yet timeless voice. Both the Romantics and the Victorians looked to her for poetic self-legitimation, as she represented the highest authority in the genre of the lyric. She became, indeed, the very engendering figure that bound “together gender and genre inextricably: through Sappho we can trace the gendering of lyric as a feminine genre” (Prins 27). In Victorian poetics, the ancient poetess grew to be the lofty model of lyric expression or, as J. A. Symonds put it, “the ultimate and finished forms of passionate utterance” (310).

Within the framework of Victorian gender politics, Sappho became a site of debate over the Women Question and embodied divergent notions of womanhood. As an aesthetic object, the poetess incarnated the very ideal of feminine beauty combined with virtual mutism and death, which Edgar Allan Poe famously considered the most poetical topic of all. Given the fragmentary nature of her texts and their many silences, Sappho’s corpus was refigured as an agonizing body that abounded with sublime beauty, but lacked the fullness of speech and incarnated the aestheticised “paradox of a speaking corpse” (Prins 49). In this manner, the figure of Sappho contributed not only to the Victorian fantasy of silenced, inert, and passive femininity, but also to “the Victorian gendering of lyric as a genre simultaneously feminine and dead” (51). Sappho was the perfect woman writer –nearly dead and with a bibliography of nearly mute lyrics.

In his *Sappho, Memoir, Text, Selected Renderings, and a Literal Translation* (1885), a widely read and much reprinted edition of the Sapphic fragments in the late-Victorian period, Henry Wharton drew on German and British classical scholarship (particularly, Theodor Bergk’s *Poetae Lyrici Graeci* and John Addington Symonds’s *Studies of the Greek Poets*) to popularise the figure of Sappho, translate one hundred and seventy fragments ascribed to her, provide multiple renderings for each fragment in English, and reconstruct her life despite the total lack of evidence for it. As a result, what Wharton offered was not so much a scholarly book, but a sublime multiplication of Sapphic song into infinitely different versions and an idealised portrayal of the Lesbian poetess that

respected “the Victorian cult of ideal womanhood” (Prins 59) and purged her image of any possible hint of sexual deviance.

In line with nineteenth-century codes of feminine conduct was also the Romantic and Victorian tradition of sentimental Sapphism, which focused on the Ovidian myth of the ancient poetess as a heterosexual tragic lover who jumped off the Leucadian cliff due to her beloved’s disdain.⁴⁶ This particular topos of a suffering, powerless, and suicidal Sappho flourished in the Romantic verses of Mary Robinson, Letitia Elizabeth Landon and Felicia Hemans with a secure and productive continuity in the Victorian poetry of Christina Rossetti and Caroline Norton. Beyond their differences, all these poets treated Sappho analogously as a lyric figure of self-denial, self-silencing, self-effacement, extreme renunciation, personal emptiness, suspended agency, perpetual suffering, and impossible subjectivation (Prins 174-225). In this inactive position, Sappho acted merely as a “hollow construction” and an “evacuated figure” (184) that maintained the status quo of Victorian womanhood completely unquestioned.

However, towards the end of the nineteenth century, Sappho broke her ties with the hegemonic gender ideologies, appealed to the nascent discourse of Anglo-American feminism, and came to embody “a progressive ideal of womanhood that could be projected into futurity” (Prins 227). It was a minor group of little known poets – Elizabeth Oakes Smith, Mary Catherine Hume and Catherine Amy Dawson Scott– who incorporated the figure of Sappho into their creed of progress, invoking her as an example of heroinism, interpreting her fragments as pure manifestations of affective freedom, transforming her into a transcendental woman, and using her prestigious name to argue for the education and emancipation of women. In this sense, Sappho served as a symbol to contest the canons of Victorian gender politics, refuse “the domesticated lives of married women,” and “stir and inspire a crowd of women” (241) with her libertarian message. She was now a rebel.

Going far beyond political progressivism, Algernon Swinburne wrote three main poems on the ancient lyrist –“Anactoria,” “Sapphics” and “On the Cliffs”– that presented a new, Decadent and scandalous model of Sapphism in late-Victorian poetry. Not only did he portray Sappho explicitly as a lesbian lover, but he went so far as to re-imagine

⁴⁶ According to Ovid’s epistle “Sappho to Phaon,” included in his *Heroides*, Sappho was grief-stricken and committed suicide after her beloved Phaon rejected and abandoned her.

her as an abused and abusing body, a dominatrix, then a submissive sufferer, a violent erotic subject, an ecstatic object, an overt embodiment of sadomasochism, a sublime force, and a complete inversion that dismantles “the hierarchy of masculine over feminine, making the female principle dominant, and implicitly feminizing the male subject” (Prins 123).⁴⁷ In his Sapphic appropriation, Swinburne transgressed all codes of Victorian decorum, took no heed of gender conventionalities, and created an idol of perversity and Decadence out of the figure of his much venerated Sappho.

For their part, Katharine Bradley and Edith Cooper made a significant contribution to the miscellaneous discourse of Victorian Sapphism with their very first volume of verse published under the name of Michael Field, *Long Ago* (1889). In order to carry out this lyrical project, the poets turned to three chief sources of classical erudition: Theodor Bergk’s *Poetae Lyrici Graeci*, John Addington Symonds’s *Studies of the Greek Poets*, and Henry Wharton’s aforementioned edition. By using these references, citing Sappho in her original language and making up a masculine identity, the Michaels authorised themselves as Hellenists, entered an elite group of connoisseurs of Greek literature, and followed “a new trend among late-Victorian poets who found in Greek poetry new ways with which to reinvigorate the lyric” (Thain and Vadillo 55).⁴⁸ After the publication and successful reception of *Long Ago*, Robert Browning bore out Bradley and Cooper’s notorious position within *fin-de-siècle* Hellenism by saluting them as his “two dear Greek women” (in Madden 69).

In *Long Ago*, Michael Field’s Hellenism is wholly mediated by a peculiar and complex model of Sapphism –yet another rebirth of Sappho in the late nineteenth century. How Bradley and Cooper appropriated and refashioned the figure of the Greek poetess has been an amply debated question among several critics. For Mary Sturgeon, *Long Ago*, apart from constituting Michael Field’s most perfect lyric volume, performs a vivid, harmonious, and unified dramatisation of Sappho’s fragments that celebrates life in all its aesthetic, sensual and fatal dimensions:

⁴⁷ It is worth adding that this predatory Sapphism is also common to other poets that the Fields knew well –mainly, Charles Baudelaire and Paul Verlaine.

⁴⁸ Thain and Vadillo suggest a direct parallelism between Michael Field’s *Long Ago* (1889), Mary F. Robinson’s *The Crowned Hippolytus* (1881) and Amy Levy’s *Medea* (1881), all closely linked by their Hellenic poetics and lyricism.

The pursuit of joy, the adoration of beauty, the ecstasy and the pain of love, the gay light and colour of the physical world, its sweet scents and sounds, its lovely shapes and delicate textures, are all here, their brilliance but the brighter for the shadow that flits about them of death and its finality (91).

In like manner, Stefano Evangelista underscores *Long Ago*'s marked aestheticism, reads it holistically as a Paterian biographical portrait, and maintains that, not unlike Pater, "Michael Field's Sappho is, on a fundamental level, a promoter of art for art's sake and a believer in the right of art to speak out against conventional morality through a language of sensation and emotional intensity" (106). Moreover, beyond its aestheticist values, such an unconventional language transgresses, as some critics have pointed out, yet another significant conventionalism: the unitary subjectivity of the lyric. In their Sapphic poems, Bradley and Cooper challenge the traditional doctrine of the individual, solitary, self-enclosed, and ego-centred lyrical voice by fusing their literary identities into a singular masculine persona. In *Long Ago*, their collaboration calls for a revision of the lyric and offers an experimental model of lyrical subjectivity now transformed into intersubjectivity. As Prins puts it, Michael Field's "signature unsettles conventional definitions of lyric as the solitary utterance of a single speaker" (*Victorian Sappho* 16).

Nonetheless, it must be emphasised that *Long Ago* has mostly been interpreted in light of its sexual politics since the 1990s. Most critics have agreed on the idea that *Long Ago* signifies "the entry of Michael Field into lesbian writing" (Prins 79), assuming that what the poets found in Sappho was particularly a classical archetype of love between women and "a way of writing about lesbian love at a safe distance" (Donoghue 37).⁴⁹ Similarly, T. D. Olverson submits that Bradley and Cooper's Sapphic Hellenism responded to their need to find "an authoritative and scholarly discourse through which they could subversively celebrate (same-sex) sexual pleasure" ("Libidinous Laureates" 760). By contrast, Lillian Faderman hardly sees any discourse of lesbianism in *Long Ago*: in her view, this volume of verse "gives little hint of any consciousness about the possibility of sexual expression between women; the emphasis in these poems, in fact, is on the heterosexual Phaon myth" (210).

⁴⁹ For Madden, "Bradley and Cooper find a model of love between women in Sappho" (80). For Leighton, likewise, *Long Ago* constitutes a poetic effort "to recuperate a long-suppressed knowledge of Sappho as a lover of women and as the poet who dared express that love" (210).

Considering the contrary strands of criticism presented above, it seems more reasonable to conciliate them instead of polarising them. I would argue that, in *Long Ago*, the Michaelian Sappho overrides the modern sexological dichotomy between heterosexual and same-sex love and manages to “speak unfalteringly of the fearful mastery of love” (Preface to *Long Ago*) in a radically pluralistic, versatile, and ambivalent fashion. Countering any divisive discourse of sexual identity, the Michael Fields explore “the heterosexual version of Sappho, alongside poems on passion between women” (White, “Poets and Lovers” 199). Inevitably, the language of love –or the *ars amatoria*– that the Fieldean Sappho speaks is always complex, heterogeneous, and hence hard to subsume under a clear-cut category. In this respect, I completely concur with Marion Thain, who holds that *Long Ago* focuses on Sappho “*because* she represents a category-defying mixture of sexual imagery” (50).⁵⁰

It is important to note here that the italics Marion Thain uses in her causative statement are powerfully critical and even self-critical: being speculative, that ‘*because*’ opens up a vast field of re-interpretation in which *Long Ago* becomes radically unstable yet very intriguing and suggestive. Marion Thain’s *because* is self-consciously an attempt, and just an attempt, to stabilise the Fieldean text and interpret it as a self-portrait of Bradley and Cooper’s counter-sexological ambivalence. Although I completely underwrite this reading, I nevertheless contend that the question of ambivalence in *Long Ago* should be carried over into other terrains beyond the sexual or the sexological. As this study seeks to reveal, Michael Field’s Sapphism disestablishes not only dualities between the masculine and the feminine, but also other binary constructions that fixate and organise the supposed limits between life and death. It is precisely this overarching counter-binarism that, as I show in this thesis, proves to be central to *Long Ago* by virtue of its intrinsic Tiresian ontology.

⁵⁰ In his study, Evangelista also follows Thain and asserts that the poems in *Long Ago* “encourage us to explore sexual subject and object positions expressive of a plurality of desires centred on the figure of Sappho” (*British Aestheticism* 111).

1.10. 'This Multiform Life' and Its 'Tragic Elements'

From the biographical and literary sketch I have provided above it follows that, both experientially and intellectually, the Michael Fields had a profound sense of life and death. In his edition of their journals, Thomas Sturge Moore manifests his astonishment “at the amazing zest with which these ladies encountered experience” (in Field, *Works and Days* 44) and his assessment could not be more accurate. Life was never taken idly for granted by the Fields. Bradley lived with a firm and intense will: “she was immensely vivacious, full of vitality and curiosity, with a great taste for life and character” (Ricketts 1). For her part, despite her delicate health, Cooper was “an immensely alive and vivid spectator and questioner, occasionally speaking with force and vitality, but instinctively retiring and absorbed by an intensely inner life” (Ricketts 2). With their idiosyncrasies and common aesthetic affinities, both women deliberately and even playfully formed a very dynamic, curious and eccentric couple with a theoretical but also experiential sense of vitalism.

Their very literary identity can be regarded as a central part of such creative vitalism. It seems that, for both poets, the name “Michael Field” not only served them to gain public recognition as artists, to circumvent prejudices against women writers, and to receive genuine critical appraisal “such as man gives man” (Field, *Works and Days* 7). Their pseudonym became more than just a mere mask over time: it was a ludic, subversive and Tiresian strategy against their inherited ontologies of gender and sexuality. Their ‘Michael Field’ worked as a long-sustained way to present themselves as an authentic and dissident example of self-creation. In this respect, Thain rightly states:

Once they are known to be two women, who continue to write under a man’s name, they are deconstructing the idea that masculine and feminine qualities are determined by a person’s sex. They are saying that one can exhibit masculine or feminine qualities as one chooses because they are socially constructed differences, not innate sexual ones. They can choose when they want to be Michael –and so claim all that the Victorians placed in the masculine sphere- and when they want to be Edith and Katharine (*Poetic Identity* 28).

It is such a possibility of identity play that shows the vital creativity and plasticity with which the Fields constructed themselves as authentic self-authors –poets not only of poems or dramas, but also of their own name, their own public presentation, their own

gender sensibilities, and their own life as a whole. This insistence on their ownmost –or *eigentlich* in Heideggerian terminology⁵¹ – personality is to suggest how creative the Fields were in shaping their literary identity and playing with other names (Henry, Puss or Sim), how seriously they owned up to the Michaelian persona even after being outed as women, and how this onomastic inventiveness was but a reflection of their fervent sense of radical independence. Simply put, one might say that they held such a creed of creative and personal freedom that even their name had to be of their own choosing.

However, as explained above, Bradley and Cooper’s pseudonymous identity does carry important political or ideological overtones that were instrumental at the time in the defence and protection of their creative and personal freedom. Under the authorial mask of Michael Field, the two women legitimised themselves as writers and felt free to even express what could have been judged as unwomanly ideas. This search for freedom of speech, traditionally gendered as a masculine right, is exactly what Bradley vindicates in a letter to Pen Browning: “we have many things to say that the world would not tolerate from a woman’s lips. We must be free as dramatists to work out in the open air of nature [...] we cannot be stifled in drawing-room conventionalities” (Field, *Works and Days* 6). Significantly enough, the fact that the Fields spoke of intolerable things and exercised their creative freedom as women writers –even behind a mask– was a source of empowerment and increased vitality for them, as they felt their efforts to gain public recognition surpassed those of their male peers. In a diary entry, Edith confesses: “I am a woman, and to bring out a play is experience of life –just what women feel so crushingly that they need. You men get it like breathing” (Field, *Works and Days* 184). For the Fields, each of their works involved a particular value of freedom, commitment and industry that came with their difficult position as female authors.

What freedom most probably meant for the Fields was the uninterrupted possibility of living their lives artistically. Both women embraced life as an aesthetic phenomenon to the extent that they came to embody aestheticism itself in their works, as well as in their most ordinary affairs and customs. Rather than a professional activity, art became for

⁵¹ For Heidegger, Dasein tends to live in the most average, anonymous, and disowned manner by simply complying with societal conventions and expectations in an ordinary world where “everyone is the other, and no one is himself” (165). However, in the case of the Fields, it seems rather clear that they made every possible effort to live authentically (*eigentlich*), to overlook conventionalities and to cultivate, as Heidegger would put it, their ownmost *Freisein* or “Being-free for the freedom of choosing” themselves and “taking hold of” themselves (232).

them a *modus vivendi* per se. Their letters, diaries, books, contacts, pets, houses or even holiday trips were all deeply networked within a holistic artistic vision. In their pagan phase, before their religious conversion, the Fields not only read classical literature and attended courses thereon: as Thain claims, they came to develop “a sensual, pagan, and erotic mode of being” in the manner of some Bacchic maenads (Thain, *Poetic Identity* 4). Their classicism was such a vital experience that it crystallised into Sapphic lyrics, tragic plays, real dances around a Dionysian alter, multiple allusions to mythological characters in their diaries, and passionate conversations about Greek antiquity with their most venerated Browning. In a letter to the eminent poet, Edith Cooper empathically says that such conversations “give more abundant life: to expand it in higher, more reverent effort is the only true gratitude possible” (Field, *Works and Days* 3). Art, particularly in its classical forms, signified for the Fields pure abundance, effort, growth and pleasure. Their life was expanded, elevated or diversified through their aesthetic endeavours. Thus, in a way, each of the Sapphic expansions or extensions that the Fields present in *Long Ago* could be regarded not just as a literary experiment, but as a very prolongation of their highly classicised and aestheticised existence.

In 1888, when they moved to Reigate, Bradley and Cooper intensified their existential immersion in the arts, withdrawing gradually from society, dedicating their time almost exclusively to their work and relegating life itself, according to Charles Ricketts, to “a second place” (5). Nevertheless, I believe that such a withdrawal did not necessarily entail an impoverished degree of vitality. Rather, the Fields committed themselves to a more ontological, contemplative or intellectual lifestyle.⁵² Perhaps more than ever before, their being-in-the-world became an overly conscious and meditated experience. This acute consciousness of life soon manifested itself in a long series of diaries that the Fields started to write in 1888. In them life is made into art, dramatically aestheticised and even shaped “with the narrative craft and control of autobiography” (Thain, *Michael Field* 24-25). In other words, life transforms for the Fields into a source of rhetorical *inventio* or literary material constantly mediated by writing and even, according to Marion Thain, by “contemporary models for thinking about history” (35).

⁵² By ontological I denote what Heidegger defines as that which is most “distinctive of Dasein” (61), i.e., our ontological faculty to raise the question of the meaning of being, to take issue with how the world makes sense –if it even does at all– or to transform existence into an issue in itself.

After a visit to Browning, Bradley and Cooper noted in their diary how they “shaped life divinely” (*Works and Days* 21) with poetry, constant reading and diary writing. This pagan or sacred lived aesthetics was not only in play in their best days, conversations, travels and soirées. In Dresden, where Edith fell terribly ill and ended up in hospital, the vivid presence of art and the persistent activity of introspection found no impediments despite the adverse circumstances. Cooper continued writing and amazing herself at how “forms of art and poetry swim round and into me” or at how plastic and diverse her identity had become: “I am Greek, Roman Barbarian, Catholic, and this multiform life sweeps me toward unconsciousness” (*Works and Days* 54). On another occasion, she celebrated the blessing of her mortality, the simple yet abundant beauty around her, and the spiritual and physical joy of her being-still-in-the-world in spite of her fragile health:

The sun shines broad and yellow over the ward. I lie half-slumbering with deep, blissful breaths and with the sense that corn-fields, harvest meadows, the great enlightened fruitful Earth, is all around me. And the joy of life –here- in the world, enters my soul and body, stays with me and re-consecrates me as a mortal being (55).

If Cooper’s condition was no deterrent to Michael Field’s aesthetic vitalism, neither was the familiarity with death that both poets had. In fact, their vision of life covered not only a divine landscape of joy and Bacchic pleasure, but the vastness of nature with “her vicissitudes” and “terror” (*Works and Days* 6). This interest in the terrifying facets of life is perhaps what most appealed to the Fields –or at least what they wished to explore fearlessly in their work. In an 1884 letter to Browning, Bradley clarifies her intentions as a women writer and remarks that her refusal to abide by the conventionalities of her day is nothing but a strategy to avoid being “scared away, as ladies, from the tragic elements of life” (*Works and Days* 8). In this sense, the Fields opposed the conservative doctrine that dissociated female writing from any kind of “unwomanly preoccupation with violence and death” (Harding 138). Romantic and Victorian women authors were emphatically encouraged to explore such various topics as motherhood, morality, sentimental conflicts or general domestic concerns, yet at the expense of morbid, perverse, tragic, political and metaphysical themes. Bradley and Cooper transgressed this doctrine of proper womanly writing and, in so doing, became authentic “tragedians” (*Works and Days* 12), as Browning himself addressed them repeatedly.

The Fields faced tragedy with creativity. Their *Long Ago* was finished in the midst of Emma Cooper's agony and followed after its publication by the death of Browning. As attested in the diaries, the unfavourable reception of their works affected the poets with feelings of utter incompleteness or lost hope, and yet their ultimate reaction was a greater commitment to art. This artistic tenacity helped the Fields cope with the initial disappearance and death of James Robert Cooper in Switzerland. According to Bradley, it was literature and, in particular, classical drama that served them as therapy against despair and uncertainty: "Our Sophocles taught us patience. Thank God for literature, the literature of the dark days, with its long reaches far into the world to come" (*Works and Days* 224). After the discovery of Robert's body, the Fields wrote a play titled *The Viewless Fields* in his name. For them, notwithstanding its devastating effects, death seemed to have an inner potential for poetic transformation. In the diary, when dealing with her sister's terminal condition, Edith solemnly noted: "Death always comes to us with the poetry of an event, big with battles for the soul" (291). Such battles were fought with a pen in hand and with an eye to always seeking the poetry of any event – whether joyful or dreadful.

In 1906, when the Fields lost their most cherished Whym Chow, the loss translated into a spiritual rebirth, a series of religious works, and a serious interest in theology. Their new Catholic faith, according to Charles Ricketts, "enriched their daily lives and proved a source of infinite consolation when Henry [Edith] was smitten with cancer" (6). Not only, however, was their conversion a useful coping mechanism, but also an infinite source of creativity. In the years close to their deaths, "between attacks of pain, both poets continued to write" (Thain, *Poetic Identity* 16), and so more than ten works saw their publication in the final period of Michael Field's career. It seems that, for both women, the experiences of loss, pain or vulnerability were all fertile opportunities to enrich their *poetic dwelling*.

I purposefully use the late Heideggerian concept of poetic dwelling above, for it clearly serves to encapsulate Michael Field's philosophy of life. Bradley and Cooper lived their life as a poetic event and trusted poetry –and writing in general– to fashion themselves, to make sense of their experience and, more Heideggerianly, "to preserve the force of [Sapphic] elemental words and disclose the significance of things" (Michelman 267). For the Fields, the world made and gained complete sense in poems and plays. The

world mattered to them within a holistic framework of understanding and meaning that was created by means of the poetic or dramatic word. Their creative concern with life made them acutely aware of the world's potential for beauty even in its most fatal forms. In other words, it is no stretch to state that the Fields were ontologically concerned with things not as mere ordinary and detached objects, but as aesthetic events. Their understanding of the world implied, to a large extent, an ontological aestheticisation of things. The being of things appealed to the Fields in that such things were transcendently possibilities for the emergence of beauty. In Heideggerian terms, Bradley and Cooper somehow put into practice a certain sense of “fundamental-ontological transcendence” (87-88) that meant understanding the world not as an objectivity to be known or epistemologised, but rather as an encounter with what is always already transformable into all possible “forms of art and poetry” (*Works and Days* 54). What is more, this aesthetic engagement with the world was part of a larger sense of aesthetic self-engagement: the Fields had a particular mode of being-in/with-themselves that, as a matter of fact, entailed a very conscious process of self-renaming, self-reflection, self-creation, or self-poeisis mediated by language itself –by reading, writing, rewriting and self-writing.

As explained above, the (self-)poetic being-in-the-world that the Fields cultivated was not only hospitable to the joys of a multiform life, but also to its tragic elements. In a way, Bradley and Cooper developed an aesthetic awareness of being-towards-death that was not at odds with their heartfelt vitalism. Certainly, the experience of loss or death afflicted both poets on many occasions, but never to a point that made them incapable of persevering in their artistic efforts. Instead, in encountering tragedy, they channelled their afflictions into a large number of written or read books and acquired a richer and more authentic understanding of life that encompassed the phenomenon of mortality not as an antithesis but as a closely interrelated dimension. This integrative ontological view was to inevitably inform their work and endow it with a fine sense of philosophical realism. *Long Ago* is a paradigmatic case in point, indeed: its lyrics form a Tiresian or integrative *Weltanschauung* that replaces conventional ontological dualisms with what George Meredith defined as a “realist passion” (in *Works and Days* 66) in his laudatory appraisal of the Sapphic volume. It is this realist passion, as I shall argue in the next chapters, that manifests itself in *Long Ago* in the form of a holistic attention to life and death, joy and tragedy or pleasure and pain –both terms synonymous with passion.

CHAPTER II

LONG AGO AS A LYRICAL ONTOLOGY OF REVIVALS

2.1. The Romantic Cover and the Audacious Handshake

In *Long Ago*, the paratextual surface promises complexity and abundance of meaning. In the cover of the book, the title is a temporal deixis that opens an instant mystery. The long agoness has no possible objective measure.⁵³ The reader, Victorian or contemporary, can only assume that the book promises to show some uncertain past. However, in this assumption lies a significant implication already: *Long Ago* deals –at least nominally– with time, temporality and even history itself. This implication per se does not resolve the titular ambiguity, but it does reveal how the very title serves as a classical beginning for a story. The phrase “long ago” can be read as closely synonymous with the formulaic ‘once upon a time’ that opens traditional tales. In this manner, the title is essentially a form of *captatio* and invitation for the reader to enter a distant dimension of time, an old world or even an alternative past. With their titular deixis, the Michael Fields seem to grasp and direct our attention towards a remote and intriguing past. The deixis does its job as an effective gesture of invitation, yet the mystery remains as to the length or distance of such long agoness.

⁵³ For a reproduction of the cover, see figure I in the appendix to this dissertation.

Below the title is the roundel of a strange woman that must have existed long ago. Her strangeness may be attributed to the poor quality of the portrait, which fails to delineate the female profile with precision. The lines are too uniform, straight and so tentative, that the piece seems unfinished. In fact, when the Fields showed Browning the roundel, the ageing poet directly said: “If I were an artist, I should like to paint what the artist strove to express but could not” (*Works and Days* 24). It is perhaps the incapacity of the original painter that accounts for the woman’s strangeness. She looks unimportant or even undignified, and yet her face occupies the very centre of a golden and solemn book cover. In itself the portrait leaves us disoriented and contributes inevitably to the mystery initially created by the uncertain temporality of the deictic title.

The mystery persists and expands right under the chin of the feminine portrait. There one discerns five Greek graphemes that read “ΠΣΑΦΟ.” These characters offer no hints to the general Greekless reader, but at least they do ascribe a locative specification to the opening temporal deixis. In conjunction, the graphemes and the title place us in the ancient days of Greece, circumscribe the reach of the long agoness, and even justify the golden solemnity of the cover. *Long Ago* is an invitation not to some unknown or minor period of history, but to the noble antiquity of the Greeks, the cradle of Western culture and the golden age of Homeric verses. The transliteration of the five graphemes gives us further temporal specificity with the name “Psapho.” Now the deictic title seems to be a more precise reference to the archaic era when Lesbian poet Sappho lived –sometime between the seventh and sixth centuries B.C.

However, the Greek name starts with a pi that makes us wonder whether it refers to the celebrated lyrist of Lesbos or to some other ancient woman. The exact answer appears in a final paratextual note added by the Fields in *Long Ago*: “THE archaic head of Sappho reproduced on the cover of this volume is taken from a nearly contemporary vase, inscribed with her name, which is now in Paris.” This endnote not only ratifies what should be viewed as an unmistakable link between the title, the Greek characters, the female profile, and the figure of Sappho: it also makes a significant claim for authenticity. The reproduction on the cover comes from a genuine original source that confirms the historical identity of Sappho or Psapho in ancient Greece. In a way, the Fields seem to suggest with the reliable portrait that their volume is an invitation to an

authentic past authenticated by ancient ceramic pieces. With or without the intrusive pi, their Sappho is presented as the *real* poet who lived long ago on the island of Lesbos.

It appears now that the initial enigma of the uncertain deixis, the portrait and the *misspelt* name is unravelled. *Long Ago* presents itself as a look back to Sappho's long agoness or perhaps as a dialogue with her. The cover already promises the possibility of this transhistorical and transcultural encounter by working as an open paratext that hosts an ancient guest or, more precisely, as a threshold between present and past. Intuitively, the ontological implication of this temporal convergence is that the past the Fields promise to explore does not rest dead and insignificant on an old vase and that, instead, it can be re-presented, made present again, or even resignified. In this sense, the most promising aspect of the encounter with Sappho is that it opens a world of meanings that certainly matters to the Fields and probably, too, to their readers. Said otherwise, the Sapphic past seems to have such posthumous relevance or such a life that it deserves to be revisited and integrated into the very *care structure* of author and reader.⁵⁴ Sappho is made to concern or preoccupy us. The golden cover renders her already significant.

Nevertheless, although *Long Ago* intimates in its very frontal paratext that Sappho has something significant to be recuperated, the enigma remains as to whether the encounter with her is truly possible and meaningful for Michael Field's present –or even our own. On the face of it, such an encounter seems rather *audacious*. I use this adjective in direct allusion to what a literary friend replied to Bradley and Cooper apropos of their Sapphic project: "that is a delightfully audacious thought –the extension of Sappho's fragments into lyrics. I can scarcely conceive anything more audacious" (Preface). That Michael Field's undertaking entails a reiterated degree of audacity for the anonymous friend is quite an inevitable observation. The central Sapphic image and the authorial signature at the bottom of the cover hold no straightforward connection. It seems, on the contrary, that an abyssal gulf arises between them, one that cannot be readily bridged or circumvented. Vast lengths of time separate Archaic Greece from Victorian Britain, Sappho from Michael Field, and ancient Greek from English. One inevitably wonders how these worlds and figures can converge and make some sense together after and

⁵⁴ Here I employ the Heideggerian concept of care (or *Sorge*), which essentially establishes that, in order for something to mean or signify anything, it has to matter to us, fall into our concern, and become a part of our being-in-the-world (83-84). In *Long Ago*, the Fields appropriate Sappho, rescue her fragments, raise the very question of their hidden meaning, and make them actively interrogative, present, and hence relevant once again.

despite the centuries between one and the other. In his *Studies of the Greek Ethics* (1873), John Addington Symonds, a contemporary of Michael Field, raises the same question with greater eloquence:

How can we then bridge over the gulf which separates us from the Greeks? How shall we, whose souls are aged and wrinkled with the long years of humanity, shake hands across the centuries with those young-eyed, young-limbed immortal children? (398).

The handshake between Sappho and Michael Field –their aesthetic compression and transcendence– in *Long Ago* does appear to be an audacity, because it poses a major challenge to what Heidegger understands as Dasein’s “essential tendency to closeness” (140). Logically enough, the German thinker holds that things only gain significance as long as they enter into one’s spatial or cognitive nearness and, by extension, into one’s care structure. The motion of appropriation or approximation is a necessary condition for the emergence of understanding. The meaning of things emerges when one feels some kind of closeness to them. The ancient Greeks put such a condition to the test and provoke such daunting questions as how they can be approached in/despite their long agoness, how accessible their texts can be and what enduring meaning can be derived from them. The Fields embrace the audacity of answering these questions in a volume that brings the archaic Sappho in a close and direct dialogue. In *Long Ago*, the nearness to the Lesbian poetess is radical and diverse. Sappho not only inaugurates and authenticates the book with one of her possible faces and one of her names: her original words appear on every page in an intimate interplay with Michael Field’s words. This textually patent nearness is as audacious as it is puzzling.

The textual proximity with Sappho carries with it some sense of strangeness that evokes what Walter H. Pater, another contemporary of the Fields, writes of his most cherished Michelangelo: “A certain strangeness, something of the blossoming of the aloe, is indeed an element in all true works of art: that they shall excite and surprise us is indispensable” (*Library Edition* 57). I find this requisite element to be undoubtedly conspicuous in *Long Ago*, judging not only from the reply the Fields received from their literary friend, but also from the intellectual and aesthetic allure that comes along with the mere prospect of a Sapphic Graeco-English handshake. The rich juxtaposition –with Sappho, Greek and English put together– estranges, excites and surprises as early as in

the very promising cover. It may perhaps resemble “something of the blossoming of the aloe.” It certainly arouses wonder.

Pater claims further: “It is the addition of strangeness to beauty which constitutes the romantic character in art” (*Library Edition* 246). *Long Ago* incarnates such romanticism of both beauty and strangeness in its immediate paratextuality –before the display of any poem. The book itself is an art object: “Its elegant white vellum cover is stamped in gold with a roundel of an archaic Greek woman identified as Sappho by Greek letters” (Hughes 250). Yet, the beautiful here commingles with the strange straightaway. It is perhaps the Greekness of the feminine figure and the name that most excites, surprises, and even disconcerts. In the cover, the Greek trace not only opens up a transcendent and auspicious encounter that attracts the learned critic: it may also strike the Greekless reader as utterly strange and enigmatic. For the general Victorian and contemporary reader,⁵⁵ the mix of Latinate and non-Latinate letters is likely to create a (con)fusion that raises several questions: What do those strange characters conceal? What do they mean and evoke? Their identification with Sappho is not necessarily automatic. Their obscurity doubtless reifies the romantic character of strangeness.

I suspect that *Long Ago*’s romanticism engages in a larger cultural drift that fosters the revival of the Romantic imagination in the latter part of the nineteenth century. Theodor Watts-Dunton, another major Victorian critic, describes this revival with a turgid and emphatic phrase: “the Renaissance of the Spirit of Wonder in Poetry and Art” (in Maxwell, *Second Sight* 49). In light of the previous insights, I would submit that the beautiful, strange, and even confusing cover of *Long Ago* invokes such a spirit of wonder effectively. The title, the portrait and the obscure Greek graphemes foreshadow an auspicious encounter not only with an extremely remote past, but also with an open-eyed reader who, only judging by the cover, approaches *Long Ago* in an attitude of estrangement and wonder.

⁵⁵ Needless to say, knowledge of the classical languages has commonly been the exclusive privilege of a highly elitist minority in the Victorian era and even nowadays. Edith Hall sums up the history and current prevalence of such a privilege in a concise manner:

In the early 18th century, the subject-matter called ‘The Classics’ was adopted as the bedrock of elite school and university curricula. Its association with the maintenance of the British class system has left scars on our culture, which are still affecting debates over their place in education today. It is sometimes very difficult to find access to tuition in the Latin language in the state school system; when it comes to Greek there is scarcely a state school in the land where you could hope even to learn the alphabet (8).

The moods elicited by *Long Ago* in its immediately romantic –beautiful and strange– paratextuality are the beginning of a promising dialogue with any reader. Drawn by a formulaic ageness and puzzled at the profile and name of an archaic face, the reader can certainly have some approximate experience of *Unheimlichkeit*. By this term Heidegger refers to the breakdown of meaning, the suspension of received ontologies and, more exactly, the disruption of the essential familiarity that Dasein normally has with its own world. When faced with an extra-ordinary phenomenon that challenges all its pragmatic schemes of intelligibility, Dasein finds itself cast away, loses its pre-conceptual protocols of understanding, enters into a state of “not-being-at-home” (233), and even succumbs to anxiety. Although *Long Ago* does not instil such an ontological crisis with its cover, it nonetheless dislocates the new reader in a particular manner. As explained previously, the titular deixis functions as a mechanism of *captatio* that welcomes the reader with a conventional temporal formula of *in principio*, and yet the common welcome is visually followed by the enigma of a face and a name. In this way, the reader passes rapidly from a familiar code of literary communication to a somewhat *unheimlich* feeling of inability to make immediate sense of the old female profile and the foreign letters. *Long Ago* seems to address the reader with an effective double strategy of familiarity and estrangement. The reader is left in an ambivalent state with one foot inside a volume that promises a journey *in illo tempore* and with the other not entirely at home in the presence of a strangely named figure.

It would be an exaggeration to claim that the special cover of *Long Ago* is a source of existential anxiety or that its archaic difference recalls the nothingness that Heidegger associates with his concept of *Unheimlichkeit*. However, rather than anxiety, what the *unheimlich* paratextuality of the Sapphic volume does awaken is a pre-mood of wonder or astonishment. As commented previously, the mere appearance of foreign graphemes tests the reader’s tendency to nearness, confronts her with something utterly remote, suspends her habits of instant understanding, and opens her to all sorts of questions concerning the origin, meaning and relevance of such archaic letters. This questioning emanates from a sense of wonder that is, in turn, the affective inception of any form of genuine thinking –philosophical or poetic. *Long Ago* begins effectively with the reader in amazement.

2.2. The Death of the Author: Writing as/in Ambivalent *Mitsein*

The cover continues disrupting the reader's common literary practices. At the bottom is inscribed a pseudonymous Michael Field whose identity, as the former chapter showed, substantially revises the ontology of authorship. Traditionally our understanding of authorship has revolved around "the myth of solitary genius," which simply consists in our romantic and "universal concern with author and authorship as single entities" (Stillinger 23). In our common dealings with literature, we tend to assume that behind a work stands an individual mind, an isolated personality or a pure personal voice. The author is often imagined as a Cartesian atomistic subject whose very being-in-the-world radically excludes the presence of the other at least when the creative process is taking place. It seems, in line with this romantic notion of literary composition, that the writer's world is completely compressed into his selfhood. The author only exists, then, at his best in his innermost solitude.

The myth of solitary authorship becomes all the more radicalised when it comes to such collections of lyric poetry as *Long Ago*. In its modern theorisation, the lyric is routinely defined as "a record of the voice or the mind speaking to itself" (Jackson and Prins 2), "the performance of the mind in solitary speech" (Vendler 2) or an elevated mode of "feeling confessing itself to itself in moments of solitude" (Stuart Mill xiii). The itself-ness of the lyric writer is extreme. In his creative act, he retreats from the world, turns his back to everybody else, speaks only to himself of his own emotions, and thus becomes an introspective Narcissus or, more crudely put in John Stuart Mill's words, "a prisoner in a solitary cell" (xiii). In short, the lyric poet is but a soliloquist essentially characterised by pure subjectivity, self-enclosure, monovocality, introspection, and isolation. The lyrist stands as the loneliest among his fellow writers.

In *Long Ago*, the authorial signature, known to be the mask of two women since its very publication, debunks such romantic myths around literary creativity by transforming the male and solitary space of authorship into "a discursive site of resistance" (Ehnenn 2) in which the Fields contest the core onto-sexologies of poetic writing. Their Michael Field does away with the paradigm of the single author, opens the lyric poem to an intimate encounter with the other, negotiates lyrical self-expression with inter-subjectivity, and embodies a fertile model of collaborative poesis. Under the penname of Michael Field, Bradley and Cooper bring themselves into existence as literary collaborators by causing,

as Jill R. Ehnenn points out, “the death of [...] traditional modes of thinking about subjectivity and authorship” (5). The author dies not in the Barthesian manner (as an external subject that becomes utterly irrelevant to the text), but in the Cartesian sense of his solitude.

The author ceases to be a being-in-himself and comes to experience poetry as part and parcel of his *Mitsein* –or being-with. I resort to this Heideggerian term for its usefulness in capturing the intrinsic entanglement between self and other or the fact that “the world is always the one that I share with others. The world of Dasein is a with-world” (155). For Heidegger, Dasein exists as being-with or Dasein-with in such a way that the other partakes of its most essential and basic constitution. This ontological sociality, routinely and artificially dissociated from the idea of authorship, comes to the fore in Michael Field’s creative partnership. Their writing is an authentic experience of co-writing with all the richness and complexity involved in any instance of sociality. Their work forms, as they explain in an 1886 letter to Havelock Ellis, “a perfect mosaic: we cross and interlace like a company of dancing flies; if one begins a character, his companion seizes and possesses it; if one conceives a scene or a situation, the other corrects, completes, or murderously cuts away” (Sturgeon 47). In this regard, Bradley and Cooper’s authorial experience is a genuine scenario of *Mitsein* characterised not only by their personal and aesthetic affinities, but also by their murderous discrepancies. Their literary *Mitsein* enables us to imagine their works as fields for “shared intimacy and intellectual *jouissance*” (Ehnenn 2), as well as for negotiation and even confrontation. What Pen Browning saw as their “indubitable poetic genius” (*Works and Days* 2), far from solitary, is the product of a poetic interpersonal praxis.

In the particular case of *Long Ago*, the authorial *Mitsein* of Michael Field includes not only the crossings and interlacings between Bradley and Cooper: the Sapphic text also bears a timid yet significant trace of Robert Browning’s intervention in some lyrics. As Francis O’ Gorman has empathically proven, “RB *did* in fact contribute in a direct and tangible way to *Long Ago*, leaving his mark in places upon the text itself” (39). The eminent poet made several suggestions and annotations in a manuscript he had received from the Fields before the publication of the volume. Part of his generous advice was rejected altogether or simply taken as an invitation to amend certain dysfunctions in the text, yet “a significant proportion of the suggested alterations were directly included,

but unacknowledged, in the published edition of the poems” (39). Such alterations involved, for the most part, preferable synonyms, better-sounding lexical forms, and particularly, the use of a more familiar register –against certain exotic or archaic words. It becomes clear on this account that Robert Browning played an important part in the composition of *Long Ago* and that his intervention alone must lead us to regard the mere signature on the cover as a complex space of polyphony and multiple authorship.

I make no casual use of Stillinger’s concept of multiple authorship in my approach to the authorial agency behind *Long Ago*. In fact, as the Fields themselves attest in a final paratext, their Sapphic volume owes two important debts, one to the German philologist Theodor Bergk for his *Poetae Lyrici Graeci*, which served as the reliable source of the Sapphic texts, and another to Dr. Wharton for his *Sappho: A Memoir and Translation*, which the Fields found to be of the highest value. According to Evangelista, there is a third possible debt that could be added to Michael Field’s direct space of collaboration devoted to Sappho:

[John Addington] Symonds’s chapter on the lyric poets in his *Studies of the Greek Poets*, the book he had recommended to Bradley and Cooper in 1881, is indeed an influential precedent for *Long Ago*, not least because it clearly associates Sappho with an aestheticism *avant la lettre* that Symonds retrospectively sees at work in the best products of ancient Greek art and poetry (*British Aestheticism* 103).

The Fields, Browning, Bergk, Wharton and Symonds form the imaginary landscape of collaborative authorship that I discern behind the signature on the cover of *Long Ago*. Each collaborator, needless to say, has a different degree of involvement in the genesis of the work. Bradley and Cooper stand as the primary creators of their Sapphic creature. Browning comes across as their most admired mentor and advisor actively engaged in the internal process of composition. For their part, Bergk, Wharton and, perhaps to a lesser extent, Symonds should probably be considered external collaborators or even guarantors of *Long Ago*’s legitimacy as a serious classical rewriting. Consequently, the kind of literary *Mitsein* that the Fields practiced when working on their Sapphic book was both multiple and strategic in that they engaged eminent and academic cooperants in their authorial activity so as to authorise themselves legitimately as experimental Hellenists.

To add further complexity to the collaborative signature of *Long Ago*, Jill R. Ehnenn invites us to

...consider Katharine Bradley and Edith Cooper who, inspired by Sappho, collaborated as “Michael Field” on a book of lyric poetry, *Long Ago*. For them, Sappho is not dead; she is only sleeping. They see, feel her presence, her verses scattered like leaves around their bed. Together, they invest her with new breath; and whispering back to them in a voice both new and old, she comes to their text, as they had come to hers. The authorial dyad opens to include the third term; the collaborative dynamic shifts and becomes triangular (3).

This graphic description of the contiguity between Sappho and Michael Field returns our attention to the archaic head that takes up the centre of the cover. The female profile now becomes more than just a complementary reference that circumscribes the temporal scope of the titular deixis and situates us in pre-classical Greece. Sappho is neither just the representative figure of the long agoness nor the mere object of what *Long Ago* is expected to explore. Sappho becomes an active subject in the textuality of the volume, a participatory voice, and a creative collaborator that adds yet another layer of complexity to Michael Field’s authorial dynamic. The type of collaboration that emerges with the Lesbian poet is of a particular nature, though. Gilbert and Gubar would most certainly define it as a “fantastic collaboration” (“Sapphistries” 95) in the sense that Sappho does not work, obviously, as a contemporaneous participant co-present with the Fields in the composition of *Long Ago*, yet she does intervene as a phantom, a spectre or a haunting voice that comes back to life, breathes afresh and establishes a new conversation with her literary galvanists. This Sapphic rebirth does not create, as Ehnenn remarks, just a triangulation of the authorial signature behind *Long Ago*: rather, it results in a diverse or perhaps excessive spectrum of authorship that includes not only the proper names of direct or indirect collaborators mentioned above, but certainly many others that, dead or alive, contributed in various significant ways to Bradley and Cooper’s literary education.

Under the Fieldean model of collaborative authorship, the solitary author dies doubly as a romantic myth and as a male construct. In his stead, a new Sappho comes to life in direct collaboration with Michael Field’s lyric voice. Authorial atomism is superseded by a genuinely rich modality of creative *Mitsein* that brings together synchronic and diachronic cooperants. This cooperation, moreover, involves a major subversion against

the nineteenth-century definition of poet. As Thain explains in one of her first studies on the Fields, the aunt and niece had to grapple with the fact that the categories of woman and poet were made mutually exclusive and hardly reconcilable by the sexual politics of “romantic poetic theory” and its reinforcement in “Victorian gender ideology” (*Poetic Identity* 21). On this view, women functioned as poeticised objectivity and never as poetic subjectivity. Their position within the conservative paradigm of poetic authorship was not expected to be solitary or multiple, but ideally and radically non-existent. As pointed out in Chapter I, Bradley and Cooper adopted a male pseudonym precisely to find their place within such a paradigm and give free expression to things “that the world would not tolerate from a woman’s lips” (*Works and Days* 184).

Although the Fields may have intended to comply with the gender conventions inherent in poetic authorship by going undercover as a singular male writer, their persistence in employing the pseudonym after its public leakage suggests something rather subversive or unconventional. It seems that, for Bradley and Cooper, the persona of Michael Field became more than just a means to general recognition and serious criticism: it was, as I explained in the previous chapter, an ingenious way of playing with gender categories, deconstructing the masculine/feminine binarism, and exhibiting their authentic sense of creative freedom through the very act of self-naming. In this manner, the solitary poet ceases to be an ideal male voice and morphs into a plural, plastic and Tiresian construct that breaks with the reactionary alliance between Romantic poetic theory and Victorian gender ideology. As Holly Laird would put it, the Fields enter into a frontal “battle with the Romantic myth of single, canonized (male) authorship” (93). *Long Ago* should thus be viewed as a battlefield in which several transgressions and deconstructions are taking place at different levels.

As a matter of fact, *Long Ago* resists such a canonical myth with an authorial signature that raises a challenging question, according to Prins: “How shall we read these poems written by two women writing as a man writing as Sappho?” (*Victorian Sappho* 74). The only possible answer lies perhaps in understanding *Long Ago* as a multi-vocal and queer space in which the mythic solitude of the poet and his virile nature are radically replaced by a *Mitsein* of gender-shifting voices. Prins holds that, in *Long Ago*, it is precisely the Tiresian figure that serves to illustrate this complex case of authorship: the prophet “embodies the contradictions of a poem written by two women (Bradley and

Cooper) writing as a man (Michael Field) writing as a woman (Sappho) who writes about a man (Tiresias) who was once a woman” (92). The Fields open the authorial space not just to a multiplicity of simultaneous and distant voices, but also to a fluid interchange of gender positions and ambivalences.

In line with the above, Holly Laird notes: “Field produced a doubly indeterminate utterance in which the gender and number of speaker(s) and thus also the kind of relationship enacted became tantalizingly uncertain, or multiple, permitting simultaneity of different relationships” (25). Here I would underline the reiterated and suggestive idea of relationship. The authorial collaboration between Bradley and Cooper is far more than a contestation against the myth of the solitary male author. Both women were well aware that the exposure of their dual authorship would mean “utter ruin” for their careers (*Works and Days* 6). For Mary Sturgeon, their collaboration probably involved “something obscurely repellent” (29) that deprived the couple of public appreciation. This anxiety over the authorial *Mitsein* seems to result from what Laird identifies as “a more obscure, underlying anxiety about homoeroticism” (2). What can certainly repel any conservative reader is not just that the individuality and virility of authorship crumbles altogether, but also that this crumbling may have come about in an authorial space that conflated both poetic creation and erotic interaction between two desiring women. It costs no imaginative effort, indeed, to envisage the Fields working together passionately, negotiating their affinities and differences, leaving and entering the scene of writing, communicating personally through their verses, and giving shape to their “socioerotic poetics” (Laird 25) in the process of such continual sharing. This intimate poetics was perhaps both written and lived at once on a plane where writing and living went hand in hand.

In the particular case of *Long Ago*, Ehnenn invites us to imagine a more intimate scene with Bradley and Cooper sleeping with Sappho –with her fragments “scattered like leaves around their bed” (3). With the involvement of the Lesbian poet, the conservative concern over homoeroticism soars dramatically. Sappho conjures up what Terry Castle names ‘the apparitional lesbian,’ associates the Fields with a discrete tradition of same-sex desire, and thus invests their authorial agency with an erotic quality that becomes not only more evident, but even more repellent for certain readers. As a result, what lies implicit in the authorial signature of *Long Ago* is a major transgression: the solitary

male poet dies eventually in Bradley and Cooper's Sapphic bed and gives way to a choir of queer voices.

2.3. Approaching the Past: *Gewesenheit* and Proto-Modernism

The death of the author occurs parallel to the rebirth of the past. As explained above, the phenomenon of diverse authorship encompasses synchronic and diachronic relations in *Long Ago*. The most prominent among these relations is undoubtedly with Sappho. The Lesbian lyricist replenishes the volume with her objective pastness. Her enigmatic head on the cover refers us back to an archaic vase that authenticates the copy reproduced by the Michael Fields. The second page of the book features another portrait of Sappho that reproduces an illustration drawn by Giovanni Battista Cipriani in 1785, engraved by Francesco Bartolozzi, and published by John Murray in London in 1845 –within a large volume of plates showing figures from Graeco-Roman history and mythology.⁵⁶ With their first paratextual images, the Fields take us diachronically from a pre-classical face to a late eighteenth-century reinterpretation of that same face, which can be identified as the very face of lyric poetry given the ornamental addition of a lyre. In this manner, the past is not just crossed plastically from antiquity to modernity: it is made fully dynamic and congruent by means of disparate materials dating from all too different periods.

After a few blank pages comes the title of Michael Field's book in capitalised English together with a phrase and a full sentence in ancient Greek. This time it is not a little name that creates the *unheimlich* effect with its foreign graphemes. The title page confronts us directly with two separate lines of Greek characters printed in bold red.⁵⁷ A superficial reading of these characters reveals an important iteration: the long agoness of the title is doubly repeated in the Greek phrase *πάλαι πότα*, meaning "long ago." In this way, the past makes itself predominant, reiterative and ever over-present as though the volume were claiming to be a thing of the past or a living re-enactment of a past turned vividly present in vivid red ink. The past thus comes to life and usurps the pre-eminence of the present with its repetitious deictic invocation both in ancient Greek and English.

The oxymoronic present or presence of the past becomes graphically patent in the frontispiece of the volume that features the figure of Sappho sitting at ease and reading

⁵⁶ The full title of the source is *Gemmarum Antiquarum Delectus; Ex Præstantioribus Desumptus, Quæ in Dactylithecis Ducis Marlburgiensis Conservantur. - Choix De Pierres Antiques Gravées Du Cabinet Du Duc De Marlborough*, which can be found within the digital archive of the Royal Academy of Arts. For a reproduction of this page, see Figure II in the Appendix to this dissertation.

⁵⁷ For a reproduction of the title page, see Figure III in the Appendix to this dissertation.

an ancient parchment.⁵⁸ This illustration is yet another copy of a vase-painting dated to c. 450 B.C. and held at the National Museum in Athens. Not only does this image resituate us in the distant past of the Lesbian poet: it also connects the past directly with our present by simply mirroring our position of readers. Seated and focused on the roll in her hands, Sappho reproduces what both the Fields and their readers do. The reading of her own verses coincides with our own reading of her lyrics alongside those of the Fields. With Sappho we thus share the simultaneous temporality of reading. In the act of reading, both past and present converge within a plane of immanence. Sappho reads what we are set to read. The past of her reading becomes synchronised with our present moment of reading.

With its suggestive paratextuality, *Long Ago* moves us from the ancient roll in Sappho's hands to the more contemporary title page on which the pastness of the volume is made to intersect directly with its date and place of publication. This paratextual motion from past to present implicitly adumbrates how *Long Ago* works in its entire textuality as a continual displacement or communication from antiquity to modernity, from Greek to English or from Sappho to the Fields. Both past and present are completely open to one another, in permanent touch and within the synchronic temporality of reading. What is particularly significant in this temporal interaction is the role ascribed to the past, which is far from static, neutral or alien to the present. Rather, the past becomes an explicitly necessary and active part of the Fieldean project.

Long Ago reconceptualises the past in a way that calls for the useful distinction posited by Heidegger in *Being and Time*. In his view, the past can be understood in its classical sense as an ontic, fixed or frozen set of events –as “something historical” (432) whose relevance for the present is not necessarily known. For this traditional understanding Heidegger reserves the basic term *Vergangenheit* (432), which corresponds neatly to our general idea of the past. However, there is another mode of looking at the past that Heidegger names *Gewesenheit*, which “is never past” (376) and whose differential value resides in its repercussions for the present. It is a past beyond itself or a living past that transcends its own limits and comes into direct contact with the present time. This past concerns the present, makes itself ontologically important, and becomes an integral

⁵⁸ For a reproduction of the frontispiece, see Figure IV in the Appendix to this dissertation.

element of our dealings with the present world. Despite its ontic distance, *Gewesenheit* feels strangely present and unfolds in *ek-stasis* or “outside-of-itself” (376).

In *Long Ago*, the reader enters such temporal ecstasy that fuses past and present, Greek and English, Sappho and the Fields, or ancient vases and modern engravings. Although seated at ease like the Lesbian poet frozen in the act of reading, the reader of *Long Ago* is in ecstasy. Our time is dislocated, no longer linear, and constantly immersed in a past-present continuum. *Long Ago* opens us to a dimension of liquid temporality. Just with a few paratextual elements we are placed and displaced from the reproduction of a 450 B.C. ceramic to an 1889 volume published in London. After the paratexts, the *ek-stasis* of time carries on. The living past or *Gewesenheit* imposes itself on every page of the volume, thus making it impossible for the reader to separate the old from the new –to leave the past behind and focus only on the present lyrics of the Fields. The past speaks to us in ancient Greek all the time and necessitates our attention in the reading of each poem.

The manifest and permanent engagement with Sappho’s *Gewesenheit* aligns *Long Ago*, probably as a major precedent, with a later literary movement that takes its relationship to the past very seriously. As explained in the former chapter, the Fields belong to an artistic generation broadly identified with aestheticism and with the particular idea that art should only observe its own laws and ideals of beauty without seeking any allegedly superior moral truth. However, although the link between the Fields and the aesthetes is as close as it is self-evident, their original works have also been read as special cases exemplifying the often neglected and even rejected connection between Victorianism and modernism. Indeed, in the current field of Victorian studies, the Fields are counted among those artists “who have been labelled as aesthetic” and “have altered the contours of the aesthetic map, forcing critics to radically re-examine the nature of aestheticism and its links with modernism” (Coste et al. 4). For Snodgrass, Hughes and other critics, it is Michael Field’s *Sight and Song* (1892) in particular that anticipates “modernist experiments with improvised metres, open-ended forms and unexpected rhymes” (Snodgrass 31), and at the same time it serves “as an echo-camber and fore-glimpse of Romantic and Victorian precursors or modernist poets” (Hughes 575). Also, according to Vadillo, the pre-affiliations between the Fields and the modernists materialise clearly in some of their avant-garde plays –the so-called Roman Trilogy, in

particular— that should be integrated “into two new trajectories of the stage that were emerging and would be at the centre of intense debates during the first two decades of the twentieth century: modernist verse drama and ballet” (“This hot-house” 217).

In her major monograph on the Fields, Thain devotes the conclusions precisely to the vexed Victorian/Modernist divide and makes a few points that are extremely relevant to this study. For Thain, the Fields must be included in the “continuous lineage” between aestheticist writers and modernism “that is so often lost in a criticism too fixed within period boundaries and the modernist myth of discontinuity” (205). The inclusion of the Fields in this intersection of literary generations rests at least on three solid reasons: the direct line of influence and resemblance between Bradley and Cooper’s poetics and W. B. Yeats’s modernism (208); the preoccupations in the “most clearly protomodernist” *Wild Honey from Various Thyme* (1908) with the chasms between “poet and audience, high culture and mass culture, the personal and the impersonal” (208); and more importantly for my discussion, the combination in *Long Ago* of Victorian and modernist epistemologies of the past by configuring a complex temporal “dimension in which Sappho is historically contextualised, while also being able to conjoin with Bradley and Cooper in a space which is both present and past” (213). For these primary reasons, Thain rightly concludes that the Fields “anticipate concerns that became definitive of literary modernism” and shape an idiosyncratic poetics that “combines elements more usually thought of as either Victorian and modernist in a manner that produces a rather distinctive aesthetic” (209).

The third reason indicated above requires further elaboration here. Thain claims that the approach to the past in *Long Ago* responds to a double epistemology: it is a Victorian construction of the past in the strictly historical sense that it shows full awareness of “the subject’s own historicity and the distance of the past temporally and conceptually” (213), but at the same time the Sapphic past receives a modernist treatment based “on the model of memory in which the past becomes knowable only insofar as it is present” (213). These two modes of understanding the past seem to correspond roughly to Heidegger’s distinction between *Vergangenheit* and *Gewesenheit* —with the Victorians favouring the former and the modernists, the latter. However, in applying these notions to *Long Ago*, I would argue that the volume appears to lean more prominently towards

the modernist modality of living past or *Gewesenheit* on account of the immediacy and newness that the Sapphic past is given.

It is true, as Thain claims, that the Fields show a historicist view in their approach to Sappho by resorting to serious classical scholarship about her, aspiring to attain the optimistic ideal of restoring her fragments, and ultimately fulfilling “the Victorian sense of obligation to give the past a voice” (213). Nevertheless, this sense of obligation, although theoretically manifest in Michael Field’s reparative project in *Long Ago*, becomes textually deconstructed. Given her fragmentary corpus, Sappho is treated as an open and malleable object of the past, a direct conversant and even an intimate partner in bed, as Ehnenn suggested. Her portraits make up the inaugural paratextuality of the volume, as though intimating that a face-to-face dialogue with the Lesbian lyrist is taking place immediately. Her ontic temporal distance or *Vergangenheit* is neutralised by an ecstatic temporality and an organic textuality in which her archaic Greek enters into direct co-presence with Bradley and Cooper’s responsive English. Consequently, as a proto-modernist text, *Long Ago* proves capable of articulating, as George Meredith observes, Sappho’s philosophy “in a manner to make it new, almost convincing, as if her blood were in your lines” (*Works and Days* 67).

The newness Meredith acknowledges in *Long Ago* is the primary effect of its treatment of the past as *Gewesenheit*, as a stock of modernist material that is “always available for reinterpretation” (Butler 11) or, paraphrasing T. S. Eliot, as the most vigorous way of asserting the immortality of the dead poets for unprecedented purposes. The value of the literary past is transparently asserted through an explicit form of juxtapositive intertextuality that brings old ruinous texts together with their potential message for modernity. In *Long Ago*, this renewed message results precisely from an ahead-of-time epistemology of the past. Although relatively faithful to a historicist will in its scholarly inception and its optimistic restorative intentions, the volume seems to replace the Victorian fixation on history with a more mythical method or a modernist “form of myth-making” (Butler 47). As I shall evince in each subsequent chapter, Sappho is not approached as a historical figure per se with a coherent and linear biographical ego: she functions rather as a myth that is diversely “composed of a kaleidoscope of sense impressions and memories” (Whitworth 26). Her newly reinvented life, rather than historically contextualised, is structurally organised by means of constant allusion to

other classical myths. Accordingly, *Long Ago* reads as some kind of mythography more guided by the modernist concept of myth as a potential usurper of history than by the Victorian sense of *Vergangenheit*.

2.4. Revivalism: The Face and Air of a Feminine Past

In the wake of the previous discussion, a pressing question remains whether *Long Ago* should be considered a Romantic, aestheticist or proto-modernist text. Thus far, I have suggested that the very cover of the book conjures up the late Paterian romanticism of strangeness combined with beauty, that the doctrine of art as the highest mode of vital experience is the governing principle of Bradley and Cooper's lived (Sapphic) poetics, and that their Sapphism presents an original approach to the past as an ecstatic form of temporality. These contentions point towards different literary movements, make them all intersect, and even blur their theoretical boundaries, apparently leaving *Long Ago* in some indeterminate place within the critical spectrum of literary periods. Yet, according to Thain, the determinate answer lies in noticing that Michael Field's work represents a distinctive *fin-de-siècle* aesthetic characterised by a hybrid set of idiosyncrasies that have been reductively attributed to either Victorianism or modernism without the due acknowledgement of the *fin de siècle* as a literary category in its own right. To avoid and overcome this reductive criticism, Thain encourages us to "delineate the fin de siècle as a period that partakes of the characteristics of the Victorian and the modernist but can be equated with neither" (*Michael Field* 214).

I certainly agree with such a theoretical proposition, but I would put forward a possible, more concrete designation for the type of hybrid aesthetic particularly at work in *Long Ago*. The term 'revivalism' seems rather appropriate for this purpose. Michael Field's volume is fundamentally an act of revival in many senses: it revives the past, Sappho, her fragments, her archaic Greek, her faces, or even her blood, as Meredith would put it. In so doing, *Long Ago* brings about the revival of Romantic and Victorian values in the form of its material aesthetic, its paratextual strangeness, its sublime feel, its rhythmical iambic feet, its end rhymes or its rhetorical exclamations.⁵⁹ In reviving these forms and effects together with the Sapphic corpus, *Long Ago* makes distant and near pasts intercommunicate, working as their echo-chamber and revitalising their significance. This far-reaching dynamic of revitalisation is central to the ontology of writing underlying the volume, which appears to derive its own poetic life from the dead matter of old poets and forms. Indeed, for the Fields themselves and for many critics, the

⁵⁹ I agree with Thain that the last three elements of this list are the visually superficial traits that clearly make Michael Field's *Long Ago* "look very Victorian" (211) in comparison to future modernist versions of Sappho's fragments.

inventio of *Long Ago* emanates from an organic, resurrective or Promethean alchemy that reanimates dead words, overcomes their death, infuses them with a fresh breath of life, and transforms them into fully renewed poems.

In their first letter to Walter Pater, the Fields refer to their Sapphic work as a mode of evoking “the most exciting charm” of Renaissance, an aesthetic attempt to “live as in continuation of the beautiful life of Greece,” or even an investment “in the survival of human things” (in Vadillo, “Walter Pater” 38-39). In his reply, Pater confirms how the volume captures an ancient “Attic wisdom” and fulfils its purpose of ‘returning, by conscious effort, to distant worlds of thought or feeling’ (39). This epistolary exchange has significant theoretical implications: to fully understand the concept of poetry behind *Long Ago* or its fundamental otology, it must be approached as an act of renaissance that implies, as Pater would put it, not only “the discovery of old and forgotten sources of [...] enjoyment, but [...] the divination of fresh sources thereof –new experiences, new subjects of poetry, new forms of art” (*Renaissance* 2). In this sense, the revivalism of *Long Ago* operates in a double temporal direction: it looks back on Sappho’s textual past and projects it directly towards the possible future of a new Sappho, thereby endowing her old and nearly dead songs with an abundant afterlife in innovative forms.

Similarly, in its contemporary critical reception, *Long Ago* has been dealt with as a matter of life and death. Paraphrasing an early poem written by Edith Cooper in 1878, Evangelista holds that the volume represents a form of awakening of the past meant to reanimate “a world that has been made old and heavy by stale moral convention and intellectual stagnation” (*British Aestheticism* 93). For Ehnenn, the idea of renaissance or awakening amounts to the “new breath” (3) of life that the Fields infuse into Sappho’s moribund words. For her part, Thain would replace this respiratory metaphor with a plainer description of *Long Ago* as a narrative of “the immortalisation of Sappho” or even as a metaphysical project of overcoming her death through the forces of “desire and poetry” (64). Much more explicit in regard to the revivalist aesthetic of Michael Field’s Sapphism is O’Gorman’s reading. For him, *Long Ago* is essentially a “matter of galvanism,” a “calling back into the present of the lost forms of distant lives” (649), a textual paradigm of “the conundrum of the dead immortals” (653), or a literary proof of “the continued life of the dead” (657). My approach follows exactly this line of criticism, and so I reassert the adequacy of the term ‘revivalism’ to define the aesthetic

project that the Fields undertake in their Sapphic lyrics. However, I would argue that there is a relevant point missing in most of such criticism: the logic of revival operates not only on the textual or intertextual level of the lyrics themselves, but even on the paratextual level of the highly evocative cover and frontispiece.

The visual paratexts chosen by the Fields serve to illustrate the implicit ontology not just of poetry but of art in general as revival. The profile on the cover is a reinvention of a much more elaborate vase-painting that, according to the very source consulted by the Fields, presents “une seule figure, la célèbre Sappho, désignée par son nom et jouant de la lyre à sept cordes. Elle est vêtue d’un chiton talaire et d’un péplos” (De Witte 33).⁶⁰ In *Long Ago*, the celebrated figure of Sappho is revived to be re-celebrated in a recreative tête-à-tête. The Fields only retain her face and her name as the only fragments of the vase needed to identify the famous Lesbian poet. The very fragmentation of the painting suggests that it is the volume’s task to reconstruct it once again or even to repaint what Browning saw as a deficient representation of Sappho. In *Long Ago*, the lyre, the dress and the peplum of the original image are to be redrawn with new songs, new robes and new ornaments –all in all, with a new literary portrait of the ancient lyrist.

Similarly, the volume’s frontispiece featuring Sappho with an ancient book roll in her hands is yet another revival and fragmentation of an ancient vase-painting attributed to a group of painters known as the Group of Polygnotos. The original scene shows three women standing around Sappho, one holding a wreath of ivy leaves, another wielding a six-stringed lyre, and the third looking attentively towards the poet. *Long Ago* disposes of the standing girls, zooms in on the figure of Sappho seated on her *klismos*, and seems to understand that the interest of the vase-painting lies primordially in the act of reading.⁶¹ In this sense, The Fields revive the ancient poet not only as an author, but also as a reader that gives voice and life to the silent words on the scroll that she has in her hands. The frontispiece hints at this power of life-infusion implicit in the act of reading by inserting three Greek letters that float between the seated poet and the manuscript as if they were coming directly from her mouth. The letters form a partial version of her name that is undergoing a sequence of diachronic revivals. In the illustration, Sappho revives her own words as she reads them from the scroll. The Fields

⁶⁰ For a reproduction of this ancient vase-painting, see Figure V in the Appendix to this dissertation.

⁶¹ For a reproduction of this scene, see Figure IV in the Appendix to this dissertation.

occupy her position of reader, complete the name that she has only half-uttered, and revive what is left of the words she once authored. The reader of *Long Ago* revives Sappho once again through Bradley and Cooper's new revival. In this diachrony of revivals, it is the foundational act of reading that initiates poetic life and guarantees its survival over time.

Sappho reads what the Fields are set to revive and complete. The roll Sappho is holding in both her hands only shows the first column. The Fieldean revival involves not only the recreative disclosure of the unopened parts of the manuscript, but also the reconstruction and continuation of the words vaguely glimpsed on the scroll. In an endnote, the Fields quote and even repair such words: *θεοί, ἡερίων ἐπέων ἄρχομαι ἄγγ[ελος] ν[έων] ὕ[μ]ν[ων]* This text unfolds originally in twelve lines, some of which consist of only two or one grapheme. In their reconstruction, not only do the Fields put all the lines together in a familiar horizontal syntax, but they also amend the dead or broken words by giving them a full morphology in coffin-like brackets. As a result, the lines that only included two or one character now become wholly revived and signifying semantic units. This process of becoming –from meaningless ruins to complete forms of signification– is what characterises *Long Ago* in its entirety as a paradigmatic revivalist text whose reconstructions might well be put into square brackets.

In the reconstruction of what Sappho reads, the most legible part –the first eight lines– provides some fore-glimpses of the type of revival that *Long Ago* is going to carry out. The opening line makes a vocative address to the ancient *theoi* or gods whose presence here, although obscure and nearly unnoticeable, is an early indication of the polytheistic paganism that the Fieldean text revives. The Greek gods are indirectly invoked, invited to the direct dialogue with Sappho, and hosted as post-classical exiles in a poetic work that turns its back on Christian faith. Within this pagan framework, the Fields seem to experiment poetically with a particular Romantic tradition whose origin is attributed to Heinrich Heine in his seminal essay effectively titled “the Gods in Exile” (1853-54). In this tradition, Evangelista explains:

...mythological characters from antiquity reappear in post-classical times as ‘exiles’ or revenants, usually to take part in episodes of violence and trauma that re-enact the disjunction between ancient and modern ethical and social codes. The authors represent the modern condition in terms of the violent repression of its classical roots, mainly by the hands of Christianity (*British Aestheticism* 82).

I would not go so far as to claim that *Long Ago* conforms to the subgenre of the gods in exile by virtue of a mere invocation in a paratextual illustration. As a matter of fact, the volume does not even follow the usual ways in which such a genre presents the Greek deities as leading characters fully retransformed into modern subjects, reinvented with a new suggestive name, and resituated in haunted and uncanny places. However, what *Long Ago* does evoke time and again is a pantheon of divinities that represent universal human affections, partake of Sappho's tragic experiences, become necessarily involved in the genesis of her verses, or simply offer the promise of an end to her tragedy. In this sense, I would state that, although it does not comply strictly with the conventions of the gods-in-exile tradition, *Long Ago* nevertheless appears to be preparing the ground for the Fields to explore that tradition in their unpublished series of Paterian short stories called *For That Moment Only*, which revive Bacchic figures as central characters that symbolise, among other things, "modernity's frustration of a type of individual freedom associated with ancient paganism" (Evangelista 120).

Reverting to the original scroll that Sappho reads, the invocation of the gods is followed by a performative utterance in which the lyric speaker declares her intention to compose airy or ethereal words (*ἡερίων ἐπέων*). Like this speaker, the Fields intend to breathe new life into such words. The frontispiece of their *Long Ago* graphically illustrates the air or flight of Sappho's verses by leaving her incomplete name in suspense between her lips and the manuscript. The words on the scroll and the floating name seem to intimate that, in the process of her revival, Sappho is flying from antiquity to modernity, taking fresh air from the Fields, and even sharing the same breath with the readers of *Long Ago*. The airy words she aims to compose are not dead on an archaic scroll, but always on a flight towards new textual lives.

However, Sappho's words may imply some degree of contradiction. Their etherealness appears to carry connotations of fragility and even perishability that clash with the self-evident fact that their significance has passed the test of time with flying (red) colours, as *Long Ago* attests. To resolve this apparent contradiction, I would ascribe different connotations to the air of Sappho's words and interpret them not as frail or vaporous, but rather as fluid, expansive, receptive, dynamic, and particularly feminine. I genderise the airy words deliberately for two main reasons. On the one hand, Sappho engenders and legates her lyrics not just as one of the most primitive testimonies of female writing

in the history of humanity, but also as an alternative to the patriarchal Homeric heritage. In fact, the book roll that she reads gives its centre to her airy words and marginalises those of Homer. Inscribed and capitalised on both margins of the scroll are the words *ΠΤΕΡΟΕΤΑ ΕΠΙΕΑ* ('winged words'), which directly evoke the formulaic phrase *ἔπεα πτερόεντα* that Homer repeats constantly both in the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*. His glorious poetic birds/songs, however, are not to be repeated or revived in *Long Ago*. He ends up decentralised, ostracised to the periphery and replaced by the Lesbian lyrist. The solid and solemn stature of Homer's epics falls under the shadow of Sappho's airy words. For the Fields probably, the Homeric question, a distinctive concern of nineteenth-century classical philology, loses its gravity in favour of "the Sapphic question" (xii), as Wharton calls it –or a whole set of reconstructive questions on the lost integrity of Sappho's airy lyrics.

Nevertheless, if I characterise such lyrics as feminine, it is not only because their author happens to be the Lesbian poetess or because their textual tradition can be contrasted to the solidity and prevalence of Homer's poetry. There is a second, and more important, reason that accounts for the very femininity of Sappho's language on the grounds of a convoluted yet viable link between the Lesbian poet, the Fields, Tiresias, Heidegger and French philosopher Luce Irigaray. In common to these disparate names is the prominent idea of ontological openness and fluidity –or existential (Sapphic) etherealness. As I announced in the introduction, the Michael Fields revive the figure of Sappho within an original discourse that sees human existence as a fluid and liminal phenomenon whose ontological borders with death are utterly indefinite. In this sense, the Tiresian myth and Heideggerian phenomenology intersect coherently to frame and characterise such a Sapphic discourse as one that knows how to poeticise the many concrete and abstract points of open confluence between life and death. However, I propose to make Luce Irigaray, an interpreter of Heidegger herself, take part in my theoretical model in order to better understand Sappho's airy discourse of fluidity as a true possibility of the feminine language that has been systematically excluded from the masculinist tradition of Western thought.

The Fields and Irigaray have already been paired in some critical studies. For Leighton, *Long Ago* describes Sappho's affairs with her entourage of maidens in "an unhampered woman-to-woman's language as suggestively labial as any Irigarayan writing of the

body” (230). Likewise, Prins sees the connection between the French thinker and *Long Ago* in how this volume eroticises such affairs “beyond heterosexual opposition” and “into more fluid desire” (106). In my next chapter, I seek in part to ratify and re-elaborate on these Irigarayan readings from an ontological perspective, but here my point is different: the ties between Michael Field’s Sapphism and Irigaray reside not only in the rich narrative of Sappho’s homoerotic desire, but also in the constitution of *Long Ago* as a revival of Sappho’s airy words. In *The Forgetting of Air in Martin Heidegger*, Irigaray argues that the element of air represents a feminine force in itself that philosophers such as Heidegger have completely ignored in favour of philosophical accounts metaphorically centred on the solidity and stability of earth and ground.⁶² What the aerial matter symbolises for Irigaray is an ideal principle for understanding human existence not as Cartesian individuality and rationality, but rather as fluidity, relationality, plurality and even inconsistency. From this divergent understanding emerges the possibility of a feminine critique or counter-discourse that can subvert the patriarchal order of “fixed set of semantic elements” with a more “fluid and associative” language or with an airy language able “to produce understanding and relationship” (Villanueva 128).

Enabled by their feminine etherealness, Sappho’s words flow freely from ancient scrolls to modern volumes. Her lyrics generate fluid, plural and even inconsistent revivals due to their lack of solid and complete sets of semantic elements. Their fragmentariness allows the Fields to engage in a free, plural and productive relationship with a Sappho whose legacy is founded on airy yet powerful words. Far from fragile or perishable, her words derive their power from their inexhaustible potentiality to be reanimated not as fixed Homeric lines, but as fluid counter-lines that emanate from the half-extinct breath of a dead poetess and her corpse-like body of poetry. Accordingly, *Long Ago* constitutes a revival of a feminine heritage of sighs/words that know no firm ground, lie suspended in the air, fly freely towards modernity, and develop into new Tiresian textualities. The Tiresian here is neither Homeric nor Ovidian anymore: it now becomes fully Sapphic, feminine and ethereal.

⁶² Irigaray writes: “Metaphysics always supposes, in some manner, a solid crust from which to raise a construction. Thus, a physics that gives privilege to, or at least that would have constituted, the solid plane. Whether philosophers distance themselves from it or whether they modify it, the ground is always there” (2).

However, in her Heideggerian pneumatology, Irigaray notes that air has a contradictory and critically evasive nature. Although all-pervasive, spacious, and vitally necessary for human habitation, air is at once evanescent, ephemeral, and alien both to perception and to knowledge in that it resists epistemological reduction and even falls easily into oblivion. To some extent, Sappho's work partakes of this notional airiness: in the book roll she reads, her words reach a point where they become excessively obscure, fugitive, illegible, and ultimately resistant to perception or knowledge. Her breath comes to a halt and her poems are left in suspense like the unfinished floating name between her and the ancient scroll. Indeed, after the eighth line of the scroll, Sappho vanishes into solitary meaningless letters and eventually into thin air. Here is where the Fields dare intervene with their aesthetic of revivalism. In the final note they append to *Long Ago*, Bradley and Cooper provide a complete reconstruction of such solitary letters into an entire phrase that reads: 'ἄγγ[ελος] ν[έων] ὕ[μ]ν[ων] ("new hymns of a poet"). The thin air of Sappho's letters acquires semantic density with the reconstitutive breath of new affixes.

In such reconstructed pseudo-words, the original resistance to meaning is mitigated, yet never neutralised, by the hypothesis of provisional characters between reparative square brackets. The hypothesis is as audacious as the entire ideation of *Long Ago* in that it goes so far as to infer an entire word from one single grapheme and create the cohesive illusion of a syntagm out of separate and virtually empty lines, where most classicists have seen nothing possibly comprehensible (Yatromanolakis ch. 2). However, as with each lyric in *Long Ago*, the audacious reconstruction proposed by the Fields in their endnote finds its legitimacy in the fact that it results directly from their serious research, their committed Hellenism, and their plural authorial space of invention. No wonder the exact same reconstruction can be found in academic works such as J. Henry Middleton's *Illuminated Manuscripts in Classical and Mediaeval Times: Their Art and Their Technique* (1892), where the airy inscription undergoes a re-assemblage that involves "supplying missing letters and correcting blunders" (25). Here Sappho's words are not only revived and restored, but even corrected under the philological authority of a Cambridge erudite. In *Long Ago*, what Middleton sees as blunders are instead creative occasions for new hymns –or ν[έων] ὕ[μ]ν[ων]. The Fields do not work with a logic of error detection and correction. Their logic is based rather on the horizontality –or sorority– of collaboration through the act of revival.

The previous paratextual analysis shows how *Long Ago* begins with a suggestive fabric of intermediality –of visual and literary textualities– that serves to revive the figure of Sappho as an enigmatic face, a foundational reader, an amplified scroll, a reconstructed hymn, a contact with ancient paganism, an ethereal feminine voice, and more generally, as a text that is fluid, free and always ready for survival. Implicitly, the paratexts reveal that Bradley and Cooper were aware of Sappho’s only possible existence as revival. In the illustrations and the airy scroll, the lyrist is represented as an unfinished subject, suspended, in ecstasy, “standing outside of a self” (Prins 38), only existing in incomplete words, and embodying a fragmentary model of subjectivity with no fixed core of identity and always in a fluid or ethereal process of renaissance.

2.5. Sappho's Eternal Postmodernity: The Dumb Attempt

In their conscious choice of extremely short fragments and fragmented illustrations, the Fields were acutely aware that Sappho was nothing but a fragment –perhaps “the perfect fragment” (Prins 3).⁶³ For, indeed, the ancient poet holds no historical status practically. Although she is believed to have lived on the island of Lesbos in the sixth or seventh century B.C., her actual existence remains enigmatic to the very extent that, for some scholars, she may be simply a stock character in the ancient Greek oral tradition –or, in other words, “a poetic construct rather than a real life figure” (Lardinois 63). The texts that have come down to us bearing her authorial signature throw little light –if any– on her identity, not only because their authorship may be contentious, but chiefly due to their fragmentary state. As Page duBois writes in a long yet compendious paragraph:

Sappho, life and works [...] might be read as an alternative text in postmodernity. If we read her biographies, the attempts to make sense of her life, we realize that there is no there there; Sappho the poet is a multiple, unfixed, constantly transmuting subject. She is a Lesbian supposed lesbian who supposedly died for love of a man. She may be a mother who celebrates her erotic desire for women. She writes epithalamia, poems written in honor of marriage, even as she mourns her separation from women she has loved. Her poems have come down to us only in the most fragmentary of forms, quoted in other poets' work, translated by Catullus, cited by rhetoricians as exemplary texts, found in shreds of papyrus stuffed in sacred crocodiles at Oxyrhynchus in Egypt. There is no text of Sappho, really, just reports, distant sightings, rumors, a few words reputed to be hers (*Burning* 82-83).

In her unknowability, Sappho *is* not. The mere predicate of *being* does not adequately fit her abiographical and fragmented subjectivity. She only reaches a stage of half-existence and even a position nearing nothingness. Put otherwise, she inhabits a strange space between absence and broken presence, perhaps closer to the former than to the latter. In this space, Sappho indirectly challenges the traditional discourse of ontology. Commonly understood as presence, visibility or even temporal immediacy, the notion of being becomes insufficient for making sense of the major textual absences that abound in Sappho's corpus. If being equates only to the exclusion of absence, there seems to be something utterly disrupting in Sappho's absent words. Their very absence implies not

⁶³ Prins rightly portrays the Lesbian poet in relation to the Romantic and Victorian credo of fragmentation which, coinciding with the appearance of new Sapphic texts, transformed them into “an aesthetic ideal” and consecrated the dominant image of Sappho –as a “muse in tatters” or a ‘lost body’– that modernists and postmodernists would embrace in their own literary codes (3-7).

only a pre-existence, but also the potential of a new existence –a lost past with a highly promising future or a death with a large potential for posthumous lives. In this respect, as a body or a corpse with absent parts, Sappho makes the long-standing *metaphysics of presence* plummet by privileging what the conventional notion of being negates.⁶⁴ In her fragments, the haunting pseudo-presence of absence acquires an ontological density that never exhausts itself, renders meaning infinite, and opens a field of absolute becoming –of incessant transtextuality. The Sapphic absence is generative, futural, and hence a literary Heideggerian model of *Existenz* (67): it becomes radically open or transcendent, leaves its manifest blanks and ellipses at the disposal of the belated poet, offers itself to be potentially re-and-over-written, and yet never ceases to defer itself –to perpetuate its openness of meaning– with no chance whatsoever to produce any ultimate semantic determination.

In working with Sappho, the Fields engage with a long tradition of conceptualising the fragmentary or the absent as a fertile field of potential meaning and creation. In Henry Wharton’s inspiring memoir, Sappho is presented as one of the most “untranslatable” of poets (xiv), an “impossible task” (35) in Swinburne’s words, and a mysterious figure that “we can only vainly long to know” (48). Yet, it is in spite and because of this impossible access to her reality and her work that Wharton makes her the object of numerous biographical speculations, commentaries, renderings, and prose translations. Her ontological poverty or precariousness becomes the enabling condition for a boundless space of projections, myths, legends and memoirs. In this vast condition, Sappho has been anachronistically re-examined not just as a modern construct, but even as a postmodern fantasy. For Page duBois, the Lesbian lyrist is an unstable entity, a broken narrative, and “less a person, an author in a modern sense, than a nexus of knowledge, connections, attachments and projections” (*Sappho* 7). Defined in a more postmodernist fashion, “Sappho is a project, a process, and in fact an unending and discontinuous engagement with what she means” (5). What is more, Sappho is always radically new, fresh, and unfinished in that her “body of work continues to change as new fragments come to light” (3).

⁶⁴ For Heidegger, Western metaphysics has always conceived of being “as presence” (38) or as entities that are present to be used, manipulated or exploited, and thus any ontological consideration of notions such as absence or nothingness is directly dismissed. Being only becomes thinkable in its manifest and material dimension.

Not long ago, a new Sappho emerged for us. In 2004, her body of work expanded after the discovery of an almost complete poem addressed to a young girl and focused on the losses of old age. In 2014, new papyrus fragments attributed to Sappho saw the light of publication and included not only additions to five previously known poems, but even two completely new lyric pieces –one devoted to Sappho’s absent seafaring brother and the other dealing with the pains of unrequited love. In like manner, the Fields witnessed the emergence of a new Sappho in their time after the discovery of new verses ‘found among the Fayum papyri in the possession of the Archduke Rénier’ (Wharton ix). In *Long Ago* and today, Sappho appears to be perpetually new, always open, and never frozen in a grand closed narrative. In this respect, Page duBois hits the mark when she states that Sappho seems to belong to “an eternal postmodern present, chaotic and fluctuating” (*Burning* 1).

Sappho’s eternally postmodern textuality, indeed, conforms to poststructuralist semiotic theories of the text, for which the Sapphic word would neatly reflect the “vision of texts as always in a state of production” (Allen 34). Given their radical openness, Sappho’s fragments are not finished products endowed with stable structures of meaning: rather, they are “ongoing transformations and/or production” (34), always under construction, and in process. It is, of course, their fragmentary textuality that makes blatantly explicit their productive condition. In their half-woven textures, every burst seam opens a semiotics of productivity that can produce potential –yet inevitably unstable–completive signs in order to re-weave the Sapphic word over and over again.

Sappho’s proto-postmodern voice is unstable and open, because it is tragically broken, nearly voiceless, and inarticulate at best. In fact, in one of her own lyric poems, she explicitly declares: ἀλλά καὶ μὲν γλῶσσα ἔαγε.⁶⁵ According to these words, her tongue breaks and her faculty of speech fails as a result of an abrasive desire –of “a subtle fire [that] has run under my skin” (Wharton 65). This erotic trope of linguistic impotence and virtual voicelessness admits readily of a generalising extrapolation to the figure of Sappho herself: as a fragmented subject, with her tongue broken, she can barely pronounce her own name, which ends up floating in the form of an apocope between her and the manuscript she reads. It is precisely in this interstitial space that Bradley and

⁶⁵ This line belongs to Fragment 31 and translates, according to Wharton, as “my tongue is broken down” (65). For a close analysis of the line, its trope of lingual breakage and its controversial hiatus, see Campbell, Svenbro, Nagy, or Prins (33-36).

Cooper inscribe their poetic unitary voice in a reparative fashion: they repair, stretch and fill out the apocope –the broken speech– in what one might equate to a postmodern model of *bricolage* consisting, as Derrida would phrase it, fundamentally in the transformative appropriation of a Sapphic “héritage plus ou moins cohérent ou ruiné” (418).⁶⁶

The heritage that the Fields choose to (re)invent in *Long Ago* does not encompass the entirety of Sappho’s corpus: it is solely and strategically formed by “the short fragments [and] the more fragmentary texts” (Prins, *Victorian Sappho* 102) –or *les plus ruinés* in Derridean terms– on account of their radical openness and their subsequent vast potential for (re)semantisation. It seems, then, that the Fields intervene as *bricoleurs* in those Sapphic nooks where there where brokenness reaches its zenith, where a generous possibility for restoration shows itself most overtly, and where silence offers ample room for reparative words. In a spirit of subverting the hierarchical dichotomy between presence and absence, the Fields decide wittingly upon the latter and profit from its prospective richness. After all, the Sapphic lacuna proves more promising, generative, fertile, and transcendent than the complete songs of the ancient lyricist: absence outweighs –or *outsignifies*– any abundance of presence.

In a similar postmodern jargon, the Sapphic fragment could be defined as a writerly or blissful text that, as Roland Barthes describes it, destabilises every unit of meaning, “imposes a state of loss,” “discomforts” the reader (14), and engages her not as a passive observer, but as a rewriter. In effect, Sappho engages the Michael Fields in this way: the Victorian couple seems to experience the Sapphic text as a blissful one (as a source of “passionate of pleasure,” as they confess in the preface), setting as their goal “the blissful apprehension” of the Sapphic ideal (Preface), and aspiring to become readers/rewriters of the ancient poet. More importantly, Bradley and Cooper seem to have deeply understood the modernity and even eternal postmodernity of Sappho. Again in their preface to *Long Ago*, it is explicitly acknowledged that the volume amounts to “an attempt to express in English verse” what remains of Sappho (Preface). The idea of attempt should be brought to the fore here as a core one, for it hints precisely at what moderns and postmoderns think of Sappho: she can only be treated

⁶⁶ Here I deliberately choose the term *bricolage* –over more or less similar notions such as rewriting, parody, intertext, adaptation, pastiche, palimpsest or even translation– for its explicit original connotations of reparative composition and reconstruction: not in vain does it stem from the French verb *bricoler*, which means ‘arranger, réparer ou fabriquer quelque chose’ (*Dictionnaire Larousse*).

tentatively, provisionally, relatively, and under the assumption that her biographical and literary identity always remains elusive, unfathomable, and radically ideal. In the same preface, Bradley and Cooper show their awareness that Sappho is just an ideal that they wish to apprehend with audacity. A red Sapphic phrase confirms such awareness: “Ἐγὼν δ’ ἐμαῦτα / τοῦτο σὺ νοῖδα.” (‘And this I feel in myself’). This inward feeling not only refers to the authorial, affective and intellectual communion that *Long Ago* establishes between the Sapphic fragment and the Michaelian expansion: it is a conscious feeling that the very thought of such a communion “must be audacious” (Preface). The audacity lies exactly in trying to translate the untranslatable, complete the fragmentary, and stabilise the chaotic. *Long Ago* results from this intrepid effort not as a totalising, conclusive or Hegelian text, but rather as a felt effort in itself, a mere attempt, and even just a “dumb prayer” (Preface) devoted to Sappho – “dumb,” write the Fields in the preface, because no definitive words can articulate the potentially infinite language of Sappho’s songs.

2.6. From the Greek Sublime to the Liberated Field

Sappho's language is ultimately inaccessible owing both to its fragmentary and its very ancient Greekness. In *Long Ago*, her Greek is systematically and organically present: it pervades every page, legates the title in translation, and crowns every poem as an epigraph. Its capital preponderance brings along an inherent sense of singularity and magnetism, well pointed out by Martin Heidegger: "If we listen now and later to the words of the Greek language, then we move into a distinct and distinguished domain [...] The Greek language is no mere language like the European languages known to us" (in Steiner 24). I understand, however, that the non-mereness of Greek –its distinguished character– goes far beyond its undertones of erudition, elitism, and exoticism. There is some sublime feel to it that appeals, intrigues, interpellates, and yet impedes immediate apprehension. It appears to conceal a density of past meanings, an abundance of primeval knowledge, and a long-standing message that, nonetheless, resists any chance of direct understanding. It is its radical remoteness that renders it not only obscure, but outright inaccessible. Even the classicist critic has to come to terms with its ultimate impenetrability. The ancient Greek word and world are at bottom too distant and alien to admit of a transparent epistemology. In its ancient form, Greek does seduce and exert some kind of intellectual erotic, and yet it remains utterly illegible for the modern reader.⁶⁷ From this ambivalence emerges what I would denominate the Greek sublime, a kind of linguistic perplexity that attracts yet overpowers the intellect at once, thereby standing in a paradox between aesthetic attraction and epistemological unintelligibility.

The Greek sublime inheres in *Long Ago*. The Greek that the Fields choose to adapt and translate in their lyrics is ultimately unfathomable: it is preserved mostly in fragments, through indirect sources, and from an all too archaic epoch. Sappho figures as the writer of this primitive Greek, but her historical identity sheds little light on what it could have

⁶⁷ From this viewpoint, history becomes an object not of scientific inquiry, but of erotic desire. As Stefano Evangelista rightly points out, the fact that we assume the past to be ultimately inaccessible not only reveals:

the limits of historical criticism, forever prevented from obtaining perfect knowledge of its object by the physical laws of time and space; but it also suggests that desire may be able to override those limits, or, more radically, that the ultimate aim of criticism is not to know the object as it really is but rather to desire it intensely ("Greek Textual Archaeology").

meant in its fullest form.⁶⁸ Her words are elliptic, broken, solitary, enigmatic, and sublime in that they strongly appeal to Michael Field by virtue of their very brokenness, and yet they remain epistemologically evasive and even uncanny. Here Julia Kristeva's postmodern terminology comes in handy. One could argue that Sappho's Greek and Michael Field's English function respectively as the *genotext* and *phenotext* of *Long Ago*. Where the Fieldean speaker represents "the part of the text bound up with the language of communication" and "displays definable structure" (in Allen 50), the Greek epigraph constitutes the internal part that "disturbs, ruptures and undercuts the phenotext" (51). To put it differently, the Sapphic genotext forms an integral part of *Long Ago*, co-signifying with its poems and even pre-signifying each of them, and yet it imparts no transparency of meaning, hinders immediate symbolic (re)cognition, and thus creates some kind of disturbance –or strangeness– right before and above the phanotextual unfolding of each lyric. The Sapphic fragment inhabits the Fieldean word, but holds out against functional communication and approximates to what Kristeva denominates *signifiante*, a sublime form of language that defies "representative and communicative speech" (in Allen 219).

Nevertheless, I would insist again that *Long Ago* hosts Sappho's Greek in an organic and hospitable manner. Her fragmented word informs the Fieldean project from beginning to end. Her Greek is fully engrained in every paratext and text. The title echoes a fragment that appears in its original form in the interstice between the cover and the preface. The lyrics are all crowned by a Sapphic epigraph that frames Michael Field's amplifications. Each poem offers a translation of the capital fragment amongst its lines. In her own words and in translation, Sappho speaks continually. However, her genotext is particularly central: it presides over every poem as if it were the very first and most prominent word –as if the rest below were just a mere response or a post-script to something much more meaningful and vital. It seems that the hospitality that *Long Ago* confers upon the Sapphic language is radical and even transgressive: the guest word becomes the host. In its elevated position, it embraces and hosts the English word as an afterthought that Michael Field appends.⁶⁹

⁶⁸ As I shall discuss below, Sappho is hardly a historical figure in absolute terms: "we know very little about her poetry, hardly anything about her life, not much more about her society, nothing to speak of about her character and nothing whatsoever about her personal appearance" (Reynolds, *Companion* 2).

⁶⁹ In this context, I appropriate Paul Ricoeur's idea of linguistic hospitality, defined as "the act of inhabiting the word of the Other paralleled by the act of receiving the word of the Other into one's own

Sappho's Greek does not lose its irreducible otherness, though. Despite its capital role and textual immanence within *Long Ago*, the Graeco-Sapphic sublime persists. No immediate grasp of it is possible. No definite meaning can be found in its fragmented corpus. No semantic determination would prove valid. In *Long Ago*, Greek is always already something else, a wholly different other, and an evanescent beyond. Its ultimate mystique prevails, and so does the bafflement before its constitutive differentness. What is remarkably peculiar, though, is that Sappho's Greek expands intimately into Michael Field's poems as an integral and immanent part of *Long Ago*. As I have indicated above, each Fieldean poem grows out of Sappho's fragments and responds to them in a well-embedded dialogue. All in all, Sappho's Greek appears to constitute an ambiguous form of immanent otherness: it inheres deep-rooted in the textual self of *Long Ago*, and yet transcends it as a fugitive other that cannot be reduced to a determinate facticity. Said otherwise, the Sapphic word is both inside and outside *Long Ago*.

With Sappho inside and outside, *Long Ago* raises "the general problem of making what is alien our own" (Gadamer 19). In the face of Sappho's otherness, Michael Field confront a major hermeneutic challenge in regard to how they can render the foreign understandable and translatable, how they can make vernacular sense of Sappho's fragments in English, or how they can domesticate her ancient Greek in a Victorian text. The answer cannot be simple. The Sapphic mystique does not yield to an easy understanding and translation: both its antiquity and its fragmentary nature are insurmountable impediments to any ambitious hermeneutics. As I have formerly explained, Sappho's otherness is altogether indeterminable.

What does seem possible and actually functional in *Long Ago* is a fusion of horizons or, in other words, an approximation to "the always provisional and hard-won meeting at the intersection between the familiar and the alien" (Hermans 132). The Michael Fields are situated at this complicated intersection, fusing their own voices with the alienness of Sappho's songs and offering a provisional translation of words that are archaic, fragmentary, and hence inscrutable. As a provisional re-expression of Sapphic language, *Long Ago* represents only an option or an alternative interpretation of an excessive

home, one's own dwelling" (xvi). In *Long Ago*, this hospitality is radical: the guest or source language enters into textual co-habitation with the hospitable translation, taking a capital role, framing the Fieldean translation, and even amplifying itself into a new lyrical dwelling that is not specular or mimetic, but generative, augmentative, and enriching.

message, one that keeps its radical otherness open, intact, and irreducible. Put differently, what Bradley and Cooper present is a translation that “cannot be a reproduction of an original: it can only be an interpretation reflecting both empathy and distance” (Hermans 132).

I would emphasise the conjunction of empathy and distance in its application to the hermeneutic method behind *Long Ago*. In choosing to engage with Sappho, Michael Field identify with her affectively and project themselves into her preserved word. Their lyrics derive from an understanding or *Verstehen* that escapes the strictly rational or mental and involves the emotional. In the preface to *Long Ago*, the Fields reveal that it was with “passionate pleasure” that they read Henry Wharton’s Sapphic renditions and resolved to rework them in English verse for the sake of “the blissful apprehension of an ideal.” In this respect, empathy constitutes the most elevated objective for the Fields: they aspire to affectively –blissfully– apprehend and translate the Sapphic experience into their own lyrical idiom, thus making *Long Ago* function somehow as an empathetic text that recognises its most intimate mirror and interlocutor in the figure of Sappho.⁷⁰

Nevertheless, Sappho is still an ideal or an aspiration that precludes total apprehension. *Long Ago* does not form a full synthesis or merging with her. Sappho and the Fields do not confuse into one another, erasing all boundaries and creating a dialectic of primal unity between self and other. The intertextual empathy that Michael Field practices seems to illustrate Edith Stein’s notion of *Einfühlung* as “a blind mode of knowledge that reaches the experience of the other without possessing it” (Makkreel 255-6). The Fields empathise and identify with the Sapphic experience: they write themselves into their first lyrical being through the mirror of Sappho’s words. However, they do not – and cannot– possess Sappho and her original songs. The Lesbian lyrist remains ideal, unattainable, always at a distance, serving as a poetic model for Bradley and Cooper, and yet maintaining her superlative semantic mystique intact. Sappho is, after all, “a foreign tongue that would always remain untranslatable” (Reynolds, *History* 14).

⁷⁰ In forming an empathetic bond with Sappho and deriving “passionate pleasure” from her ancient songs, the Fields take up their appropriative project as if acting by the pleasure principle, which is, according to John Ellis, the ultimate cause behind the creative will to adapt or rewrite those texts that have left an indelible imprint on one’s memory. In this regard, *Long Ago* is a memorialisation of the pleasure taken in reading Sappho. It is, in other others, “a means of prolonging the pleasure of the original presentation, [...] repeating the production of a memory” (in Sanders 33), and perpetuating the bliss of the encounter with the Lesbian lyrist.

With the sublime or mystical presence of Sappho's Greek, *Long Ago* discloses its intrinsic openness and dialogue. Sappho donates her words. Michael Field listens and responds to them. In their poetic exchange, they seem to need one another to originate the creative act. Sappho (re)lives through Michael Field's responses. In turn, Michael Field inaugurates their identity through the Sapphic song, fusing their first poetic signature with the Lesbian lyricist's name. Their conjunct (re)birth—their foundational intersubjectivity—takes the form of a dialogue in which self and other are mutually defined and constructed. Sappho and Michael Field come into being together in their dialogic communication.⁷¹ The Fields build their own words upon Sappho's broken texts, and it is in this (re)construction that Sappho finds the potential voice of what her fragments probably said. What *Long Ago* presents as a result is an intertextual subject that, as I shall explain below, emanates from the dialogic quality of the Sapphico-Fieldian word—from “the dissolution of the unitary ‘I’ in a signifying practice shot through with semiotic and intertextual forces” (Allen 56).

Sappho and Michael Field engage in a long conversation that merges their “voices and consciousnesses” and creates “a genuine polyphony” (*Poetics* 6). I borrow these words from Russian critic M. Bakhtin, but with a significant difference: the dialogism constitutive of *Long Ago* does not involve a “plurality of independent and unmerged voices” (6). Sappho and Michael Field are not strictly independent of one another. Instead, they seem to articulate a confusing dialectic between co-dependence and autonomy. Sappho speaks anew and renews her expression in the Fieldian poems, which are in turn founded upon the Sapphic word. However, the Greek poetess retains her ultimate autonomy in her sublime fragments: although embedded in *Long Ago*, her language is *au fond* over-determined, infinite, and untranslatable.⁷² By extension, Michael Field's translations constitute nothing but a tentative attempt and only an attempt to approximate Sappho's broken words and propose one of their countless possibilities of translation and amplification.

⁷¹ In this respect, I am implicitly adopting Bakhtin's conception of dialogue as/and personhood: for him, “in dialogue a person not only shows himself outwardly, but he becomes for the first time that which he is, not only for others but for himself as well. To be means to communicate dialogically” (*Poetics* 252).

⁷² In tune with Bakhtin's theory, the transcendental value that Sappho's Greek holds in *Long Ago* can be understood as a case of literal heteroglossia: the Sapphic language is ultimately alien, strange, different, and *hetero* in that it retains its unbridgeable pastness despite its structural integration in the Fieldian text.

Needless to say, each translation and amplification owes itself to the Sapphic fragment. Sappho has the first say and determines –to a certain extent– the sum and substance of each poem. With her fragments on top, she pre-scribes Field’s words in a double sense: she prefigures what the Fields mean to recompose at the head of the lyrics, and this capital prefiguration lays their symbolic and conceptual foundations. In this manner, the Sapphic fragment is rhetorically deterministic or prescriptive: it plays a crucial part in the inventional or heuristic process that operates within *Long Ago*. The Sapphic text becomes the visible site of *inventio* in which Michael Field discover the *topoi*, stases, and arguments that are later revised. Said otherwise, Sappho’s fragments concretise what French critic Michael Riffaterre defines as *matrix*, which “refers to a word, phrase or sentence upon which the whole semiotic structure of a text is built” (in Allen 215). It is clear that, in keeping with this term, *Long Ago* edifies itself upon the matrix, textually present, of Sapphic words and sentences.

As the visible rhetorical genesis of *Long Ago*, the Sappho fragment conforms to a specific notion of intertextuality or co-textuality that cancels out the common logic of verticality.⁷³ Sappho’s words are neither hypotextual nor hypertextual *stricto sensu* –nor do they function as the hidden layer of a palimpsest waiting to be revealed. Rather, they share an immediate, intimate and syntagmatic textual field with Michael Field’s reinventions, manifesting their capital condition of originators and in a way procreating –in the futural sense of the verb– at least the possibility of an extension in the simultaneous space that Sappho frames. *Long Ago* therefore works as a horizontal intertext where the Bloomian trope of “the poet-in-a-poet” (19) becomes textually patent. Instead of hiding as a haunting precursor, Sappho appears openly, converses immediately with the Fields, and thus instils no anxiety of influence per se.

The influence Sappho exerts is neither vertical nor necessarily oppressive. Given their fragmentariness, the Sapphic words do not impose a determined rhetorical facticity upon the belated poet: they succumb inevitably to misreading or clinamen in Harold Bloom’s terms, favouring new directions of interpretation and rewriting, and even

⁷³ Here I depart Kristeva’s specific notion of intertextuality as a vertical process whereby a given text directs itself or the reader paradigmatically “toward an anterior or synchronic literary corpus” (60). This process does not take place in Michael Field’s poems: their primary mode of intertextual connection with the Sapphic fragments is not oriented towards an external or contextual referent, but towards itself, its double-voiced textuality, and its own internal *dispositio*. In a way, the Fieldean type of intertextuality is at once *intertextual* and *intratextual* –with Sappho’s textual otherness forming part of the double textual selfhood that characterises *Long Ago*.

opening up an agon-free space where parasitism is amply replaced by transcendence and askesis.⁷⁴ In their parody or misreading, Michael Field need not parasitically repeat a dense text with closed signifiers and meanings. Working with the broken corpus of Sappho's texts, Bradley and Cooper can feel free to accommodate a world of difference, innovation, and unbound creativity into a poetic inheritance that, far from any semantic finitude, displays a radical porosity to different and liberated post-meanings. The Fields can readily write their lyrics on the basis of "a rhetoric of textual liberation" (Allen 198).

However, such liberation is possible not only because of the fragmentary nature of Sappho's songs, but also because little –if any– anxiety can arise from a canonical tradition of verse "with too few mothers" (Gilbert and Gubar 50). Unlike the male writer, who "feels hopelessly belated" in the face of a long history of "many fathers" (50), the female writer can see herself as "helping to create a viable tradition which is at last definitively emerging" (50).⁷⁵ In *Long Ago*, Bradley and Cooper go back to the very beginning of Western poetry, find their authoritative mother in the figure of Sappho, and make their own contribution to an emergent canon of female voices without any coercive sense of belatedness. In choosing Sappho, the Fields opt for a particular model of authority: they form a bond of filiation with the most ancient poetess, authorise themselves by directly citing her originals,⁷⁶ and engage with her special lyrical corpus, which is not a primal locus of finished words hard to emulate, but a liberated and liberating "space for filling in the gaps, joining up the dots, making something out of nothing" (Reynolds, *Companion* 2).

Inhabiting such a free field, the Fields treat Sappho as a myth in a manner that Alicia Ostriker (1982) would perhaps style as "revisionist" with *Long Ago* serving as a great example of "the old vessel filled with new wine" (72). Here I speak of revisionism in a

⁷⁴ In this respect, Sappho incarnates the Barthesian death of the author in her own words: with her porous fragments, she fulfils the poststructuralist dream of "liberation from the traditional power and authority of the figure of the author" (Allen 4). In their spirit to rewrite Sappho's heritage, Michael Field encounter an already inhabited word whose original author, however, far from constraining or tormenting the belated writer, acts as a most generous host.

⁷⁵ In a later article, Gilbert and Gubar ("Sapphistries") think of Sappho as the most productive mother or muse for the modern woman poet in these terms: "Precisely because so many of her original Greek texts were destroyed, the modern woman poet could write 'for' or 'as' Sappho and thereby invent a classical inheritance of her own" (46-47).

⁷⁶ Implicit in this direct recourse to Sappho's original verses is the idea that, as a mode of textual adaptation, citation is "self-authenticating, even reverential, in its reference to the canon of 'authoritative', culturally validated texts" (Sanders 6).

loose way, assuming that the Fieldean poems constitute transformative, expansive, and experimental revisions of the Sapphic archetype as contained and transmitted in various fragments. I understand the Fieldean lyrics, in light of Ostriker's theory, as a kind of mythic revisionism that transforms a canonical text with material "not present in any classical source" (73). With the Sapphic myth, the Michael Fields discern an evident and fruitful possibility of adding revisionary and innovative material to a corpus of fragments where "the not present" is pervasive and promising.

Alternatively, poet and critic Adrienne Rich formulates an idea of revisionism that may be applicable, but only to some extent. In her view, a literary revision of a classic or previous work equates essentially to "the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction" (17). Clearly enough, at the level of this generic definition, *Long Ago* might well be considered a re-vision through and through, but Rich goes on in a divergent direction: "We need to know the writing of the past and know it differently than we have ever known it; not to pass on a tradition but to break its hold over us" (18). If literary revisionism were to be understood in these more restrictive terms, then I would not construe Michael Field's work as a revisionary attempt to break with Sappho in any possible way, but rather as an (re)creative act, whether revisionist or not, of perpetuating her words and repairing her truncated tradition/transmission. After all, it seems fairly difficult and even unnecessary to break with an author whose heritage is already broken, incomplete, and thus hospitable to reparative—not defensive or antagonistic—revisions.

Furthermore, I would assert that *Long Ago* is a fulfilment of the Sapphic promise, a Victorian metamorphosis of her myth, a beneficiary of her mythic authority,⁷⁷ and a protraction of her mythopoetic tradition. Appropriating Laurence Coupe's terminology, I would read the Fieldean lyrics effectively as an instance of *radical typology*:

... all myths presuppose a previous narrative, and in turn form the model for future narratives. Strictly speaking, the pattern of promise and fulfilment need never end; no sooner has one narrative promise been fulfilled than the fulfilment becomes in turn the promise of further myth-making. Thus myths remake other myths, and there is no reason why they should not continue to do so, the

⁷⁷ As a consolidated myth, Sappho "confers on the writer the authority unavailable to someone who writes merely of the private self" (Ostriker 72).

mythopoetic urge being infinite. This understanding is what we are calling radical typology (108).

Long Ago perpetuates Sappho's promise and mythopoetic urge by citing her original fragments and creating new meanings virtually *ex nihilo* –out of ellipses and lacunae. This movement from citation to creation clearly reveals how the complex dialectics of dependence and emancipation operates. *Long Ago* is at one and the same time a dependent and free anti-type of Sappho's poetry: in the Fieldean radical typology, "the anti-type is dependent upon the type; yet the anti-type manages to evade its debt to the type" (Coupe 109). The Sapphic myth motivates and inspires Michael Field's rewriting not with a solemn sense of authority or rigid demands of mimetic transposition, but rather by offering a generous space of absences in which to write into being a radically new Sappho. It could be said, then, that *Long Ago* has a dual existence: as a Sapphic intertext and as an independent text in its own right.⁷⁸

⁷⁸ Here I am just paraphrasing Allen's "commonsensical argument that texts have a dual existence: as autonomous texts and inter-texts" (112).

2.7. Translating the Sapphic Seed: From Shelley to Steiner

As already proven, Sappho is extraordinarily open and porous. In her corpus, meaning falls into extreme indeterminacy. The very idea of meaning collapses altogether, explodes, and disseminates. In their truncated forms, Sappho's fragments offer no fixity or stability of meaning. Most of her words and sentences barely form a logical semantic unit, their porosity being absolute. On this account, the Sapphic word allows for an authentic model of free translation and amplification grounded in its semantic sublimity and broken language. Since its ultimate references are inscrutable, Sappho's heritage lends itself to be translated into new words, new meanings, and new originals –more creative than recreative.

As a transcendent mode of translation beyond the Sapphic fragments, *Long Ago* is in a certain way a Romantic work that abides by Percy B. Shelley's analogical maxim of the translated text as a plant that "must spring again from the seed" (in Hyde 243). This re-springing involves a process of going to the root of a foreign text and growing a new expression out of it. In the Fieldean translation, Sappho is at the root: her fragmented work makes up a bare seed that permits such re-springing with no difficulty. In itself the Sapphic seed poses no demanding conditions of transfer or re-cultivation to Michael Field's receptive language, but exactly the opposite: it grows readily into new lyrics, bearing new fruit and starting propitiously anew. In this regard, *Long Ago* may well be read as a new beginning of Sappho's incomplete utterance, a new springing of her voice, or a new Sappho altogether.

In like manner, Walter Benjamin understands translation as an organic and vital process that consists in catching "the fire from the eternal life of the works and the perpetually renewed life of language" (18). Translation is not merely representational or reproductive: it is more than mere reproduction of meaning. For Benjamin, translation operates by pure creativity: it revives the original text, makes it reverberate once again, liberates "the language imprisoned" in it (22), and longs "for linguistic complementation" (21). In other words, translation re-creates, transforms and completes the source text in a symbiotic and connective way that makes "both the original and the translation recognizable as fragments of a greater language" (21). No doubt, Sappho and Michael converge in *Long Ago* to speak such a language in unison. The Fields revive Sappho's fragments, contribute to their eternal afterlife, become part of their growth,

and complete them in a translation that seems to be, more precisely, a transfusion of new life –or new blood. It seems no coincidence that in *Long Ago* the Sapphic epigraphs are all printed in red ink: the chromatic metaphor suggests perhaps that this red Greek not only “restores colour and blood to the Greek language” (Evangelista, “Archaeology”), but also revives and liberates the language imprisoned in Sappho’s songs. What Shelley prescribed is fulfilled here: Sappho springs again from her ancient seed into a reinvigorated afterlife.

It must be recalled, however, that Sappho favours such a renewal of life. As commented above, her originals are extremely elliptic, porous, and more than adequate for what Benjamin calls linguistic complementation. Given their lack in semantic determinacy and finitude, Sappho’s fragments impose low objective conditions upon their potential translations, so much so that one could say that *Long Ago* directly invalidates the very doctrine of ekphrastic translation that the Fields themselves defend in their second book of verse, *Sigh and Song* (1892):

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 (Preface).

Sappho’s fragments –especially, those chosen by Michael Field for their project– sing very little in themselves, incarnate little poetic material, and thus set low demands of objectivity for their translation. Indeed, the Sapphic word calls for full subjective involvement and enjoyment on the part of the translator, not because it has nothing to be possibly transferred, but because what it offers is so minuscule and incomplete, that its translator can afford absolute freedom of creation, speculation, and complementation.

Moreover, the type of translation that Sappho makes possible and that Michael Field practices comes very close to what Willard Van Orman Quine understands as radical translation. By this term the American philosopher means that the phenomenon of translation is essentially indeterminate in that it follows no straight path from one language to another and may always lead to radically plural products. It is not that translation proves to be ultimately impossible or bound to failure: what Quine claims, in

fact, is that there is not just one single method of translation, but a plurality of indeterminate yet valid ways of communication across languages.⁷⁹

Using Quine's terminology, Sappho incarnates indeterminacy. Her fragments are mostly unstable and incomplete referents. With them the translator can only cling onto a few broken sentences and venture a possible translation or reconstruction that is intrinsically optional, a contingent possibility, and nothing determinate. However, for Michael Field, such indeterminacy seems to entitle their poetic imagination to resume what history has transmitted in truncated forms and write down a contingency –nothing necessarily determinate or similar to what Sappho might have composed, but at least a tentative, valid, and audacious exploration. *Long Ago*, a product of such an exploration, is thus a radical translation in the sense that it stems from the indeterminate Sapphic fragment and culminates in an attempt to translate not only the fragment itself, but also its ellipses and gaps, all into a possible and radically new version of Sappho's lost songs.

Long Ago may be read not only as a radical translation in the above terms, but also an original twist on George Steiner's model of hermeneutic motion. The Franco-American critic views translation as a fourfold process whereby the translator (1) generously trusts the foreign text –an “adverse text” or an “unmapped alternity of statement” (186)– to mean something understandable, potentially mouldable, and worthy of transmission; (2) s/he then penetrates it in an incursive and extractive way, (3) incorporates it into the receptive language as a strange or fully domesticated text, and eventually (4) seeks a restorative balance or parity between the source and the product. Applied to *Long Ago*, this model reveals several idiosyncrasies. No doubt, the Fields trust Sappho in the sense that they come to her with passionate pleasure, make “an investment of belief” (186) in her fragments, and acknowledge them to be inspirational, meaningful, and promisingly expressible in English verse. Michael Field recognise no adversity in Sappho's words in spite of their ultimate otherness and sublimity: what they discover instead is a generous opportunity to trust Sappho as an everlasting voice, a transcendent poet, and even a divine muse.

⁷⁹ Simplifying Quine's theory of radical translation, Hylton writes rather concisely: “That successful translation occurs is not cast in doubt by anything he [Quine] says; his claim, indeed, is that it may be possible in more than one way” (*Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*).

In regard to the second motion of aggression or penetration, it seems that Sappho's texts need not be invaded, abused, or violated in any way. Their indeterminate forms, full of solitary words and blanks, allow for unobstructed absorption, immediate intervention, and free transformation in other texts. Yet, the only possible mode of hermeneutic violence, pervasive throughout *Long Ago*, occurs perhaps in the act of adopting Dr. Henry Wharton's translations and other sources of Sappho's fragments as authoritative and trustworthy. This bias, although inevitable, conditions the Fields –and any reader, for that matter– in their access to the Sapphic word: they penetrate it through the mediation of prior interpreters whose understanding of Sappho's songs is assumed to be thoroughly reliable. In this sense, I construe such mediation as “an act, on the access, inherently appropriative and therefore violent” (187). The Michael Fields access and appropriate the Sapphic fragments by means of previous appropriations, laden with their own presumptions. Accordingly, although *Long Ago* unfolds its lyrics, with no necessary aggression, in the vast unimpeded space of creativity generated by Sappho's fecund lacunae, nevertheless it enters the Sapphic world with a re-appropriative spirit that implies some degree of what Heidegger and Steiner see as hermeneutic violence.

The third movement of a translation is, according to Steiner, towards incorporation or embodiment, which takes the form either of “a complete domestication” or a “permanent strangeness and marginality” (188) of the translated artefact. Both incorporative modalities appear at work in *Long Ago*. Michael Field write a large ensemble of lyrics where Sappho's fragments merge with derivative yet new words and acquire a full sense of “at-homeness” (188) within an organic, natural, and cohesive flow of aestheticist compositions. Nevertheless, the foreign or strange stays in place. Sappho's original Greek does not disappear into translated and renewed verses, but participates unaltered in each Fieldean lyric as a sublime and permanent strangeness. *Long Ago* is, then, a paragon of the incorporative motion with its two dimensions at play, always oscillating between naturalisation and absolute foreignness in every single poem.

The final motion of restitution is an idiosyncratic operation in *Long Ago*: Michael Field do not seem to look for a balance or a “restored parity” (189) between their lyrics and Sappho's texts with the aim of compensating, as Steiner prescribes, for the hermeneutic violence perpetuated at the previous levels. Rather, the Fields seek to reconstitute what

Sappho lost in the course of history, repair the enormous damage inflicted upon her textual bodies, and *translate* her silences and fractured words into fully-fledged lyrics. In this regard, the restitution that the Fields practice is not so much an act of atonement for the appropriation of Sappho's songs, but a form of creative bricolage that rebuilds a ruined yet splendid heritage in what appears to be, in Steiner's words, "a dynamic of magnification" –or a reparative homage that "enlarges the stature of the original" (189). *Long Ago* constitutes a precise example of *incremental literature*, whose "aim is not replication as such, but complication, expansion," and restitution (Sanders 15).

2.8. Prospective Revivalism and Ontic Writing

Thus far I have endeavoured to interpret *Long Ago* as a complex interplay between the English self and the Greek other, the translatable and the sublime, the dependent and the emancipated, the mimetic and the original, the empathetic and the distant, the reparative and the fragmentary, the present and the absent, the revisionary and the mythic, the anti-type and the type, the immanent and the transtextual. This plurality of betweenesses is forcibly asyndetic and even over-determined. The space that the Fieldean lyric occupies seems to have no fixity, no stability, no univocality, and even no harmonious encounter between one polarity and another. Whether *Long Ago* veers towards the mimetic or the parasitic rather than towards the different or the transcendent is an open question that brackets itself off without any definitive resolution possible. Consequently, I take *Long Ago* to be a perfect Tiresian text, finding its own place in the midst of irreducible dualities and bridging the gaps, as the ancient prophet does in Thebes, between the old and the new or the dead and the living.

In its fundamental ontology as a revival, *Long Ago* is a textual organism that grows out of a cemetery of poets and ideas, out of an ontic mortality that becomes an ontological form of immortality –or out of “the conundrum of the dead immortals” (653), as O’Gorman puts it. The volume alchemically transforms the factual death of old voices into the life of new poems, thereby postulating a tacit ontology of writing that reconceptualises death as a generative field, a vigorous source, and even a guarantee for posterity. For the Fields, the Sapphic graveyard of ruins, fragments and absent words becomes a radically free space of abundant life, newness and innovation. Sappho becomes a vital companion and collaborator in the creation of artistic modernity. The result of this collaboration is a volume whose life germinates in a direct encounter with dead texts. Ontologically, *Long Ago* makes the polarities of life and death converge and even co-depend in an original process of poetic creation.

As I have formerly shown, in the creative process from death to life or from the past to all possible futures, *Long Ago* partakes of different aesthetic values usually perceived as belonging to the Renaissance (in Paterian terms), Romanticism, Victorianism, or even modernism. In this sense, the volume follows a double temporal logic: it revives old and contemporary principles at the same time as it projects itself towards the future in many ways. Sappho’s fragments are given an afterlife, a possible future, an eternal present,

and even a promise of continued immortality. In turn, Sappho allows the Fields to navigate from the pre-modern to the modern and, unconsciously and anachronistically, to the modernist and even the postmodern through a fragmentary textuality that opens itself to chaotic and fluctuant meanings. In reviving this radically porous Sappho, the Fields assume her ideality, her ultimate sublimity and the inaccessibility of her original truth, and so their project is born as an audacious yet dumb attempt only to shape a provisional Sapphic discourse.

Implicit in such an attempt is the acknowledgement that a totalised Hegelian project proves inapplicable to the elusive figure of Sappho and that she lends herself only to an ethereal, fluctuant and open-ended form of ontology. The Fields show this ontological understanding in *Long Ago* through a multi-vocal, dialogic and even sublime textuality in which the Sapphic fragment is vitally present as an irreducible otherness and as an organic voice that elicits audacious lyric reactions on Michael Field's part. The poetic ontology that emerges from this paradoxical textuality is yet another projection towards the future: as if unconsciously growing apart from their admired Hegel, the Fields come close to Heidegger's ecstatic, existential and anti-Cartesian philosophy. Their *Long Ago* is an ecstasy in itself that makes death abound in many possible lives, dislocates the past towards the present and the future, and reworks the Sapphic fragment as an ambivalent text that is at once internal and external to the volume itself. As a consequence, I claim that perhaps the most appropriate term to define *Long Ago* is not just 'revivalism,' but rather 'prospective revivalism.' The volume works essentially as a revival of different ideas, words, images and silences from the past, but this revival also involves multiple directions or projections towards the future of modernism and post-modernism (at least in its Sapphic variant) –even towards the immortality of Sappho and her rewriters.

A final significant question arises as to whether the notion of revival undermines any claim for the originality of *Long Ago* and automatically implies that the volume is but a copy or imitation of other texts. For Prins, the answer to this question is simple and clear: "The lyrics in *Long Ago* are self-consciously non-original, the textual copy of a voice not their own, the doubling of Sappho's signature rather than the reclamation of her song" (*Victorian Sappho* 85). By the same token, Macfarlane approaches the volume as a case of "deliberate non-originality" characterised by "doubleness and repetition" (204). However, I differ from these interpretations and contend that *Long*

Ago is particularly convincing and even fascinating as a tacit experiment in textual theory because it takes issue with the dualism between imitation and originality –or between heritage and authenticity. If merely understood as a mode of imitation, *Long Ago* would pose a radical challenge. Its textual complexity disavows any presumption against imitation as a debased form, a second-rate artefact, and a mere parasitic duplication of an original text. In imitating Sappho, the Fields escape this pejorative preconception: for their original referent, lacking every finitude in itself, lends itself to be imitated in an active, free, and auspicious way.

The imaginative power that the Fields deploy transcends the model of mere copying or reproduction. In conversing with the Sapphic other, the Fieldean subject develops the extraordinary ability to present otherness and difference in their intact forms. In their act of revival, the Fields are no longer merely Michael Field: they become Sappho, while remaining themselves at the same time. Their identity is doubled and enriched through a poetic engagement with an original otherness. The Fieldean text opens to the Sapphic other, empathises with it, partakes of its potential meanings, and yet leaves its ultimate differentness untouched. This essentially means that *Long Ago* is not to be regarded as an independent and self-referential text that obeys its own norms and reduces itself to its very selfhood. Instead, what the Fields sing in their lyrics is an act of cooperation-in-original-creation: it is with Sappho that they share and co-write the act/art of original creation. *Long Ago* invalidates the opposition between original and copy by textually proving that it is through the revival of, and direct cooperation with, original sources or traditions that new originals become fertile, possible and even promising.

The cooperative model of originality at work in *Long Ago* adjusts neatly to the notion of ontic writing that Alan Reiser postulates in a cogent interpretation of Heidegger's *Being and Time* for the purposes of a possible textual theory. Reiser defines ontic writing as a kind of textuality that "is created as original through appropriation of fragments of one's cultural heritage, transposing them into a new individual narrative" (2). Here he adeptly revises the Heideggerian concept of authenticity and makes it function as a descriptor not only for *Dasein*, but also for how we can become different and original in a process of self-writing or self-poeisis that recognises the value of tradition, assumes a necessary connection with the past, appropriates this inescapable inheritance, and creates a novel narrative of being for the present and the future. For Reiser, this appropriative process is

necessarily the outcome of what Heidegger understands as care, for it is a way of being-in-the-world that concerns itself with the past, illuminates the being of the present with one's heritage, and even "postulates a futurity" (70) that will be part and parcel of the care structure of subsequent generations. With the cooperative ideas of authenticity, care and temporality, Reiser improves on his own definition of ontic writing in a summative manner, as an original form of "personal metamorphic mythopoesis, wherein *dasein* appropriates (fragments) of its heritage as language [...] and speaks itself in dialog with others resulting in a bricolage" (72-73).

Long Ago is, indeed, a personal volume in which Bradley and Cooper fuse their voices and feel what Sappho appears to feel fragmentarily in their literary singularity ("Ἐγὼν δ' ἐμαῦτα / τοῦτο σὺ νοῖδα"). As a metamorphic process, the volume translates fragments into a tentative English, transfuses new lyric energy into their antiquity, and transforms their sublime lacunae into a whole narrative body. In this process, Sappho is revised as an open myth and treated even as a goddess in her own right and on an equal footing with Aphrodite, as the preface suggests: "Devoutly as the fiery-bosomed Greek turned in her anguish to Aphrodite, praying her to accomplish her heart's desires, I have turned to the one woman who has dared to speak unfalteringly of the fearful mastery of love." In deifying the figure of Sappho, the Fields emphasise her mythological nature and offer their *Long Ago* as a mythopoetic reconstruction of her ahistorical persona. Yet, in its mythopoetic dimension, the volume also amounts to a mode of authorial self-representation for Bradley and Cooper under the myth of Michael Field, whose identity is a Tiresian and Sapphic case of fluidity, ambivalence and ontological indeterminacy.

Long Ago's originality is essentially predicated on how it appropriates Sappho's broken heritage, integrates her language into its textual immediacy, and engages her in direct polyphonic poems, all for the purpose of a (self-)mythographic bricolage that not only presents the Lesbian lyrists as a modern and even eternally post-modern myth, but also as a metaphor for Bradley and Cooper themselves –for a 'Michael Field' that is plural in its authorial space, utterly ambiguous in its sexological constitution, and only unitary in that it assembles the fragments that are Bradley and Cooper into one mythic creative unit. As an original mythographic experiment, *Long Ago* introduces us both to a whole new Sappho and to a new complex lyric voice that alchemises a virtually dead corpus of ancient fragments into an anti-Homeric, fluid and fertile field of birth. This motion from

death to birth and revival, as explained above, not only operates within a past-to-present continuum, but even “postulates a futurity” (70), as Reiser claims. Just as Sappho acquires a future for her fragments in *Long Ago*, so does this poetic volume lead its own afterlife within the ecstatic temporality of reading at work in this very study, which revives Bradley and Cooper’s Sapphic revival.

CHAPTER III

TOWARDS AN ONTOLOGY OF THE FEMININE

3.1. The Dionysian Community of Maidens: Beyond the Cartesian Ego

In the opening poem of *Long Ago*, the Michaels establish a recurrent pattern of Bacchic vitalism haunted by the looming shadow of death –literal or symbolic. The inaugural subject of the volume seems indeterminate, dissolved and Dionysian: it is a collectivised and anonymous presence and an iterative plural third person seems to refer to them without providing any clear hint as to their identity. Only the translation of the Sapphic epigraph sheds some light: “But charming [maidens] plaited garlands” (Wharton 118). Here the anonymous ‘THEY’ resolves its vagueness in a repaired ellipsis and finds its referent in a feminine collective of virgins whose well-garlanded unity renders the principle of individuation invalid. The inaugural subjectivity loses its limits, bridges the gap between self and other, and becomes intersubjectivity. In other words, the Apollonian individual, discrete and self-contained, dies into the Sapphic feminine community.

The maidens form a compact community of what Luce Irigaray defines as “women-among-themselves” in direct opposition to the long tradition of Cartesian metaphysics of individualism (*Sex* 124). For Irigaray, this notion is, at bottom, an ethical call for women to form a radical and autonomous space of “nonintegration” where “something of a speaking (as) women is heard (135)” –something other than the hegemonic masculine monologism. In *Long Ago*, Sappho’s maidens inhabit such a space, dwell in temporal isolation and behave freely like maenads. Together they participate in a Dionysian scene of “Quick breath and rapture” (l. 3) where all the plaiting and weaving is followed by a repetitive kissing –with the double commas seemingly duplicating its duration– and a subsequent ‘recapture’ of their communal work. Their immersion and complicity are absolute, ecstatic, and even erotic in both a literal and figurative sense: not only do they display an innocent and blissful style of affection, but also translate it symbolically into the motif of the garland, which functions as a “sign of being in love” (Wharton 118). The first stanza expresses all of this rather plainly:

THEY plaited garlands in their time;
 They knew the joy of youth’s sweet prime,
 Quick breath and rapture;
 Theirs was the violet-weaving bliss,
 And theirs the white, wreathed brow to kiss,
 Kiss, and recapture (ll. 1-6).

The second stanza exponentially enhances the freedom and eroticism of the initial scene by portraying the community of virgins as sexually mature, wildly self-sovereign, and ambitious. Much less innocent than before, they are no longer blind to the secrets of adult love – “Love’s golden mysteries” (l. 8), presumably unknown to them in their tender girlhood. Their ripe spirits become “unloosed” (l. 10) at the sound of a lyre whose melody seems to structure their dance in the carefree form of Spanish sestets or *sextillas*, composed of feminine rhymes that weld together the central and final lines of each stanza in a well-plaited lyrical symphony of feminine togetherness. This type of structure follows the rhyme scheme AABCCB, preserves the conventional use of octosyllabic verse, and shortens the third and last lines in a similar fashion to Jorge Manrique’s *coplas de pie quebrado*. Conceptually, in the case of Michael Field’s first poem, the *sextilla* links up with the sense of the Petrarchan sestet, whose purpose it is to introduce the so-called *volta* and settle the tensions presented in the first quatrains of the

traditional Italian sonnet. American critic Paul Fussell equates this purpose to the action of exhaling or “release in the muscular system” (114) in a suggestive comparison that may well apply to the Sapphic virgins. With no preceding quatrains of conflict or tension, their breath is not just pressure-free, but quick, blissful, and even rapturous—as though they were exhaling or releasing their muscular systems without cease.

The collective ecstasy shared by the maidens, oblivious to any Cartesian split between subject and object, embraces the unisonous involvement of nature through a pathetic fallacy that turns it into a ludic participant in the rapturous dance with its “trembling leaves at play” (l. 11). Here the trope that John Ruskin denominates pathetic fallacy does not simply consist in attributing the “characters of a living creature” to the natural object-world—or to the “crawling, cruel foam” in the critic’s original example (Mikics 229). It is *au fond* a disruptive device in that the ontological (dis)order it institutes dismantles the common polarity between subject and object: the human I and the natural Thou dislocate one another from their respective delimitations, intermingle into a common ecstasy, and form an all-embracing organism of sympathy. A co-feeling or an inter-feeling of vast joy engages both the maidens and the “trembling leaves” (l. 11) in the same pathetic play. The subject-object that emerges out of this joint pathos is therefore a Romantic They-cum-nature, strongly redolent of Romanticism’s creed of interpenetration between “observer and observed, subject and object, species and biosphere, consciousness and cosmos” (Hutchings 179).

In such a pathetic context, the virgins’ experience of “unloosed” (l. 10) freedom allows not just for Dionysian merriment and erotic playfulness, but even for “Bright dreams to follow” (l. 12). Thanks to their free condition of unmarried women, accompanied by their equals, their imagination can—at least temporarily—afford ambitiousness, limitlessness, and oneiric brightness.

They plaited garlands, even these;
They learnt Love’s golden mysteries
Of young Apollo;
The lyre unloosed their souls; they lay
Under the trembling leaves at play,
Bright dreams to follow (ll. 7-12).

In this second stanza, the lyric voice poses a minor interpretative challenge: it includes an unexpected reference to Apollo in a context of rapture with the strange attribution of some erotic “golden mysteries” (l. 8) and with a lyre which, instead of producing the usual effects of appeasement, unlooses the souls of the female dancers. Given that the young god represents light, rationality, order and singularity, his presence appears groundless and ineffective in the midst of a collective festivity of maenads. However, it may well be that the Dionysian maidens do not share anything with the orthodox images of the luminous god, but rather with his savage, violent, sexual and Dionysian side. Contrary to the favourable reputation he holds in Western imagination, Apollo is no stranger to darkness, cruelty and voracious desire in his classical and modern appearances. In Book I of Homer’s *Iliad*, for instance, he acts as a nightly and ruthless divinity, bursting out in rage, sending a plague upon the Achaeans, sowing death and destruction amongst them, and even descending from his sacred abode with his bows in order to slay more Greek soldiers. His descent, wrath and countenance are depicted as the very antithesis of his common attributes:

Down from the peaks of Olympus he strode, angered at heart, bearing on his shoulders his bow and covered quiver. The arrows rattled on the shoulders of the angry god as he moved, and his coming was like the night. Then he sat down apart from the ships and let fly an arrow: terrible was the twang of the silver bow. The mules he assailed first and the swift dogs, but then on the men themselves he let fly his stinging shafts, and struck; and constantly the pyres of the dead burned thick. (I. 44-50).

Apollo’s “like the night” behaviour establishes a curious parallel to Dionysus that does not escape the critical and artistic attention of fin-de-siècle intellectuals.⁸⁰ In several of his academic studies and literary stories, Walter Pater outright rejects the trite antithesis between Apollo and Dionysus and advocates in its place a conflation of the two into “the gnostic Christian form of the devil, Apollyon” (Dellamora 168). Nonetheless, this union obeys no sense of symmetry or equality: one force violently predominates over the other in a way that Michael Field’s poem illustrates. The Apollonian/Dionysian opposition does not dissolve into a harmonious and fixed synthesis or, in Nietzsche’s

⁸⁰ Criticising Nietzsche’s failure to comprehend Apollo’s complexity, Shullenberger argues that, in actual fact, there exists “a problematic and disturbing parallel” (124) between the luminous god and his alleged adversary: “The careers of Apollo and Dionysus overlap,” for instance, “throughout the text of Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*. Apollo’s thwarted efforts as an ardent lover whose love can destroy its object make him the divine catalyst for several narratives of loss” (124).

words, into a miraculous “bond of brotherhood” (104) that assigns equal power to both of the deities.⁸¹ What results instead from their conflation is a reinforced form of Dionysianism that internalises the Apollonian at the expense of all its light, reason, and serenity. For this reason, it appears that the Fieldean Phoebus, ontologically subsumed by his nemesis, encounters no difficulty in teaching the Bacchic maidens his erotic “golden mysteries” (l. 8), unfettering their souls with his lyre, and taking part in their show of “Quick breath and rapture” (l. 3).

The third stanza of the poem, much more complex than the previous ones, comprises three parts arranged in a dialectical structure. The first three lines prolong the virgins’ elation, intensify their alliance exclamatorily and intoxicate their “deep pleasure” (l. 15) with wine, thereby keeping the Dionysian –what Nietzsche calls the “intoxicated reality” or *rauschvolle Wirklichkeit* (19) – well afloat. The unconscious kind of proto-Nietzscheanism that Bradley and Cooper cultivated before actually reading the Prussian thinker is implicit here: “They plaited garlands — heavenly twine! / They crowned the cup, they drank the wine / Of youth’s deep pleasure” (ll. 13-15).

The fourth line of this stanza, which opens immediately after the only full stop in the whole poem that appears right in the middle of a stanza, interrupts the Dionysian elation with a deictic ‘Now’ introducing a present scenario of *lyrelessness*. The maidens are, as it were, decelerated –or *dashed* in a graphical manner–⁸² by an ambiguous pendent verb (‘lingering’) that forms a subjectless anapodoton and denotes the fragile persistence and potential decline of their ecstasy: “Now, lingering for the lyreless god—” (l. 16). Prins reads this line as a form of lamentation over the gap between a poetic antiquity and a barren modernity and thus as a nostalgic allusion to “the loss of Sapphic song in the present” (*Victorian Sappho* 86). I would take this construal a step further. The implicit nostalgia points not only towards the bygone era of Sappho’s artistic splendour and the material extinction of her verses, but also towards the disappearance of her possible life

⁸¹ According to the Prussian philosopher, the oppositional forces of Apollo and Dionysus can intertwine “by a metaphysical miracle of the Hellenic Will: they appear paired and, in this pairing, finally engender a work of art which is Dionysiac and Apolline in equal measure: Attic tragedy” (14). Curiously, despite his hostility towards Hegelianism, Nietzsche propounds the possibility of an Apollonian/Dionysian synthesis that abides by the logic of dialectics championed by the most dominant philosophical voice of the nineteenth century –none other than Hegel.

⁸² I use the word “dash” deliberately in two of its several senses: as a noun referring to the punctuation mark used to indicate “a pause or a break in sense” and as a verb that designates the action of dispiriting or causing “(someone) to lose confidence” (Stevenson 444). To all appearances, the graphic presence of the dash in the line under scrutiny has a verbal or performative effect: it interrupts and discourages the Sapphic maidens, leaving them suspended in a ‘lyreless’ ‘Now’.

and world as an artist and even as a lover of women. In the modern now, the absent god and the lost lyre seem to be but a synecdoche for a major loss –the loss of artistic, affective, and erotic freedom among women. In this regard, I concur with Primamore in construing lyric I as a revival or “a return to the sensual, artistic, and beautiful world of the Isle of Lesbos,” marked by a haunting sense of “nostalgia for a lost land” (‘Sapphic Communities’).

Alternatively, the “lyreless” line may be read as an abrupt interruption of the Dionysian scene that the poem has initially created. In the interval of this silent moment, with the god gone, one can imagine the Sapphic maidens in a state of stasis and perhaps certain awareness that their very freedom is in serious jeopardy due to their fragile status as marriageable women, and that they will not keep on indefinitely plating garlands, enjoying “youth’s sweet prime” (l. 2), nourishing their “Bright dreams” (l. 12), and drinking the wine of “youth’s deep pleasure” (l. 15). As Mitton notes, these maidens seem to know that they “are working outside the confine of home, away from the jurisprudence of men” (67), and that their autonomy of time, love and oneiric imagination has an inevitable end. The erotic mysteries they once discovered are to be put into practice with their future husbands once the god who safeguarded them ceases to play his lyre and the dancers’ souls are no longer “unloosed” (l. 10). Put more bluntly, the “lyreless” scenario may represent a symbolic form of death: the maidens will inevitably die as virgins, lose their communal intersubjectivity, and enter into the patriarchal economy of marriage.

The last part of the third stanza offsets the abrupt anapodoton interposed by the fourth line, returns the focus of attention to the community of maidens, and even suggests a final note of optimism: “Oh yet, once in their time, they trod / A choric measure’ (ll. 17-18). The chorus of virgins closes the poem in a synthesis of hope. Their chrono-autonomy is reaffirmed, at the same time as their choric union surpasses the adverse caesura marked by a “lyreless god” (l. 16) and recaptures the previous rapture. This recapture thus follows a dialectical logic: it integrates the antithetical interruption and reverts to the initial thesis of collective ecstasy, reinforced this time by a touch of optimism. Despite suggesting that the present may not be favourable territory for the maidens, the poem rescues their presence at the very end and, in so doing, intimates that “their song and dance might continue in the choreography of writing” (Prins 86). In this manner, the ‘lyreless’ antithesis is bracketed off and superseded by a promising

synthesis that leaves the Sapphic chorus at the disposal of Michael Field's following songs.

Nonetheless, the first poem of *Long Ago* not only sets the Sapphic chorus in motion for the imminent future: it establishes a Tiresian phenomenology of feminine communion and a pattern of Dionysian vitalism always interrupted or threatened by death. As I have shown, the lyric subject is not an atomistic ego, but an inter-subject that *exists*, in the etymological sense of the verb, as a “unified phenomenon,” a “whole phenomenon,” or a compact being-in-the-world (Heidegger 78), standing outside itself and co-belonging with other subjects and objects (with the vast involvement of nature) in a double state of truthful existence and ecstasy. Here the Heideggerian notion of *Mitsein* becomes pertinent once again and significantly structural. In *Long Ago*, the self is constructed in indissoluble connection with the other in its different manifestations. As I discussed in the former chapter, in its invention and composition, the volume results from the death of the solitary author and the formation of an authorial space that Bradley and Cooper share with a whole choir of academic and literary voices, transforming the signature ‘Michael Field’ into a deceptive name –as a matter of fact, a plural, ambiguous and even queer co-name. Likewise, in its very textual presentation, *Long Ago* exposes its authorial diversity by heading virtually every page with Sappho's original Greek and engaging her in a direct dialogue that, in spite of her organic presence within the volume, never comes to domesticate, reduce or demystify her ultimate otherness and difference. The Fields and Sappho form a textual *Mitsein* that “leaves the other as itself, and thus situates the self as being-with” (Reiser 72). For Prins, this open and dialogic textuality, which characterises the entire volume, is metaphorically coded in poem I through the iterative motif of plaiting that announces “the garlanding of all the poems within the pages (or ‘under the trembling leaves’) of this book” (87). The notion of text implied here retrieves its etymological connection with texture or textile, likening *Long Ago* to a fabric in which the Sapphic words and their extensions are all interwoven or inter-garlanded into polyphonic structures.

Moreover, the fundamental structure of plaited co-existence transcends the authorial and textual spheres, and proves to be a major thematic concern in the very first lyric. In it the Sapphic maidens are depicted as experiencing the world in direct communion with their social and natural environment and phenomenolising such a communion by means of conjunctive actions: plaiting, weaving, wreathing, kissing, or twining. These verbal

dealings debunk the traditional myth of epistemology that reduces the multiple ways of human interaction with the world to the mere scenario of a mental subject that accesses and knows an object. In a Heideggerian spirit, Michael Field's Sappho and her maidens live (among) themselves in an existential manner that stretches "beyond the dualisms of subject and object, of mind and body, beyond epistemology and positivism, and into the concreteness of factual life" (De Beistegui 193). Kissing, dancing and plaiting, the Sapphic maidens form an intimate *Mitsein* symbolically and erotically represented by the constant motif of the garland, which epitomises the organic and concrete fusion between subject and world. And yet, it is important to keep in mind that, as the 'lyreless' line warns, such a life of inter-garlanded fusion plays out not without its perils and menaces ahead: the feminine community is fragile and vulnerable to the deathly appearance of men.

3.2. Sapphic Utopianism: Maidenhood as Freedom

In lyric VI, the garland reappears as a significant symbol of a collective subjectivity that finds its strongest union bond in the arts. Sappho, her deceased friend Erinna, the Muses (the Sacred Nine), Orpheus (the minstrel) and all those ‘who have laurel in our hair’ – artists and creators– form such a strong bond or intimate *Mitsein*:

ERINNA, thou art ever fair.
Not as the young spring flowers,
We who have laurel in our hair–
Eternal youth is ours.
The roses that Pieria’s dew
Hath washed can ne’er decline,
On Orpheus’ tomb at first they grew,
And there the Sacred Nine,
‘Mid quivering moonlight, seek the groves
Guarding the minstrel’s tomb;
Each for the poet that she loves
Plucks an immortal bloom.
Soon as my girl’s sweet voice she caught,
Tither Euterpe sped,
And, singing too, a garland wrought
To crown Erinna’s head (ll. 1-16).

In this poem, the community of laureates creates and shares a genuine ambience of aesthetic pleasure and possessive intimacy. Sappho claims to have somebody: “my girl’s sweet voice” (l. 13). The possessive adjective changes her previous ontological situation altogether. The romantic solipsism prevailing right in the preceding lyrics is bracketed off,⁸³ put on hold, and somehow offset by an alternative unified ontology of artists praising one another, singing in a common choir, celebrating their physical beauty, and possessing each other. Visually, this intimate togetherness is what might account for the poem’s compact form and flawlessly regular rhyme scheme, as well as for its possible intertextual connection with Simeon Solomon’s erotic watercolour *Sappho and Erinna in a Garden at Mytilene* (1864).⁸⁴ Bradley and Cooper were probably acquainted with this painting given their direct connection with Simeon, and so one could read their lyric on Erinna under the tacit assumption, according to

⁸³ As I will show later on, *Long Ago* includes a sub-narrative in which Sappho suffers, despairs, and dies due to her utter failure to inspire love in a beautiful yet disdainful fisherman named Phaon. It is against the backdrop of this failed romance that one can regard Sappho’s passionate and reciprocal affection for her maidens as an alternative reality where the poetess can live and love without the shadow of death overhead.

⁸⁴ For a reproduction of this painting, see Figure VIII in the Appendix to this dissertation.

Evangelista, that both the watercolour and the lyric itself constitute Victorian “representations of homoerotic female touch” (“Archaeology”).

In lyric VI Primamore also sees a celebration of female homoeroticism as “the catalyst for women’s creativity” and imagines “a subtle scene of seduction between Euterpe, the Muse of Music, and Erinna” (“Sapphic Communities”). Much more explicit, however, is the exuberant ode numbered XLVIII in which Sappho not only celebrates her dead fellow Erinna for her matchless mastery of poetry, but also lays bare a deeper feeling of devotion and covert desire:

Ah, child, I know the spell:
It is that, when my shell
Grows vocal to me, thou
Alone hast knowledge how
My heart within me fares;
No other being shares
The secret hope, the vow
That in my bosom dwell (ll. 33-40).

The communion between Sappho and Erinna is unique and subtly erotic. Both the “secret hope” and “the vow” (l. 39) that the lyric voice harbours may well suggest a romantic sentiment for her friend, a desire that has to be secret, and perhaps a wish to meet and love her again after death –as if the afterlife were to favour their lesbian reunion outside the normative order of life, in a queer eschatological sphere. It seems that there are only two possible scenarios where Sappho’s homoeroticism can dare speak its name: the hopeful afterlife or the pre-marital status of her maidens. In the hereafter, Sappho and Erinna can express and share their secret bond, oblivious to the norms that proscribed their desire in life.⁸⁵ Likewise, in their maidenhood, Sappho’s girls have their own time, enjoy full freedom, and remain alien to the oppressive regime of matrimony. Indeed, for the lyric voice, maidenhood represents the most joyous time in a woman’s life. In poem XVII, Sappho openly declares:

Come back again, virginity!
For maidenhood still do I long,
The freedom and the joyance strong
Of that most blessed, secret state
That makes the tenderest maiden great (ll. 24-28).

⁸⁵ Here I am tacitly using Giffney’s idea of “queer eschatology” in the sense that Sappho’s posthumous reunion with her friend Erinna could be viewed as an optimistic scenario of futurity in which lesbian desire would find full freedom and no antagonism thanks to “the arrival (of queer) and the end (of heteronormativity)” (61).

Maidenhood constitutes a utopian space of desire and creativity or, as Primamore puts it, “a sensual condition associated with same-sex amorosity, and also the source of inspiration and creativity” (“Sapphic Communities”). In this condition, Sappho’s girls enjoy their creative autonomy, inspire one another, and even welcome the Graces in their artistic community. Their only mode of contact with the world, as explained above, is mediated by a rich floral aestheticism and a syntax governed by the transitivity of unity and entwinement. Lyric XIII presents Dica, one of Sappho’s pupils, collecting and plaiting flowers as sacrifices to honour the Graces, engaging the surrounding landscape in the creation of art, and brandishing the garland as a symbol of unity and beauty, as well as a distinctive sign that separates the well-knit community of inspired maidens from “those who come ungarlanded” (l. 19). The poem reads:

DICA, the Graces oft incline
 To watch thy fingers’ skill
 As with light foliage they entwine
 The aromatic dill:
 Then seek the fount where feathery,
 Young shoots and tendrils creep,
 For samphire and for rosemary
 Climb thou the marble steep,
 Turn to the red-bed by the stream
 For pansies’ dark and yellow gleam,
 And midmost of thy blossoms set
 Narcissus with white coronet.

To clothe thy life with brilliancy
 And honour is to give
 Joy to the gods; they love to see
 How pleasantly men live;
 They love the crowned and fragrant head,
 But turn their face away
 From those who come ungarlanded,
 For none delight as they
 In piercing, languorous, spicy scent,
 And thousand hues in lustre blent:
 Such sacrifice, O Dica, bring!
 Thy garland is a beauteous thing (ll. 1-22).

With her maidens and pupils, Sappho’s life gains in brilliancy, beauty and pleasure at the same time as it leaves no room for suffering. In her female community, there exists “no thought of pain” (l. 6) and no trace of “inward want or woe” (l. 14). What prevails instead is an existential principle of peace, harmony, aesthetic sharing, unobstructed

communication, emotional support, and “soft vitality” (l. 20). In lyric XXXIII, Sappho addresses her maids and celebrates the affective stability of her feminine community in contrast to the limited, tormenting and painful nature of her relationship with men:

MAIDS, not to you my mind doth change;
Men I defy, allure, estrange,
Prostrate, make bond or free:
Soft as the stream beneath the plane
To you I sing my love’s refrain;
Between us is no thought of pain,
Peril, satiety.

Soon doth a lover’s patience tire,
But ye to manifold desire,
Can yield response, ye know
When for long, museful days I pine,
The presage at my heart divine;
To you I never breathe a sign
Of inward want or woe.

When injuries my spirit bruise,
Allaying virtue ye infuse
With unobtrusive skill:
And if care frets, ye come to me
As fresh as nymph from stream to tree,
And with your soft vitality
My weary bosom fill (ll. 1-21).

Critics have singled out this lyric as an emblematic piece within Michael Field’s covert poetics of lesbian desire. For White, it presents Sappho clearly in her role of “maternal or passionate lover” of women (“Poets and Lovers” 200). Waters reads it nearly as an ekphrastic poem in which Sappho prioritises “the visual” and “enjoys gazing at women engaged in sensual tasks –at the garland-weaving Dica” (123). Likewise, for Prins, the lyric intimates “the possibility of lesbian language” in showing women as active “desiring subjects” (105) among themselves –rather than objects in the service of men’s gaze and desire. These interpretations are certainly right in underscoring the homoerotic tension behind the poem, yet they fail to notice that the kind of eroticism is much more nuanced. The poem divides men and women into separate categories, differentiating the former as tiring lovers and the latter as agents of “manifold desire” (l. 9). This differentiation, as Mitton remarks, leaves unclear what type of desire Sappho attributes to her fellow maids: the poem can be read as one that reserves sex only for the category of male lovers and “denies the possibility of sexual activity between women, while from another angle it suggests the opposite, simply because Michael Field’s lexicon of sexual

desire is so amorphous, so fluid” (77). It is so amorphous, indeed, and complex that some critics even venture to regard the Sappho of *Long Ago* as an incestuous figure that embodies the special filiation between Bradley and her niece Cooper by coding “erotic bonds between women as mother-daughter relationships” (172). In any case, what becomes immediately clear here is that the notion of female desire that the Fields articulate, far from falling under a Hegelian view of closed totality, entails a radical sense of openness, ambiguity and indetermination that allows us to imagine the Sapphic world as an utopian space of affective diversity and sexual freedom for women.

Such utopianism that characterises Sappho’s feminine community powerfully recalls the vivid topography of ancient Lesbos offered by John Addington Symonds in his *Studies of the Greek Poets*, a reference book that, as I explained in Chapter I, influenced the Michaels in their composition of *Long Ago*. Of Lesbian women Symonds writes:

While mixing freely with male society, they were highly educated, and accustomed to express their sentiments to an extent unknown elsewhere in history –until, indeed, the present time. The Lesbian ladies applied themselves successfully to literature. They formed clubs for the cultivation of poetry and music. They studied the arts of beauty, and sought to refine metrical forms and diction [...] Unrestrained by public opinion, and passionate for the beautiful, they cultivated their senses and emotions, and indulged their wildest passions. All the luxuries and elegances of life which that climate and the rich valleys of Lesbos could afford, were at their disposal; exquisite gardens, where the cyclamen and violet flowered with feathery maiden hair; pine-tree-shadowed coves, where they might bath in the calm of the tireless sea; fruits such as only the southern sun and sea-wind can mature; marble cliffs, starred with jonquil and anemone in spring, aromatic with myrtle and lentisk and samphire and wild rosemary through all the months; nightingales that sang in May; temples dim with dusky gold and bright with ivory; statues of heroic forms. In such scenes as these the Lesbian poets lived, and thought of Love (128-29).

What Symonds depicts as a Greek retrotopia rife with aesthetic productivity, emotional indulgence, wild passion and overt eroticism among women corresponds neatly to the felicitous sociology of freedom and sensuality that the Michaels attribute to Sappho and her virtually indivisible community of women. As Elizabeth A. Primamore has noted, the kind of world that Bradley and Cooper create partly in *Long Ago* is a “world of passion, nature, and art –an environment with few social restraints– conducive to creativity that Virginia Woolf claimed women lacked after Sappho” (“Sapphic

Communities”). Indeed, it is a utopian world for the second sex, now transformed into the very first.

However, Michael Field’s utopianism goes beyond the self-evident link between *Long Ago*, Victorian Hellenism, and the particular tendency to use ancient Greek culture as a legitimising model of sexual diversity. The utopian rhetoric of female autonomy and welfare that Bradley and Cooper advocate in their Sapphics also seems to participate in a wave of feminist utopian fiction that flourished in the late-Victorian and Edwardian periods.⁸⁶ Matthew Beaumont provides a general characterisation of this specific genre of *fin-de-siècle* literature:

Feminist utopias contributed directly and with a lively combativeness to contemporary debates about women in the past, present and future. They derived their popular appeal in part from their practical intervention in this polemical context. They addressed the desires of many women for some glimpse of a society not premised on the oppression of their sex; but they also functioned as an initiation to the task of building communities of sympathetic men and women, fellowships for the future (*Spectre* 105).

However, although most feminist utopias envisioned a future of gender equality and egalitarian societies, there was a special trend of utopianism that erased every trace of patriarchy, instituted all-female governments, or even dreamt of a completely man-less future or undetermined temporality. Novels such as Elizabeth Burgoyne Corbett’s *New Amazonia: A Foretaste of the Future* (1889), Mary E. Bradley Lane’s *Mizora* (1890) or Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s *Herland* are three notable examples of a utopian discourse that celebrates the triumph of female power as a direct source of peace, freedom, stability, and even beauty when the presence of men is either banished or eliminated altogether. It seems to some extent that Bradley and Cooper uphold such a discourse in some of their Sapphic lyrics: for both poets, the all-female community that surrounds Sappho in *Long Ago* creates an idyllic microcosm of hedonism, autonomy and love where the only possible peril, as I discuss below, proceeds from the dystopian power of men.

⁸⁶ For general discussions of this fiction and its historical context, see Roemer, Pfaelzer, Darby Lewes or Beaumont (*Ideologies*).

3.3. Lesbian Desire: Ontologising the Feminine

In *Long Ago*, Sappho revels not only in receiving affective attentions from her maidens, but also in the simple yet erotic act of watching them sleep together through the night. In poem XLIX, the lyric gaze transforms the recumbent bodies of her girls into sources of hypnotic magnetism and creates a highly sensual scene of scopophilia in which Sappho feels delighted, revitalised and eroticised to the point that she fantasises that the night doubles its duration and lingers on. In the closing lines, Sappho presents, as it were, a subtle symphony or chorus of respiratory pleasure with her weary sighs joining the collective breathing of her beautiful maidens.

WHEN my dear maidens lie
Each on her bed,
When all night long sleep holds
Their eyes, and softly folds
Their busy hands that ply
The wheel, or spread
The linen on the grass,
While hours of sunshine pass:

Thus when they lie and dream
Of happy things,
The golden age reburns;
When youth to slumber turns
Beneath the Cynthian beam
Again it brings
To life such bliss and glow
As vanished long ago.

Ah, once to lie awake
Seemed sweet to me!
Now I who even have prayed
That night might be delayed,
Yea, doubled for my sake,
Sigh wearily,
Watching my maids, where they
Together breathe till day (ll. 1-24).

The closing allusion to the collective breathing among women is inevitably evocative of Luce Irigaray's pneumatology, since the French thinker attributes a special signification to the metaphysical equation between breath and woman. For Irigaray, it is the female subject who "has a privileged relation to breath. Feminine breath remains both linked to the life of the universe and more interior; it unites, without rupture, the most subtle aspects of the cosmos and the body" (in Wong 146). In *Long Ago*, the implicit ethics of

breath functions in a way fairly analogous to Irigaray's notion of feminine breath: when plaiting, sleeping, dancing or drinking together, the Sapphic maidens share an intimate unity that is virtually indivisible and even erotic. In poem XIV, the Michaelian Sappho claims: "My darling! Nay, our very breath / Nor light nor darkness shall divide" (ll. 13-14). The lyric formula of pneumatology that Bradley and Cooper postulate is thus another significant expression of the intersubjectivity and eroticism inherent in Sappho's all-female community.

So intense and possessive is Sappho's rhetoric of union with her maidens, that just one instant of their absence becomes altogether tragic. In her lyric XIV, the Fieldean Sappho reveals how a minimal gesture of separation from her beloved Atthis proves painful and causes her "a great fear and passion" (l. 3). Her profound affection comes inherently with an extreme sense of loss and finitude –with the lived oxymoron of love as an experience of pain-cum-pleasure:

ATTHIS, my darling, thou did'st stray
 A few feet to the rushy bed,
 When a great fear and passion shook
 My heart lest haply thou wert dead;
 It grew so still about the brook,
 As if a soul were drawn away.

Anon thy clear eyes, silver-blue,
 Shone through the tamarisk-branches fine;
 To pluck me iris thou had'st sprung
 Through galingale and celandine;
 Away, away, the flowers I flung
 And thee down to my breast I drew.

My darling! Nay, our very breath
 Nor light nor darkness shall divide;
 Queen Dawn shall find us on one bed,
 Nor must thou flutter from my side
 An instant, lest I feel the dread,
 Atthis, the immanence of death (ll. 1-18).

Fearing to find her beloved Atthis dead amidst the brook, Sappho approaches the river and feels as though "a soul were drawn away" (l. 6). Her heart anticipates the possible loss of her beloved, and this anticipation turns Atthis into a potential ghost drowning and dissipating into the waters. The interplay between love and loss determines Sappho's eroticism: in suffering and fearing her beloved's death, she reveals the depth of her love, as well as the dissociative complex of dominance and vulnerability that

affects her. Sappho cannot bear ‘a few feet’ of distance from her beloved: she covets her permanent company and depends vitally on it.⁸⁷ In other words, Atthis sustains her alive to such an extent that, without her, Sappho would become the ‘soul drawn away’ by the river.

However, as the second sestet shows, Sappho’s irrational fear abates when realising that Atthis has not disappeared: rather, she has been seeking flowers of every description to flatter her lover. Sappho throws away the floral presents and embraces Atthis in an act of intimate proximity and explicit erotic devotion. With her lover lying on her breast, Sappho declares their union and their common breath indivisible and immune to death – if Atthis never dares to stray again.

In lyric LIV, Sappho’s breast comes to be the central locus of lesbian desire for Atthis and for all the other maidens who embrace the ancient poetess, shower her with flowers, and open their hearts to her. Sappho receives their tributes with ‘unsated’ pleasure, sings for them in token of gratitude, and hopes they preserve their maidenhood –by ignoring the duty of matrimony or “Hymen’s call” (l. 34).⁸⁸ With her maidens Sappho shares a special self/other entanglement that transcends the limits of epistemology, replaces the mere act of knowing the other with an erotic exchange of flowers and songs,⁸⁹ and establishes a candid openness within a confessional and intimate embrace that unites Sappho and her maidens against the adversity of marriage. Given its explicit intensity, the poem is worth quoting in full:

ADOWN the Lesbian vales,
When spring first flashes out,
I watch the lovely rout
Of maidens flitting ’mid the honey-bees

⁸⁷ In the next chapter, I will show how Sappho’s *ars amatoria* articulates a complex dialectic between victimhood and aggression, self-subordination and dominance, pain and pleasure in a variety of ways that situate the lyric voice in a permanently ambivalent state of power and vulnerability.

⁸⁸ In Greek mythology, Hymen or Hymenaeus was the god of marital unions, usually invoked in wedding songs to favour the bride and groom.

⁸⁹ As pointed out earlier, from a philosophical perspective, what is remarkable here is that, within the Sapphic community of maids, the world or the other is no longer a mere object of episteme, cognition or mental apprehension: epistemology proves to be utterly insufficient. The intentional syntax or contact between subject and object implies forms of lived mediation that transcend the ambit of knowledge and incorporate affective actions with the power to bring together an entire community of de-individuated subjects and objects. In this regard, I take my cue from Heidegger’s anti-epistemological philosophy: for him, the act of knowing constitutes “only one relation among many that we may take up to the things of the world; it is not the first relation we adopt towards them” (Inwood 13). Sappho goes beyond knowledge or episteme and lives the object world in a rich variety of emotionally connective actions with her fellow maids.

For thyme and heath,
Cistus, and trails
Of myrtle-wreath:
They bring me these
My passionate, unsated sense to please.

In turn, to please my maids,
Most deftly will I sing
Of their soft cherishing
In apple-orchards with cool waters by,
Where slumber streams
From quivering shades,
And Cypris seems
To bend and sigh,
Her golden calyx offering amorously.

What praises would be best
Wherewith to crown my girls?
The rose when she unfurls
Her balmy, lighted buds is not so good,
So fresh as they
When on my breast
They lean, and say
All that they would
Opening their glorious, candid maidenhood.

To that pure band alone
I sing of marriage-loves;
As Aphrodite's doves
Glance in the sun their colour comes and goes:
No girls let fall
Their maiden zone
At Hymen's call
Serene as those
Taught by a poet why sweet Hesper glows (ll. 1-36).

The poem is open to ambivalent meanings. White argues that it centres on Sappho's wish to keep her maidens "away from marriage" ("Poets and Lovers" 30). Prins reads it as a "seductive song" that celebrates "lesbian eroticism" (103). Likewise, for Evangelista, the poem focuses on "frank visual desire for the female body" (107). However, it also seems to present "a female homoeroticism which [...] is the ideal preparation for marital sexuality, and a Sappho who is more than complicit in the loss of maiden virginity that she regrets" (Ward 78). These different readings raise a major question concerning the real presence of lesbianism and the value of marriage in *Long Ago*. I would claim that, in lyric LIV and in general, the Fields articulate a language of desire that refuses clear resolutions in favour of a more convoluted and ambiguous spectrum of affections and orientations. And yet, what does seem fairly clear is that

Sappho shows a marked preference for tender intimacy with her maids over other erotic interests and sees marriage not as the ideal goal of a simply preparatory homoeroticism, but rather as a regrettable yet inevitable end in a woman's life.

More explicitly, in the opening stanza of lyric XXVI, Sappho expresses such a homoerotic preference by praising her community of maids –her “virgin train” (l. 2)– as a strong, joyful and intimate togetherness well-united by the abundance of “laughter, love, [and] serenity” (l.6). Among the maidens, Eros reigns with no tyranny, causes no fear, dissipates all sorrow, and hence forms a utopia full of dreams and optimism.⁹⁰

Not Gello's self loves more than I
The virgin train, my company.
No thought of Eros doth appal
Their cheeks; their strong, clear eyes let fall
No tears; they dream their days will
All laughter, love, serenity,
And violet-weaving at my knee (ll. 1-7).

In *Long Ago*, Sappho composes a long and consistent poetic narrative of her rapturous experiences with her fellow women, laying stress repeatedly on their Dionysian vitality, free creativity, floral aestheticism, fluent communication, and profound intimacy. This solid sense of unity and affection is not theoretically groundless: it complies effectively with Sappho's own theory of the feminine, as put forward in her Tiresian poem (LII). For the poetess, the Bacchic vitalism that characterises the life within her community of maidens derives from the very ontology of the feminine, which is well encapsulated in the description of Tiresias's metamorphosis:

When womanhood was round him thrown:
He trembled at the quickening change,
He trembled at his vision's range,
His finer sense for bliss ad dole,
His receptivity of soul;
But when love came, and, loving back,
He learnt the pleasure men must lack.
It seemed that he had broken free
Almost from his mortality (ll. 12-20).

⁹⁰ In this portrayal of Eros, unlike the one offered in lyrics XV, XXVIII and XXXI, the Michaels do not follow the tradition of depicting the god as a whimsical, wayward and even cruel force that robs men and women of their rational faculties and leads them to total insanity. Eros becomes, instead, a benign deity that keeps Sappho's maids together, nourishes their free dreams, and institutes a life of pleasure in a manner that manifests again in other specific poems (VIII and XXXVI).

In light of these lines, Sappho implicitly compares womanhood to manhood and places the former on a superior level of visionary intelligence, mystic sensibility, mysterious magnetism, sexual potency, Dionysian spirituality, and even virtual immortality. For the Michaelian Sappho, Tiresias owes all his powers and gifts to the discovery of the feminine: it is his femininity that gives him access to the unknown, the occult, the Dionysian, the future, and the dead.⁹¹ The feminine elevates him above the crude limitations of masculinity and enables him to experience a “finer sense” of life (l. 15). As Madden simply puts it, “the experience of womanhood is an experience of enlarged vision and greater sensibility” (82).

Nevertheless, as I have pointed out earlier, the vitalism of the feminine experience faces the looming threat of extinction in view of the likely –and deathly– impact that men can have on the affective fabric of Sappho’s female community. As the opening poem has forewarned with its final anapodoton, the divine lyre that unlooses the Bacchic maidens runs the risk of ceasing, interrupting their rapture, and condemning them to a state of silence, isolation and virtual death. For Sappho, this risk of fatal lyrelessness looms and imposes itself with the intrusion of men and the promise of marriage. I say *intrusion* with all its negative and violent connotations and in a way that is, once again, reminiscent of Luce Irigaray’s feminist thought. Both the French thinker and Michael Field appear to coincide to some extent in interpreting the masculine subject as an intruder or an invader that inflicts symbolic or real violence upon women. With her distinctive psychoanalytic and sexually charged prose, Irigaray sees masculinity as a “violent break-in” or even as “a violating penis” (*Sex* 14) that separates the female self inwardly and socially –from other women. In like manner, for the Michaelian Sappho, the masculine subject and the patriarchal institution of marriage pose a fatal threat to her community of maidens, who will end up separated and deprived of their autonomy if they subordinate themselves to the codes of wifehood.

In poem XVII, Sappho regrets falling prey to such a fatality. It seems that, after having lost her status of maiden, she encounters direct rejection: neither Artemis, the deity of virginity nor her own community welcome her in their sacred rituals. The moon, symbol

⁹¹ In this respect, Michael Field’s conception of the feminine corresponds approximately to Irigaray’s idea of the female subject as “the sex which is not one” (23-33). For the French philosopher and for the Fieldean Sappho alike, the feminine belongs to a certain sphere of mystery that ‘resists all adequate definition’ and “has no proper name” (26), thus sharing a close relationship with the wholly other, the unknown, the mystic, and all that lies far outside the regime of mere rational control.

of the chaste goddess, hides away and despises Sappho, who grows desperate, longs for the return of her maidenhood, and considers her passion “regretful” (l. 30). The Lesbian poetess deplores her sexual and ontological condition, feels remorse presumably for having succumbed to the disruptive love of a man, and only wishes to restore the intimate unity with her chaste maidens. Put differently, it seems that Sappho rejects her heterosexual desire, prioritises her affection for her fellow women, and prefers to inhabit a permanent liminality between girlhood and womanhood or between innocence and maturity,⁹² as only in this state can she stay within her virginal community and avoid the destructive impact of man-oriented passions. Although some lines of lyric XVII have already been quoted, the integral text sheds greater light and clarity on Sappho’s special attachment to her fragile maidenhood:

THE moon rose full: the women stood
 As though within a sacred wood
 Around an altar—thus with awe
 The perfect, virgin orb they saw
 Supreme above them; and its light
 Fell on their limbs and garments white.
 Then with pale, lifted brows they stirred
 Their fearful steps at Sappho’s word,
 And in a circle moved around,
 Responsive to her music’s sound,
 That through the silent air stole on,
 Until their breathless dread was gone,
 And they could dance with lightsome feet,
 And lift the song with voices sweet.
 Then once again the silence came:
 Their lips were blanched as if with shame
 That they in maidenhood were bold
 Its sacred worship to unfold;
 And Sappho touched the lyre alone,
 Until she made the bright strings moan.
 She called to Artemis aloud—
 Alas, the moon was wrapt in cloud!—
 "Oh, whither art thou gone from me?
 Come back again, virginity!
 For maidenhood still do I long,
 The freedom and the joyance strong
 Of that most blessed, secret state
 That makes the tenderest maiden great.
 O moon, be fair to me as these,
 And my regretful passion ease;
 Restore to me my only good,

⁹² Sappho’s defence of maidenhood equates to what Irigaray denotes by “defensive virginity” (*Sex* 24): it is by preserving and defending their chastity that women can protect their freedom, safeguard their bonds with other women, remain inviolate, and reject the masculine “desire force entry, to penetrate, to appropriate for himself” the female self (25).

My maidenhood, my maidenhood!"
She sang: and through the clouded night
An answer came of cruel might —
"To thee I never come again."
O Sappho, bitter was thy pain!
Then did thy heavy steps retire,
And leave, moon-bathed, the virgin quire (ll. 1-38).

In lyric XX, Sappho encounters utter indifference once again on the part of her maidens. Her romantic desires and pains become “unfamiliar things” (l. 7).⁹³ What she feels –for her beloved fisherman, as I shall discuss later– excludes her from her community and tears apart the affective linkage she used to have with her fellow women. Sappho loses her vitality, grows powerless, and sinks into a death-like defeatism as she notices that her female audience stands impervious to her elegiac songs. In the first stanza of poem XX, Sappho pours out her grievous sorrow in the face of her community’s apathy:

I SANG to women gathered round;
Forth from my own heart-springs
Welled out the passion; of the pain
I sang if the beloved in vain
Is sighed for—when
They stood untouched, as at the sound
Of unfamiliar things,
Oh, then my heart turned cold, and then
I dropt my wings (ll. 1-9).

In lyric XLV, most presumably on account of her regretful passion for a disdainful man, Sappho stands all alone, isolated and emotionally disconnected from her dear maidens. Afflicted with a bitter sense of nostalgia, the poetess evokes the bygone days of care, love, bliss, abundance and beauty spent with her community. Her present is solitary, desolate and barren: all that she receives now from her former fellows is insouciance, hostility and distress. The Dionysian existentialism of compact unity, aesthetic sharing, and intimate rapture has completely disintegrated and given way to a failed and even

⁹³ Once again, the Michael Fields relate to Luce Irigaray and, in particular, to her idea that “man’s desire and woman’s are strangers to each other” (*Sex* 27). For Irigaray, both men and women live their sexualities as social roles within the bio-political framework of production and reproduction, conforming accordingly to the traditional division of labour that “prevents them from making love” (28) and from developing genuine amorous codes in their little leisure time. In Michael Field’s *Long Ago*, the interaction between women and men causes a feeling of estrangement or unfamiliarity that may be related to Irigaray’s bio-politics: Sappho and her maidens find masculinity and heteroeroticism strange, alien and unfamiliar not merely because they have so far remained inviolate and out of men’s reach in their all-female community, but also because any form of sexual attention to men will put an end to the maids’ unity and subjugate them to the dominant bio-politics of marriage and reproduction.

extinct form of pseudo-life, deprived of all the values Sappho once held to be vital.⁹⁴ Her inherent *Mitsein* is now completely broken. Indeed, poem XLV reads as a stark antithesis to the vitalism celebrated in the lyrics that the poetess devoted to her band of maids:

AH friends, who altered grow,
No rancour shall ye sow
Within my simple mind:
I ponder on the days when ye were kind.

In summer drouth we tread
A torrent's whitened bed,
And love to recollect
How here the deep, cold waters rushed unchecked.

The oleander-rose
Its flushing light still throws
Across the stony track;
And all the fertilizing founts well back.

We see by the ravine
The seats of shady green
That drew us to the bank:
Sacred the channel where athirst we drank.

I will not then refuse
On those sweet years to muse
Before ye loved me less,
O friends, or sought to injure and distress.

Ill-favoured now ye seem,
But I of you will dream
As of a beauty gone
That once the lingering sunshine looked upon (ll. 1-24).

Implicit in these narrative lyrics of nostalgia and desolation is the idea that the presence of men and the patriarchal regime of marriage inflict severe damage on Sappho and her fellow women. For the ancient poetess, masculinity is not only disruptive, monolithic and crude, as the Tiresian lyric intimates: it is ultimately fearsome and threatening for the Sapphic collective of maids.⁹⁵ In poem XXVI, Sappho dreads any form of contact

⁹⁴ In the following chapter, I will reveal how this form of pseudo-life is what best characterises Sappho in her failed relationship with Phaon: in view of her beloved's indifference and disdain, the disheartened poetess portrays herself as a living corpse, a lifeless soul and a being-towards-death that *lives* the process of her own death as *Long Ago* progresses and ends –with her final act of suicide in an epilogic poem.

⁹⁵ As discussed above, when describing Tiresias's metamorphosis in lyric LII, the Fieldean Sappho contrasts manhood to femininity and associates the former with a more limited visionary power, a greater lack of pleasure and bliss, a "cruder" existence, and even a more violent nature that the lyric voice likens to "the lightning" harming the sky or "the blast" hitting an "idle sail."

between her girls and the potential emergence of heterosexual desire. When Dica, one of her pupils, advances towards the sea and discerns the unforgettable figure of a fisherman, Sappho instantly rescues the adventurous maid to prevent her from falling into the fatality and perdition of “love-charm” (l. 18). This salvific act seems to constitute a pre-emptive measure against the adverse effects of (heterosexual) love and the risk of matrimony:

Dica put forth her hand to reach
The blue sea-holy on the beach
Last night. I drew the child away;
She knew not where the love-charm lay,
And from the fatal fibre let
Her hand relax; but by his net
One stood she never can forget (ll. 15-21).

Similarly, in the last stanza of lyric XXVII, Sappho deplores the desertion of one of her maidens and feels bitterly how her experience of love tends to mix with pain. Her words are exclamatory and even desperate: “And now she leaves my maiden train! / Those whom I love most give me pain: / Why should I love her so?” (ll. 22-24). In all probability, the fugitive maiden succumbed fatally to the love-charm of a man, believed in his promises or accepted his ring before Sappho could prevent it. For the poetess, rings, jewels and their aesthetic effects represent a threat and even a calamity in that they magnetise men, human or divine, and signify the maidens’ separation from their female community, as well as their entry into the patriarchal economy of desire, possession and marriage. In lyric XXXV, Sappho addresses her pupil Gorgo as a caring mentor and warns her against the danger of embellishing her figure with ornamental artifices:⁹⁶

COME, Gorgo, put the rug in place,
And passionate recline;
I love to see thee in thy grace,
Dark, virulent, divine.
But wherefore thus thy proud eyes fix
Upon a jewelled band?
Art thou so glad the sardonix
Becomes thy shapely hand?

Bethink thee! 'Tis for such as thou

⁹⁶ In the Sapphic all-female community, it seems that beauty operates on two different levels: although it is celebrated, created and shared by the maids as an integral part of their lived aestheticism, beauty can nevertheless backfire against their precious unity by attracting the destructive attention of men. For the Sapphic poet, beauty is therefore a paradox in itself: a creative energy yet a potential magnet for disaster.

Zeus leaves his lofty seat;
'Tis at thy beauty's bidding how
Man's mortal life shall fleet;
Those fairest hands—dost thou forget
Their power to thrill and cling?
O foolish woman, dost thou set
Thy pride upon a ring? (ll. 1-16).

Sappho speaks brazenly against the regime of matrimony and wifehood that can subjugate her maidens. As seen in poem LIV, Sappho hopes that her fellow women preserve their free maidenhood and remain at a distance from the dominions of Hymen and Hesperus – gods or personifications associated with the rites of marriage:

No girls let fall
Their maiden zone
At Hymen's call
Serene as those
Taught by a poet why sweet Hesper glows (ll. 32-36).

In the next lyric (LV), the anti-matrimonial rhetoric escalates in an ironic key. Sappho calls upon the god Hymen to bless brides and grooms with eternal joy, fertility and even affective immortality – as though marriage implied some form of liberation from “the harsh rape of death” (l. 29). Nonetheless, in the middle of the poem, a self-evident irony takes centre stage: “Espousing us, free us / From the harsh rape of death” (ll. 28-29). Inevitably enough, the paradoxical combination between espousal and freedom intimates that marriage is far from emancipatory and lively: it annihilates us and robs us of our freedom so that we cannot die again. As it were, under the “funereal discord” (l. 30) of marriage, we lie already dead and harshly raped. In this sense, the poem proves to be fairly deceptive and equivocal in that it starts out as an explicit praise of marital love and ends up as a tacit death sentence against marriage:

O Hymen Hymenaeus,
Come in thy yellow shoes,
With crimson marjoram about thy head:
Assembled see us!
Shaking thy torch, diffuse
A pinewood richness; let thy welcome tread
Beat on the ground. Unkindly day is fled.
Ah for Adonis! Hymen, hear
The cry of those around the bier;
Keen is thy bliss, and frail our growth,
And we are wronged if thou art loath
To visit us with thine exultant cheer.

O Hymen Hymenaeus,
 Soft glows the evening-star,
 The loveliest in the heavens and thy delight:
 Thou must not flee us!
 The bridegroom from his car
 Descends, he has his shining girl in sight,
 His door is wreathed. Young god, it is the night!
 Ah for Adonis! To the tree
 And herb sweet life returns, but we
 In unstirred winter must grow numb,
 Except we feel youth's stir and hum
 As flocks of children gather at our knee.

O Hymen Hymenaeus,
 Thou hast ambrosial breath;
 We love the grave, sweet fashion of thy suit—
 Espousing, free us
 From the harsh rape of death;
 And we funereal discord will confute
 With silver laughter and with Lydian flute.
 Io, Io! thou comest, and no word
 Of threnody near thee is heard;
 Thou linkest in a living joy
 This virgin and this noble boy:
 For time's defeat thy blessing is conferred (ll. 1-36).

In the light of this poem, it becomes evident that, in *Long Ago*, the Michael Fields engage directly in the New Woman movement and its reformist rhetoric that spread widely in urban Britain at the fin de siècle. In this period, claims Heilmann, feminist thinkers raised a heated public debate “about the construction of gender and male violence in society, about the institutions of marriage and motherhood, and about women’s right radically to redefine every aspect of their position in the world” (53). On the subject of marriage in particular, most New Women –some of them organised around a review called the Anti-Marriage League– strongly felt that matrimony was an oppressive, vexatious and violent institution that suppressed women’s freedoms and rights in all senses. As I showed in the first chapter, the Fields shared this political feeling, espoused a radically free conception of love, and even considered their own union more solid and heartfelt than any kind of traditional marriage. In *Long Ago*, as some poems suggest, marriage is subject to fierce criticism: it comes to embody the destruction of female-to-female relations, the tragic end of women’s freedom, and the beginning of a life subjugated to the strictures of patriarchy.

3.4. The Perverse Mythology of Marriage and Maternity

Michael Field's Sappho has no misgivings in mounting her attacks on the very social foundations of her Victorian society. In lyrics LVI, LVII and LIX, she appropriates a series of Graeco-Roman myths to represent heterosexuality, marriage and motherhood as disastrous, tragic and even terminal experiences. These appropriations reveal not only that *Long Ago* functions structurally in a permanent dialogue with ancient texts that become new again, but also how these texts constitute more than mere fiction and serve as authentic sources of truth that shed light on human existence under any historical circumstances. From a Heideggerian perspective, as I advanced in the introduction, myths can offer "an openness in which truth and truths about human existence are unconcealed" (Gordon and Gordon 13).

In the sequence of marital and maternal myths that the Fields adapt, poem LVI reworks the tragic story of Niobe and Leto, who were united by the solid bond of friendship, the affective commitment, and the communal breathing that Sappho, too, had with her maidens.⁹⁷

LETO and Niobe were friends full dear:
Then were they foes
As only those
Can be who once were near
Each to the other's heart,
Who could not breathe apart,
Nor shed a lonely tear (ll. 1-7).

However, as this stanza anticipates, Leto and Niobe grew apart and became foes as soon as they fell in love with men. This love, claims Sappho, was terribly strange, disruptive, and altogether destructive:

Leto and Niobe were virgins then,
Nor knew the strange,
Deep-severing change

⁹⁷ In one of her original fragments, used as epigraph in Michael Field's lyric LVI and identified as 142 in Lobel's compilation, Sappho remarks: "Leto and Niobe were truly dear friends." This affective detail is an exceptional version of the traditional myth in which no special bond is said to exist between Niobe and Leto. On the contrary, the two women are systematically depicted as rivals in Homer's *Iliad* (XXIV, 600-618), Pseudo-Apollodorus' *Library* (III, 5.6), Parthenios of Nicaea's *Erotica Pathemata* (XXXIII), Hyginus' *Fables* (IX), or Ovid's *Metamorphoses* (VI, 146-312). In all these versions, the outcome of the rivalry is profoundly tragic: as a consequence of her hubris, Niobe morphs into a rock that sheds tears perpetually and forms a spring of grief.

That comes to women when
Elected, raised above
All else, they thrill with love,
The love of gods or men (ll. 8-14).

Niobe married Amphion, one of the founders of Thebes, while Leto became a lover to Zeus. Their friendship broke up instantly and gave way to rivalry and death. The main cause of their disunion lay in motherhood: Niobe boasted of her large progeny, felt superior to Leto, and scorned her for having only two children, the twins Apollo and Artemis. This act of maternal hubris resulted in the end of a precious bond, the loss of Niobe's offspring, and her own emotional extinction –her petrification:

Apollo and his sister both divine,
Insulted, fierce,
With darts to pierce
The Theban brood combine;
Then girls and boys sink dead
As pitiless o'erhead
The vengeful archers shine (ll. 15-21).

And Niobe in anguish sees her own
Injurious friend
Aside commend
The deed—and makes no moan:
'Tis not her stricken flock,
Hate's violating shock
Turns her fond heart to stone (ll. 22-28).

It is striking that, despite losing all her children in the hands of Apollo and Artemis, Niobe made no lamentations –as if the death of her progeny had not affected her.⁹⁸ In fact, the lyric voice asserts that the reason for her anguish did not rest on “her stricken folk” (l. 26). It was, rather, a visceral kind of hatred that petrified her. Such hatred seems to become clarified in light of its “violating” nature (l. 27): the poem intimates that Niobe violated and betrayed her friendship with Leto in favour of her bounteous maternity. As pointed out above, it would be no exaggeration to claim that wifehood and motherhood destroy the affective alliance of women-among-themselves.

⁹⁸ The Michaels completely refashion the original myth in this respect: as the different sources quoted in the previous note attest, Niobe bitterly suffers the loss of her children, weeps over their corpses without cease, and calls on the deities to transform her into a rock that carries on pouring out her tears in the form of a spring. However, in lyric LVI, the Fieldean voice suppresses all reference to Niobe's uncontrolled weeping and claims instead that the queen ‘makes no moan’ when confronted with the slaughter of her offspring.

In lyric LVII, Sappho focuses on the myth of the muse Calliope, her affair with the king Oeagrus, and the fate of her son Orpheus.⁹⁹ In particular, what gains special importance in the poem is the origin of such a family triangle: it seems that, in assuming her roles as a wife and a mother, the muse had to suffer the concomitant loss of her voice, power and maidenhood:

Alas, what ailed thee then?
While delicate girl-muses in a ring
Sang softly to thy babe thou could'st not sing—
Thy maidenhood would never come again (ll. 18-21).

Calliope is afflicted with sorrow. Sappho wishes to know the cause of her affliction, and the answer comes immediately after the abrupt dash in the previous stanza: with her maidenhood gone, Calliope can no longer sing, nor delight anyone with her music. Her power hinged entirely on her “strong, virgin days” (l. 46). Her artistic fertility only thrived in the company of her chaste sisters, “close to sunshine and to tree” (l. 47). As soon as she fell under the sway of marriage and maternity, she sank into silence and poetic sterility.

In a similar vein, poem LIX rewrites the myth of Selene, goddess of the moon, and her infatuation with the mortal Endymion as a story of loss, violence and symbolic death.¹⁰⁰ Before developing her fixation with the ephebe, the divine moon was a paradigm of virginal sensuality, strength, autonomy and brilliance. The Fieldean Sappho writes:

Cold was her figure, and her breast
Secure and hard; her eyes confessed
No yearning; she was whole from love, and strong
With undivided mind. Thus she
In her complete virginity
Austerely brilliant urged her steeds along (ll. 7-12).

Nevertheless, when she caught sight of Endymion and became instantly smitten with his “loveliest mortal form” (l. 18), Selene lost control of herself, grew impotent, fell victim

⁹⁹ The primary sources that the Michael Fields consulted for this lyric must have been Apollonius of Rhodes' *Argonautica* (I, 23-34), Pseudo-Apollodorus' *Library* (I, 3.2) or Hyginus' *Fables* (XIV), since these accounts coincide, unlike other versions, in presenting Orpheus as the son of Calliope and the Thracian King Oeagrus.

¹⁰⁰ The most common sources of this myth are Apollonius of Rhodes' *Argonautica* (V. 55-65), Hyginus' *Fables* (CCLXXI), and Ovid's *Heroides* (XV), although one can presume that it was the last version that most probably attracted Michael Field's attention, because it is a fictional epistle that Sappho dedicates to her beloved Phaon.

to an oppressive passion, and acted against her own fate and role as a god of chastity. Once more, masculinity and heterosexual desire play havoc with the utopianism ontologically intrinsic to Sappho's community of mortal and divine maidens. Poem LIX describes Selene's erotic katabasis and fatalism in these lines:

She dropt the reins, the horses reared
In tumult as the hand that steered
Their course grew impotent—a moment's change!
As her intact and tranquil life
Was devastated by a strife
She could not master, tyrannous and strange.

Fear fell upon her, and the wild
Revolt of chastity beguiled,
Of pureness grown a passion against fate (ll. 19-27).

As seen above, the Fields characterise hetero-eroticism as devastating, terrifying, and utterly unfamiliar. In this sense, what becomes especially significant is that, in rewriting different marital and maternal myths, the Fields seem to have identified perhaps the most common equation between marriage and women that prevails in Greek and Roman mythology:

... in broad terms, myths concern virgins who are raped by gods and heroes and married (or destroyed), or competed for and married, or else who sacrifice themselves and fail to achieve marriage. Even those myths which present married women dramatize the failure of marriage through violent action, the saving of it through self-sacrifice (Sian Lewis 450).

The vast corpus of Greek and Roman myths offers a structural narrative model that presents women in extreme situations of jeopardy, suffering, violence, or death caused by oppressive patriarchal practices and institutions. In *Long Ago*, Sappho knows such possible situations, puts her maidens on guard, and advises them to keep away from the ominous influence of men and heterosexual desire.

3.5. Subverting the Sexual Politics of Being: Authentic Existence

In *Long Ago*, the dichotomy between masculine and feminine has major metaphysical repercussions. The Michaels propose a lyrical ontology that convulses the very grounds of Being in a challenge to what feminist critic Sue-Ellen Case defines as “the Platonic parameters of Being –the borders of life and death” (3). Particularly, the convulsion affects the gender or sexual politics associated with such parameters by inverting the metaphysical values of masculinity and femininity. In Western literature and thought, death has commonly been gender-coded as feminine: the archetypal figures of Eve or Pandora, for instance, are held responsible for the fall of humankind, the loss of immortality and the origin of human death and misery. In her *Second Sex*, Simone de Beauvoir unmistakably writes: “In most popular representations Death is a woman, and it is for women to bewail the dead because death is their work. Thus the Woman-Mother has a face of shadows: she is the chaos whence all have come and whither all must one day return; she is nothingness” (166). Essentialised as corporality, materiality, alterity, and hence inferiority to male subjectivity, mentality and spirituality, the feminine embodies the fear of death and the radical other of life.

In stark opposition to the traditional gendering of death, Michael Field’s Tiresian lyric posits a particular metaphysics that equates the feminine with the Platonic parameter of life. In *Long Ago*, the feminine lives ecstatically, unloosens souls, basks in all forms of pleasure, dreams freely, breathes collectively, dwells poetically, and ends up shaping a utopian vitalism that recasts the ontological vices of corporality, materiality and alterity in a positive light. It is now masculinity, by contrast, that stands for misery, deprivation, violence, and mortality. Put otherwise, the masculine shifts radically to operate within the ontological parameter of death.

Moreover, the metaphysical revision that the Michaels formulate in *Long Ago* disrupts the hegemonic politics of sexual orientation, along with its implicit linkages with the ultimate ontological dimensions of being and non-being. In the vast tradition of Western metaphysics, the ontology of life presupposes heterosexuality as the necessary condition for human existence, procreation and preservation. In essence, life amounts to the fundamental interaction between woman and man, and from this ultimate reduction it must follow that heterosexuality constitutes the very ground of Being and the primary

anthropological principle of vitalism. By extension and by contrast, homosexual desire becomes perforce correlated with the negation of such a principle and the metaphysical assertion of sterility, extinction and death.¹⁰¹

However, as I have shown in the previous sections, *Long Ago* subverts and inverts the sexual politics of Being. In Sappho's community of maidens, female homosociality and homoeroticism embody vitalism, Bacchic pleasure, sensuality, beauty, creativity, and life itself, thereby transforming the proscribed queer realm of the other-than-natural into a space of legitimate, creative and free desire. Conversely, it is the mere potentiality of heterosexual love that disrupts, destabilises, threatens and ruins *Long Ago*'s feminine utopia. The interference of men brings death to the Sapphic world of female autonomy, freedom, harmony, and artistic fertility. The social constraints of marriage, wifhood and maternity sever the Sapphic community and subject its members to 'the harsh rape of death' –the death of their independence, their pleasure, and their intersubjectivity. The consequent chiasmus is radical: homosexual desire is conceptualised in harmony and connection with nature, creativity and free love, whilst heterosexuality becomes the unnatural, the *unheimlich*, the violent, and ultimately the fatal.

The Tiresian plays a crucial part in Michael Field's subversion of the sexual politics of Being. The Theban seer intervenes textually and symbolically as a mediator between the masculine and the feminine, as well as between life and death. In their Sapphic ontology of womanhood, the Michaels appropriate the Tiresian myth to define the feminine experience as an ideal model of androgyny. In lyric LII, the feminine not only embodies a vitalism of freedom, beauty and harmless eroticism: it comes to comprehend the absolute plenitude of being and the synthesis of masculinity and femininity. The feminine Tiresias is strangely depicted as active and passive, receptive and penetrative, and metaphorically as a protean rose that gives and receives:

Though fragrant breath the sun receives
From the young rose's softening leaves,
Her plaited petals once undone

¹⁰¹ The queer critic Sue-Ellen Case expresses this idea very clearly and even invites us to situate the figure of the Sapphic maiden within the realm of the other-than living:

Queer sexual practice [...] impels one out of the generational production of what has been called 'life' and history, and ultimately out of the category of the living. The equation hetero=sex=life and homo=sex=unlife generated a queer discourse that reveled in proscribed desiring by imagining sexual objects and sexual practices within the realm of the other-than-natural, and the consequent other-than-living (4).

The rose herself receives the sun (ll. 44-47).

Beyond its androgynous nature, the Tiresian provides an ontological model for defining the liminal position of the Sapphic maiden in *Long Ago*. Just as the Greek soothsayer inhabits an uncertain state between life and death in his Homeric version, so too the Sapphic maids appear to dwell in a social and sexual space of indetermination between the self-governing life shared with their equals and the potential death of their freedom and joyance that will occur as soon as they participate in the patriarchal order of desire, matrimony and motherhood. The maidens have a very fragile status and identity: their fortunate lives, free from men, run the permanent risk of ceasing and yielding to the calamitous invasion of the male other. In consequence, the Sapphic maid is always dangerously between the life and death of her own blessed state.

Lastly, and perhaps most importantly, I would contend that it is in such a fragile state that the Fieldean conception of the feminine materialises at its best. It is, in other words, the phase of maidenhood that incarnates the feminine in its most pristine, liberated and vitalistic expression. In Sappho's utopia, maids gather freely, join forces, develop their common senses of pleasure, and engage in no competitions or rivalries. However, their maidenhood is nothing but a phase, as the Tiresian lyric cautions: "free / Almost from his mortality" (l. 20). When Tiresias metamorphoses into a woman, he assumes a nature that is virtually eternal given its vital greatness. Yet, the lyric voice does not neglect to add an antithetical adverb that poses a limit to the lifespan of the feminine Tiresias. In a similar vein, the Sapphic maid leads an ecstatic existence with her equals, but an 'Almost' also comes her way. Her experience of the feminine is authentic, Dionysian and rapturous, yet it verges too closely on the mortal encounter with men and heterosexual desire.

What is especially striking, then, is that the feminine manifests itself with uttermost radiance through the figure of the Sapphic maid, and that, at the same time, it is through this figure that the feminine approaches its own death. In a way, the maiden lives her experience of the feminine in a phase of transition where her life reaches its zenith of intensity whilst she simultaneously comes closer and closer to the end of her blissful condition with the foreseeable arrival of adulthood and wifedom. One may presume here that the maiden's vital intensity is a consequence of the anticipation of her death as a free virgin –as though her rapturous life were, or had to be, indeed rapturous because

of the proximity of death. This positive attitude towards, and despite, the proximity of death may be related to Martin Heidegger's idea of anticipation as "the possibility of authentic existence" (307). For the German philosopher, it is when we assertively and seriously anticipate the possibility of our death that our life opens up as a whole, becomes liberated, and diversifies into infinite possibilities available for each of us. In other words, our life exposes us to a vast landscape of freedom, transcendence, and authenticity. One could say that it is in this very landscape, utopian though it may be, that Sappho and her maids live their genuinely existential or ecstatic being-alongside or togetherness with the full awareness, however, that their blessed condition is fragile, vulnerable, and bound to an ineluctable end. In other words, the Sapphic maid lives the quintessence of the feminine while standing on the verge of losing this vitality to her potential husband.

CHAPTER IV

SAPPHO'S *SEIN-ZUM-TODE* AS HETERO-MORTALITY

4.1. The Inauthentic Love and the Heroic Quest towards Death

In the previous chapter, I have come to a significant conclusion: heteroerotic desire is no longer aligned with the ultimate metaphysics of being, life and nature, but rather with some form of fatalism that de-naturalises heterosexuality and converts it into a violent source of oppression and death. This narrative of hetero-mortality, as I suggest calling it, unfolds extensively and intricately in *Long Ago*. As hinted at earlier on, the shadow of men and heteroeroticism is not a mere threat to the feminine existentialism of Sappho's maidens: it becomes a visible, tangible and tragic phenomenon in the Fieldean portrayal of the Lesbian poet. She falls victim to this tragedy in her experience of failed romance with a handsome fisherman named Phaon, whose contempt leads her to suicide. Ovid offers the best known version of this romantic myth in his *Epistulae Herodium* (XV), in which he acts as a transvestite narrator and impersonates a miserable Sappho who writes to her beloved to reproach his cruel behaviour and even share her suicidal inclinations. This tragic version, according to duBois, is "the one bequeathed to posterity, for many centuries the definitive, forlorn, love-struck and suicidal

poet who has given up the love of women for an unrequited passion for a young man” (108).¹⁰²

In *Long Ago*, the Fields appropriate the Ovidian archetype of Sappho as a radical lover and transform her existence into an agon between life and death, a wavering between hope and despair, and ultimately a slow process of agony. As early as in the second poem of the volume, immediately after having celebrated the Bacchic experience with her maids in the very first lyric, Sappho wishes to live a dream with her beloved while despairing and dying. Invoking the personified deity of Sleep, who proceeds originally from the Sapphic epigraph crowning the poem, she hopes that the god, with his inherent complicity with Darkness, favours the blurring of ontological contours, the intermingling of subject and object, the intergarlanding of self and other, and the Aphroditean fusion of bodies. Sappho turns to Hypnos to awaken his Dionysian power, for he can dissolve “separate individual identities” and make us “part of a single, living being with whose joy in eternal creation we are fused” (Ansell 11). The result of this fusion is a “unity and primordial oneness” (12) that the charming maidens knew well in the first poem, but one that the Sapphic lover covets with imperative verve and antagonism towards daylight. Whilst the Dionysian night enables lovers to encounter one another in a fluid exchange of erotic energies, the Apollonian light imposes borderlines, establishes “a world of distinct individuals” (10), segregates each of them within their mental confines, and hinders any possibility of genuine pleasure between them. Accordingly, the Sapphic logic of desire advocates the chaotic ontology of the night to the detriment of the diurnal regime of identity and duality:

COME, dark-eyed Sleep, thou child of Night,
Give me thy dreams, thy lies;
Lead through the horny portal white
The pleasure day denies (ll. 1-4).

Under the influence of Night and Sleep, the dreams and lies the lover demands lose the oppositional relationship with their respective disjuncts in an axiology that undermines their normative values. Dream and reality or lie and truth are no longer in metaphysical

¹⁰² In the case of English poetry, the best known appropriation of such a particular version of the Sapphic archetype is perhaps Romantic writer Mary Robinson’s *Sappho and Phaon: In a Series of Legitimate Sonnets* (1796), sourced from Ovid’s epistle and particularly focused on Sappho’s vivid eroticism.

conflict: desire makes their synergism and co-presence possible to a certain point. The dream of the beloved, although induced by Hypnos, promises to acquire some degree of reality that the lyric voice imagines to be sufficiently satisfactory and vital. Likewise, the lie of the beloved's presence has the potential to be felt and lived as some kind of truth capable of assuaging the lover's passion and despair. For Sappho's desiring consciousness, reality and veracity do not seem to be measured as factual magnitudes: they become ductile emotional categories whose limits are diffused and even obliterated at the mercy of any attempt that she can make to reach some level of erotic fulfilment. This diffusion enables dreams and lies to be legitimate affective variants of truth insofar as they render Sappho's object of desire more truthful, real, liveable and accessible in the lover's imagination. Said otherwise, Sappho survives as a dreamer and a liar.

Nevertheless, while holding on to a form of oneiric vitalism, Sappho loses her vitality and despairs in the face of what she has most feared –heteroerotic desire. As formerly explained, Sappho falls in love with Phaon, “a boatman of Mitylene, who was endowed by Aphrodite with youth and extraordinary beauty as a reward for his having ferried her for nothing” (Wharton 16). His stunning physique attracted all women on the island and drew Sappho particularly mad: she tried her utmost to gain his affection, but he disdained her with fatal contempt. Desperate and broken-hearted, the rejected lover leapt from the Leucadian cliffs and drowned. In lyric II, Sappho has not yet renounced her life, yet her death feels utterly close. Recognising the impossibility of sharing her life with her beloved Phaon, the Lesbian poet finds herself deprived of “the bliss for which I live” (l. 8) and subordinates her entire existence to this unattainable bliss. The subordination in itself presupposes an erotic reduction of her complete subjectivity. She disowns herself and becomes utterly inauthentic or *uneigentlich*. I use this German word as Heidegger understands it, i.e., as a mode of existence in which Dasein “can lose itself and never win itself” (68) by simply trading its very sense of own (*eigen*) identity or original self-belonging for a life led under “the real dictatorship” of the Other (164). In her hetero-romantic *Mitsein*, which now represents the exact opposite of her utopian co-belonging with her maidens, Sappho loses her ontological independence and “stands in subjection” (Heidegger 164) to her male beloved. It is Phaon that holds sway over her ultimate will to live: she is left irremediably vulnerable, powerless, and desperate in the face of his disdain. It is only in his power to define her status as loved or unloved, to

stabilise her subjectivity, to close her down ontologically, or to leave her pending, dependent, unresolved, and in agony.

Apart from being extremely detrimental, the erotic *Mitsein* Sappho aspires to achieve is ontologically complex in that it takes issue with bivalent logic in general and with the classical *principium tertii exclusi* in particular. Also known as the law of excluded middle, this principle is at the root of binary thinking: it affirms the either/or resolution of any proposition, impedes the emergence of illogical contradictions, and cancels out the possibility of merging opposite terms into synthetic structures. It is Aristotle who enunciates this classical precept in his *Metaphysics*: “Nor indeed can there be any intermediate between contrary statements, but of one thing we must either assert or deny one thing, whatever it may be” (4.1011b). It seems, conversely, that the Fieldean voice defends an anti-Aristotelian code of erotic logic wherein the active lover and the passive beloved –or, in the figurative terms of poem III, the stinging bee and the consumed honey– do not operate within an either/or scheme, but as members of a possible junction. Sappho does not want to choose one option over the other. Rather, she wishes to incarnate both options at once:

OH, not the honey, nor the bee!
Yet who can drain the flowers
As I? Less mad, Persephone
Spoiled the Sicilian bowers
Than I for scent and splendour rove
The rosy oleander grove,
Or lost in myrtle nook unveil
Thoughts that make Aphrodite pale (ll. 1-8).

Establishing a metaphoric disjunction between honey and bee, arguably tantamount to the basic passivity/activity dichotomy, she suspends the opposition between both terms and adumbrates a coveted intertwining of the two. The penetrative bee, which drains and pollinates flowers, and the honey, which is produced and depleted, stray from their contextual schism and give rise to a desired conciliatory synthesis, passive and active at once. However, the Sapphic lover does not stand a chance to enjoy either of the roles – let alone their promising conflation. It is only her fervent desire that remains vibrant and keeps her alive in her quest to become the bee and the honey for her loved one.

Sappho’s erotic quest is what postpones her death. Despite her beloved’s disdain and inaccessibility, Sappho finds herself in a state of ceaseless transit and ontological

ambivalence: she is and is not with Phaon at once, living him imaginarily, resisting his painful absence, roving for his honey, and permanently advancing towards-without-for him. The sum of these prepositions is descriptive and concurrent: Sappho keeps her quest ongoing, discovers her *raison d'être* in it, makes up an affective contiguity with her beloved, and perpetuates a desire that can only grow on the trail of a paradoxical transcendence which is unrestrictive: it gives her the possibility of a limitless quest. Sappho is forever in the reach: her sense of “love is characterised by longing, striving, and incompleteness” (Greenwood 316), and these feelings leave her in suspension, (un)caught in the process of reaching out, and constantly projecting herself towards the possibility of complete love. Her erotic being is thus a dynamic *being-in-the-quest*, a form of existence that lives (in) her desire without ever attaining its object – in an absolute manner.¹⁰³

Nonetheless, despite the heroism of her quest, Sappho’s sense of power and life remains utterly frail. In the third stanza of *Long Ago*, she likens herself to a voracious bee that embarks on a heroic quest for her beloved flower with one literal intention only: to possess, conquer, reduce, and castrate her indifferent Phaon. Yet, on this passionate journey, the Sapphic bee bumps inevitably into the potential hazard of death that looms beneath the rich symbolism of the stanza above quoted. Sappho’s search for scented and splendid pleasure involves a risk. The reference to the “rosy oleander” (l. 6) carries a symbolism of its own that reveals how dangerous and deathly the pursuit of love can be. According to some folk legends, this plant derives its name “a young man who fell into the water and was drowned, while he was trying to get a blossom of that plant for his ladylove. She exclaimed in agony “O Leander!” and the name clung to the shrub ever after” (Daniels and Stevens 824). In line with this story, Sappho’s quest for love does not exclude the looming presence of death. In fact, in most versions of her life, she suffers a tragic fate similar to that of Oleander: after her beloved’s rejection, she jumps off the Leucadian cliffs and drowns in the Ionian Sea. It seems that love, including its

¹⁰³ This form of existence evokes –and refashions– the common monomyth of the hero’s journey that was formulated by Joseph Campbell in his work *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*. Although it is clear that, in *Long Ago*, Sappho does not embark on an epic adventure “into a region of supernatural wonder” in order to seize “a decisive victory” at the end of her journey (23), she nevertheless displays a pure and tenacious sense of nomadic heroism that keeps her striving, roving, desiring, imagining, and persisting in her search for Phaon. However, unlike its mythical analogues, which often go through a delimited process of transformation from a starting point to a finish line, the Sapphic journey is not a transient phase, a rite of passage or an interstice: it seems to be an ontological totality, a compensatory telos in itself or, better still, the only viable position where, despite its instability or fluidity, Sappho can remain, if illusively, in touch with her elusive beloved, who represents the unattainable telos.

Sapphic variant, goes hand in hand with death in a relation that eschews the dualistic systems of antinomy, symmetry or dialectics. Contrary to Freud's theories, the forces of Thanatos and Eros "overlap and collapse [...] into one another" in an amalgam of mutual inclusiveness or dependence" (Carel 41). In other words, the so-called death drive operates "as a continuous presence within Eros" to such an extent that "Eros is incomplete without the death drive" (42). This thanato-erotic interconnection applies readily to Sappho's case: since her life hinges entirely upon her beloved, who represents her vital bliss, the potentiality of her death stays as a permanent horizon. Just a word of disdain suffices to direct her love drive towards self-destruction, as her legend effectively attests. The "oleander grove" (l. 6) can turn into a grave at any given time.

The oleander is not the only element hinting at the spectre of Thanatos within Eros. The first stanza of poem III rests upon a mythical substructure that interconnects the forces of life, sex and death in peculiar ways. In the ancient Greek lore, bees, honey and Persephone share an intricate spectrum of interdependent values and symbols. As a myth-ridden insect, the bee features a large number of attributes ranging from virginity, purity and social wisdom to the confluences between life and death.¹⁰⁴ Given its mythic state of chastity, the bee is commonly identified with the goddess Artemis and the priestesses known as *Melissae* ("the bees"), devotees of Demeter and Persephone.¹⁰⁵ By extension, in the Fieldean imagery, the Sapphic lover relates to the bee in that she also remains sexually immaculate like the charming maidens of her community, albeit in dire need of deep pleasure and consummation with Phaon.

Associated with parthenogenesis and purity, the bee not only transcends the rules of sexual reproduction, but also the successive order of life and death: it originates, according to the ancient Greeks, by spontaneous generation from flowers, by resurrection "in the ashes of fig-tree wood" or from "the carcasses of oxen and bulls" (Rigoglioso 110). In what equates to a paradoxical aetiology, the bee comes to life out of death and, unsurprisingly, produces a substance with deathly connotations. In the

¹⁰⁴ Kritsky and Cherry provide a brief yet thorough description of the complexity underlying the symbolism of the bee in ancient and modern cultures:

Bees are probably the most universally symbolic of all insects; objects of admiration, veneration and fear and subjects of cults, rituals, and beliefs in birth, death and the soul [...] The bee is considered to be a rich symbol as an exemplar of ethical values. Among qualities attributed to the bee are diligence, organization and technical skills, sociability, purity, chastity, cleanliness, spirituality, wisdom, courage, abstinence, sobriety, creativity, etc. (5-6).

¹⁰⁵ Kritsky and Cherry claim that bees were associated "in ancient Greece with virgin priestesses and or *Melissae* who were termed 'bees' (the queen bee being the Great Mother)" (6).

mysterious cults of Demeter, “honey is considered as a symbol of death” and used as such “to offer libations to the terrestrial Gods” (Porphyry 24). In the myth of Persephone, who is often nicknamed as *Melitodes* (“the honeyed one”), it is a honeyed pomegranate seed” that Hades offers Demeter’s daughter to magically bind her to the netherworld during the winter season (Sanchez-Parodi 43). Here the relation between the Sapphic lover and Persephone becomes all the more patent: Sappho leads a life-in-death in close connection with the unfortunate deity. Just as Persephone is retained alive and against her will among the dead after having sampled a honeyed fruit, so too the Sapphic bee is completely deprived of the bliss for which she lives, painfully rejected by her beloved, and condemned to an elegiac existence that sustains death as a permanent trace in her mad search of the honey she is denied.

4.2. The Form of Life, the Content of Death, and the Liminal Shore

The ideal erotic *Mitsein* that Sappho covets finds its most compact expression in the morphology of poem IV, which consists of a single stanza and compresses its twelve lines in a harmonious symphony of six rhymed couplets. The effect of formal unity is not just flagrantly transparent and well accomplished, but also highly meaningful in that it enters into a stark opposition to the semantic level of the poem, bringing about a tacit debate on what seems to be the hackneyed dichotomy between form and content. The poem itself becomes the locus of convergence –or the scenario of a *coincidentia oppositorum*– where the debate unfolds in an attempt to find a possible resolution.

WHERE with their boats the fishers land
Grew golden pulse along the sand;
It tangled Phaon's feet —away
He spurned the trails, and would not stay;
Its stems and yellow flowers in vain
Withheld him: can my arms detain
The fugitive? If that might be,
If I could win him from the sea,
Then subtly I would draw him down
'Mid the bright vetches; in a crown
My art should teach him to entwine
Their thievish rings, and keep him mine (ll. 1-12).

In actual fact, the formal junction of poem IV comes as a surprise after a sequence of laments over Sappho's erotic greed and Phaon's painful inaccessibility. The sum of both circumstances equals the bare fact of disjunction: lover and beloved remain at a remove from one another. However, the compact body constituting the forth poem appears to create an unexpected sense of union that neither the previous co-texts nor its own text – on its semantic level– anticipate or reinforce. Autonomously meaningful, the form trespasses the boundaries of lexical or content-determined meaning: it contravenes the strictly factual by suggesting the ideal.

The formal ideal of unity operates at first glance as a tenuous variant of the Kantian idealism of form insofar as it asserts some degree of independence from the Hegelian crudity of historicism or contentualism.¹⁰⁶ In Sappho's case, the historical corresponds

¹⁰⁶ I adhere provisionally to the well-known “controversy between Kant and Hegel” in the field of aesthetic theory (Adorno 355), siding with the Enlightenment thinker's notion of *freie Schönheit* as posited in his *Critique of Judgement* (1790). Under this radical idea, Kant separates the aesthetic dimension of form from “any content, whether rational or sensible,” understanding that “If sensible

roughly to the fatal truth of disjunction, disdain, and desolation that the lover has to bear in the face of her beloved's physical and emotional distance. This experience does not take on the shape of dismembered, fragmented or fractured lines. The form of the poem is radically non-mimetic and hence autonomous: it does not limit itself to mirroring the meanings of Sappho's adverse facticity. The interplay between form and content involves no sense of semantic dependence: each polarity has its own potency of meaning. The form points towards the ideal, the possible, the oneiric, and the vital hope that keeps Sappho alive. The content is, conversely, grounded in the real, the crude, the elegiac, and the fatality that Sappho has to face owing to her beloved's disdain. As a result, what Irish critic Terry Eagleton terms "the mimetic theory of form, for which the form somehow imitates the content it expresses," (65) finds no validity in this case: the correlation between form and content is overturned in favour of a formal composition connoting an ideal sense of romantic *Mitsein* which does not tally in the slightest with the disjunctive despondency of the content.

The polarisation between form and content, tantamount in poem IV to a duality between formal union and contentual disunion, resumes and renews some aspects of the early Nietzschean metaphysics that inscribed the first lyric of *Long Ago* within an ontological conflation of the Apollonian within the Dionysian. In the case of poem IV, both forces recover their differences and, in so doing, conform in a relative manner to the semantic values of the form/content binary. The Apollonian accounts for the order, symmetry, and unity that give the poem its deceitful morphology: it works exactly as the force that Nietzsche denominates *der Scheinende*. This ambivalent epithet, associated in German with brilliance and appearance, designates both Apollo's luminosity and his illusive nature. In setting the cosmos alight, the god "wraps man in the veil of Maya and thus protects him from the harsh realities of his altogether frightening and pitiful existence" (Megill 39). In this light, the form of poem IV is nothing but an Apollonian veil or an illusion: it gives an impression of unity, harmony, hope and optimism that the content belies.

content were to play any part, then the object would not be beautiful but only agreeable; if a concept were involved, then the beautiful would be too easily convertible with the rational" (Caygill 92). I would not go so far as to say that poem IV constitutes a paradigmatic illustration of Kant's radical formalism, for its form does seem to possess a clear conceptual value of unity. What I remark and underlie instead is the degree, weak though it may be, of semantic independence that the form of the poem claims from its own content, which, far from celebrating the ideal of unity, concentrates on the frustration that results from the crude reality of erotic deprivation.

The form serves a protective function to a certain extent: it conceals the crude facticity of lovelessness, projects the texture of a promising fullness, and perhaps protects the integrity of the erotic subject against fatal despair, defeatism, and death. The form of lyric IV opposes and suspends the content, anticipating the end of the Sapphic quest, consummating the ideal of romantic union, and obfuscating the status of desire into pure indeterminacy. Sappho's desire is not oppressed by the strictures of the real content, nor does it culminate objectively in the aspirations of the form: rather, it remains unfulfilled, yet vitally hopeful in view of the ideal possibility or the transcendence that the form itself enacts. Sappho occupies, as it were, a midway position between form and content or, in other words, between the possibility of living with her beloved and the raw reality of dying without him. She thus embodies both the Apollonian illusion of life and the Dionysian rawness of death.

While the Apollonian corresponds, as explained above, to the structured form of poem IV, it is the Dionysian that seems to undergird the content inasmuch as it is understood as the "realm of formlessness and dissolution" (Paglia 579). Although Nietzsche links Dionysus mainly with the notion of a primordial oneness or a "unified source of all being" (Dieth 30), the Greek god also acts as a figure of violent disunion: according to a Cretan myth of his birth, he was torn to pieces by the Titans and then resurrected by his father Zeus. This experience of dismemberment and disjunction is the mythic and metaphoric backdrop against which the Apollonian appearance of plenitude emerges with all its delusive splendour. Beneath the formal surface, Sappho is in fact dismembered, formless, and fragmented: she is pre-Dionysian or simply a Dionysian limb. Without her beloved, she has no sense of ontological unity –as if her being were yet to be born, to form itself wholly, and to engender a totality or oneness that can only be simulated as a formal, visual artifice.

However, beyond the difference between form and content, the integral text of poem IV presents both poles as an *existentially* inseparable structure,¹⁰⁷ as a complex semantic unity or, more precisely, as a syntagm in which meaning is polemical, divisive, and yet inclusive of illogical antimonies. The formal semantics of union clashes frontally with

¹⁰⁷ I use this adverb in line with Terry Eagleton, who recognises, despite some reservations, the idea of the inseparability between form and content "as far as our actual experience of the poem goes" (65). In the fourth poem of *Long Ago*, however, such inseparability takes on a double signification in that the poem not only unifies the traditionally contentious binary of form and content, but also the conceptual opposition between the possible and the factual or the ideal and the real, thereby allowing for a systemic unity of opposites –or a double-layered *coincidentia oppositorum*.

the contentual semantics of disunion, and yet both cooperate within a major system of meaning that is paradoxically complete: it somehow merges its unitive formalism and its schismatic historicism into a self-contradictory poem that accommodates the factual, the crude or the dismembered within the Apollonian structure of the ideal and the compact.

Poem IV forms a self-destructive totality in itself: it affirms union at a formal level only to negate it at the level of its content. A synthesis arises between the polarities of ideal union and real disunion, which are made co-present. What stems from this co-presence is a plenitude of meaning, veracity, and experience. Sappho is not merely portrayed as a mournful and moribund lover: she verbally exposes her fragmented self, but simultaneously manages to overcome it by projecting her ideal image of *self-other* as a formal simulation of the life she aspires to live.¹⁰⁸ A counter-dualist dynamic takes place here: Sappho's self and self-other are shown to co-exist just as "the antithetical inheres within, and is partly produced by, what it opposes" (Dollimore 33).¹⁰⁹ Her factual brokenness concurs with her ultimate aspiration of romantic and vital fullness. At the same time as pouring out her feelings of alienation, Sappho enacts her ideal of union through the formal anatomy of the poem. The experiences of disunion and union co-occur, one opposing and complementing the other and both shaping a complex ontological picture of Sappho as an erotic subject: she is at once factually broken and ideally full. Her actual brokenness does not exclude the possibility of an amatory plenitude. In fact, both experiences constitute Sappho's liminal reality, which conciliates the real with the possible –the fatal with the vital.

Equally liminal is the Sapphic topography delineated in the Greek epigraph and the first two lines of poem IV: "WHERE with their boats the fishers land / Grew golden pulse along the sand." The space evoked here corresponds to that of the shore, the littoral, the border, and the point of convergence between land and sea –even between self and other, centre and margin, or inside and outside.¹¹⁰ It is, indeed, a space of mediation

¹⁰⁸ In employing the term *self-otherness*, I suggest that Sappho's ideal image, reflected in the form of poem IV, is to be understood not just as a different self (different from her actual/contentual self), but also as a self that loses the ontological boundaries that keep it apart from the loved other. It is, in this sense, a compact self-other or maybe an inter-subject that subsumes both lover and beloved.

¹⁰⁹ Here I am making use of J. Dollimore's notion of perverse dynamic, for it seems to apply neatly to Sappho's dual subjective experience, which integrates a broken self and a fulfilled futural self-alterity as though they were the two sides of the same coin.

¹¹⁰ In this respect, I completely partake of René Dietrich's vision of the shore: for him, the shore, "[a]s any other boundary region, [...] is not only a place where land and sea meet, but also centre and margin,

where Sappho appears to reach some degree of contact with her beloved Phaon, but also a space of separation where she sees him sailing away and turning his back on her: “spurned the trails, and would not stay” (l. 4). Personified, nature acts in her place as a mediator, trying to ensnare the elusive beloved with the golden pulse which “tangled Phaon’s feet –away” (l. 3). The ensnaring affects the poem syntactically: the first two lines quoted above form a mimetic hyperbaton that imitates the effortful attempt to seize hold of Phaon.

Nevertheless, the attempt falls through altogether: Phaon “spurned the trails, and would not stay” (l. 4). His disdain becomes clearly explicit for the first time in *Long Ago*: he rejects Sappho’s advances with contempt and contumacy. The use of the habitual past – “would not stay” – indicates that it was many a time that Sappho attempted to capture Phaon only to receive his indifference. The solidarity of nature, which acts under the sway of Sappho’s desire by means of a pathetic fallacy, proves completely fruitless: the “stems and yellow flowers in vain / Withheld him” (l. 5-6). In this sense, the mediatory function of the pathetic fallacy fails: the possibility of interceding between lover and beloved seems to vanish. This failure, however, is geographically determined: the shore, where Sappho and Phaon meet, is no place of permanence, stability, or promise.¹¹¹ Nothing stays on it –not even the long-awaited beloved. Its fluidity, fugacity and flux transform it not only into a paradigm of perpetual liminality, but also into a capricious space where life and death co-exist and co-operate in bringing hope to the shore only to sink it again and again. Phaon appears near the littoral only to disappear on the horizon. Sappho’s desire revives only to die away as soon as her lover turns his back on her.

In poem IV, Sappho-as-nature fails to make contact with her fugitive beloved, yet her resilience has not run out. In the second part of the lyric, right after the central colon, the possibility of romantic union re-emerges with a rhetorical question: “can my arms detain / The fugitive?” (ll. 6-7). This self-inquiry, whose actual answer matters little, appears in a very strategic position between the negative facticity of the preceding lines and the revitalising transcendence of the subsequent ones. The question brackets off the previous experiences of failure and re-opens up the possibility of erotic gratification,

inside and outside, self and other, and in which those very concepts shift, switch, dissolve, and clash” (450). This view applies effectively to Sappho’s littoral topography, for it is on the shore that her loving-despairing self encounters her loved other, interrupting their previous separation momentarily, and even clashing frontally, as shall be explained later on, in a belligerent competition.

¹¹¹ Dietrich puts it in a concise and precise manner: “the shore is an inherently instable place, never fixed and always in flux, constantly in the process of being made, un-made, and re-made” (450).

thereby liberating the Sapphic subject from her irremediable past and projecting her towards a hopeful future. In other words, by means of the rhetorical question, the lyric I manages to arbitrate between the realms of the real and the possible so as to lighten the weight of Sappho's vain efforts and reclaim the nook of transcendence where she and her fantasies are still safe. The gesture of transcendence suggested in the question is the stretching out of Sappho's arms, which now imitate the golden pulse and seek to detain the fugitive beloved, to sustain the erotic quest indefinitely, and ultimately to give the heroic searcher a modicum of hope and life.

4.3. The Necrological Analogy: Sappho and the Broken Topography

In a direct narrative connection with poem IV, the fifth lyric continues to show the fatal impact of Phaon's spurning of the trails –or his overt rejection– on Sappho's emotional and physical integrity.

As on the hills the shepherds tread
A hyacinth down, and withered
The purple flower
Is pressed to earth, and broken lies,
Its virgin stem no more to rise
In summer hour;
And death comes stealing with the dew
That yester evening brought anew
A fresher growth and fragrant grace,
Ere footsteps crushed the grassy place:

So underneath thy scorn and pride
My heart is bowed, and cannot hide
How it despairs.
O Phaon, weary is my pain;
The tears that from my eyelids rain
Ease not my cares;
My beauty droops and fades away,
Just as a trampled blossom's may.
Why must thou tread me into earth—
So dim in death, so bright at birth? (ll. 1-20).

As discussed above, poem IV has nature chase and tangle Phaon on the shore only to bump into his disdain, lose hold of him, and fail altogether in her efforts. In poem V, the consequences of this failure are shown to be devastating and deathly: in her most affective and dramatic mode of personification, nature seems to run away from the shore –the former site of rejection– to take shelter “on the hills” (l.1), where she now suffers greatly, withers, breaks, and strives “no more to rise” (l. 5). After the central colon, the poem personalises and emotionalises the metaphoric presence of nature by means of an overarching simile or analogy. In poem IV, Sappho likens her desiring arms to the golden pulse that failed to ensnare Phaon only to offset this failure with a rhetorical question and a sequence of conditional scenarios whose effect is revitalising. In poem V, however, the Sapphic subject harbours no optimism anymore and analogises her post-rejection condition of devastation to an afflicted mountainous landscape crushed by thoughtless shepherds.

Accordingly, the two semi-narrative poems create different schemes of analogy. The post-colon lines of poem IV partake implicitly of the correlation between nature and Sappho, but they also go beyond it: after and despite the initial experience of failure that her floral analogue had to undergo in the past, the lyric I installs herself in the present to project speculative visions in which the ensnarement and ultimate conquest of her beloved could eventually take place. The logic at work in this scheme is one of resilience, persistence, hope, and survival. By contrast, poem V proposes a purely specular logic that converts the post-colon segment of the poem into a more literal and emotional reflection of the first stanza, which is essentially figurative.

The logic scheme of poem V brings up an explicit display of the close relation between figuration and literalness or between semantic opacity and transparency. No opposition acts upon these interacting terms. Both hinge on one another to such an extent that their interaction is an instance of absolute cooperation. The field of figuration lends its figures and symbols to the sphere of literalness and becomes a source of identification upon which the lyric I draws to convey her severe experience of pain. Simultaneously, in drawing upon such a source, the subject embeds the inherited figures and symbols with the literalness of her self, her lived facts, and her agony. As a result, neither field can do without its necessary other: without Sappho's explicit identification, the sphere of figuration would amount to a mere literal description of a pastoral scene or an anti-bucolic landscape of devastation. This interdependence between one and the other – figuration and literalness – is yet another example of the fundamental poetics at work in *Long Ago*, a poetics that blurs and redefines polar categories as actual cooperants.

The first part of the fifth lyric starts with a scene of natural, subtle violence. The landscape has changed with respect to poem IV: the openness of the shore is now replaced by the sheltering environment of the hills. The actions of nature are also different: it no longer grows, chases, tangles, or withholds, but rather suffers in a variety of ways. Its previous activity yields to a form of passivity enforced by the shepherds, who behave as agents of violence and oppression, treading, pressing, crushing, and trampling all that comes their way. The salient victim is, unsurprisingly, the hyacinth. As tradition has it, this flower represents the flower of grief and pain. The Greeks contemplated the shape of its petals as emulating the plaintive interjection 'AI-AI,' which apparently constitutes the first lexeme of the Greek word *ῥάκινθος*. In English verse, John Milton exacerbates the correspondence between the hyacinth and grief by

describing it as a “sanguine flower” (Ferber 102). The meaning of “sanguine” here has nothing to do with its present-day values of optimism and cheeriness. It is rather a sanguine blossom in that it lies in pain, in blood, and in death.

The hyacinth holds a strong mythical bond with mortality. Several ancient Greek stories relate that a beautiful young Spartan named Hyakinthos was once playing discus with his divine lover Apollo when, by accident, the discus lost its course, hit the youth’s head and killed him instantly. In Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* (10.167--219), Zephyrus is to blame for the killing: in an act of jealousy, since he was taken with the Spartan boy, the god of the West Wind diverted the trajectory of the discus towards Hyakinthos to end his life. After his death, the youth’s blood gave birth to a flower that now bears his name and whose petals, adds Ovid, are bathed in Apollo’s tears.

In Michael Field’s lyric V, the hyacinth only experiences part of its legendary fate: it is pressed, broken, and fatally wounded, but no signs of rebirth loom in its future –no “summer hour” (l. 6) awaits him. Its condition is such brokenness that it will never rise again. This early truncation has a rhetorical effect on the line that closes the doors to any future: “its virgin stem no more to rise” (l. 5). The sentence lacks its main verb: it is left incomplete and “broken lies” (l. 4). This ellipsis seems to stand for the void that the hyacinth has ahead of itself: the impossibility of resurrection. Here the presence of death, implicit in the symbolism of the hyacinth, becomes explicit: “And death comes stealing with the dew” (l. 9). The initial conjunction marks a direct sequenciality from the previous lines to the following ones as if suggesting that the underlying theme of death continues its development with the mere linguistic mediation of an additive particle. In fact, the subsequent lines go on to add further devastation to what was already an anti-bucolic scene. The pressing and withering of the hyacinth is replicated in the entire “grassy place” (l. 10). Death steals and creeps all around, usurping the active role that nature played in poem IV: while before the golden pulse grew and crept to ensnare Phaon’s feet, now it is death that advances surreptitiously against the fruits of nature. With this reversal, the mere action of creeping reveals its inherent ambiguity: it connotes sensuality, eroticism, and lust, as well as oppression, destruction, and even outright extermination.

In a similar vein, “the dew” (l. 9) that accompanies death is double-natured: although it used to spawn growth, grace, freshness and fragrance, it now colludes with death to ruin

“the grassy place” (l. 10). The last line of the first stanza appears to give away the actual agency behind the stealing death: “footsteps crushed the grassy place” (l. 10). With this synecdoche as the subject of the sentence, the pre-colon segment of the poem closes in a perfect thematic circle: the shepherds mentioned at the outset of the poem return in their destructive, deathly, and violent manner. The oppression they sow in their march is well reproduced by a fricative and plosive alliteration in the two closing lines of the stanza: “A fresher growth and fragrant grace / Ere footsteps crushed the grassy place” (l. 9-10). The effect of these repetitive consonants is compelling, yet contradictory at the same time. The penultimate line confronts the phonemes underlined above with the lexical meaning of the words they form: they participate in creating the destructive alliteration, whose ultimate referent is none other than the crushing steps of the shepherds. In this way, the alliteration falls into a clearly paradoxical semantics: part of its constitutive sounds contribute to the suggestion of a unified meaning (devastation) while the sense of the alliterated words alludes to the state of freshness, fragrance and grace that reigned “yester evening” (l. 8), but which is now subject to the advent of fatal footsteps.

The central colon opens the second part of the lyric –the literal or personalised stanza. It begins with the word ‘so’ that functions here as a conjunction serving the syntactic purpose of completing the analogical structure introduced by its linking correlate ‘AS’ in the very first line of the poem. The ensuing scheme is clearly a comparative or specular poem that applies what nature undergoes in the first stanza to Sappho herself in the second. With this syntactic formula, the correlation between the floral tropes and the lyric I finds its most precise and limpid articulation in a *dispositio* that uses the conjunctions *as* and *so* in unison to show the direct connection of the terms on both sides of the comparison. In this manner, the specular logic, mediated by the nuclear colon, becomes heightened and patently established. Just as the hyacinth lies broken in the first stanza, so too does Sappho plunge into a subterranean ontology of oppression, suffering and death. The accusation against her oppressor is direct: the possessive pronoun ‘thy’ brings Phaon to the scene, bracketing off his factual absence, making him into an absent-present interlocutor, and thus enabling Sappho to hold an imaginary dialogue with him.¹¹² Phaon’s “scorn and pride” (l. 11) are pinpointed as the cause of

¹¹² Here Sappho effectively deploys the power of words, whose inherent function, as Heidegger claims, “lies in letting something be seen by pointing it out” (56). The German philosopher retrieves the original sense of the Greek λόγος and discovers that languages consists in “making manifest” or “accessible” anything “to the other party” (56). Sappho, too, seems to be aware of this faculty behind words and uses a

Sappho's pain. He exerts a cruel tyranny that sinks Sappho underneath, bows her heart, and exposes her despair.

Sappho's despair, however, raises a legitimate suspicion: when she declares exclamatorily how her heart "despairs" (l. 13), the painful verb is rather ambiguous. Its tense indicates an action that has not come to an end and implies that, as a matter of fact, Sappho's hope has not yet died out altogether. Her present despair hints not only at an on-going loss of hope, but also at some retention thereof. It is as though her hope rested between prevalence and expiration –in decline, yet still in existence. On the grounds of this tenuous sense of hope, Sappho maintains her imaginary dialogue in progress, addresses Phaon through an interjectory apostrophe, and claims: "weary is my pain" (l. 14). The adjective she employs in this line is a sharp choice. Her pain has grown tired and exhausted, yet without meaning that it is now weak or dormant. In fact, it seems her affliction is exhausted because of itself as though its weariness were *causa sui*. The cause and effect commingle into the experience of pain: it tires itself of itself as a result of its own magnitude and extremity, which are implicit in the interjection and the apostrophe –the phrase "O Phaon" (l. 14) does sound effectively like a heartfelt exclamation from Sappho's afflicted heart.

Such is the extremity of Sappho's grief that only a hyperbole can aptly verbalise it: "The tears that from my eyelids rain" (l. 15). The lyric I projects or throws the description of her crying beyond all limits –of figuration– to adequately measure the depth of her own pain. With this implied pluvial metaphor, the hyperbole does not necessarily alter or exaggerate what Sappho is undergoing: rather, it serves to show her emotional profundity perhaps by mediating between an extreme affect and its possible ineffability. In this sense, one may think that the tears/rain association operates as the only topological approximation available to express an immense pain that, without its dramatic hyperbole, would run the risk of total misrepresentation or inexpressibility.¹¹³

Nevertheless, the pluvial outpouring of Sappho's tears leads to no liberation or catharsis: "Ease not my cares" (l. 16). Her suffering persists and even induces terrible

direct vocative reference to Phaon to make him manifest or accessible (imaginarily). The Sapphic *λόγος* thus becomes a mechanism to bridge the painful schism between lover and beloved or at least to sustain the hope of erotic plenitude.

¹¹³ In this regard, I understand hyperbole as a way, according to Seneca, to affirm "what is incredible" or impossible "in order that they might be thought to be as much so as possible" (7.23). Put otherwise, the figure of hyperbole enables one to address an ineffable or abstruse truth in a manner that makes it intelligible and credible.

consequences for her own physical integrity, turning her into a somewhat decadent figure: “My beauty droops and fades away” (l. 17). It is clear that, without Phaon and only under his disdain, Sappho succumbs to an ontology –a necrology even– of decline, decay, and death. In her loveless existence, everything is underneath, bowed, trampled, despairing, tearing apart, raining, drooping, and fading away. This insistent aesthetic of decay, together with the manifest simile that likens her appearance to a “trampled blossom” (l. 18), returns the poem inevitably to the first stanza and reaffirms the correlation between a heart-stricken Sappho and a devastated natural landscape.

The shepherds, the footsteps, and especially, the dew can all be identified with Phaon’s conduct of oppression and tyranny. In particular, the dew typifies him most closely: just like the dew, which once brought life and now accompanies death, Phaon is a source both of bliss and pain for Sappho. He can either inspire her most sanguine dreams or sink her underneath a rain of tears. Moreover, to complete the analogy, it is self-evident that Sappho and the hyacinth share the same dismal fate: both lie broken, pressed, bowed, crushed, withered, and bathed in tears. Their ontological position is determined by the preposition ‘underneath’ that appears to become, in actual fact, a supra-position, i.e., a predominant word that not accidentally takes place of pride in the first line of the second stanza and captures her submission and vulnerability under the tyranny of her scornful beloved. The overt indictment against this despotism or *underneathing* is formulated as a rhetorical question in the two closing lines of poem V: “Why must thou tread me into earth / So dim in death, so bright at birth?” (ll. 19-20). With these dramatic words, Sappho prolongs her ambiguous conversation with an absent-present Phaon until the very end in order to raise her grief-stricken voice against the burial she is undergoing. Her beloved not only afflicts her with his scorn and pride: he is, in fact, killing her –*earthing* her. His despise is forcing or treading her into the darkness of death. Sappho lies broken and moribund like the withered hyacinth on the threshold of her demise, between life and death.

The final question Sappho poses participates in her tragedy. Although it interpellates an external addressee and involves him into a fictitious interlocution, it is *au fond* a tragic question in that it is radically open, forever suspended, and doomed to receive no answer in view of its inaccessibly proud and contemptuous interlocutor. The question functions as a rhetorical locus of both enablement and failure: it enables Sappho to approach, confront, and even accuse her beloved, and yet its intrinsic rhetoricity implies that the

interlocution is internally broken, incomplete, and ultimately monologic. Such internal brokenness may also be discerned in the form of poem V, for it presents a couple of ten-line stanzas that bear a close resemblance to the structure and rhyme scheme of a *sonnatina due* –composed entirely of couplets– with the significant difference, however, that there are two unruly lines in poem V that break the pattern at its core. The connotation of this breakage is inevitably extensible to the semantics of disunion that dominates the entire poem. The separated couplet –with one line above and the other underneath– phenomenalisises the distance, hierarchy and detachment between Sappho and Phaon. Their dialogue –or possibility of unity– “broken lies” (l. 4).

4.4. A Suspended Ophelia: The Waters of Oblivion and the Composing Body in Decomposition

Unfolding after the ode of praise devoted to Erinna in poem VI, the seventh lyric is a regressive one: it returns *Long Ago* to the previous narrative of Sappho's failure and ongoing death, the liminal seashore, the *underneathing* or tyrannical oppression, and the elegiac form par excellence –the English quatrain that also shaped poem II. In this manner, the Sapphic (auto)biography maintains its internal coherence intact, follows a pattern of narrative continuity, and even develops a sense of teleology that aims to show the entire erotic evolution of its lyric I. In poem VII, the opening stanza resumes the fictitious yet broken dialogue between Sappho and Phaon by addressing the fisherman imperatively:

STIR not the shingle with thy boat,
It groans beneath the keel;
Still on the senseless waters float,
Until thy heart can feel;

Keep to AEgaean tracts of fair,
Invulnerable sea;
The land cries out in pain to bear
One who from love is free.

Yea, linger 'mid the barren foam,
Ungreeted, out of reach
Of those who watch the sailor home
On Mitylene's beach.

Oh, I forget that Love's own Queen
Is called the Ocean-born;
Forth from the wine-dark waves, first seen,
She sprang in grace forlorn:

Forget that once across the sea,
Thou, with thy swinging oar,
Did'st row the goddess mightily,
Careless of coin, to shore.

She gave thee beauty—love's delight
Would give thee. Sail away!
Learn from the natal waves her might,
Then joyous seek the bay (ll. 1-24).

In the first quatrain, Sappho's use of the imperative conveys a different modulation from her previous peremptory utterances predominantly present in poem II: rather than

dictating or commanding, she seems to be entreating and imploring her beloved to put a halt to his oppressive behaviour in a lyric that becomes a supplication or deprecation in its entirety. The portrayal of Phaon's oppression acquires a new symbolic vehicle: while in poem V it was the violent footsteps of shepherds that trampled Sappho underneath her beloved's scorn, now it is his boat that inflicts all its weight upon the shingle, which correlates directly with the figure of the moribund hyacinth and, by extension, with Sappho herself. With this analogical change, the symbolic magnitude of the crushing or the tyranny increases to a hyperbolic –and nautical– extent, and so does in proportion the suffering of the lyric subject, who now “groans beneath the keel” (l. 2).

The shingle, a metaphoric importation from the Greek epigraph (*χέραδας*), creates a lamentable image of Sappho: like a heap of stones on the seashore, she is torn to pieces, scattered, dismembered, bearing the burden of Phaon's incommensurable contempt, groaning in her subjection, and floating “on the senseless waters” (l. 3). In this state, which evokes a scene of gradual death by drowning, Sappho bears a close resemblance to the Shakespearean figure of Ophelia. Both women, after all, partake of a symbolic tradition that associates them with madness, erotomania, lovesickness, and suicide, but it is the motif of death that particularly underpins the link between the Sappho/shingle correlation and the Danish maiden's fate. According to Queen Gertrude in *Hamlet*, a deranged Ophelia approaches a willow tree, climbs it up to reach for a handful of flowers, and falls off with them after the sudden breaking of a branch. For a while she stays afloat, sings her last melody, and eventually drowns to death:

There is a willow grows aslant a brook,
That shows his hoar leaves in the glassy stream;
Therewith fantastic garlands did she come
Of crow-flowers, nettles, daisies, and long purples
That liberal shepherds give a grosser name,
But our cold maids do “dead men's fingers” call them:
There, on the pendent boughs her coronet weeds
Clambering to hang, an envious sliver broke;
When down the weedy trophies and herself
Fell in the weeping brook. Her clothes spread wide;
And, mermaid-like, awhile they bore her up:
Which time she chanted snatches of old tunes;
As one incapable of her own distress,
Or like a creature native and endued
Unto that element: but long it could not be
Till that her garments, heavy with her drink,
Pulled the poor wretch from her melodious buy
To muddy death (4.7.190-208).

The differences are self-evident between the Sapphic submersion beneath Phaon's boat and Ophelia's bucolic fall –with “her weedy trophies” (198). For one thing, the nautical violence clashes with the Shakespearean floral delicacy. For another, in Sappho's case, the waters upon her are “senseless” (l. 3) and “invulnerable” (l. 6), whereas Ophelia falls into a brook that seems to weep and deplore the noblewoman's death. However, although Sappho endures a more ominous and overwhelming burden than a subtle bunch of weeds, she finds herself equally afloat, suspended in the water, and singing perhaps her last tunes just as Ophelia does before drowning. The *afloatness* common to both women is Sappho's predominant ontological position in poem VII. Her love-death song is ongoing, but her future lies in suspension, adrift, and dependent on Phaon's emotional will. Sappho stays paralysed, on hold, in pain, trampled, agonising, and yet still persistent and intent upon bending her beloved's senselessness. In some way, she appears to be a half-dead or half-living Ophelia facing the imminent possibility of her demise, but refusing to stop her tunes and erotic fantasies.¹¹⁴

As mentioned above, the first stanza of poem VII restores the narrative order, adds further layers of violent and deathly symbolism to Sappho's desire, and insists upon the narrow dialectic between the lyric subject and nature. Nonetheless, no powerful strategy of mediation between lover and beloved is devised. Phaon's tyrannous dominion lingers on. Sappho remains either underneath or afloat, but radically far from her ferryman. Lover and beloved are then two separate poles with no intermediary. It is in the second stanza that Sappho addresses the “invulnerable sea” (l. 6) as a potential mediator. Well aware that Phaon spends most of his time fishing with his boat, Sappho invokes the sea –immune and powerful like Phaon and completely unlike her– to assist her in keeping her beloved near the shore where she lies in wait: “Keep to Aegean tracts of fair” (l. 5). Nevertheless, her request is tragically impossible, hopeless, and even preposterous. She wishes the sea to stop its course, remain within her reach, and detain Phaon's boat. No prospects of an auspicious answer can possibly favour her. Not only is the sea invulnerable: it is also unstoppable, volatile and senseless. In her invocation, Sappho does not realise an essential contradiction in her marine representations: she turns to the sea for help and mediation shortly after pointing out its senselessness in the previous

¹¹⁴Pre-Raphaelite John Everett Millais' painting *Ophelia* (c. 1851) offers a celebrated and suggestive Victorian representation of this agonising figure and allows one to imagine Sappho precisely in her place. See Figure IX in the Appendix to this thesis.

stanza. The sea holds a problematic status, for it could be Sappho's most advantageous ally, but by its own very nature it is capricious, unrelenting, and thus an adversary.

The intrinsic antagonism between Sappho and the sea generates some conflict in the central lines of the second quatrain. As indicated before, the sea is described as "invulnerable" (l. 6), whereas the land that Sappho inhabits –and operates rhetorically as an anthropomorphism for her– "cries out in pain" (l. 7) as if prolonging and intensifying the initial groaning of the shingle. This divisive emotional geography that poem VII demarcates internally becomes all the more patent in the last line of the quatrain: "One who is from love free" (l. 8). The sea offers Phaon freedom, autonomy, and even its own epithet –invulnerability. By contrast, the Sapphic land is a sterile and oppressed space of waiting, suffering, subjection, and death.

In order to confront and overcome her emotional sterility, which is projected onto the "barren foam" (l. 9) where she floats, Sappho persists in calling on the sea to linger steadily and retain her beloved "ungreeted, out of reach / Of those who watch the sailor home" (ll. 10-11). With these lines, the spectrum of antagonism and rivalry enlarges. The sea is not the only adversary against Sappho's desire: those awaiting Phaon in his homeland also come across as potential enemies. The sea keeps him on the move –far from Sappho's reach. His relations can always receive, greet, and have him –much to Sappho's jealousy. She thus wants him to remain ungreeted. His *ungreetedness* –or isolation– signifies detention, possession and bliss on Sappho's land.

In the fourth stanza of poem VII, the lyric subject learns that the mediation of the sea she has been imperatively seeking will not work in her favour. The opening interjection functions as a contrastive marker that introduces Sappho's reconsideration of her erotic strategy. In a triad of intertextual lines, she remembers that, beyond its mutability and senselessness, the sea is the natal home of "Love's own Queen" (l. 13) –i.e., the Greek goddess Aphrodite– whose birth took place, according to Hesiod's *Theogony*, in the middle of the ocean as a result of the creative contact between Uranus's genital blood –after his castration– and the waters (190-205). This profound connection between the deity and the sea adds yet another figure of antagonism to Sappho's stratagem. For, as in the fifth stanza, she explains with another mythical intertext that Aphrodite and Phaon once had a special encounter in which he kindly and disinterestedly sailed her to the shore and, in recompense, received the divine gift of beauty (Wharton 16). In

recalling this story, Sappho grows to regard the beautiful goddess as a rival, treats her as another object of jealousy, and even asks her beloved to forget the divine encounter altogether. Since she notices that the sea cannot arbitrate by any means, much less with the menace of a possible reunion between Phaon and the Ocean-born, Sappho refrains from seeking mediation and addresses her fisherman directly once again. In her final supplication, she intends to persuade him that the gift of beauty the goddess bestowed upon him can also be found “in love’s delight” (l. 21) –with her. The lyric I then urges him to sail away from the others and reach the bay where Sappho awaits him.

In poem VII, the Sapphic subject continues to be ontologically irresolute and undefined: she suffers from utter oppression, depends entirely upon Phaon’s will, lies suspended in Ophelian afloatness, and yet her ethics of antagonism and persistence does not subside at all. Although she falls victim to a lethal contempt, she nonetheless prolongs her quest, requests, rivalries, and strategies of conquest. Her condition of victimhood does not enfeeble her in all respects: while a victim, she refuses to accept defeatism and loss. Her erotic quest lingers on. Indeed, Sappho persists in her attempt to transform her beloved into an unmediated interlocutor, even though this attempt seems to bear no fruit not just because of Phaon’s emotional inaccessibility, but also because he may perhaps be dead *towards* Sappho. In lyric IX, the lyric voice suggests such a scenario of projected death, where Sappho accounts for her failure to reach and attract her beloved by attributing her own state of numbness and foreseeable demise to him.

THOU hast not parted from the sun,
Thou art not dead,
Numbered with fickle ghosts as one
By Hermes led.

Thou still hast breath and memory,
Can'st seek and yearn;
Yet wholly thou forgettest me,
Or I discern

The truth—thou lov'st another more.
Assuageless pain!
Betake thee to Oblivion's shore!
Wilt thou profane

Love's wine by drinking twice the draught
Of that red tide
We lifted to our lips and quaffed
When side by side?

To thee let Lethe's drowsing wave

Its solace give!
I, one bright memory to save,
Will weep and live (ll. 1-20).

Addressing Phaon directly and reproachfully, Sappho makes what seems to be a plainly empirical claim: “THOU hast not parted from the sun” (l. 1). In this line, she merely attests to her beloved’s living presence in a declarative and apparently pointless way. However, the reference to the sun carries an added meaning that derives from lyric VIII, where the solar star is intimately associated with the omnipotent, splendid and glorious agency of Eros. Thus, if Phaon remains under the sun’s influence, he is then susceptible to love and accessible to Sappho. The first stanza of poem IX insists on the evident fact that Phaon is alive and hence available, yet the allusion to Hermes in the closing line raises a possible contradiction and intimates a very different picture. In Greek myths, the god Hermes is an ontologically unstable and unfixed figure: he inhabits a liminal position between life and death, the Olympus and the Hades, or between divinities and mortals (Brisson 36-38). Although Sappho clearly remarks that her beloved has not been accompanied by this nomadic deity to the underworld, Phaon nevertheless appears to bear some resemblance to Hermes. Obviously enough, Phaon is not dead, and yet a speculative question arises as to whether he is truthfully and fully alive in Sappho’s reality. The second stanza seems to answer this question in the affirmative: Phaon preserves his breath, memory, and identity. Nonetheless, the affirmative answer is not completely convincing for Sappho. She complains: “Wholly thou forgettest me” (l. 7). Although he stays alive and full of his own memory from an objectively detached perspective, Phaon does appear dead and memoryless from Sappho’s viewpoint. He erases her and himself. As it were, he dies towards or in relation to her. In eradicating her from his memory and mentally killing her, Phaon perishes himself and disappears from Sappho’s world –from any possibility of a co-being with her. He becomes a “fickle ghost” (l. 3) for Sappho.

Interestingly, the act of forgetting entails the existence of a common past experience between Sappho and her beloved –a memory of union that Phaon obliterated and one that was positive and significant enough to make Sappho lament her beloved’s oblivion. In the fourth stanza, the lyric voice reveals that lover and beloved did once share “Love’s wine [...] When side by side” (ll. 13-16). This is the first occasion on which Sappho seems to confess that she, indeed, met her loved one, gained his favour at least

for a moment, and indulged with him in a Dionysian erotic intoxication. In such a scenario, the affective tyranny against Sappho was overturned, and the possibility of romantic fusion germinated hopefully for the very first time.

Nonetheless, as discussed above, Phaon fell back into his previous indifference and even opted for direct forgetfulness. In pain and reproachful, Sappho identifies at least two interrelated reasons for his beloved's hostility: oblivion itself and betrayal. Between the third and fourth stanzas, she makes a realisation: "I discern / The truth – Thou lov'st another more" (ll. 8-9). Here the value of the truth she discovers conceals a few implications. The truth is not merely the product of an act of discernment, deduction or cognition: its character transcends the limits of any notion of veracity as an intellectual discovery or an epistemic aspiration. The truth acquires a sensible, material and somatic dimension, signifying an "Assuageless pain" for Sappho (l. 10). After her discernment, she feels the heft of the truth as an affective magnitude and an unbearable fact. It is, therefore, a truth that is both discerned and felt –mental and corporeal.

Furthermore, the truth holds a paradoxical relationship with the central phenomenon of oblivion. In Greek, truth and oblivion –*aletheia* and *lethe*– are antonyms: the former designates an act of revelation, unconcealment or unhiddenness,¹¹⁵ whereas the latter refers simply to an act of forgetting or casting something out of one's memory and consciousness. In poem IX, the lyric speaker seems to play with both terms: she uses them purposefully in the same stanza and adds an explicit reference to the mythological river Lethe. What surprises in her usage is the absence of contradiction or conflict between the two terms. In fact, the truth Sappho discerns involves them both. Her truth or unconcealment is her own concealment, oblivion and extinction from Phaon's mind. In other words, her truth is the etymological opposite of itself: it embodies the paradigm of a painful truth that affirms and means what it should deny.

After discovering the truth, Sappho refuses to accept her beloved's sacrilegious betrayal and urges him to forget her: "Betake thee to Oblivion's shore" (l. 11). In this case, the shore acquires an additional value in the Sapphic geography of desire and pain: in addition to symbolising fluidity and mutability, it represents a mythological site of loss

¹¹⁵ Curiously enough, this same notion of truth is fully embraced by Heidegger in his magnum opus: for him, the truth does not function in the mode of an "agreement" between facts and propositions (56), but rather as a process of taking things "out of their hiddenness" (56). In other words, the truth is a project of discovery and revelation that seeks to show things in their complete significance and avoid their fall into oblivion.

and erasure. In ancient Greece, it was believed that, after one died and descended into Hades, one's spirit drank from the Lethe's waters to lose its memory, consciousness, and identity. In sending her beloved to the river of oblivion, Sappho transforms the shore into a space of loss and death where Phaon is expected and encouraged to erase the only memory he has shared with Sappho. In this manner, the correlation between the shore and death amplifies: before it was Sappho herself that floated as if moribund over the shingle, and now it is her most precious remembrance of love that is bound to be swept away by the inexorable flux of the sea.

For Sappho, betrayal constitutes an outright scandal and a profanity. In her economy of eroticism, "drinking twice" (l. 13) the wine of love is not option. Instead, she prefers her loved one to drink from "Lethe's drowsing wave" (l. 17) and lose every memory of her altogether in spite of the fact that she knows what will become of her after being forgotten. As soon as Phaon drinks from the river of oblivion, Sappho will become just "a memory to save" (l. 19), a remembrance in herself, a prisoner of the most precious memory she once shared with her beloved, an entrapped consciousness, and a nostalgic lover. Indeed, her future will be marked by a profound nostalgia that will condition her transcendence under the determinism of the past –of a memory. Sappho will "weep and live" (l. 20) in a way that limits and determines her future tragically. Her future will not transcend or outlive the tears from the past. Her weeping will determine her life in a precarious existence that will carry on with a tragic sense of vitalism. As a forgotten memory in itself, Sappho's life will inevitably be closer and closer to death –a death by weeping.

As *Long Ago* advances, Sappho's life becomes all the more unsustainable. In poem XI, the very first line exposes her sterile and hopeless reality: she does not dream anymore. The oneiric idealism that she espoused in the second lyric of the volume has proven to be a fleeting and pointless aspiration. Neither the dreams nor the lies in which she once wished to dwell sustain her now. Her desiring imagination is drying up. Her fantasies are nullified by the crudeness of her objective reality. The real imposes itself upon the ideal, debunking any formal or imaginary simulation of romantic fulfilment and placing Sappho in an unpromising state of dreamlessness and defeatism.

DREAMLESS from happy sleep I woke,
On me the piercing sunlight broke,

I drank the laughter of the breeze
Divine, O Cypris, from thy seas,
Then lithely in thick robe I sprang;
To me it seemed my body sang—
"Death is an evil." Phaon bent
Above his nets, magnificent.
"The wise immortals never die."
Phaon grew conscious I stood by;
And, oh! to bury in thy wave,
Lethe, one day, the glance he gave! (ll. 1-12).

In these two stanzas, Sappho elaborates on the motif of her death-in-life and amplifies its capital significance. In assessing her existential plight, the lyric voice establishes a clear opposition between the alternate reality of dormancy where she could find rest and the barren facticity that she endures: it is the "happy sleep" she renounces in the first line that suggests the plausible existence of a post-real or perhaps utopian sphere of blissful unconsciousness. Her placid oblivion entails a peace of mind that contrasts with the oblivion that she identifies in lyric IX as the only antidote against Phaon's contempt and betrayal. In this sense, the phenomenon of forgetfulness develops into a double semantics of pleasure and pain: it assuages Sappho in her utopian sleep and afflicts her simultaneously in that it turns her into the object of a preferable yet grievous forgetting.

After her happy night of sleep comes to an end, Sappho awakes to a fatal encounter with the external world. The day begins and so does her agony. The morning sun no longer shines down with the splendour, glory and erotic omnipotence that it displayed in poem VIII: it is now piercing and violent in how it breaks down on Sappho. In a more hostile vein, the wind seems to poke fun at her misery: she remembers that, after she woke, she "drank the laughter of the breeze" (l. 3). The image of Sappho drinking indirectly from the sea evokes the mythological reference to the river Lethe in lyric IX. The mocking breeze seems to act as an intermediary between Sappho and the waters of death. In taking her first breath of the day, Sappho comes closer and closer to the shore of the fatal river of oblivion. The breeze she inhales shortens the distance between her and her own demise. The agents behind this forthcoming tragedy are represented by natural forces. The piercing sun, the breeze and the sea form a common front against Sappho's life. Once her very analogue, nature has now become complicit in Sappho's suffering.

Despite such forces attacking her upon waking up, Sappho manages to rise. The poem reads: "Then lithely in thick robe I sprang" (l. 5). However, in this resurgent act, a

particular oxymoron occurs: the delicacy and ease of Sappho's springing seems to be at odds with the thickness of her garments, which do not reduce her mobility. To make sense of this suggestive scene, it is possible to imagine Sappho wearing more clothes than a body of her own –as though she were a fickle ghost able to spring with ease and gentleness, for all she carries is nothing but a “thick robe” (l. 5). Her body is perhaps mere delicacy, vapour and even just an ethereal funeral melody. The lyric voice claims: “To me it seemed my body sang” (l. 6). This suggestive line intimates a considerable density of meaning: it appears to formulate, as Yopie Prins would put it, “an inquiry into the phenomenology [...] of seeming” and dying (*Victorian Sappho* 41). Sappho feels detached from her own body, which is perceived just as an appearance, a semblance, a separate object, or a ghostly shadow much more linked to the dead than to a living Sappho. However, she still owns the singing body as an indissoluble part of her own subjectivity. In this regard, the communion between object and subject becomes transparently evinced in the phenomenological status of the body, which is objective and subjective at once. It objectifies the subject, but constitutes the subject itself simultaneously.

In Sappho's case, the seeming of her own body, however detached or ghostly it may be, represents the physical performance of her own subjectivity, which owns and is owned by a decaying corporality. Her own body performs and undergoes the death it sings. Its lyrics are a funeral melody addressed to herself. Sappho quotes in inverted commas what her body sings and suffers: “Death is an evil [...] The wise immortal never die” (ll. 6 and 8). She envies the immortality of gods and laments the cruelty of a death that is happening to her own body, which is decomposing while singing and composing its own requiem. In this manner, Sappho converts the process of her death into an elegant paradox of creation and self-destruction: her body composes its own decomposition.

In the second sestet of poem XI, Sappho identifies her beloved Phaon as the main agent of her ongoing agony. Despite praising his magnificence, she only finds further reasons to feel humiliated and devastated in his presence. While fishing, Phaon notices Sappho nearby and looks at her in such a manner that she cannot but wish to cast his gaze away to the very depths of oblivion. Indeed, his gaze deals another fatal blow to Sappho's enfeebled heart. Although she does not specify the nature of her beloved's glance, her invocation of Lethe intimates that it was a glance of scorn and pride. In the face of this mortification, Sappho advances closer and closer to the waters of oblivion and the final

encounter with death. In poem XI, her body is not merely portending such an encounter: it is performing it through a lived lyric that sings and enacts the motif of Sappho's death-in-life.

4.5. Sappho's *Sein-Zum-Tode*: Death as a Way to Be (Authentic)

As I have shown in the former sections, the narrative of Sappho's gradual death unfolds consistently and solidly as early as in the first ten poems of *Long Ago*. The presence of death lurks and creeps behind every romantic endeavour that Sappho makes. In fact, her mortal awareness manifests itself through the symbolism of bees and honey, the cryptic language of flowers, the pathetic anthropomorphisation of nature, the crude historicism of meaning, the discernment of a hurtful truth, and even the lyricisation of a decaying body that sings its own death. Although Sappho lives on, her life not only integrates the certainty of death as her most inevitable possibility: it is consubstantial and concurrent with death itself. Her death runs parallel to her life. In Heideggerian terms, Sappho is always already dying. In living she dies.¹¹⁶ Her ongoing death does not constitute a mere natural and general fact of existence: it is lyrically represented as a lived experience. Put otherwise, Sappho is living her death throughout *Long Ago*. As she speaks and sings her lyrics, she is already dying. Her body sings and dances its own decomposition. Her words become a requiem in progress. Accordingly, it would be no exaggeration to state that *Long Ago* could be read as a narrative of being-towards-death, a lyrical ontology detailing Sappho's process from a precarious form of being towards the self-imposing ideal of non-being, or a thanatography whereby Sappho lives and writes her own death as though the very act of living-as-writing were concurrent with the process of dying.

Sappho's experience of being is essentially antithetical to the Platonic understanding of ontology. Her being knows no perfection, no permanence and no coherence. Rather, she fails, contradicts herself, fades and dies slowly. Her existence unfolds as a tragic agon between life and death. On some occasions, Sappho affirms her life, struggles for her romantic ambitions, persists in her erotic and existential quest, resists any unfavourable determinism, and endeavours wholeheartedly to transcend her facticity through her own lies, delusions, dreams and hypothetical propositions. It is true that her resilience proves to be limited in the face of a hostile reality that allows nearly no room for hope and love: Sappho oftentimes loses heart and finds no transcendental meaning in her life, and her being even seems to become its own negative polarity –as though she were more

¹¹⁶ For Heidegger, Dasein embodies "already its end too. The ending [...] does not signify Dasein's Being-at-an-end [*Zu-Ende-sein*], but a Being-towards-the-end [*Sein zum Ende*] of this entity. Death is a way to be, which Dasein takes over as soon as it is" (289).

defined by her non-being than her factual existence. Nonetheless, she counter-balances this tragic fatalism with her most assertive actions: fantasising, dreaming, singing and praying. Her being fades and revives in a constant agon(y) between life and death. In this state, she experiences nothing but failure, self-reanimation and utter instability –or perhaps the only form of stability that she knows is the steadfast experience of struggle and death that she is undergoing.

If Sappho's experience of being opposes Plato's ontological idealism, her experience of non-being discredits the materialism of those like the celebrated Hellenistic philosopher Epicurus, who restricted the thinking of being only to its empirical ante-mortem vitality, assuming that the issue of non-being or mortality constituted an existentially irrelevant phenomenon that comes to pass when one is already gone and hence unable to make sense of it. For Epicurus, the phenomenon of death is "nothing to us, because when we exist, death is not present, and when death is present we do not exist" (22-23). In *Long Ago*, Sappho clearly rejects this positivistic perception of death that oversimplifies and downplays the vast significance of death as if it were merely an empirical, biological or ontical phenomenon that deserves no critical attention. Instead, Sappho approaches death ontologically and as an existential truth that impresses itself on her consciousness, threatens her own self, suspends her everyday structures of being, and shapes her experience of everything in the world. In Heideggerian terminology, her being-in-the-world becomes an all too explicit form of being-towards-death: Sappho lives the world with an acute awareness that her non-being is not just a universally certain possibility, but one that is materialising at the very time of writing herself into being throughout *Long Ago*. What she seems to be writing into being is the very process towards the impending certainty of her non-being. Sappho's being is not so much a possible futural non-being as it is a being immersed in the process of actualising its final possibility. Inevitably, in this limit situation, her comportment cannot embrace a stoic attitude of nonchalance. Her death is too manifest and felt to be left unconsidered or unsung. Sappho assumes the raw truth of her finitude and exposes herself as a fully self-aware *Dasein*, so much so that the consciousness, anticipation and even actualisation of her own death constitute an outstanding part of Michael Field's existential narrative in *Long Ago*.

In his commentary of Martin Heidegger's *Being and Time*, Lee Braver rightly interprets the notion of being-towards-death as implying that "death is a way to be rather than the

finishing off of our being” (80). I contend that Michael Field’s Sappho represents this very doctrine of mortality with clarity: she lives her death not as an alien future event, but as a constant fact that co-exists with the unfolding of her erotic quest, hopes, and dreams. Nonetheless, there is more to the notion of being-towards-death. For Heidegger, our take on the ultimate possibility of death can either be authentic or inauthentic. Those who are inauthentic in the face of their mortality

... agree that ‘one dies.’ This is something they chatter about, and chatter ambiguously, referring to suicide, for example, as ‘doing something silly.’ But they obscure the ever-present possibility, and even the imminence, of my own death. They treat dying as a remote possibility, as something that happens to others but not to myself [...] The authentic person, by contrast, has a constant awareness of the possibility of his own death; he is anxious, though not fearful, in the face of it. He sees his situation and the possibilities it presents to him, and makes a decision among them, in the light of this awareness (Inwood 70).

Sappho’s being-towards-death seems to be fairly authentic. One might argue that she completely lost herself and her will to live as a result of her inability to cope with her beloved’s disdain and neutralise the determinism of her subsequent despair. One might even deduce that she behaved inauthentically, renouncing her own life, letting the burden of her romantic failure weigh fatally upon her destiny, and understanding that her despair could only extinguish itself into death. However, as I have explained in the first analyses of this chapter, Sappho manages to survive her constant feeling of loss, her double sense of loneliness in the absence of her maids and her beloved, and even the very fact that her despair is leading her directly to death. Aware of her fragile mortality, Sappho develops an authentic being-towards-death: without ever denying the actuality and rawness of her death in progress, she nevertheless sees her precarious situation and the possibilities it presents to her, and acts upon them. Instead of paralysing herself in front of the certainty of her finitude, Sappho confronts her plight by seizing the only chances left for her: she sings, dreams, writes and imagines. Although it does not cloud her avid mortal consciousness, her imagination does sustain her alive in the transit towards her last possibility. Sappho lives her own death creatively, authentically and with some kind of heroism that enables her to persevere and hold her ground while composing her own threnody.

As I have been showing in this thesis, the relationship between life and death is not necessarily an antithetical one. Life does not exclude death as its absolute nemesis.

Death does not manifest itself only when life comes to an end. Instead, functioning as a Tiresian figure, Michael Field's Sappho cogently reveals that the boundary line between life and death is rather blurred, unfixed and even merely abstract. In actual fact, life and death share in an intimate structure of co-presence that invalidates any form of binary ontology and calls for an radical metaphysics of openness, one that conceptualises the intricate dealings between being and non-being or between life and its alleged other in a plastic and pluralistic manner. In *Long Ago*, it is such open and dynamic metaphysics that is at work behind Sappho's real experience of death not as an ontic phenomenon alien to her own life, but rather as an intrinsic part of her existence, as a constant way to be, and even as an inescapable condition that she fully recognises and undergoes with authenticity.

CHAPTER V

THE MYTHOPOESIS OF SAPPHO'S *SEIN-ZUM-TODE*

5.1. Sappho and the Birds of Sorrow: The Paradoxical Passion

The process of *Sein-Zum-Tode* that Sappho undergoes throughout *Long Ago* unfolds not only in the sequence of elegiac poems analysed in the previous chapter, but also in an extensive and rich sub-narrative that forms an entire model of mythopoesis focused on reinventing the legendary figure of Sappho more dramatically and representing her life as an existential myth of desire and despair. In this chapter, I seek to gather and discuss the lyrics in which the Fields turn to different classical myths in order to rewrite the Ovidian archetype of Sappho as the radical lover who suffered greatly and died for Phaon. I want to argue that Bradley and Cooper devote a major part of their first poetic volume to weaving a rich mythological narrative that reworks such a romantic archetype in close dialogue with other Graeco-Roman intertexts. What emerges from these reworkings is an original Sappho dramatically characterised as a tragic heroine that allows us to empathise on the basis, as Francis O’Gorman claims, of “a universal sense of human emotions” embodied by Sappho herself (650). As I aim to prove, it is through her figure, her mythical analogues, and her approach to the divine Eros that *Long Ago*

shapes its own mythology of death and desire while tacitly defining the very concept of myth as some form of affective truth –or, in Heideggerian terms, as a site of existential unconcealment.

Poem X is the very first to explore the mythopoetic connections between Sappho's existential drama and other classical figures. In this case, it is the tragic figure of Procne that lends her story of violence, infanticide and metamorphosis to be identified in a subtle and suggestive manner with Sappho. According to the traditional account of the myth, the queen Procne was painfully betrayed and outraged by her husband Tereus when discovering that he had raped her sister Philomela and had cut her tongue to keep his crime a secret. In retaliation, Procne murdered her own son Itys, cooked his body and gave it as food to his father. When Tereus finished his meal, Procne and her sister Philomela brought him the head of his son and gave him to understand he had just eaten his own heir. Tereus burst with fury, grabbed an axe and chased down the two sisters. While escaping and right before being caught, they called upon the gods to save them from Tereus and transform them into birds. Procne turned into a swallow and Philomela into a nightingale.¹¹⁷ In Michael Field's *Long Ago*, the empathic encounter between Sappho and Procne-as-swallow begins with an anthropomorphic apostrophe and a question taken from the Greek epigraph that crowns poem X:

AH, Procne, wherefore dost thou weary me?
Thus flitting out and flitting in,
Thou show'st the restlessness of one love-slighted:
And yet, Pandion's daughter, thou did'st win
Thy Tereus. Though he loved too well
Dumb Philomel,
Tease not the air with this tumultuous wing!
Hast thou no passion for unbosoming?
Such misery
Befits the breast that love hath ne'er delighted;
Thou to thy Thracian boy wert once united. . .
Ah, lovely Procne, wherefore weary me? (ll. 1-12).

The opening inquiry is not rhetorical: it seems to serve to mediate between the Sapphic subject and the invoked queen. Procne, however, does not respond in words. It is her

¹¹⁷ The most fertile version of this myth appears in Ovid's *Metamorphoses* (VI. 382-674) as the beginning of a cycle of tragic love stories that Brooks Otis famously labelled "The Pathos of Love" (166). Curiously enough, the Procne myth also inaugurates the cycle of classical reworkings that the Fields employ to further dramatise and characterise Sappho's romantic pathos.

movements that articulate the answer: “Thus flitting out and flitting in, / Thou show’st the restlessness of one love-slighted” (ll. 2-3). The miserable bird grows desperate, nervous and repetitious in her flight for a reason that Sappho understands “too well” (l. 5), as the poem claims: Procne is heartily wounded, slighted and devastated. Her husband betrayed and wronged her in the most painful manner –by raping her own sister. As a victim of love, Sappho can somehow identify with the restless swallow.

However, the lyric voice discerns a significant ambivalence in Procne’s tragedy. Sappho considers the Thracian queen fortunate in that she “dids’t win / Thy Tereus” (ll. 4-5). Procne did conquer her beloved, married him, and even bore him a child. Sappho cannot help but take notice of a major difference in intensity between her own sorrows and those of the restless bird. Yet, despite this contrast, Sappho adds a capitalised “Though” (l. 5) to reaffirm and revert to the empathic analogy with Procne, central to poem X: “Though he loved too well / Dumb Philomel” (ll. 5-6). What Tereus perpetrated against Procne’s sister seems to be sufficient reason for Sappho to reconsider the queen’s tragedy and empathise with her restlessness. As a result of this rhetorical motion from differentiation to reconnection, Procne falls within a paradoxical portrayal that presents as fortunate and unfortunate at once, as loved and de-loved, luckier than Sappho, yet equally slighted and distressed.

The swallow’s despair and restlessness becomes particularly perceptible through an effective metaphor of violence against the wind: “Tease not the air with this tumultuous wing” (l. 7), Sappho tells Procne. The queen flies aggressively, batters the air, and transforms her wing into an oxymoron in itself. Hers is not a light, thin and delicate wing, but a tumid agitated one: it is heavily swollen with grief, anger, and slight. In her empathic dialogue, Sappho asks Procne whether she wishes to unload or mitigate such affective heaviness: “Hast thou no passion for unbosoming?” (l. 8). The bridge of analogy and empathy is set up with this particular question. Sappho and Procne, two specular figures, can offer one another solace, consolation, and understanding based on their common experience of sorrow. Nonetheless, Sappho herself answers the question tragically: no comfort appears to be possible for either of them. Their loveless hearts can only feel and harbour misery: “Such misery” (l. 9), says the lyric voice, “befits the breast that love hath never delighted” (l. 10). The logic here is severely tragic: lovelessness leads automatically and inevitably to a grief that has no remedy.

In Procne's case, the feeling of brokenness and pain is double in its cause: she lost her husband and her child. Her grief has no possible antidote and no cease. Sappho closes the poem with the opening question: "Ah, lovely Procne, wherefore weary me?" (l. 12). The response is clear: Sappho can offer her no assistance. The implication is equally clear: like the miserable swallow, Sappho's lovelessness cannot be assuaged in any way. As the lyric voice claimed in poem IX, hers is an "Assuageless pain" (l. 10).

Shortly afterwards, in poem XII, Sappho enlarges the scope of her mythical analogies and likens herself to the figure of Philomela after her metamorphosis into a nightingale. This time the comparison is framed within a long lyric that may be broken down into two interrelated sections. The first encompasses the first four stanzas and presents a bucolic topography of abundance, peace, pleasure, and even Dionysian excitement:

SPRING'S messenger we hail,
The sweet-voiced nightingale;
She sings where ivy weaves
Blue berries with dark leaves.

Beside each forest-root
The lilies freshly shoot,
Narcissi crown the grass,
Bees hum, and toil, and pass.

The glades are soft with dew,
The chestnuts bud anew,
And fishers set their sails
To undelusive gales.

The shepherd's pipe is heard,
The villages are stirred
To shout the wine-god's praise,
And jest in rural ways (ll. 1-16).

In this opening section, the portrayal of nature allows no room for death, destruction or sorrow: it is perhaps a natural environment that offers Sappho some solace, distraction, and escapism from her lifeless and loveless reality. The atmosphere she describes in this scene is a unanimous congress of union, freshness, delicacy, melody, and jest.¹¹⁸ The ivy weaves garlands of blueberries and creates symbols of affective fusion. The lilies

¹¹⁸ This topography recalls the discourse of utopianism that Victorian Hellenists developed when evoking Sappho's ancient Lesbos. For John A. Symonds, the island of Lesbos was home to a plethora of cultivated ladies who enjoyed all "the luxuries and elegances of life which that climate and the rich valleys of Lesbos could afford" (128).

and narcissi embellish the scene and embody the powers of rebirth and perennial joy. The nightingale only sings with transparent sweetness. The bees, unlike their desperate and ravenous sisters depicted in poem III, follow their own routine in all tranquillity. The dew, formerly allied with the stealthy irruption of death, now spreads delicacy over the glades. The wind, whose laughter poked fun at Sappho's misery only a poem ago, favours the activity of the fishers. Once characterised as agents of violence, the shepherds now play music, uplift their villagers, and participate in a Bacchic encounter of communal merriment. All in all, the topography that frames lyric XII constitutes a sprouting, thriving and celebration of life in all its natural aestheticism.

Ranging from the fifth stanza to the last, the second section does not interrupt the first abruptly, nor does it develop a contrary scenario. Both segments form a continuum and a spatial unity that simply evolves into an affective encounter between Sappho and the nightingale with the necessary manifestation, however, of the pain they share. In the opening stanza of the first part, the spring bird appears timidly and starts to sing with her sweet voice while the surrounding nature orchestrates the idyllic atmosphere described above. Yet, the content of her song is only revealed in the second part of the poem, which reads as follows:

Then breaks the piercing note
From Philomel's wild throat,
Passion's supremest pain
That may not hope again.

Zeus sends the gracious Spring,
And must her herald sing
In kindly-bowered retreat
Only of love's defeat?

Ah, woe is me! I learn,
When light and flowers return,
Love's anguish, cark and care;
Its infinite despair

Comes back, and makes me mad,
Telling how all is glad:
Then swell the throb, the wail,
The want, O nightingale! (ll. 17-32).

In the first line of this part, the violent adjectives and the iterative allusion to the tragic myth of Procne's sister suggest an important turnover towards the narrative of grief, despair and death that prevails Michael Field's Sapphic rewriting. The nightingale,

associated with the raped and mutilated Philomela, no longer partakes of the Dionysian celebration that was unfolding in the first part of the poem. Rather, she appears as the herald not of the advent of the spring, but of “Passion’s supremest pain” (l. 19) and “love’s defeat” (l. 24). Her news is neither jubilant nor mellifluous. Her throat is neither dumb nor sweet. The metamorphosis Philomela undergoes results in a certain form of paradox: it liberates her and restores her mutilated voice, and yet it condemns her at the same time to a prescriptive melancholy that Sappho laments through this rhetorical question: “must her herald sing / In kindly-bowered retreat / Only of love’s defeat” (ll. 21-23). In becoming a nightingale, Philomela recovers her faculty of speech, but the price for this recompense is the exclusive duty –the “must” in Sappho’s question– of composing songs of despair and misery.

Equally paradoxical and revealing is the use of the word “Passion” in the fifth quatrain. Its most usual meaning marks an opposition to the phrase that follows it: “supremest pain” (l. 19). Passion functions as a synonym for love and desire. However, it may be that it forms a pleonasm with the pain that ends the line: originally, passion designates suffering, enduring and, in particular, Christ’s agony and martyrdom. Thus, its semantic spectrum covers the ambivalent experience both of Philomela and Sappho herself. As explained above, the melancholy bird becomes liberated from her forced dumbness and regains the pleasure of speech as singing, but she also encounters a severe limitation: her songs can only express grief and defeatism. In Sappho’s case, the double phenomenon of passion defines the very nature of her desire, which amounts essentially to a form of pleasure-cum-pain. It is a desire that keeps Sappho alive, afloat, burning, and on her erotic quest, but it is also a destructive kind of desire: she suffers, withers and nearly drowns underneath the affective tyranny that arises from her own passion.

Standing against the backdrop of a booming and Dionysian life, where “all is glad” (l. 30) and “light and flowers return” (l. 26) with the beginning of spring, Sappho has to endure another kind of return: “infinite despair / Comes back” (ll. 28-29). It is suggested here that, before Philomel sings her sorrowful and “piercing” song, Sappho sidetracks herself from her own grief, immerses herself in the festive welcoming of spring, and manages to experience some escapism. However, once the nightingale initiates her threnody, Sappho is inevitably induced to remember and relive “Love’s anguish, cark and care” (l. 27). For her, the overall bliss that opens the poem now comes to an end with her grief resettling again. Sappho exasperates, grows mad and pronounces a final

order addressed to the sad bird: “swell the throb, the wail, / The want, O nightingale” (ll. 31-32). The swelling that Sappho demands can either mean a conclusive culmination of the threnody that is fusing her own passion with the bird’s grief or an intensification that ends up consuming her with utter hopelessness and even contaminating the entire bucolic scene with “anguish, cark and care” (l. 27). In either case, what poem XII shows plainly is a Sappho writing herself into a fluctuant topography in which she wavers between an idyllic shelter of escapism and an “infinite despair” (l. 28) at the mercy of Philomela’s song –sweet and sanguine initially, but then piercing and disheartening.

5.2. From Aphrodite as Tragic Double to a Ghostly Sappho

In XXV, Sappho continues exploring the filiations of her pain with classical myth and, particularly, with a special version of the Aphrodite myth. Here the goddess of love and beauty appears in her most vulnerable and precarious state, completely divested of her power, profoundly smitten with a mortal hunter named Adonis and dramatically humanised.¹¹⁹ In the first stanza, after evoking a bucolic beauty that is to fade away in the imminent future, the lyric poem presents Aphrodite facing the death of her cherished Adonis, who never grew to love her:

Ah for Adonis! So
The virgins cry in woe:
Ah, for the spring, the spring,
And all fleet blossoming—
The delicate and slight
Anemones, rose-bright,
With buds flushed in and out,
Like Aphrodite's pout
When she is soft and coy;
Ah for the mortal boy,
Who would not hold her dear,
And now is dying here (ll. 1-12).

The demise of Adonis marks the end of the spring-summer cycle and the beginning of the cold seasons.¹²⁰ All forms of life and fertility await their ineluctable decay, the loss of their golden splendour, the extinction of their fragrance, and the final arrival of a death-like darkness:

Ah for Adonis! Show,
Ye virgins, what ye know!
The white narcissi breathe
Between the grass, and sheathe
Their fragrance as they die;
From the low bushes nigh,
Mimosa's golden dust
A little later must
Be squandered on decay:
And can the fair youth stay,

¹¹⁹ The most popular and fertile version of this myth is Ovid's *Metamorphoses* (X.503–60, 708–39), where Adonis plays the role of a reckless hunter who dies in the clutches of a wild boar and causes Venus ineffable grief. The goddess “sprinkled nectar over his blood, from which sprouted the flower anemone” (Segal 8).

¹²⁰ Associating Adonis with the cycles of nature, Michael Field interprets the myth of the beautiful hunter, in line with other mythologists such as James George Frazer, as “a key example of the myth and ritual of the dying-and-rising god of vegetation” (Segal 67).

When every lovely bloom
Goes to obscuring doom? (ll. 13-24).

The last lines of the previous stanza raise a question that may be attributed to Aphrodite. The goddess, presumably humbled and heartbroken, expresses her wish to stay with her beloved Adonis against the backdrop of a gloomy and hardly auspicious environment. However, in the next stanza, the lyric voice gives an unequivocally crude answer to the deity's wish:

Ah for Adonis! No,
He must to Hades go:
A goddess may not keep
Safe from the mortal sleep
Those limbs and those young eyes;
Nor can her frantic cries
Recall one transient grace
Secure Immortals trace
In things of earthly mould.
Ungirt and sable-stoled
She wanders through the glades,
And tears her heavenly braids (ll. 25-36).

Adonis cannot stay with Aphrodite: he has to die and she cannot do anything to retain him. Her divine powers prove useless in acting against her beloved's mortality. It seems that her Olympian nature crumbles and gives way to a dramatically humane, desperate and devastated Aphrodite: she cries frantically, loses control of herself, dresses in black, rambles around the woods, and unplaits her hair. In this tragic manner of experiencing the absence of her beloved, Aphrodite ostensibly resembles Sappho. Both the goddess and the poetess share the impotence, frustration and despair that ensue when they face the disdain and absence of their respective beloveds. The painful experience of desire makes both women equal in their approach to lovelessness as a form of death.

Nevertheless, there is a significant difference between Sappho and Aphrodite: unlike the poetess, whose sole truth is that Phaon has completely forgotten her, the deity counts on the certainty that she will meet her beloved again when the winter ends. Adonis will return from the dead and replenish the world with joy and pleasure only to perish once again and reinitiate the incessant cycle of life and death, bliss and sorrow:

Ah for Adonis! Throw
All flowers that quickly grow

And perish on his bed!
He will come back, though dead,
When spring returns, and fill
Cythera's arms until
He must again depart,
Again her bosom smart.
O virgins, joy is sent,
And soon with sorrow blent;
All we have loved is made
To re-appear, and fade (ll. 37-48).

While Aphrodite desperately awaits the certain return of her beloved, Sappho laments the sheer uncertainty, futility and fallibility of her desire. In the first octet of lyric XIX, she portrays herself lying passively, wandering why her erotic life has been a complete failure, and trying to pin the blame on some adverse deity:

WHEN longing on my couch I lay,
The moon shone clear above the bay,
And whether Heaven's queen,
With her dread power,
Did come me and my love between,
Whether in Dian's holy air he chilled,
I know not: the sweet hour
Is unfulfilled (ll. 1-8).

It might be that the ever-jealous Hera interfered between Sappho and Phaon to prevent their union. Perhaps, aiming to retain the Lesbian poetess amongst her virgin maids, the chaste Artemis paralysed Phaon in her “holy air” (l. 6). The lyric subject only speculates here and recognises her utter ignorance concerning her frustrated desire. As remarked above, Sappho is merely aware of one truth: her erotic bliss remains “unfulfilled” (l. 8). Much to her chagrin, Sappho knows that she cannot enjoy the splendid night that surrounds her. The moon shines clearly and powerfully. The occasion lends itself pleasure and fulfilment. As the lyric voice declares, the hour is propitiously “sweet” (l. 7). However, Sappho finds herself all alone bearing the intensity of her own desire. The temporal sweetness she perceives in the night suggests that her eroticism runs high. Her sexual “longing” (l. 1) is zealous, and yet her solitude imposes frustration and dissatisfaction. As a consequence, Sappho opens lyric XIX in a state of sexual suspension and impotence. Her lust clashes with the absence of every possibility of consummation. Sappho lies on her couch in an anxious position between erotic ripeness and objective hostility.

Although Sappho's desire is true and ardent, its exact orientation appears somewhat uncertain in the second octet of poem XIX. By turning to the myth of Sterope and her dear Oenomaus, the lyric voice muses how the Pleiade managed to abandon her sisters and married her beloved.¹²¹

Athwart the grove the Pleiades
Beamed clear —a lovely cluster these.
I mused how it befell
That Sterope
Loved her Oenomaus so well
She flitted from her shining sisters' side,
And in obscurity
Became his bride (ll. 9-16).

Sappho's musing is central to the sexual politics of *Long Ago*: what seems to preoccupy her is the very choice between one sex or the other, between her maiden community and Phaon or, put blatantly, between heterosexuality and homosexuality. Sappho wishes to know how Sterope solved such a choice, renouncing her allegiance to her sisters and privileging her male beloved. Unlike the mythical star, Sappho is at a loss. Her desire is dual, ambiguous and amorphous.¹²² To all appearances, she loves her maids and Phaon in equal measure and it is this ambisexuality that complicates the direction of her desire. Sappho inhabits a problematic erotic indeterminacy that renders the ideal of romantic fulfilment utterly improbable. Whatever choice she makes, Sappho will be blessed and shamed at once:

O blessed, secret, shamed one!
Now e'en the Pleiades are gone;
Now is it full midnight:
Thus should I be
Hid in the tomb from all men's sight!
O Hades, take this heart, these limbs that yearn,
Yea, I will give them thee,
Ash for thine urn! (ll. 17-24).

Independently of her decision, Sappho will feel an inevitable affective dissonance: she will experience the blessing of having attained one of her romantic aspirations, and yet

¹²¹ It seems that here the Fields are turning to the version provided by Pseudo-Apollodorus (3.10.1), for he is one of the fewest classical authors who identify the star-nymph Sterope or Asterope as the wife of the king Oenomaus.

¹²² In this regard, as I explained in the introduction, I concur with Marion Thain's claim that, by means of the Sappho myth reinvented in *Long Ago*, Bradley and Cooper exhibit and construct their "amorphous sexual identity" that challenges any form of sexological rigidity (45).

at the same time she will feel the shame of having abandoned and lost her other object of affection. In any case, with Phaon, the maidens or nobody, Sappho's desire is marked by a perpetual sense of lack, incompleteness, conflict and agony. It seems that Sappho is cognizant of this tragic determinism and thus starts to assume a verbally explicit attitude of defeatism: she invokes Hades and wishes to be embraced by death. In her lonely and barren topography, the stars disappear and the darkness of midnight becomes full. So penetrative is the surrounding darkness that Sappho thinks with a radical illative "Thus" (l. 20) that she should be entombed, hidden and deprived of all light. Moreover, in calling upon Hades to precipitate her death, she decomposes her body into a dramatic synecdoche that will be a gift for the infernal deity. "take this heart, these limbs that yearn / Yea, I will give them thee" (ll. 22-23). Sappho phenomenalises herself into a desirous body that she does not seem to own anymore. It is an aching body that she perceives externally as mere 'Ash' (l. 24) for the urn of the god below. It is, in other words, a decadent and semi-Gothic body that embodies that death-in-life that Sappho has long been leading.

Notwithstanding her decomposition, Sappho urges love as a personified interlocutor to grant her a last chance to feel the fires of passion:

Bethink thee, love, time passes by,
A little while before we die
Is Aphrodite's own.
And what were life
Without the mystery of her zone,
Her rosy altars, and her heavenly fires,
Warm, to assuage the strife
Of vain desires? (ll. 25-32).

Before the arrival of her definitive demise, Sappho sees the possibility of living "a little while" (l. 26) of Aphrodite's gifts and blessings. The goddess receives a new treatment: where she is portrayed either as an alter ego or even a tyrannous divinity in other lyrics, here her presence becomes a necessary force in life. Sappho considers the deity's power to be existentially fundamental and celebrates "the mystery of her zone, / Her rosy altars, and heavenly fires" (ll. 29-30). In this manner, Aphrodite is venerated not just as a mysterious goddess, but also as an oxymoronic one: she represents the sacredness of what is most unsacred in Western thought: the body and its carnal desires. In her erotic mysteries, the flesh becomes divine, the matter no longer opposes the spirit, and the

unity between both of them materialises. For the French philosopher Luce Irigaray and for the Fields alike, Aphrodite embodies the counter-Christian phenomenon of the “flesh made spirit” (*Difference* 95). With the beautiful goddess, the fires of passion and lust, far from posing a threat to the sacred and metaphysical dimensions of life, become “heavenly” (l. 32).

In the above-quoted stanza, Sappho longs to feel the warm influence of the lustful deity, who may ‘assuage’ her agony before she takes her last breath. In this sense, Aphrodite appears involved in a paradox: it is she who, as a matter of fact, bears the responsibility for Sappho’s vain desires, and yet it solely depends on the divinity to transmute their futility into an ultimate possibility of fulfilment. Put differently, Aphrodite has it in her hands to either condemn or save Sappho –to leave her desire unfulfilled for good or to satisfy her at least for “a little while” (l. 26). However, what is profoundly tragic in Sappho’s point about the deity’s potentially salvific intervention is that it is made in the frame of a rhetorical question in the fourth octet of poem XIX. The tacit answer to the question may well be that Sappho will never know the warmth and fires of her passion. Not surprisingly, the last stanza of the lyric points towards an adverse scenario:

The moon is gone, yet he delays,
The stars are set, but Sappho stays;
And can it be that death,
Jealous, hath sped
To suck from me my Phaon's balmy breath?
I stifle in my heart the funeral moan:
I do not weep the dead;
I lie alone (ll. 33-40).

In the course of the poem, time has flown by. The moon has come and gone away. The stars have appeared and disappeared. Everything has changed and advanced, but Sappho stays and her beloved delays. While the surrounding world follows its flux, Sappho and Phaon remain at a remove from one another. His existence is predicated upon deferral and absence. His delay, far from temporary, is a permanent condition, and his arrival amounts to nothing but a fantasy and a vain desire. Nevertheless, Sappho perseveres and enacts her own *Penelopeia*. Her perseverance is a permanent state of ontological indeterminacy. Her patience is a form of affective betweenness that presupposes hope and failure: her beloved may or may not arrive. The double articulation of this

possibility maintains Sappho heroically active in her quest, dragging a life that carries her imminent death intrinsically along with it. Death is all the more present in the final lines of poem XIX: in its personified form, it threatens to leave Sappho without her beloved's breath and to suffocate her own breath. Her song now resembles a "funeral moan" (l. 38), but it is not the dead that she remembers and weeps. Instead, it is presumably her own ongoing death that she deplores. Hers is, indeed, a ghostly life that seems to belong more to the dead than to the living. The last line—"I lie alone" (l. 40)—lends itself readily to a rhymed interpretative paraphrase: I die alone.

5.3. Aphrodite Revisited: A Frail Hope

In lyric XXIV, Aphrodite reappears as a prominent mythic figure in *Long Ago*, but this time she acts neither as a tragic double for Sappho nor as an innocent saviour. Instead, the lyric voice addresses her in a direct apostrophe to accuse her of bearing the blame for Sappho's solitary, precarious and pitiful condition. In the first stanza, Sappho pours out her anger at the fact that, despite the pious attentions she has lavished on the goddess, all she has received in retribution is the deity's antagonism against her desire to possess Phaon:

WHY should I praise thee, blissful Aphrodite?
Wrong hast thou wrought
Thy Sappho, thy flower-weaving one, who brought
The fair, white goat, and poured the milky bowl,
Using thy mighty,
Malignant craft to baulk me of my goal;
Though all my days
And starless nights I crown thee with my lays:
Why should I praise,
Why should I praise thee, blissful Aphrodite? (ll. 1-10).

Repeating the same rhetorical question that challenges Aphrodite's power and moral conduct, Sappho accentuates her anger and goes on to portray the goddess as the very efficient cause behind her sentimental conflict and madness. In the second stanza, the lyric voice insists that it is the over-blissful deity that has denied her the bliss of being with her beloved:

Why should I praise thee, blissful Aphrodite?
Thou dost not guide,
Rather with conflict dire my mind divide;
For me the trembling boy grows honey-pale,
While for the mighty
Fervours of Phaon's breast, without avail,
My mad heart prays.
Win him, O Queen, who shunned to seek my gaze!
Then will I praise,
Then will I praise thee, blissful Aphrodite (ll. 11-20).

The closing lines of this stanza offer a glimmer of hope and faith: should Aphrodite act as a mediator and help Sappho reach her beloved, the poetess will restore her devotion to the goddess with no further reservations. Nonetheless, the possibility of Aphrodite's mediation and assistance seems rather implausible in view of the fact that, as poem XV

plainly states, the goddess pays no heed to any sentimental grievances or lamentations. Sappho is well aware that her elegiac rhetoric has no place and no effect whatsoever under Aphrodite's authority:

No angry voice is heard
In Aphrodite's train;
Rude speech, it is averred,
Meets there with high disdain.

Beside her golden throne
Reproaches have no place;
Complaint or amorous moan
Will scarcely win her grace.

But she for hours will hold
Persuasion at her feet,
Her handmaid bright as gold,
Than honey-bee more sweet;

And listen how her voice
As water flows along,
Making the ear rejoice,
So like it is to song,

So voluble, so sure
To win and subjugate;
Yet mortals, who endure
Love's torments, rail and hate,

Detract, and show their spleen,
Unmindful of the maid
Who, dear to Love's own Queen,
Their impotence can aid:

For, soon as on their tongue
Is laid her beauteous speech,
Their rage, their taunts are flung
Aside, and they beseech.

No maiden is so coy
Or heartless as to spurn
Tones that invite to joy,
That sway, encourage, yearn;

And Aphrodite smiles,
Beholding with what speed
Her servant's suasive wiles
On human lips succeed (ll. 1-36).

Aphrodite forbids any "amorous moan" (l. 8) and imposes a tyranny of alleged hedonism with the aid of her companion Peitho, the divine personification of

persuasion.¹²³ In this regard, a tenuous form of paradox defines the deity's deportment: her power is exercised with apparent grace, delicacy and joy, but *au fond* it amounts to a disguised despotic regime of subjugation in which no dissidence can emerge. The normative order only prescribes an inflexible ethics of delicacy, refinement and content. Despite its very nature, delicacy is imposed as the only valid code of morality: paradoxically, it becomes a strict divine decree.

The goddess of beauty, love and delicacy exhibits an inexorable and relentless temper. Her grace is completely immune to human suffering and despair. Founded on the norm of delicacy, her tyranny knows no sympathy: she instrumentalises sweetness to repress any expression of pain and maintain her hegemony intact. In the execution of her power, Aphrodite counts on the goddess of Persuasion as a mediator between her and mortals. Peitho does not undermine the authority of the Cyprian deity in the slightest: she merely acts as a handmaid. Her divine gift is a sweet and golden voice that "[a]s water flows along" (l. 14) The liquidity of her speech opposes any form of explicit violence and translates into a fluid or mellifluous song. Indeed, it is etymologically mellifluous: for it flows like music –"So like it is to song" (l. 16). In this sense, Peitho's verbal art blurs the very distinction between speech and song. Speaking is transformed into an artistic act. Music, by extension, becomes a rhetorical instrument of persuasion. In speaking-singing, Peitho manages to "win and subjugate" (l. 18) her listeners under Aphrodite's hegemony. In the fifth quatrain of poem XV, the verb "subjugate" speaks for itself: sweetness, delicacy and melody serve to sustain a sacred tyranny that subdues all mortal lovers.

Nevertheless, forces and voices of resistance do exist and demonstrate: mortals "rail and hate" (l. 20) such a tyranny, displaying their spleen, wrath and impotence against the goddess that is "Love's own Queen" (l. 23) and hence the causal agent behind their sentimental misery. However, their acts of sedition pose no challenge to the deity's sovereignty: through Peitho's mediation and power, Aphrodite tames the furious crowd, appeases their rage, and restores her order of normative decorum. The effect of subjugation is decidedly powerful and successful: the lover-stricken protesters go in no

¹²³ Known as Suada or Suadela in Roman mythology, Peitho represented both a divinity per se and an attribute or "a surname of other divinities, such as Aphrodite" (Smith). In *Long Ago*, she clearly acts as a mere epithet or servant for the love goddess.

time from railing and hating to beseeching, surrendering and accepting Aphrodite's regime.

In the eighth stanza, the rebellious crowd seems to be specifically identified with maids who, in spite of their grief and misfortune, cannot help but succumb to Peitho's "Tones that invite to joy / That sway, encourage, yearn" (ll. 30-31). The maidens capitulate: their torments and lamentations are placated by a powerful sacred music that, while instilling peace and bliss, *sways*. The senses of this verb are suggestive and ambiguous: in its possible definitions, it combines the delicacy of a rocking movement with the more violent and authoritarian values of such synonyms as influence, persuasion and control. Doubtless, it is this peculiar verb that defines Aphrodite's pragmatics of power: she holds sway over all victims of love within a regime of supposedly delicate control.

Likewise, the words "persuasion" and "suasive" featuring prominently in the discourse of subjugation have a particular etymological substratum: they derive ultimately from the Latin verb *suadere*, which means "to urge, incite or persuade," and share their lexical root with the adjective *suavis* –sweet or soft (*OED*). The resultant notion of suasion is thus a subtle oxymoron: verbal power and subjugation become practices of delicacy and sweetness that guarantee Aphrodite's hegemonic triumphalism. In the closing stanza, the goddess smiles and contemplates despotically how her mortal victims cave in, extinguish their anger, and accept her graceful absolutism.

As I have formerly indicated, Sappho is fully aware that, however much she worships and praises Aphrodite, her lamentations will meet with repression and disdain. With the aid of Peitho, the goddess will exert her paradoxical form of power, which is coercive and delicate at once, repressive and subtle, and utterly delusive. Afflicted and mournful, Sappho will be hushed and forced into the deity's totalitarian hedonism, but her pain will remain latent and uncured. In this manner, her emotional state will be ambivalent: she will sing and embrace Aphrodite's creed of joy, yet *au fond* her heart will continue protesting, suffering and dying.

Towards the end of *Long Ago*, Sappho reconsiders her portrayal of Aphrodite in a new light. In poem LI, the lyric voice recalls a past time when she would look herself in the mirror and discover how the goddess of beauty had endowed her with ideal attributes. However, in the present time, Sappho refuses to see her reflection in the mirror, disapproves of her own appearance, and breaks the "converse" (l. 2) she used to hold

with Aphrodite. It seems that she finds no beauty left in herself and hence nobody to seduce:

DEEP in my mirror's glossy plate
Sweet converse oft I had
With beauty's self, then turned, elate,
To make my lovers glad;
But now across the quivering glass
My lineaments shall never pass:
Let Aphrodite take the thing
My shadow is dishonouring (ll. 1-8).

Despite her deteriorated appearance, Sappho retains some hope that she might still be able to attract Phaon just as Aphrodite once did under the disguise of an old lady. According to some minor myth, Phaon ferried the goddess without recognising her divinity and demanded no money. In reward, Aphrodite endowed him with “youth and extraordinary beauty,” as well as a powerful ointment “to make all women fall in love with him” (Wharton 16). In poem LI, Sappho rewrites this story as follows:

Ah, fond and foolish, thou hast set
Aside the burnished gold,
But Phaon's eyes reflect thee yet
A woman somewhat old!
He watched thee come across the street
To-day in the clear summer heat;
And must he not perforce recall
How the sun limned thee on the wall?

I sigh—no sigh her bosom smote
Who waited 'mid the crowd
Impatient for his ferry-boat,
An aged woman bowed
And desolate, till Phaon saw,
Turned swiftly, and with tender awe
Rowed her across, his strength subdued
To service of decrepitude.

Beneath a beggar's sorry guise,
O laughter-loving Queen,
Thy servant still must recognise
A goddess—pace and mien.
He loved thee in thy fading hair,
He felt thee great in thy despair,
Thy wide, blue, clouded eyes to him
Were beautiful, though stained and dim (ll. 9-32).

In Sappho's reworking of the myth, Aphrodite goes undercover as an old woman and catches Phaon's attention in the street. The fisherman finds the goddess in distress, all alone, and desperately waiting to be ferried somewhere. Phaon attends to her and takes her to her destination. In *Long Ago*, however, Sappho makes sure to add that her coy beloved does recognise the goddess on their short journey: Phaon discerns her genuine identity, feels her greatness and even falls for her in spite of her deceitful decrepitude. Noticing that her beloved can see beyond appearances and develop romantic feelings, Sappho wishes to be as fortunate as Aphrodite and attract Phaon despite her enfeebled beauty:

Daughter of Cyprus, take the disk
That pride and folly feeds;
Like thee the glorious chance I risk,
And in time's tattered weeds,
Bearing of many a care the trace,
Trusting the poet's nameless grace,
Stand unabashed, serene, and dumb,
For Love to worship, if he come (ll. 17-24).

Sappho longs impatiently for the "glorious chance" (l. 19) that Aphrodite once had when Phaon assisted and treated her with affection. The rationale behind Sappho's wish for such a chance is clear: she seems to wonder why she cannot attract the beautiful boatman *with* or *despite* all her afflictions and physical frailties when the goddess had no difficulty arousing sympathy and eroticism in him despite her decrepit appearance. If Sappho and Aphrodite share a vulnerability that could be romantically auspicious, this should entitle the poetess to enjoy her "glorious chance" (l. 19) with Phaon –or so she thinks and hopes. In poem LI, the closing lines point to a scenario of promise and hope against the backdrop of Sappho's fatal despair: completely self-exposed and mute, she waits for the unlikely opportunity to be loved in return by Phaon.

5.4. Boreas, the Moirai, and Sappho's Death Drive

Assuming her romantic cause is practically lost and facing her utter loneliness, Sappho elaborates on the consolidated narrative of her death-in-life and invokes the fierce god of the North Wind, Boreas, to resolve her tragedy by acting as an agent of destruction and death:

BOREAS, leave thy Thracian cave,
Cross the grey, up-tossing wave;
With thy lips, rough-bearded, swell
All the voices of thy shell.
Chase the wheat-producing mist,
That the teeming furrows kissed;
With thy morning breath drive forth
Every dense cloud of the north;
Let thy chilly blasts prevail,
Make the shivering olive pale,
Hold the sailor in the bay,
Sweep distress and care away!
Let thy winds, wide-wandering, bleak,
Dry the tears on Sappho's cheek!
Buffeting with gusts, constrain
Woes of love to quit my brain:
Bind them on thy pinions strong,
Bear them on thy course along.
Come, stern god, and set me free;
Rival Eros' tyranny!
Then, exultant, I will praise,
Now at banquets, now in lays,
Thee, fierce Thracian, gentle grown,
And thy mighty godhead own (ll. 1-34).

Boreas is represented here in his commonest role: he inhabits the region of Thracia, governs the course of the most violent winds, wears a rough beard and a conch shell, and possesses the power to chill all that comes his way. Aware of his divine faculties and ethereal presence, Sappho addresses him in a lyric that implies some level of self-consciousness that she is making direct contact with the deity. A sequence of imperative forms marks the rhythm of the poem and transforms Boreas into an immediate listener. Sappho expresses herself with imperative urgency, liberating her desperate words in the air and hoping to be heard by the god of the North Wind.

The lyric voice urges Boreas to leave his homeland, cross the sea and reach her. Sappho implores the god to unleash all his power, impose its “chilly blasts” (l. 9), interrupt the fertile cycle of nature, sink everything in the “dense cloud of the north” (l. 8), turn the

olive trees all pale, and keep the sailors from putting out to sea. Likewise, in her own reality, Sappho implores Boreas to extinguish all emotions, eradicate all suffering, dry out all tears, and ventilate the sorrows of love out of her life. In a desperate tone, Sappho asks the god to “set her free” (l. 29). The freedom she covets, however, is far from active, vital and optimistic: it equates essentially to a form of paralysis, emotional sterility and death. Sappho longs for a subjective and objective reality neutralised, desensitised and reduced to virtual nullity.

In her dystopian vision, Sappho envisages a confrontation between Boreas and Eros and expects the defeat of love, the triumph of a hegemonic frigidity, and the establishment of a lifeless peace. Sappho promises that, if the cold god makes this dystopia possible, she will celebrate his power and victory with banquets and songs. What is significantly striking and tragic about such a promise is that that Sappho’s celebration will not rest on affirmative grounds of hedonism: it will be presumably a Gothic celebration of affective infertility, generalised apathy and numbness. In this manner, Sappho has gone very far in her autobiographical narrative of death: she now seems to have grown to embrace the paradoxical phenomenon of death-in-life as her ideal of subjectivity and objectivity –as the most efficient antidote against a loveless and hence meaningless life.

Sappho’s mythological narrative of despair and death reaches its culminating point in lyric XL with the direct evocation of the Moirai, who are responsible for controlling the life and destiny of every mortal from birth to death with sheer impartiality and severity. Sappho depicts them in very precise terms:

SISTERS doom-weaving, dread,
Ye Moirai incorruptibly austere
From cradle to the bier,
By whom the goings of our life are led (ll. 1-4).

At this point of her tragic consciousness, Sappho knows that the goings of her own life are approaching their very final destination. Her attitude, however, has now evolved from an acute despair into a serene sense of stoicism. Assuming that she cannot find a solution to her emotional crisis and existential perplexity, Sappho not only confronts the imminent arrival of her death with serenity and silence, but she even confesses that she herself would cut the thread of her own life with a decision, paradoxically rational yet self-destructive, guided by her own brain:

I strive not, nor complain,
And what ye will accomplish with no sigh.
For surely I should die
If my own guidance issued from my brain.

I know not what to do,
Divided is my mind 'twixt love and hate;
Perplexity so great
Can reach no end, and finds not its own clue (ll. 5-12).

Sappho only wishes to die. Her breast, once the centre of attraction and affection for all her Lesbian maidens, now harbours nothing but permanent sorrow, and her mind finds no way of peace. For this reason, Sappho calls upon the Fates to sing her death and allow her to rest once and for all. It seems that, as lyric XL comes to a close, Sappho listens to her own funeral song, dispels all her fears and doubts, and discovers that her demise is already decreed. In fact, one may suppose that she is dying while hearing the Moirai's song. Her "wild suspense" (l. 20) ceases. Her actual death is happening.

And thus from all delight
My weary breast is severed day by day;
I find not any way
Of peace, until, O daughters of the night,

I think how, as ye sing,
All is decided: then my doubts grow still;
Your undiverted will
Concludes my wild suspense and wavering (ll. 13-20).

5.5. The Omnipotence of Eros: Rethinking Materialism

It has been established in this study that Sappho's death is a constant fact in *Long Ago* and that behind this fact lies the adverse agency of love and, in particular, Aphrodite's inaction and indifference as the love goddess. However, Bradley and Cooper tackle the phenomenon of love in Sappho's life from a complex perspective that seeks to revise the classical myth of Eros in different ways. In *Long Ago*, the Sapphic voice develops what could be read as an entire *ars amatoria* through various lyrics that invoke the divine figure of Eros, revalue the mythological values of this minor deity, and formulate an ambiguous erotic phenomenology –a treaty that reveals how love manifests itself essentially as an unsolvable and open paradox.

In poem VIII, Sappho composes a passionate ode that argues for a philosophy of life as an erotic and aesthetic process. The kernel of this philosophy resides in an omnicomprehensive principle of pleasure that displaces any traditional schism between the subject and the object world, invalidates the very doctrines of classical epistemology, and provides an alternative model of subject/object interaction predicated on an erotic form of being-in-the-world –or a way of experiencing the world through the mediation not of knowledge but of love itself. The poem reads:

WITH love nor languorous nor vain,
I prize, in their degrees,
The perfect odour, the red fruit
Ungathered on the trees;
The brodered strap of Lydian work
That Gorgo's foot doth deck,
The strings of tender garlands twined
About her tender neck:
The feel of fine-wove linen
When the limbs spring to pass
In lightsome dance bare-footed
Trampling the blooms of grass;
The pressure of the cushion,
The golden goblet bright,
The bubbles of the wine-draught—
Each thrills me with delight:
For each of them brings honour,
Being delicate to sense,
To the beauty of the body,
And to Love's omnipotence.
Love has to me the splendour,
The glory of the sun;
And the least action 'neath his eye
Must be divinely done (ll. 1-24).

The opening words of poem VIII encapsulate the foundational precept of Sappho's erotic phenomenology in what appears to be a mere prepositional phrase –“WITH love” (l. 1). Sappho's intimate being-in-the-world involves a *Mitsein* or a being-with that is based on love, care and pleasure. The capital preposition indicates the function of mediation and connection that the primary noun fulfils in such a relationship with the object world. Love opens and exposes Sappho to the world: it renders her sensitive and susceptible to what she herself describes as an aesthetic world of delicacy. Love acquires a world-making significance and becomes a mechanism of what Heidegger would call “world-disclosure” in the sense that it reveals the world to Sappho in the most precious and divine manner.¹²⁴ In this sense, love transforms the world not just into an object of experience, but into an aesthetic experience in itself. Put otherwise, Sappho apprehends the world as a lived form of erotic aestheticism through the agency of love.

Sappho makes it clear from the outset that the kind of love she advocates is neither “languorous nor vain” (l. 1). These attributes seem to serve as a justification for the nature of her loved objects, which do not represent special entities, elevated concepts, sublime artworks or inimical beloveds. Instead, what Sappho most treasures are little and simple objects that, their simplicity notwithstanding, arouse in her a love that is not frivolous, senseless or even hurtful, but one that prizes each object for its aesthetic value. In poem VIII, the enumeration of such objects unfolds a heterogeneous listing that ranges from natural goods to the most artificial ornaments and jewels. Every fragrance becomes a “perfect odour” (l. 3). The apple that Sappho once considered unreachable now incites no animosity. Royal fabrics, decorative garlands and “fine-wove linen” (l. 9) appear all together as symbols of female beauty that refer to the Spartan queen Gorgo's delicacy, sensuality and tenderness. On the other hand, the footsteps that once devastated Sappho's erotic landscape are now feet dancing and trampling the glass gently. The action of trampling, far from violent and destructive, now connotes a lightness or grace that finds its own music in the long alliteration between the words “pass” (l. 10), “dance” (l. 11), and “grass” (l. 12). With these sounds, it seems that the music to which the feet are dancing is not a threnody, but a gentle and

¹²⁴ For Heidegger, the agency of Eros would equate to an essential mood or *Stimmung* that “discloses, in every case, being-in-the-world as a whole and makes it possible first of all to direct oneself towards something” (176). In other words, as the Fields theorise in their lyrics, love becomes the necessary precondition for our access to the world: it makes the world accessible, significant, and even liveable.

lightsome song. The whole scene, in contrast to the dominant landscapes of despair in Sappho's narrative of desire, constitutes a bucolic or utopian setting.

Poem VIII continues to deal with the effects of love upon Sappho's world. "The pressure of the cushion" (l. 13) shares its delicacy with the lightsome trampling of the grass, marks a stark difference with regard to the affective oppression Sappho feels in other songs, and suggests an intimate rapport with the world reduced to the cushion she holds. The last two images of the enumeration – "the golden goblet" (l. 14) and "the bubbles of wine" (l. 15)– form an aesthetic picture of subtle inebriation and sensual Dionysianism that brings poem VIII to its zenith of sensuality, carnality and pleasure. In the process of this long listing of prized experiences, one is led to imagine Sappho being eroticised and seduced by the world she is describing. Her interaction with it is not contemplative, rational, passive, detached and framed by the traditional dualism between object and subject. Instead, she involves herself in a sensual objectivity, engaging erotically with it, living its beauty, and feeling its delicacy. The world's odours, feels, pressures and pleasures are not mere objective phenomena or stand-alone entities. Sappho acts and behaves lovingly towards them. Her intentionality or connection to the outer world is erotic. Her consciousness is not just consciousness of the world as *res extensa*: it is an erotic consciousness that transcends the object/subject divide and synthesises both poles in a joint experience of pleasure and thrilling delight. In her world, Sappho feels that each object "thrills me with delight" (l. 16).

After the long enumeration of prized objects, Sappho clarifies why she celebrates them with such fervency: "For each of them brings honour, / Being delicate to sense, / To the beauty of the body, / And to Love's omnipotence" (ll. 17-20). It is their delicacy that makes the objects so valuable and even erotic. Naturally, the sense of delicacy is not notional or conceptual at all: rather, it implies the immersion of the Sapphic subject in the direct enjoyment of every object's delicacy. From a phenomenological viewpoint, this immersion constitutes an experience of exchange between subject and object in which a phenomenon or effect of reversibility takes place: the subject acts not only as a sentient agent that feels such delicacy, but also as a sensible receptor of such delicacy. Here the relationship is two-faced: subject and object interchange their positions and transform the experience of delicacy into a paradigmatic form of dual encounter that can only occur when subject and object deal with one another and confuse themselves into one another. In this sense, the phenomenon of delicacy could be seen as a counter-

dualistic experience that entails the very dissolution of a loving consciousness and a loved objectivity.¹²⁵

In the reversible experience of delicacy, the body is necessarily involved and impacted, yet in poem VIII it acquires an elevated place of honour. The delicacy of the prized objects not only engages the sentient subject in a non-binary exchange: it brings “honour [...] to the beauty of the body” (ll. 17 and 19). In feeling such delicacy, the body enhances its beauty, amplifies the effects of the object world on Sappho, and thus renders the subject/object encounter more meaningful and aesthetic. However, what may be more striking here is the honour given to the body itself. Conventionally, the semantic spectrum of honour covers such aspects as human character, intellect, respect, religious piety, and even female chastity. In poem VIII, what deserves honour is the body itself or the flesh as opposed to human virtue and spirit. This entails a possible oxymoron that conflates the corporeal or material with the mental and the spiritual. As a result, Sappho proposes a revised notion of materialism that dismantles the normative schism between mind and matter in a way that elevates the status of the body as a transcendental figure of beauty, delicacy and honour.

The transcendental status that Sappho ascribes to the body in its contact with a beautiful and delicate world stems for what she names “Love’s omnipotence” (l. 20). This particular line is central to her phenomenology of Eros. Sappho treats love not as a mere notion or abstraction: she capitalises its name, invokes its mythical personification and regards it as almighty. In its apotheosis, love reaches the very stature of the sun: “Love has to me the splendour, / The glory of the sun” (ll. 21-22). From this supreme position, the deity of love becomes the transformative force behind everything that happens “neath his eye” (l. 23). In this way, love is no longer a sentimental immanence or a mere affective state: it grows into a transcendental event that ennobles and elevates every act “divinely done” (l. 24) in its name. Love becomes the very core of an overarching sacred pragmatics in which the world, if engaged through the phenomenon of love

¹²⁵ Implicit in this explanation is the idea of reversibility that Maurice Merleau-Ponty, an avid interpreter and critic of Heidegger, presents in his study *Le visible et l’invisible* (1964). Here the French thinker turns to the rhetorical trope of the chiasmus to transform it into an ontological formula “of capturing his understanding of flesh and the reversibility of touching/touched or of the visible and the invisible” (in Landes 38). Through such a formula Merleau-Ponty posits an ontological theory that resists every form of binarism between activity and passivity, seeing and being seen, touching and being touched, or feeling and being felt, in favour of an intimate “cross-over or encroachment” between supposed oppositions that, in actual fact, function within a “world that is simultaneously subject and object» (in Landes 241).

itself, is not just mundane or material: it gains a transcendental value that redefines its nature, now profane and divine at once.

In poem VIII, which seems to be a short treaty on the power of Eros, the agency of love breaks down the ontological barriers between subject and object, exposes the lyric subject to an affective being-in-the-world, transforms the phenomenon of delicacy into a reversible experience, endows the loved objects with a sense of utmost sensuality, reconceptualises the philosophical status of the body, and even attributes a spiritual significance to the mundane world of matter. Sappho holds this fervid belief in the transcendental and sacred power of love, that she reasserts it empathically in lyric XXXVI:

YEA, gold is son of Zeus: no rust
Its timeless light can stain;
The worm that brings man's flesh to dust
Assaults its strength in vain:
More gold than gold the love I sing,
A hard, inviolable thing.

Men say the passions should grow old
With waning years; my heart
Is incorruptible as gold,
'Tis my immortal part:
Nor is there any god can lay
On love the finger of decay (ll. 1-12).

In these sestets, Sappho composes another fervent ode to love in which it acquires the value of gold and surpasses the power of the gods. For Sappho, Eros resembles gold: it is timeless, solid, unalterable, incorruptible and immortal. Such is its power that no god can act against it –not even Aphrodite, who lived her own romantic tragedy with Adonis despite her divine authority over love itself. Sappho praises the force of love, feels its immortality within her own heart, and comes to view it as a supra-divine force. However, what is particularly striking in her affirmative phenomenology of Eros is that Sappho celebrates it with her songs, believes passionately in its absolute power over the whole world (including gods and mortals), and affirms this belief in spite of the fact that she herself is dying of lovelessness. Love impregnates Sappho's being-in-the-world, subsumes her life under an aestheticism that ennoble every object she contemplates, and even divinises every action taken in its name. Sappho praises this erotic order of the world and declares Eros to be omnipotent, and yet this omnipotence is precisely what reduces Sappho to a state of impotence and despair in her confrontation with her

beloved's contempt. Love exerts its power against Sappho and transforms her being-in-the-world not only into an aesthetic form of existence, but also into a literal and anxious mode of being-towards-death.

5.6. The Determinism of Love: Eros as ‘Fatal Creature’

In poem XXXI, Sappho makes a critical meta-poetic claim: “Though unbeloved, lovers are all my theme” (l. 6). As she declares, her poetry is inherently and tragically linked to what she lacks. Her verse emanates from an ontological gap, an absence, and a failure. Her songs address love as an experience of loss and hopelessness. In *Long Ago*, Sappho mostly sings of the tragedy of losing the communal affection of her maidens, loving the wrong beloved, or being loved by the wrong lover. As I proved in Chapter III, it is Sappho’s passion for Phaon that distances her from her fellow maids, isolates her emotionally, and even makes her regret her heterosexual desire. Undoubtedly, her desire for Phaon is doubly blameable: not only does it separate her from her ideal community of women, but it also causes her a permanent agony. There is more to Sappho’s tragic phenomenology of Eros, however. As lyric XXIII reveals, the poetess forms part of a triangulation of failed desire: while she loves her disdainful ferryman, the poet Alcaeus is smitten with her yet unable to win her heart.¹²⁶

In poem XXIII, Sappho addresses Alcaeus and notices how his hopeless desire for her transforms his body into a ghostly figure. According to the epigraph of the lyric (“To himself he seems”), the poet phenomenalises himself, suspends his pure subjectivity and becomes an object of his own perception. He sees himself dispossessed of his own will and lost in a fragmented body as though he were external to himself:

LIFT, lover, thy long-shadowed eyne!
Why should thy sleepless lids decline,
Thy breast so deeply sigh?
Seek we the shade of yonder pine,
'Neath which the river flows;
There we the sweet flower-test will try
For healing of thy woes.

Thou mourn'st thy maiden's faith is gone;
Stoop for fair-leaved telephilon;
Woe, if the petals cleave!
But see! sharp-struck thy palms upon,
They leap, they burst, as shoots a star.
Alcaeus, lo! thou must believe
This sign of *Love-afar*.

¹²⁶ As Williamson explains, different post-classical sources hold without any serious evidence that Alcaeus is among several ancient male poets “who were said to have been in love with Sappho” (7) and to have composed love poetry in her name.

Sappho describes Alcaeus as a dismembered body: as a result of his hopeless desire, he becomes a tragic synecdoche, a pair of eyes in decline, a breast in pain, and two furious palms that refuse to accept the revelation of the magic flower he holds. It is this flower, known as *telephilon*, that plays an ambiguous symbolic role: it functions as a prophetic talisman, unveils the very truth of love, serves to connect lover and beloved within an imaginary setting of affective verification, reads into the beloved's heart, and exposes what the lover cannot discover by his own means. However, the imaginary encounter with the beloved fails altogether as soon as the magic flower reveals the factual absence of the beloved and the lack of romantic reciprocity. In this manner, the flower confirms the meaning of its own name: the beloved is nothing but a "*Love-afar*" –a remote and inaccessible object of desire that will always be far and out of reach. This inaccessibility affects both Sappho and Alcaeus in equal measure: she dies for her distant Phaon, and so does he for his unattainable Sappho. Both poets partake of the communal 'we' that appears twice in the first stanza of poem XXIII and that unites the two of them in their common experience of love as an unendurable absence.

Sappho pities Alcaeus, empathises with him and places the blame for their suffering on the double identity of Eros. In poem XXVIII, Sappho defines love in oxymoronic terms, bemoans the curse of romantic solipsism, and foresees that, as with her, Alcaeus will endure the pain and death that accompany unrequited love:

LOVE, fatal creature, bitter-sweet,
For my Alcaeus I entreat.
Should I not plead?
To wasting fires
A secret prey I live,
Yet, Eros, that which he desires
I cannot give.

Who shall deliver him? Lo, I,
For love of whom he soon will die,
Weep through the starry night oppressed
That he should love in vain.
Ah, can another mortal breast
Learn Sappho's pain! (ll. 1-13).

Sappho apostrophises the deity of love and accuses him of incarnating a cruel paradox: for he creates and thrills just as much as it destroys and kills. His most idiosyncratic attribute is the bitter-sweetness that Sappho coined in one of her original fragments for

the first time in Western literary history.¹²⁷ Eros has the double faculty of enlivening our existence and also dooming us to a tormented death. As Michael Field's Sappho rightly claims, love is "a fatal creature" (l. 1) that can either create a blissful life or cause an irreversible fatality. The fatality that befalls Sappho and Alcaeus lies in that their erotic vitality is going to waste. Both poets live a desire that is fulgent and excessive, yet its excess only meets with objective hostility and unresponsiveness. Sappho wastes her erotic vitalism on an indifferent Phaon. Alcaeus, for his part, wastes all his love on a Sappho that claims to be unable to reciprocate his desire: "that which he desires / I cannot give" (ll. 6-7). For both Alcaeus and Sappho, love amounts to an experience of waste, dissipation, and exhaustion, like a fire that remains self-contained, propagates outwardly in vain, and returns to itself rejected, unaltered and exhausted. In the first stanza of poem XXVIII, Sappho employs a precise metaphor: the flames of love are nothing but "wasting fires" (l. 4).

Sappho laments over the love Alcaeus feels for her and wishes to deliver him from such an oppressive feeling. Her concern for him is based on her own tragic experience of love: she knows very well that "he soon will die" (l. 9) if he persists in his quest to love her. Sappho understands that loving someone ultimately unattainable can lead to a pain that borders too closely on a direct encounter with death. In effect, it is from this mortal pain that Sappho wants to liberate Alcaeus, for she knows that his love for her could place him eventually in the position of ontological loss and agony she inhabits.

In the third stanza, Sappho does value what Alcaeus grew to feel for her in a positive light, as she remembers her first encounter with him as a memory of joy:

When once his feet to me did stray,
He would forget the homeward way;
And when he gazed I turned to greet
The grace within his eyes;
With love it is such joy to meet
In any guise (ll. 14-19).

Here the lyric voice narrates a mini-scene of romantic infatuation and instant desire. As Sappho recounts, Alcaeus once changed his usual route and lost his sense of direction at the sight of her beloved Sappho. She greeted him and saw in his gaze the pure grace of

¹²⁷ According to Catherine Maxwell (*The Female Sublime*), Sappho is "one of the first poets to described the heightened emotional quality of relationships and her characterisation of the oxymoronic bitter-sweetness of love has pervaded lyric poetry ever since" (32).

love. The meeting with him and his love, as she recalls, was a truthful moment of bliss, but this same moment represented the very genesis of suffering and death. The gaze of love is the foundation both of pleasure and pain. In his gaze Alcaeus founded his love for Sappho. His gaze transformed her into his most desired object, and yet it was this gaze that inaugurated his torments. His gaze unveiled a desire that was to fail and cause extreme agony. His gaze, initially filled with grace, soon had to perceive and face the disgrace of Sappho's rejection.

As the last stanza of poem XXVIII explains, it seems that Alcaeus no longer finds any joy in love. Sappho implores the Muses to help and liberate him from the severe pain that oppresses him to the point of silencing his poetic voice. His experience of love is altogether destructive: it threatens to leave him dumb and moribund. Sappho knows that without his poetry and music Alcaeus will inevitably die. His death is always already a certain possibility due to the ominous presence of a vain desire:

To him, O heavenly Muses, come!
He cannot live if he be dumb.
Leave me awhile. O let him feel
His heart set free in song;
Hasten, for ye alone can heal
A lover's wrong (ll. 20-25).

Later on, in lyric XXX, Sappho shows a solid understanding of what love must signify to her fellow poet Alcaeus and even takes delight in his presumably sentimental poetry, but she then justifies why she rejects him: it is not only that she surpasses him in age, but also her greater experience dictates that love is always a vain and painful undertaking. For this reason, she asks her unfortunate lover to forget her and renounce the pursuit of love for his own sake:

THINE elder that I am, thou must not cling
To me, nor mournful for my love entreat:
And yet, Alcaeus, as the sudden spring
Is love, yea, and to veiled Demetia sweet.

Sweeter than tone of harp, more gold than gold
Is thy young voice to me; yet, ah, the pain
To learn I am beloved now I am old,
Who, in my youth, loved, as thou must, in vain (ll. 1-8).

This short poem perfectly defines what might be understood as the tragic determinism of love in most of *Long Ago*. In this volume, the identities of beloved and lover are negatively determined and fixed in Sappho's treatment of Eros. The lover always suffers, remains mournful, and actualises the very real possibility of death. The beloved, on the other hand, represents an impossible object, a severe absence and even an agent of ontological nullity for the desperate lover. As a result, *Long Ago* rests upon a consistent and recurrent idea: Eros is an experience of joy that, nevertheless, facilitates the actualisation of the possibility of death when the beloved is nothing but a delusion, a fantasy and a mere hypothetical object.

In the very final lyric of the volume, right before the epilogic poem, Sappho addresses the god of love directly and encapsulates his contradictory identity in a single sestet:

THOU burnest us; thy torches' flashing spires,
Eros, we hail!
Thou burnest us, Immortal, but the fires
Thou kindest fail:
We die,
And thine effulgent braziers pale (ll. 1-6).

Eros is the immortal fire of life, as Sappho asserts here. He burns us in the sense that he motivates, enlivens, ignites and kindles our life. He acts essentially as the biological and psychological force of our self-preservation and existence. However, Sappho realises that such a vital force fails and succumbs to death itself. Eros meets with his radical other in the shortest line that Michael Field writes in *Long Ago*: "We die" (l.5). Love proves to be fallible and self-contradictory: it kindles life and yet destroys it in equal measure. It burns not only in a vital and positive sense, for its flames can also consume and kill. Sappho concludes poem LXVIII by revealing in a few words how the power and failure of love burnt her into ashes: "I, Eros! am quenched within my urn" (l. 24).

5.7. Instructing Aphrodite with Authenticity: the Advantages of Mortality

As I have shown thus far, in their lyrical mythography, Bradley and Cooper formulate a direct equation between love and loss by identifying Sappho with different myths of tragic desire, presenting her romantic tragedy as an inexorable fate, drawing a complex portrayal of the love goddess, and even postulating a theory of Eros that incorporates suffering and death at its core. However, in a few lyrics, the Michael Fields transform their Sappho into an authentic heroine that finds no conflict in her own romantic tragedy and even celebrates the co-presence of death and desire in her life. In what follows, I argue that Sappho affirms her own existence with all its pain and becomes a genuine model of existential authenticity. She grows to value her life in an assertive manner, assuming that suffering and death are essential components of human existence. In lyric XXXVII, she alludes to two more myths of tragic love, makes amends with the goddess Aphrodite, and puts forwards her doctrine of authenticity:

QUEEN Dawn, in immortality doth bask
Tithonus; youth for him thou did'st not ask;
He lives in never-fading age apart:
Dione's child, less careful in her joy,
Spent her wild passion on a mortal boy,
Then watched him dying with a broken heart.

O Queen of Love, I blame thee not;
The sweet things of a mortal's lot
Are these: to win the rapture and to lose;
To learn the morrow brings not back to-day;
To bind the cup with roses while we may,
To drink, or die athirst if we refuse (ll. 1-12).

In the first stanza, Sappho evokes the myth of the Titan Eos and her human beloved Tithonus as an example of tragic romance. The Queen of Dawn once managed to make her loved immortal, but she neglected to grant him the gift of eternal youth. As a result, Tithonus aged without remedy, lost his beauty, and Eos abandoned him forever. Then, once more, Sappho recalls the story of Aphrodite and Adonis to insist upon her idea of how love all too often comes along with misfortune and despair, even for Titans and Gods alike.

In the second sestet, Sappho exonerates the goddess Aphrodite from any responsibility for her sentimental failure. The poetess learns that no one is to blame: both mortals and deities fall victim to the vicissitudes of love with no exceptions. What is more, it seems

that Sappho no longer needs to place the blame on anyone: she has apparently assumed that life is made of victories and defeats, that love brings joy as well as despair, and that one must learn “to win the rapture and to lose” (l. 9). In this manner, Sappho upholds a practical ethics that affirms existence in all its imperfection and even embraces a clearly Dionysian hedonism. At the close of poem XXXVII, Sappho invites us to seize every moment of our lives, to celebrate it with wine and roses, and to drink ourselves to death instead of dying athirst.

In lyric XLI, Sappho goes so far as to argue for the vital significance of loss and death in our lives:

DEATH is an evil: had it been a boon,
Ah, then how soon
Would the Immortals die!
But never do the blessed ones grow weary
Of the sweet joys of breath:
’Tis Aphrodite’s sigh—
“Ah for Adonis!”—makes the young spring dreary;
Lover from mortal lover severeth,
And parting is the bitterness of death.

Yet silver Hesperus is fairer far
Than any star,
Sweet Hesperus that brings
What morning scattered; and I know not whether
It be not best to lose
Awhile life’s precious things
For joy of sharing them afresh together;
They who would meet again to part must choose:
The hour of evening every bliss renews (ll. 1-18).

Initially, Sappho reiterates the idea she expressed in poem XI, namely, that death is nothing but an inimical and destructive force that no god tolerates. However, what is remarkable is that Sappho now ponders over why the gods refuse death: she wonders whether they do not become exhausted with “the sweet joys of breath” (l. 5). This question leads her to reconsider the myth of Aphrodite and Adonis yet again. Sappho understands that the goddess of love sighs and endures the very “bitterness of death” (l. 9) every time her beloved must return to the underworld after the summer. Nonetheless, the second stanza provides an answer to the previous pondering and reveals a positive side to Aphrodite’s experience of loss. Sappho thinks that perhaps when things come to an end, when one tastes such “bitterness of death” (l. 9), and when the morning light severs lovers and sees them part ways, only then can we feel the truthful value,

magnitude and preciousness of life. In other words, it is only when one loses “life’s precious things” (l. 15) that such things become meaningful and powerful once they are rediscovered or once lovers meet again with the complicity of Hesperus –the god who closes the day and reunites what the morning has separated. From this perspective, Sappho seems to contend that the goddess Aphrodite is actually lucky to lose her beloved, as this loss will certainly give way to a magnified feeling of pleasure and bliss when her Adonis comes back to life at the outset of spring. Loss and death are not, after all, incarnations of evil, but rather necessary conditions for the reappraisal, renewal and re-enjoyment of life itself.

The ethics of affirmative vitalism finds its most imperative expression in poem XLVI, where Sappho encourages an indeterminate *thou* to vibrate with life, practice *carpe diem*, fall in love, feel the violence of emotions, and embrace everything that life brings before the abatement of old age:

"Faint not," I said. Would'st thou be great,
Thou must with every shock vibrate
That life can bring thee; seek and yearn;
Feel in thyself the stroke
Of love, although it rive
As mountain-wind an oak;
Let jealous passion burn
If Rhodope must turn
To other love; and laugh that age should strive
The ardours of thy bosom to abate (ll. 1-10).

In lyric LXII, Sappho encapsulates her doctrine of vitalism in a paradoxical yet valid proposition: “joy has part / In each regret and pang” (ll. 14-15). Here the poetess reconstructs her mythopoesis of desire and despair by coming to the conclusion that life and death are not mutually exclusive, as nor are pain and pleasure. The vast width of life encompasses its very other, transforming death into some kind of lived phenomenon that gives meaning to life itself. It is mortality, after all, that makes life precious. As pointed out earlier, Sappho sees no point in divine eternity and prefers to lead an existence that deserves to be affirmed in its entirety, assuming that pain and death must be included in such an authentic affirmation. As Heidegger would put it, Sappho shows to have “the courage for anxiety in the face of death” (298). For her death is not a conviction or “certainty that is only empirical” (301), nor is it an event that can be just

“deferred for sometime later” (302) or ignored as an impersonal phenomenon. Instead, Sappho assumes her own mortality, comes to grips with it, and does not “cover up this possibility by fleeing from it” (304-305). She anticipates her death and understands it as her “ownmost and uttermost potentiality” (307). This free acceptance is what makes her being-towards-death a model of authenticity.

Before concluding this chapter, I would make three recapitulative claims. Firstly, it is clear that *Long Ago* reads as a mythopoetic text that reworks the figure of Sappho in dialogue with other Graeco-Roman motifs. What is most significant in this dialogue is that it rests upon a timeless notion of human affection that derives from the very truth value of myths. The myths that Michael Field revisits in the poems analysed here form a consistent narrative of pain and desire that not only resonates with Sappho herself and her tragic romance, but also with the ancient and modern reader. It is in the nature of myths to act as sites of revelation for existential and universal truths and, by extension, to evoke a sense of empathy or emotional recognition on account of their extraordinary competence as universal signifiers of human feelings. In this respect, I have agreed with Francis O’Gorman that *Long Ago* propounds a universalist theory of emotions, but what I have also added is that such a theory becomes possible thanks to a well-woven fabric of myths that, functioning as mirrors of existential or affective truths, insert the figure of Sappho into a major ancient tradition of tragic texts that transcend history and cultures.

Secondly, I contend that, in light of the myths revised by the Fields, Sappho’s being-towards-death becomes reinforced by her heroic attitude of assuming that life integrates loss and death as constant and valuable possibilities and that joy can thus be found in even in the experience of pain or lovelessness. Thirdly and lastly, I find it particularly significant that, as a result of her revaluation of life and death, Michael Field’s Sappho adds a new twist on the Homeric archetype of Tiresias by suggesting that life embodies the paradox that the Theban soothsayer represents in Hades: just like him, life is always in an ontological agon between itself and its other, between desire and death, between pleasure and pain, between Poros and Penia. Sappho not only lives this agon all throughout *Long Ago*: she accepts and affirms it with authentic heroism.

CHAPTER VI

PHAON BETWEEN ECSTASY AND DEATH UNDER SAPPHO'S REGIME OF DESIRE

*Men I defy, allure, estrange,
Prostrate, make bond or free.*
Michael Field's *Long Ago*

6.1. The Perversity of Sappho's Dreams

In the previous chapters, I have explored how the large narrative of hetero-mortality transforms the Sappho myth into an autobiography of suffering and death. The Lesbian lyricist knew of this possible transformation or deterioration: in the lyrics devoted to her community of maids, she posited her own theory of sexuality in which heterosexual desire represented a threat, a danger, and even a symbol of social death. Her maids were warned against “the harsh rape” of marriage and the perils of a jewel given by men. The myths of Leto, Niobe, Calliope or Selene were all reworked to further exemplify how the regime of heterosexism signified the very demise of freedom and autonomy for women. However, despite her acute consciousness of this tragic possibility, Sappho fell prey to the condemnatory love of a disdainful man. Her story of feminine vitalism soon

became one of fatalism, despair and loss. Her mythological referents now included the tragic figures of Procne, Philomela, Aphrodite, Sterope, and even the Moirai. Once a source of creativity and beauty among her maidens, her desire turned into a destructive force. Sappho ended up undergoing “the harsh rape” of heteroeroticism and leading an existence in permanent tension between hope and loss. I have shown that this tension seems to resolve itself in Sappho’s affirmation of life and anticipation of her own death. In accepting whatever life brings in an affirmative manner, Sappho assumes that her very finitude is part and parcel of such an authentic affirmation.

In what follows, I seek to prove that the perversion of hetero-mortality not only affects Sappho as a despised and oppressed lover, but also her contemptuous beloved, whose masculinity comes to be compromised by Sappho’s possessive economy of desire to the point of becoming destroyed and emasculated. As I aim to show here, Phaon faces up to the possibility of his death at the hands of a Sappho turned into a Decadent *femme fatale* who seems to understand desire as violence, subjection, and even cannibalism. In order to approach this particular portrayal of Sappho, I propose to examine a selection of nearly ten lyrics –with special focus upon poems II, III and IV– in which Bradley and Cooper posit a transgressive ethics of desire that unsettles the interaction between lover and beloved, subverts gender conventionalisms, and situates Sappho in an ambivalent yet entrenched position of power.

As discussed in Chapter IV, the second lyric of *Long Ago* serves the lyric voice well in using the agency of dreams and lies as forms of mediatory power that can bring lover and beloved together within an order of erotico-oneiric idealism:

COME, dark-eyed Sleep, thou child of Night,
Give me thy dreams, thy lies;
Lead through the horny portal white
The pleasure day denies (ll. 1-4).

Just like the non-realist subject of Western epistemology that accesses and creates the object-world in the ontogenetic act of knowing, the Sapphic lover aspires to apprehend her beloved by dreaming him into *insistence* –rather than *existence*– as an erotic idea.¹²⁸

¹²⁸ The use I make of the word “insistence” is essentially etymological: it stems from the Latin verb *insistere* and designates the state of being, standing or dwelling inside something, as opposed to that which exists or exposes itself to the external world. As an insistent being, Sappho’s beloved seems to

Should this aspiration come true, he will be ontologically compressed, internalised and possessed in an objectifying mode of eroticism. Within her dreams and lies, the Sapphic paradigm of love follows a dynamics of absolute power and appropriation: it reifies the loved one, reduces him to the stasis of a dependent object, and seizes hold of him in an imaginary act that aims to neutralise his painful absence. In this sense, the power of imagination fulfils a clear purpose: it fills the ontological void of the lyric voice in a way that may ideally allow her to take possession of her beloved if Hypnos and Nyx give her the fictional truth she imperatively solicits.¹²⁹

Nevertheless, the oneiric construction of eroticism propounded by the Sapphic lover diverges significantly from metaphysical and formal idealism. While entailing the possessive mentalisation of desire and the transformation of the beloved into an object of dormant imagination, Sappho's dreams do not adhere strictly to the idealistic clear-cut duality between the spiritual and the material: they create a hybrid space of desire wherein mind and body make common cause and leave behind their old schism. The loved body, although mind-dependent or imaginary, does not lose its original entity in the loving consciousness, but rather maintains its erotic influence over it. Sappho's passion is not, after all, autoerotic or endogenous: Phaon originates it. He does exist outside (of course), but it is his disdain that brings Sappho to consider –or settle for– the sole possibility of endorsing an idealistic oneirism that transmutes her beloved into an insistent content of her imagination without, however, abolishing his originally existent erotic force. This double ontological position that Phaon appears to occupy –as both insistent and existent– distinctly echoes Heidegger's late notion of *Dasein*, who “not only ek-sists but also at the same time in-sists” (*Pathmarks* 150). Put more precisely, there are two forms of subjectivity at work in Phaon: he acts factually as the external source of Sappho's desire and potentially as her oneiric prisoner.

Such is Sappho's need to imprison or possess her beloved at least oneirically, that it is well articulated through the powerful oxymoronic image of “the horny portal white” (l. 3). Evoking the conventional symbolism of horns, associated with sexual zeal and

(de)grow into nothing but the product or the synecdoche of a mind-dependent reality, where he becomes easily susceptible to erotic appropriation.

¹²⁹ By dreaming or imagining her beloved into being, the Sapphic lover seems to subscribe to Kant's notion of the imagination, which is “the faculty of representing an object even without its presence” (449). Undoubtedly, the Fieldean lyric subject intends to exert this faculty in a tactical manner: she imperatively wishes to orient her dreams towards creating an image of her absent object of desire with the ultimate aim of establishing some form of contact with it –irrespective of its veracity.

virility, the lyric voice invigorates, masculinises, and charges her desire with Bacchic energy –with Bacchus working as “the horned one” (Cirlot 151).¹³⁰ She opposes the classical models of feminine passivity and adopts an erotic idiom of possession and even aggression.

However, the adjective “white” (l. 3) qualifying the horny metaphor and the negative forms of the previous lines situate the lyric voice in a frustrating position of indeterminacy: she remains pure, virginal and untouched in spite of the aggressive vehemence of her desire. Hers is an elegiac and restless existence of sexual in-betweenness –between pre-coital purity and Dionysian lust, between physical inexperience and lascivious mentalism or, in Irigaray’s terms, between whiteness and redness. Being immaculate and passionate, Sappho complies ontologically with this paradoxical yet certain aphorism: “You are all red. And so very white. Both at once” (Irigaray, *Sex* 207). It appears that, given Sappho’s paradigmatic in-betweenness, the oxymoronic image manages to define her identity with figurative exactitude: she is (at) “the horny portal white” (l. 3) at the threshold between innocence and maturity, and hence in an impure state of liminality –in the strictly etymological sense of the term.¹³¹ The syntagmatic order of the oxymoron situates her right where she belongs: at/as the portal between horny and white.

The sum of what Dijkstra would define as Sappho’s “outward purity and inward lust” (374) –her libidinous virginity– amounts to a form of erotic androgyny that links her obliquely to the prototypical fin-de-siècle figure of the *femme fatale*.¹³² Far from complying with the Victorian ethos of feminine angelism, asexuality and selflessness,¹³³ she holds the dominant status of a subject predicated upon the main nominative ego, the imperative verb, and the violence of her romantic actions:

¹³⁰ As Spanish symbolist J. E. Cirlot claims, “the horn is a symbol of strength and power” (151), whose synecdochical relation with the bull extends its meanings to the archetypal domain of masculine authority, virility, and brutality.

¹³¹ According to the OED, the word ‘liminal’ and all its lexical derivations stem from the Latin noun *limen*, which means “threshold.”

¹³² Dijkstra identifies the late Victorian figure of the chaste woman as a perverse icon or a *femme fatale* whose main attributes are “her outward purity and inward lust, her seeming self-sufficiency and blood thirsty virginity” (374). In *Long Ago*, the Sapphic lover fits this model of perversity to perfection: not only does she resemble Oscar Wilde’s Salome –to name but one salient icon of the period– in her castrating potential, but her ideal of love also embraces an aestheticised style of vampirism or sexual bloodlust, as I shall demonstrate later on.

¹³³ Alternatively, one may note that, in stark opposition to Coventry Patmore’s famous paradigm of angelic domesticity, Sappho conforms quite closely to the type of angelism perverted by Lionel Johnson, whose Decadent lines could well define her as a “Dark” or “Malicious angel” ridden with “aching lust,” “subtile violence,” “sultry fire,” and a “troop of passionate powers” (67).

O bring the kiss I could not take
From lips that would not give;
Bring me the heart I could not break,
The bliss for which I live (ll. 5-8).

The particular verbs “take” (l.5) and “break” (l. 7) reveal Sappho’s aggressiveness and power: she wishes not to give her beloved a kiss, but to take –or snatch– it from him in a possessive fashion. After the act of appropriation and possession, she does not settle for winning his heart: she wants to break it. Her economy of erotic ownership knows no bounds: she desires her beloved with a totalitarian ambition –to dream him, take him, live him, and break him. In consequence, Sappho’s beloved is relegated to a non-normative space of passivity and reticence. He receives an objectified identity that has no presence whatsoever at the beginning of the poem and becomes only half-present by means of two synecdoches appearing in the second stanza –“lips” (l. 6) and “heart” (l. 7). This indirect allusion to the beloved is correlated with his passive and castrated deportment. He behaves like the archetypal figure of the disdainful mistress whose actions are exclusively defensive, negative, reactive, and hence dependent on the lover’s initiatives, advances, and strategies of conquest. He is thus a contingent and belated subjectivity that exists inauthentically as a response or reaction to the dominant source of action and power: the Sapphic lover. Phaon’s proper presence matters little in the second poem of *Long Ago*. Although his name appears in the final quatrain, it is not his identity per se that interests the lyric voice: he is reduced anew to the sensual synecdoche of his lips, which do become the centre of the lover’s regime of erotic possession.

Furthermore, the labial compression of Phaon’s subjectivity, alongside his emasculating representation as a disdainful mistress, conjures up inevitable implications of lesbianism within a simple syllogistic scheme: if Sappho adopts an androgynous identity with horny vigour and Phaon loses his normative masculinity in favour of a gender position of effeminacy, then both seem to be engaged in “an expression of same-sex desire via a model of erotic exchange that is superficially heterosexual” (Pulham 126).¹³⁴ *Au fond*, far beyond heteronormativity, Sappho and Phaon form three possible queer horizons of

¹³⁴ Although these words define, according to Pulham, the queer economy of desire in Vernon Lee’s supernatural tales, contemporary with some of Michael Field’s works, I extrapolate them to *Long Ago* on account of their extensive validity.

partnership as two androgynes, two men or two women. However, it is the last option that proves to be the most certain for good reason: in castrating her beloved as a passive object of capture and breakage, Sappho integrates him into a predominantly feminine and specifically lesbian discourse where the primary focus of erotic attention falls upon the double reference to Phaon's lips. This emphasis on his lips may be understood through an Irigarayan prism as a flagrant deviation from the hegemonic phallogentric discourse, as "a pivotal topological and embodied intervention into a masculine philosophical imaginary dominated by the phallus," or as "an alternate figure for imagining feminine sexual difference, language, and desire" (Bianchi 11). It is through the divergent figure of the lips, one could contend, that the Sapphic lover constitutes an iterative labial sexuality –twice concentrated on Phaon's lips– that conceals an ideal performance or a tacit dream of "lesbian love-making in the infinite [...] combinations of mouth to mouth, mouth to labia, labia to mouth, labia to labia, inner labia to outer labia, outer labia to mouth, outer to outer, inner to inner, outer to inner, to mouth, to labia" (Huffer 124). Integrated into this labial and lesbian discourse of desire, Phaon dies as a man and becomes intrinsically queer to Sappho's eyes.

6.2. Sappho's Sublime Voracity: Towards the Labialisation of Desire

In lyric III, Sappho's discourse of desire embraces an aesthetic of covert vampirism, madness, alliterative nomadism, and Aphroditean excess:

OH, not the honey, nor the bee!
Yet who can drain the flowers
As I? Less mad, Persephone
Spoiled the Sicilian bowers
Than I for scent and splendour rove
The rosy oleander grove,
Or lost in myrtle nook unveil
Thoughts that make Aphrodite pale (ll. 1-8).

Although far from using the Gothic idiom of bloodlust, the Fieldean Sappho proposes an aestheticised botanic version of the vampire's quest for erotic arousal and domination by replacing the gore of sanguine fluids with the floral nectar that the rapacious bee seeks and craves. The sexual energy, though, remains equally vigorous and dominant: like a castrating vampiress,¹³⁵ Sappho thirsts to "drain" (l. 2) her beloved to the point of even going –more than divinely– insane. It is particularly the verb "drain" that conjures up implications of penetrative violence, sexual hunger, and even destructive passion, all of which are symbolically subsumed under the Greek myth of Persephone. The lyric voice turns to the unfortunate goddess and her story of sexual violence so as to compare and intensify the magnitude of Sappho's torrid desire. According to the famous Homeric Hymn to Demeter, the young Persephone

... was playing with the deep-bosomed daughters of Oceanus and gathering flowers over a soft meadow, roses and crocuses and beautiful violets, irises also and hyacinths and the narcissus which Earth made to grow at the will of Zeus and to please the Host of Many, to be a snare for the bloom-like girl –a marvellous, radiant flower. It was a thing of awe whether for deathless gods or mortal men to see: from its root grew a hundred blooms and it smelled most sweetly, so that all wide heaven above and the whole earth and the sea's salt swell laughed for joy. And the girl was amazed and reached out with both hands to take the lovely toy; but the wide-pathed earth yawned there in the plain of Nysa, and the lord, Host of Many, with his immortal horses sprang out upon her (5-20).

¹³⁵ The Fieldean Sappho shares her vampirism with other fin-de-siècle literary figures such as Stephan Le Fanu's Carmilla, Algernon Swinburne's Faustine, George MacDonald's Lilith or Bram Stoker's Lucy Westenra. For an exhaustive study of these characters, see Senf, Case, Auerbach, Warwick (202-220), Dixon (47-56), Miller (21-38), or Muskovits –to cite but a few references of the large critical corpus that exists around the late Victorian female vampire.

The floral imagery and the sexual charge of this extract invite a valid comparison with Sappho's amatory behaviour. While Persephone plays around with nature collecting and spoiling blossoms of all descriptions, the Sapphic bee, with greater frenzy than her divine counterpart, explores groves and nooks in search of her most coveted flower. Translated into erotic terms, her quest takes on a 'mad' and invasive character: less like Persephone gathering blossoms and more like Hades abducting "the bloom-like girl" in an all-too brutal manner, the Sapphic lover embarks on a nomadic heuristics that hunts for scented and splendid pleasure in a persistent bee-sounding rhythm reproduced by the alliteration of sibilants: "Less mad, Persephone / Spoiled the Sicilian bowers / Than I for scent and splendour rove" (ll. 3-5).¹³⁶ Additionally, the syntax of these alliterative lines reflects the despair and madness of the Sapphic erotic journey: the grammatical correlation between "less" and "than" is split up by an intrusive sentence in the middle, and the prepositional complements precede their governing verbs in a convoluted construction dictated by a frantic and avid type of desire.

The frenzy of Sappho's desire disorients her, renders her 'lost' and symbolically manifests itself in the suggestive allusion to the myrtle, an evergreen flower which belongs to the iconic domain of Aphrodite and thus typifies seduction, inebriation, female pleasure, and lust.¹³⁷ As might be expected, the unveiling of this desire does not take place in the vastness of a grove or wood, but in the intimate secrecy of a "nook" (l. 7) where the flagrant nature of Sappho's ardour comes to make "Aphrodite pale" (l. 8). Here the figure of the love goddess appears to reinforce the analogies between

¹³⁶ This repetitive melody seems to be an extension of the alliterative rhythm of the Sapphic epigraph that heads poem III: *Μῆτ' ἔμοι μέλι μῆτε μέλισσα*. H. T. Wharton translates this line as "Neither honey nor bee for me" (146) and regards it as a typical manifestation of "Sappho's fondness for alliteration" (147). That *Long Ago* partakes of such fondness in poem III has a powerful effect of aesthetic organicity and unity: notwithstanding the temporal gulf between the archaic lyrical poem and its late Victorian rewriting, the Fieldean lyric voice endeavours not just to endow Sappho's fragments with renewed horizons of conceptual signification, but also to perpetuate their intrinsic music or, in current jargon, to create a cover version – a mashup – out of them.

¹³⁷ Ferber notes some of these values and adds that the plant is oftentimes present in the creation of floral crowns and garlands. Naturally, this significant presence turns the Aphroditean bloom into yet another symbol of the erotic union or intertwining that Sappho pursues desperately in *Long Ago*:

The myrtle plant was sacred to Aphrodite and to her Roman counterpart Venus, as it was to the Mesopotamian goddess Ishtar; hence it became the plant of love [...] Aristophanes uses "myrtle" as a euphemism for the female genitalia [...] Myrtle is an evergreen and thus suggestive of life's power against death; in Drayton's words, "bay and myrtle, which is ever new, / In spite of winter flourishing and green" (*Pastoral Eclogues* 6). Perhaps for this reason it was frequently used in garlands and crowns at festivals and to deck tombs. Early Greek lyric poets spoke of twining roses with myrtle (134).

Persephone, death, Eros, vampirism and Sappho. In some versions of her myth, the goddess destroys a king “who mated with her on a mountain top, as a queen-bee destroys the drone: by tearing out his sexual organs” (Pulham 58). Her power of castration, which originates in her own birth from Uranus’s mutilated genitalia, also affects the priests who are entitled to worship her as a queen-bee only after having performed acts of “ecstatic self-castration” (58). In keeping with this characterisation, the chorus of Euripides’ *Hippolytus* depicts Aphrodite as “Bee-like, death-like, a wonder” (602). As a vicious lover, the goddess stings, wounds, emasculates and even gives –symbolic or actual– death to her male followers.

Given her brutal and lethal ways of affection, Aphrodite does not confine her scope of influence to the sexual, nuptial and romantic facets of love: she also embodies “the dark side of love, which is death” (Johnson 80). In so doing, she inevitably intrudes into the Stygian domain of Persephone, queen of the netherworld. As the celebrated mythologist Karl Kéneyi writes:

In Greek southern Italy there are superb works of art that show how Persephone, the goddess of the underworld, can appear in the guise of Aphrodite, and how profound a religious experience underlay the Pythagorean doctrine that there were two Aphrodites, one of the heavens and one of the underworld. Aphrodite had her Persephone aspect (in Jaffé 92).

The Fieldean lover emulates the thanato-erotic paradigm of voracious desire instituted by the goddess Aphrodite. In this light, it is not Sappho’s death that looms ahead due to the traumatic lack of bliss she suffers. Her passive condition of rejected lover does not totalise her approach to love: she is not merely a powerless victim of disdain. Going beyond lamentation, what she sings articulates a sexual volition that presents her as a potential agent of death. In poem II, as explained previously, she already employs a powerful rhetoric of erotic ownership that objectifies her beloved and transforms his heart into an ideal object of breakage. Now, in the first stanza of poem III, Sappho becomes a “mad” queen-bee and a vampiress dying to “drain” her loved one, consume his “scent and splendour” and subject him to a form of passion that exceeds Aphrodite’s lust. Excessive and violent, Sappho’s desire offsets her lamentable plight as a spurned lover by analogising her to a thirsty bee invested with the latent power to sting, possess, and emasculate her drone. Nevertheless, one cannot forget that the disdain afflicting her remains all too factual and painful. Sappho acts under its sway and, in fact, seems to

project her own actual state onto her beloved with a fierce mode of eroticism that would put him in the vulnerable situation she occupies. Viewed in this manner, she is both victim and aggressor: although rejected, she pursues her active quest to take control of Phaon.¹³⁸

However, deprived of the chance to be either bee or honey for her beloved, the Sapphic voice is suspended in her erotic transit, only living in her desire and fluctuating unstably between her disinclination to renounce her “tingling quest” (l. 9) and her awareness that her senses may never know the joy of steeping in her beloved’s embrace. In this sense, the second stanza of poem III reads:

Honey nor bee! the tingling quest
Must that too be denied?
Deep in thy bosom I would rest,
O golden blossom wide!
O poppy-wreath, O violet-crown,
I fling your fiery circlets down;
The joys o’er which bees murmur deep
Your Sappho’s senses may not steep (ll. 9-16).

The existence Sappho has to lead is nomadic, always incomplete, and at best animated by the imaginings of conjectural actions. She clearly states that, were her pursuit of love successful, she “would rest” in Phaon’s bosom with her desire relying exclusively on the conditional tense to envisage its improbable fulfilment. In her reveries, however, the act of erotic possession undergoes a prepositional change of some significance: if she has formerly wished to dream of resting “*on* Phaon’s lips” (l. 14) in the second poem, she now turns the desire of superposition into a fantasy of complete *in-position*. Although it is again a product of the imagination, which helps mediate between Sappho’s frustrated love and her lover’s absence, the union she prefigures evolves into a deeper and more real experience. The interjections multiply by three in the middle of the stanza. The floral metaphors point to the coveted garlanding between lover and beloved in the fused form of “poppy-wreathes” and “violet-crowns” (l. 13)

¹³⁸ It is consequently obvious that Phaon gravitates around an also paradoxical structure of power: although it is in his hands to initiate or impede the union with Sappho, the position he assumes in such a union –as prefigured by the Fieldean lover– entails little activity and much susceptibility to Sappho’s draining power.

So profound and vivid is Sappho's fantasy that, all of a sudden, she changes the grammatical tense of her conjectural actions by replacing the conditional form –the previous “would rest” (l. 11) – with a pushy verb in the present indicative: “I fling your fiery circlets down” (l. 14). In this manner, the fictitious act of union becomes not only less distant and more substantial, but also fierce and even “fiery” (l. 14). Sappho seems to come close to what Catherine Maxwell describes as the “fleshing-out of the imagination” (*Second Sight* 49). which is a poetico-erotic process whereby the object of desire, although dreamt or hypothesised, fires and fuels the desiring imagination in such a way that the poem acquires a deep degree of physical intimacy –of sexual *in-rest* or *insistence*– which narrows the Cartesian gulf between mind and body.

What Sappho imagines becomes, as it were, a source of somatic feeling and “fiery” (l. 14) arousal as a result of a sudden process of temporal displacement: with the unrealis mood of conditionality giving way abruptly to the present indicative, Sappho's desire is endowed with a sense of reality whose truth-value resists the exclusive logic of empirical objectivity and incorporates the subjective categories of feeling as variants of veracity. Truth is pure subjectivity and imagination in Sappho's economy of desire: she seems to understand or personalise truth as appropriation in the sense that she confronts her beloved's objective absence by inventing his presence in conditional terms at first, then installing him in her immediate present, and thereby appropriating him into her subjective reality.¹³⁹ Moreover, expressing herself in a realis mood marked by the present indicative, Sappho not only manages to actualise her desire within her own reality: she also dementalisises it and charges it with corporeal energy. She penetrates her beloved's bosom, feels its “fiery” (l. 14) vitality-veracity, and defoliates it. In keeping with the apian tropes of the poem, she pollinates Phaon and strips him of his petals in a sexual assault that, despite its unilateral immanence, completes Sappho's desire into an intense experience wherein the imagination enables the body to feel –in truth– the beloved's fire. More importantly, with her imaginary and conditional speech acts, Sappho sees herself capturing, conquering and castrating her Phaon as though he were an open bloom ready to be invaded and penetrated by a deranged bee.

¹³⁹ In this regard, I understand the idea of truth through the general prism of existentialism: far from being a universal, absolute, and objective magnitude, truth falls out of the scope of metaphysics and becomes a phenomenological category, an existential experience or lived truth. In Sappho's erotic language, the present indicative lends a veracious and vivifying force to the perception that she has of her beloved as a “fiery” blossom (l. 14): in her constructed experience, she lives him as such –as a conflagrant truth.

In the third and final octet of poem III, the presence of death co-occurs with Sappho's androgyny on account of the castrating capacity she shares with Aphrodite. Her desire is by no means subtle, tender, and creative: instead, she professes urgent and deleterious feelings of voracity for Phaon, who receives an explicit vocative mention towards the end of the poem:

Honey! clear, soothing, nectarous, sweet,
Oh which my heart would feed,
Give me, O Love, the golden meat,
And stay my life's long greed—
The food in which the gods delight
That glistens tempting in my sight!
Phaon, thy lips withhold from me
The bliss of honey and of bee (ll. 17-24).

In these lines, the Sapphic variant of aestheticised vampirism escalates in intensity and complexity. The object of desire develops into a precious object of consumption under Sappho's voracious influence, which has a transgressive value. Her "long greed" (l. 20) is not an innocuous feeling, but a moral perversity. According to the Bible, a hungry female body bears with it the sin of the flesh, inherited from the first woman on Earth who imbues the act of eating with a subversive ethical quality:

And when the woman saw that the tree *was* good for food, and that it *was* pleasant to the eyes, and a tree to be desired to make one wise, she took of the fruit thereof, and did eat, and gave also unto her husband with her; and he did eat (King James Bible, Gen. 3.6).

It is Eve's appetite for wisdom that leads her to taste the forbidden fruit and share it with Adam, disobeying God and instigating the loss of the Garden of Eden, as well as the subsequent fall of mankind and the subjugation of women to their husbands. This foundational myth establishes a traditional symbolic semantics that associates female hunger to pejorative connotations of sin, shame and subversion, thus prescribing the dangerous binomial femininity-voracity as an expression of "unspeakable desires for sexuality and power" (Michie 13).

Accordingly, Sappho's appetite for Phaon does not respect "the notion that a true lady has to be petite and fragile in order to emphasize her angelic, bodiless and passionless nature" (Domínguez-Rué 297). Instead, what the Sapphic lover feels is a hyperbolic

physical ‘greed’ that, by its own definition, exceeds the intensity of hunger, takes on a long magnitude, and thus reaches a voracity that is “symbolically related to women’s predatory sexuality and aggression” (Silver 117). As a voracious vampiress, Sappho sees her beloved in an objectifying light as her own Persephone, her honeyed one, and her succulent feast. Phaon is depicted as a tempting fruit that Sappho *would* consume and drain as though he were nectar or meat. The conditional tense functions once again as the illusive approximator of an erotic meal that only the imagination renders tangible. Close to the semantics of dreaming and lying, the grammatical mood of conditionality enables the lyric voice to shorten the distance that keeps her apart from the fruit she lusts for. In other words, the persistent modal verb “would” brings the Fieldean lover – albeit imaginarily – nearer to the distant apple that the lovers cannot reach in this original fragment of Sappho:

As a sweet apple turns red on a high branch,
 high on the highest branch and the applepickers forgot—
 well, no they didn’t forget—were not able to reach (Carson 26).

It is true that, in *Long Ago*, the Sapphic lover stands far away from her desired fruit, which rests out of reach, on the highest branch. However, the space stretching between her and the sweet red apple is not barren or sterile: Sappho fertilises it with dreams, lies, and conditional actions that avert the possible exhaustion of her desire and attenuate the topmost remoteness of her beloved. The idealistic fertilisation she proposes, as hinted at above, consists in transplanting her erotic appetite into the language of food and thereby fashioning a gastronomy of desire wherein Sappho’s perceptual experience is nearly complete: with her aroused faculties of sight, touch and taste, she pictures Phaon as a sensual type of “Honey!” (l. 17) which is, to all her senses, “clear, soothing, nectarous, sweet” (l. 17). In this asyndetic description, indicative of a boundless sensuality, the gustatory pleasure Sappho imagines strongly evokes the erotic enjoyment that John Milton attributes to the disobedient Eve when she tastes the forbidden fruit:

... for Eve
 Intent now wholly on her taste, naught else
 Regarded, such delight till then, as seemd,
 In fruit she never tasted, whether true
 Or fansied so, through expectation high

Of knowledge, nor was godhead from her thought.
 Greedily she ingorg'd without restraint,
And knew not eating death: Sate at length,
And heightened as with wine (9.785-794).

Both Eve and Sappho seem to share the same greed for their respective coveted fruits, which are presented as delightful, sublime, satisfactory, and intoxicating. The shadow of death also haunts the acute feeling of hunger affecting both women: Eve engorges the forbidden apple, unleashes God's wrath, and causes the lapse of mankind and the concomitant loss of immortality. In like manner, Sappho's greed entails a destructive potential that may crystallise into the fatal devouring –or Miltonic engorging– of her beloved's "golden meat" (l. 19). This form of consumption is ultimately the extreme –Gothic and cannibalistic– fantasy of a possessive consciousness that, in the face of an unattainable object of desire, turns frustration into sheer violence. Despite her disadvantaged position of disdained lover, Sappho does not succumb to defeatism, inaction, and infertile misery. Instead, she charges her frustrated sexual appetite with a subtle –yet greedy– violence that makes her castrating behaviour unequivocally explicit, so much so that it is not unreasonable at all to identify her with what Catherine Maxwell terms the "feminine sublime." Sappho, indeed, embodies "a penetrating and often aggressive energy which overwhelms or pierces [or engorges] a man's body and soul" (7). Under the influence of this energy, imaginary though it is, Phaon undergoes "a passive feminisation" (7), bears the threat of castration, and hence becomes a death-haunted prey. The looming potentiality of death is essentially symbolic: in consuming her beloved, Sappho gains the name of action and deals a fatal blow to Phaon's masculinity.

However, beyond the sublime and lethal greed that Eve and Sappho share, there is a plain difference as to the truth-value of their transgressive experiences: whilst the biblical first woman factually reaches and eats the apple, Sappho only imagines it within a conditional gastronomy of desire and with inevitable limitations. In this regard, since it is but a fantasy, Sappho's hunger seems to re-articulate an intense moment of Algernon Swinburne's "Anactoria" in which the ancient lyrist, who acts as the speaker of the poem, manifests her sadomasochistic and vampiric desire to enjoy and consume her lesbian beloved –Anactoria, in this case– as the most succulent and lethal feast that the erotic consciousness can possibly imagine:

Ah that my lips were tuneless lips, but pressed
 To the bruised blossom of thy scourged white breast!
 Ah that my mouth for Muses' milk were fed
 On the sweet blood thy sweet small wounds had bled!
 That with my tongue I felt them, and could taste
 The faint flakes from thy bosom to the waist!
 That I could drink thy veins as wine, and eat
 Thy breasts like honey! that from face to feet
 Thy body were abolished and consumed,
 And in my flesh thy very flesh entombed! (60).

In these dramatic lines, the Sapphic voice exposes the vampirism and violence that the Fieldean bee only expresses in an aestheticised fashion. The lips, epicentre of Sappho's (lesbian) desire in Michael Field's verse, now reject the tuneful –or peaceful– music of erotic fusion and become pressing, lacerating, and scourging inflictors of a paradoxical synthesis of pain-cum-pleasure. The nectarous honey, craved by the Fieldean Sappho, relegates the quest for the Musean source of inspiration and reddens into the sweet blood that flows out of the open wounds imaginarily inflected on the beloved. The bosom where the Fieldean lover "would rest" (l. 11) hosts an exclamatory tongue that meets its oral ecstasy on the waist. The sweet blood heightens the lover as with Miltonic wine. The beloved's breasts are devoured like the honey the Sapphic bee seeks. The erotic climax eventually occurs with uttermost ferocity in the lover/murderer's imagination: Sappho obliterates and incorporates her beloved's body, abolishing the principle of individuation, effacing all physical borders between subject and object of desire, and consummating a simultaneous act of creation and destruction. Anactoria's individual identity is erotically destroyed so as to create the most radical form of inter-subjectivity, which goes beyond a mere encounter between self and other and occasions some kind of Hermaphroditic entombing of duality into a carnal unity. As McClure points out, "Anactoria's flesh will now be (and be in) Sappho's, and vice versa, suggesting possession and identity as much as containment" (218). Undoubtedly, it is this inter-fleshing or carnal unity that the Fieldean lover desperately seeks, judging by the imperative appeal she makes for the divine intercession of Eros: "Give me, O Love, the golden meat" (l. 11)¹⁴⁰

¹⁴⁰ As already indicated, the only difference between Swinburne's sense of carnality and that of Michael Field lies in that the Sapphic love articulates "Anactoria" as a blatantly sanguinary discourse of desire, whilst she moderates the violent physicality of her erotic language in *Long Ago*.

Nonetheless, despite its voracity, carnality and subtle bloodlust, exposed analogously by Swinburne's "Anactoria," Sappho's erotic imagination does know its own bounds: it encounters inevitable limitations that are made explicit by the asyndeton the lyric voice uses in her metaphoric description of Phaon as the most luscious honey: "clear, soothing, nectarous, sweet" (l. 17).¹⁴¹ This unlimited predicate amplifies the conceivable extent of the sensuous experience with the beloved, leaving him undetermined and even half-liberating him from the ontological and synecdochic reduction he undergoes in the second poem. In the Sapphic gastronomy of desire, Phaon ceases to be the yearned-for prisoner of a delusion and acquires a physical transparency, gentleness, sweetness, and other qualities that are unknown. The asyndeton exposes his otherness, transcendence, and autonomy. Put more accurately, Phaon exists beyond the four adjectives Sappho applies to him, although he relies wholly on them for his poetic existence. He exists –or rather *insists*– within the Fieldean poem insofar as he instigates, maintains, and sweetens Sappho's desire, yet the open enumeration of his attributes endows him with a *beyondness* of his own that eludes Sappho's erotic apprehension. In a way, Phaon turns out to be both ontologically dependent and independent in that his subjectivity is obliquely represented by the Sapphic voice, and yet this representation per se discloses its own limitations by acknowledging asyndetically that Phaon's honey may offer more than Sappho's senses can perceive. His status is thus both imminent and transcendent.¹⁴²

In her erotic gastronomy, Sappho entreats the personified deity of Love to intervene in her favour and serve her with a feast made of her beloved. This entreaty substitutes the previous conditional mood –"would feed" (l. 18) – for a couple of imperative verbs that frame an alternate form of intersubjectivity around Sappho and Phaon. Within her own sphere of action, as fictive as it is, she nevertheless avails herself of the resource of grammatical conditionality to impel or attract her remote object of desire: in spite of having no factual truth-value, the Sapphic act of conditional attraction ascribes some affective veracity or actuality to the beloved, making him more accessible and reachable

¹⁴¹ This asyndetic line echoes Sappho's inexhaustible iterations when describing the beauty of her female beloved in Swinburne's "Anactoria": "Ah sweet, and sweet again, and seven times sweet" (61).

¹⁴² The theological notion of *coincidentia oppositorum*, formalised by Nicholas of Cusa in the fifteenth century, resonates powerfully with Phaon's contradictory identity: like the Christian God, Sappho's beloved, who also stands, as I shall explain shortly, rather close to divinity, is "both transcendent of and immanent within it [Creation]" (Webb 157). In *Long Ago*, it is Sappho's creation –her lyrical discourse of desire– that takes/loses hold of Phaon's subjectivity in a simultaneous way: while belonging intrinsically to the Sapphic love fiction, he nevertheless transcends it with a disdain that prevents Sappho from having a more complete experience of/with him.

in her desiring imagination. Outside her limited sphere of action, Sappho has to look for a divine alliance to intercede between her and Phaon. In her address to the god of Love, similar to the one she made to Hypnos and Nyx in the second poem, she externalises her desire by means of directive illocutions that involve an intermediate agency whose superior power, she believes, may help her assuage or “stay” her erotic hunger –in her own words, her “life’s long greed” (l. 20). In both cases, the conditional mood and the divinity-oriented imperative open up spaces, one internal and the other external, wherein the loving subject attempts to reach out for her loved object as near as possible and regardless of how real or veracious the attempt is. Both modalities operate as strategies or mechanisms that initiate and favour the erotic mediation Sappho needs to gain some sense of propinquity to Phaon.

In her metaphoric proximity to Phaon as an object of cannibalism, Sappho transforms him from an ontologically ambivalent type of honey into a semi-divine class of “golden meat” (l. 19). He experiences a peculiar kind of apotheosis in personifying the ambrosia or nectar “in which the gods delight” (l. 21). His presence among the gods has a twofold effect: his ontological stature rises, yet so does his distance from Sappho. By comparing him to divine food, the Fieldean lover elevates his condition to the metaphysical pedestal of the immortals. The asyndetic *beyondness* he appeared to possess becomes more patent now. Phaon enters a supra-Sapphic space of transcendence, gaining the highest esteem –or idolatry– that a beloved can inspire and, paradoxically, making it all the more unlikely for the lover to reach him. In deifying Phaon as an ambrosial meal, Sappho inevitably widens the barrier between her mundane self and the divine object of her desire with the detrimental result that her greed loses almost all prospects of finding assuagement in view of the divine remoteness her beloved has assumed. This detriment, however, overturns itself and ceases to be a detriment in an absolute sense, for it implies a paradoxical benefit: it guarantees the continuation of the erotic quest. As M. C. Dillon explains in his prosopography of the romantic lover/beloved:

In deifying the beloved, the romantic lover at the same time places a barrier between himself and the object of his desire. He keeps his quest alive by strategies designed to preclude the contact with or carnal knowledge of his beloved [...] The beloved, for her part, is complicit in this prohibition and seeks always to remain aloof, elusive, unattainable, mysterious, in any case, unpossessed (58).¹⁴³

¹⁴³ It is worth noting that the pattern of romantic divinisation that Dillon discerns in his study of different cultural (specifically literary) traditions reflects a clear distribution of gender roles: it is the male lover

On the horizon of the Sapphic quest, the beloved's unreachability is not necessarily transcendental. His divinity is neither metaphysical nor immaterial in that it does not oppose the fleshliness or physicality that transmutes him into an appetising meal for the carnivorous lover. Instead, divine and fleshly at once, Phaon falls within a pagan and sensual version of the Eucharist. He incarnates himself in honey and meat, countering any unequivocal distinction between the bodily and the spiritual. These polarities are clearly unified by the oxymoron "golden meat" (l. 19) in which the ancient value of gold, regarded as a symbol of sanctity and spirituality,¹⁴⁴ merges with sheer carnality. It is in this sense that Sappho's beloved recalls the figure of Jesus Christ and revives His sacramental words of Communion: "my flesh is meat indeed, and my blood is drink indeed. He that eateth my flesh, and drinketh my blood, dwelleth in me, and I in him" (John 6.55-56). The analogy is self-evident here: in Sapphic terms, the Eucharist corresponds directly to what the Fieldean lover most desires –the erotic draining of flowers, the drinking of nectar, the sucking of blood, the feeding on "golden meat" (l. 19), and the Swinburnean inter-entombing of flesh.

As a transubstantiated beloved, Phaon not only dissolves the opposition between spirit and flesh: he implicitly creates a fluid economy of possession. In conformity with Christian liturgy, the act of receiving the Eucharist of love –of eating Phaon's meat– functions in two simultaneous directions: the one who eats is also eaten and vice versa. The sexual variants of vampirism and cannibalism mature into an experience of ontological confusion that obscures the chasm between the active subject and the passive object. In consuming her beloved's flesh, Sappho is also consumed in a simultaneous ceremony of reciprocal digestion: she grows to dwell in him, and he in

that takes the active part and deifies the female beloved, who is elusive and ultimately inaccessible. Nevertheless, as argued earlier, *Long Ago* transgresses and queers such a pattern by presenting Sappho as a greedy romantic idolater and her beloved Phaon as a castrated unreachable deity.

¹⁴⁴ Since the earliest periods of antiquity, gold has been associated with purity, sanctity and holiness, as Michael Ferber (2007: 87) details here:

Gold is the first of metals. "Gold, like fire blazing / in the night, shines preeminent amid lordly wealth," says Pindar (Olymp. 1.1-2). Its beauty and purity gave it divine status in biblical as well as classical culture; untarnishable and thus immortal, it belongs to the gods – "gold is the child of Zeus" (Pindar, frag. 222). Hera, Artemis, and Eos (Dawn) have golden thrones, Hera a golden chariot, Zeus and Apollo golden whips, Iris golden wings, Zeus golden scales, Artemis and Ares golden reins, Calypso and Circe golden "zones" (girdles), and Aphrodite herself is golden, all in Homer. The gods sit in council on a golden floor, drinking out of golden cups (*Iliad* 4.2-3), Aphrodite leaves her father's golden house (Sappho, "Ode" 8), "Ye golden gods" is an interjection in Aristophanes (*Frogs* 483).

her. The *rest-in-thy-bosom* she covets in the second octet results ideally in an erotic dwelling where the possessor and the possessed can be one and the same, unstable, unfixed, interchangeable, and co-existent in the individuality of each erotic subject-object. Within this supposed communion of love, the bivalent logic of passivity and activity expires and gives way to the multi-valued logic of paradox that invalidates the old principle of non-contradiction. Rather than occupying one single position, Sappho is both active and passive in her desire. Her aspiration is to enjoy the “bliss of honey and of bee” (l. 24) without privileging one form of pleasure over the other. The repetitive use of the preposition *of* seems to individuate and grant equal significance to the two terms in an order of radical openness. Receptivity and penetrability are not subsumed under one synthetic category: each remains discrete and distinctive, yet practicable by the same subject/object. The bliss Sappho pursues points not towards an indiscernible encroachment of varied erotic energies, but towards a non-reductive openness or porosity between passivity and of activity as full experiences in their own right, interacting or co-acting together without necessarily assimilating one into the other.

The labial sexuality on which Sappho lays stress partakes of such openness. The kiss she wants to take from Phaon’s withholding lips is reminiscent of the phenomenon of reversibility or chiasmus that I identified in the previous chapter. Kissing functions graphically as an X in that it is not one-sided or unidirectional, but its particular phenomenology always implies the concurrence or crisscrossing of two indivisible phenomena or, more precisely, of one single phenomenon that doubles up. The kisser is subject and object or bee and honey at the same time. The kiss is a two-faced action that reverses itself in a way that disarticulates the rigid opposition between passivity and activity. In the act of kissing and being kissed, one engages in a “relation of reciprocity in which neither of the relata is intelligible apart from the other” (Cataldi 70). French thinker Merleau-Ponty defines this relation with such different terms as reversibility, intertwining or chiasm, all of which bear directly on the experience of erotic union –or intergarlanding– that Sappho desires. Not surprisingly, the chiastic or reversible kiss she cannot take from her beloved finds a congenial place within her special economy of erotic possession, where the subject is ideally sentient and sensible, active and passive, kisser and kissed, or lover and loved.

Beyond Sappho’s chiasmatic and unifying imagination, the reality she faces is reduced to contemplative solipsism. Phaon merely “glistens tempting” (l. 22) to Sappho’s eyes.

The eroticism she envisages at first as perceptually copious –“clear, soothing, nectarous, sweet” (l. 17) – narrows down to the confines of her vision. On the level of reality, she holds an empirical contact with Phaon that is founded entirely on his seductive presence and her excited sense of sight: it is only her gaze that factually anchors itself to him. Her desire is originally and essentially scopophilic inasmuch as it stems from an attractive beloved that “glistens” (l. 22) and captivates her attention. Under the Sapphic gaze, particularly fixed on his lips, Phaon has his androgyny or effeminacy enhanced to such an extent that he seems to play the part reserved in Western cultural aesthetics, whether erotic or not, for the passive-viewed-objectified woman, whose physical presence merely presents itself, appears, or displays itself to be looked at within a visual regime in which, as John Berger famously states, “men act and women appear. Men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at” (47). In her erotic discourse, however, Sappho overthrows such a regime by reversing its traditional roles: she becomes the subject of the active gaze and pictures Phaon as the glistening object of her aroused sight.

Sappho’s gaze is not solely active, though. The notion of reversibility ascribed to the Sapphic kiss is also apposite to the visual economy implicit in *Long Ago’s* poem III. Sappho acts, looks, and imposes her gaze, but at the same time exposes herself to Phaon’s autonomous presence. His phenomenality –the fact that he articulates himself as an embodied self-appearing– is not a mere fact that falls passively under Sappho’s control. Phaon seduces: he “glistens tempting in my sight” (l. 22). He embodies the oxymoronic identity of the eroticising passive agent: although visually objectified, he nonetheless does not lose the power to influence, allure and tempt his desiring gazer, who inevitably ends up relegated to the passive condition of the visible as a result of what Merleau-Ponty views as the crisscrossing or chiasmus “between the seer and the visible” (Landes 226). Sappho is the seer, the seen, and even the tempted. For his part, Phaon is not just a tempter or, more precisely, given his initial state of visual reification, a temptress, but also one that, making his effeminacy all the more blatant, is elusive, reticent, and ultimately unconquerable. As such, he adheres –maybe more directly than before– to the lesbian discourse underlying Sappho’s limited approach to him: not only is he an evasive beloved and an object of castration (of capture, breakage, and draining), but also a labial site of desire and a gleaming temptation. In this light, his identity is

essentially gendered in the feminine and specifically encoded into a lesbian subtext or secret nook wherein the Sapphic lover queers her object of desire.

Beyond the scopophilic regime of Sappho's desire, Phaon amounts to nothing but a fond delusion. He is purely "theoretical" in the etymological sense of the term: an object of vision, contemplation or speculation. For this reason, the only forms of pseudo-connection with him include, as explained earlier on, the imaginary, the speculative, and the mediatory mechanisms of dreams, lies, imperative invocations to divine forces, and conditional scenarios. The penultimate line of poem III adds another such mechanism: the apostrophe. Sappho addresses Phaon in a seemingly direct manner to accuse him of denying her the "bliss of honey and of bee" (l. 24). Although remonstrative and rhetorical, this address fills up the void that the real Phaon represents by treating him as an immediate interlocutor. By dint of the vocative appellation, Sappho creates a special sense of immediacy with her beloved. If her coveted dreams and her conditional imaginings served the implicit purpose of making her feel close to Phaon, it is now the direct appellation that gives her not a feeling of propinquity, but of involvement with him. Even though it is, as a matter of fact, a delusive feeling, it helps fertilise or pollinate the space of separation between Sappho and Phaon: it keeps her desire active, prolongs her quest, and makes the fantasy of possession-as-emasculation plausible.

6.3. The Snake-Woman on the Littoral Battlefield

In lyric IV, Sappho elaborates on her extreme form of eroticism by creating an implicit simile between her ideal self and the invasive motion of nature on the shore:

WHERE with their boats the fishers land
Grew golden pulse along the sand;
It tangled Phaon's feet—away
He spurned the trails, and would not stay;
Its stems and yellow flowers in vain
Withheld him: can my arms detain
The fugitive? If that might be,
If I could win him from the sea,
Then subtly I would draw him down
'Mid the bright vetches; in a crown
My art should teach him to entwine
Their thievish rings, and keep him mine (ll. 1-12).

In the space of mediation that the littoral opens between lover and beloved, Sappho seems to reach some degree of contact with her Phaon. Personified, nature acts in her place a mediator, trying to ensnare the elusive beloved with the golden pulse which “tangled Phaon’s feet –away” (l. 3). The ensnaring affects the poem syntactically: the first two lines form a mimetic hyperbaton that imitates the attempt to seize hold of Phaon. The whole scene constitutes an effective metaphor that pictures Sappho as a serpentine plant, a creeper, or even a snake: she creeps along the sand, reaches down to the shore, and strives to entrap “Phaon’s feet” (l. 3). Inevitably, this dramatic trope conjures up the archetypal image of the serpent-woman, reminiscent of Medusa, *Lilith* or Melusina,¹⁴⁵ who are usually portrayed as “agents of fascination, allegories of evil and incarnations of deception, destruction and decay” (Baumbach 114).¹⁴⁶ Common to these agents is their existential purpose to entice, ensnare, enslave, and emasculate men. As observed in poems II and III, Sappho does seem to pursue such a purpose with overt

¹⁴⁵ John Collier’s painting *Lilith* (1892) serves as an eloquent fin-de-siècle illustration of the archetypal correspondence between woman and serpent: the Jewish female demon is represented as an overtly sexual icon, as an incarnate temptation, amidst the primitive wilderness, fully in the nude, in a plain attitude of pleasure and gratification, with her face immersed in a fulfilled reverie, her reddish hair on the loose, and her white body embraced by a dark snake (see figure X in the Appendix to this thesis) By analogy, one can automatically imagine Sappho exhibiting Lilith’s attitude, curving her way along the shore, alluring her beloved, and venturing to enfold him like the serpent that her Jewish ancestor wears.

¹⁴⁶ Baumbach offers a succinct catalogue of such different mythic agents, including Medusa, Lilith, Eve, Pandora, Medea, Helena, Cleopatra, Salome, and Melusina, “who metamorphoses between the shapes of a woman, snake and dragon” (114). Amongst them all, I single out the cases of Medusa, Lilith and Melusina by virtue of their direct associations with serpents, which seem to contribute, as in Sappho’s implicit floral conduct, to the enhancement of their fatal traits and practices, namely: sensuality, corporal sinuosity, deception, evil, cruelty, and castration.

determination: she desires to take and break her beloved's heart, drain him, inhabit him, and even consume him to assuage her greed. Now, in poem IV, the lyric subject re-articulates her fantasy of erotic possession-as-extermination by substituting the apian imagery, utterly dominant in the third poem, with specific floral similes that bare the trace of the mythic figure of the woman-snake, whose sensual and menacing sinuosity resembles the movements of a creeping, entwining, and tangling Sappho-as-golden-pulse in her strenuous effort to possess her beloved.

Similarly, in the middle of the poem, Sappho tacitly likens her arms to the figurative yet threatening "stems and yellow flowers" (l. 5) that seek to "detain" (l. 6) the elusive beloved and bring the erotic quest to a successful end. The image is highly suggestive: Sappho may well be pictured stretching herself out desperately, menacing Phaon with her determined arms and wishing to subjugate him to her power once and for all. This image of radical desire is then followed by a series of conditional clauses that present a scenario of erotic hope and potential violence against Sappho's beloved. As pointed out in the analysis of poem II, the conditional mood permits the desiring subject to resist the oppression of her factuality and protract her abiding desire by envisioning the ideal circumstances in which the very desire touches ground –far from the unsteady shore– in the conquered presence of the erotic object. Functioning perhaps as tentative responses to the nuclear rhetorical question in poem IV, the conditional clauses disclose the richness and delicate brutality of Sappho's erotic consciousness. In the initial protasis, "If that might be" (l. 7), the demonstrative pronoun works ambivalently as an anaphora and cataphora at once: while it clearly refers to the content of the preceding question, it also seems to anticipate the sense of the subsequent protasis, thus accumulating such a density of (other possible) meanings, that it certainly becomes, in spite of its inherent semantic occasionality, an emphatic illustration of the plenitude of Sappho's desire. Indeed, if highlighted and assertively isolated, the demonstrative acquires a rhetorical and semantic potency that enables it to comprehend or encapsulate the totality and intensity of what Sappho would presumably do were her quest successful in the end: implicit in her "that" is the virtual certainty that she would detain, entrap, break and engorge her loved one with her all too vicious desire.

The second protasis –"If I could win him from the sea" (l. 8) – turns Sappho's quest into an overt belligerent competition. She becomes a contestant; the sea, her rival, and Phaon, the final trophy. In this competitive erotic economy, the lover adopts a certain

role of aggressor, a candid attitude of conquest, and hence a virile deportment –if judged from an orthodox gender ideology. On the contrary, the beloved loses his subjective transcendence altogether (his *beyondness*), falls prey to sheer objectification, and enters into the artificial categories conventionally ascribed to femininity. These gender reversals have very little –if any– novelty value within Michael Field’s project, for they actually take place in other poems, as I have evinced in previous analyses. What does make some difference, however, is the inclusion of the sea in Sappho’s geography of desire. Three conceptual spaces arise. The terra firma, on the one hand, presents itself as the territory where Sappho holds sway and wishes to detain her beloved: it is thus a space of control, detention and emasculation. On the other hand, the sea seems to represent Phaon’s domain, where his errancy and freedom keep him away from the mainland –and, by extension, from Sappho. The third space, the shore, unites and separates the previous two: it serves to a degree as an intermediary between land and sea, yet the mediation it favours comes down to nothing but a momentary occasion. It is, however, in the brief course of this occasion that Sappho starts up her competition, establishes her own battlefield, mounts her serpentine attacks, stretches out her arms in the form of “stems and yellow flowers” (l. 5), and does her uttermost to “win [her beloved] from the sea” (l. 8). In this fashion, the littoral becomes an erotic field of competition and belligerence where the Fieldean lover seeks the ultimate conquest and the beloved runs the risk of losing his masculinity.

In the event of the eventual conquest, the first apodosis avows: “Then subtly I would draw him down / ’Mid the bright vetches” (ll. 9-10). The motif of ensnarement repeats itself once again with the recurrent floral imagery. This time Sappho renders more explicit her eagerness to wrap herself around Phaon and enfold him wholly underneath her “bright vetches” (l. 10) –perhaps her arms, her sinuous torso or her entire body. It seems clear that the body/nature correlation, formerly evocative of the serpent-woman archetype, endows Sappho’s carnality and eroticism with some subtle sense of wildness or natural violence that accounts for her competitive disposition and her desire to subdue her beloved –to “draw him down” (l. 9).

Nonetheless, such violence clashes with the adverb “subtly” (l. 9) that qualifies the coveted act of subjection. A paradoxical complexity underlies this discordance. Sappho’s erotic brutality is at least two-sided: on the surface, it appears subtle, tepid, flowery, aesthetic, driven by despair, and vehement at the most, yet an insightful

reading discloses Sappho's profound undercurrents of greed, vampirism, detention, and subjugation. It is, in effect, this tacit violence that becomes all the more apparent in the second apodosis, in which Sappho claims: "in a crown / My art should teach him to entwine / Their thievish rings, and keep him mine" (ll. 10-12). In the final verb phrase of these lines, no subtlety is intended. Sappho's desire aspires to the absolute possession of her beloved and the total union with him –with no half measures.

The symbol she employs for such a union is the crown, which also figures in the first poem of *Long Ago* in the form of garlands plaited and shared between maidens. On this occasion, the crown seems to typify the *Hermaphroditean* entwinement that Sappho pursues as a "thievish" lover (l. 12).¹⁴⁷ Her "art" (l. 11) consists in nothing but robbing Phaon of his autonomy, appropriating him altogether, and plaiting him into her garland. If such is her artistic conduct, then hers is a covert aestheticism of erotic violence, assault, and even annihilation. In Sappho's approach to love, no room is left either for a subtle romantic epistemology –for the possibility of discovering and knowing the loved other– or for any form of intersubjectivity. The only ideology at work is *au fond* a radical *ars amatoria* of aggression, appropriation and castration against a beloved that would have to die as a man in order to participate in Sappho's competitive economy of desire.

¹⁴⁷ The myth of Hermaphroditus coincides closely with Sappho's ideal of erotic fusion: according to Ovid's *Metamorphoses* (4. 271-415), Hermaphroditus took a bath in a fountain at Salmacis, where a nymph fell in love with him, yet he rejected her. The nymph enfolded herself around him like a serpent, entreating the gods to fuse her with her beloved forever. Her prayer was heard and answered, and her body became one with that of Hermaphroditus. The analogy with Sappho is self-evident: both the nymph and Sappho profess an all-consuming love, both manifest serpentine proclivities towards their beloved, and both pray for an erotic union that entraps, devours, and appropriates the loved other into their very physical selves.

6.4. A Mythology of Feminine Ravishment and Combustion

As I have revealed in previous chapters, *Long Ago* develops a common narrative pattern of mythological rewritings that reinforce the central preoccupations of the volume with virginity, marriage, lovelessness, desire and death. Not surprisingly, Sappho's fantasies of castration find their own mythopoetic expression in a few lyrics. In poem XXXII, the figure of Eros or Cupid fuses with Sappho's self-image and evinces the violence of her passion for Phaon:

NOT for revenge!—one shaft alone
From Sappho's hand, in ire, hath flown;
Love smote: the arrow from my heart
I drew, and bent the string
For Phaon's breast; he felt no smart,
With me remains the sting;
And I am weaponless, apart
From that too wildly wasted dart (ll. 2-8).

The poem opens with an apparent irony: Sappho exclaims that no vindictive feelings motivate her actions, but immediately thereafter she confesses that, in imitation to the despotic god of love, she grabbed and shot the very same arrow that wounded her chest at her beloved to win his heart against his own will. Although her attempt failed, the tacit analogy between her and Cupid reveals the peril and hostility of her desire. Sappho wishes to coerce, attack, penetrate and overpower Phaon. All she seeks is to make him feel the “smart” (l. 5) or pain of love. Her codes of eroticism include an inherent association with violence, suffering and even revenge. Undoubtedly, if she succeeded in her attempt to penetrate her beloved with the dart of love, he would lose all power and freedom, and Sappho would subject him to the slings and arrows of love that she knows so well.

The motif of Sappho as castrator or penetrator gains explicit prominence in the Tiresian lyric (LII), where different myths of tragic women are revised in a strategic way that ascribes full agency and power to the female figures:

Medea's penetrative charm
Own'st thou to succour and disarm,
Hast thou her passion inly great
Heroes to mould and subjugate?
Can'st thou divine how sweet to bring

Apollo to thy blossoming
As Daphne; or, as just a child
Gathering a bunch of tulips wild,
To feel the flowery hill-side rent
Convulsive for thy ravishment? (ll. 53-62).

For Michael Field's Sappho, Tiresias never loses his feminine potential. Although he regains his manhood, his heart nevertheless preserves the power and knowledge he once acquired as a woman. This internal femininity partakes of a transgressive ontology of gender that subverts the ideological binarism between men and women. The female part that Tiresias harbours is far from submissive, angelic and silent. Instead, the prophet possesses an active, assertive and even aggressive femininity that relates him to the menacing figure of Medea and to reworked versions of Daphne and Persephone. With the sorceress of Colchis Tiresias shares a "penetrative charm" (l. 53) that threatens men and renders them mouldable and weaponless –like impotent and vulnerable Jasons. In the naiad Daphne Tiresias discovers a story not of harassment and violence against her, but of radical empowerment. For the Michael Fields, Daphne is no longer a beautiful nymph that tries desperately to avoid Apollo's lust. Now she assumes control and behaves as the active part who wishes to seduce and bring the god to fulfil her own desires of "blossoming" (l. 58). In a similar vein, the figure of Persephone, identified as the child plucking flowers in the lines quoted earlier on, takes on an active and powerful role: the daughter of Demeter ceases to be the innocent girl abducted by Hades and now becomes a sexually mature temptress who seemingly wishes to uproot all tulips, crack the earth open, allure the god of the underworld, and use him for her own delight –for her "ravishment" (l. 62). In these rewritings, the Michael Fields transform the myths of Medea, Daphne and Persephone into illustrations of their own gender ontology, according to which the feminine represents not merely beauty, freedom and vitalism as I showed in Chapter III. Contrary to all metaphysical and societal conventionalisms, the feminine is a powerful, penetrative, and highly dangerous charm that converts women into *femmes fatales* and hence into potential menaces against men.

In lyric LIX, Sappho provides yet another mythological example of how the feminine, understood on Michael Field's terms, threatens to emasculate men and even kill them all too literally. This time it is Selene, the Greek goddess of the moon, that falls for the

beautiful shepherd Endymion and subjugates him to her voracious desire to the point of turning him into an unconscious, castrated, and virtually dead prey:

Oh, she drooped
Her long wings round her, as she stooped
Close to his cheek, his eyes, his very breath!
But ere, in that profound eclipse,
She brake the fountain of her lips
O'er her beloved, in swoon as deep as death
She laid him; then securely spent
Her virgin frenzy innocent,
Then took her maiden pleasure unespied;
And, sealing the dark cavern where
He lay asleep, resumed her care,
With steady hand her steeds through heaven to guide.

But nightly from Meander's stream
Southward she turns her snowy team
Behind the further slope of Latmos' height,
Pierces unseen a mountain-rift,
Then climbs the air, effulgent, swift,
And fills the lovely river-bed with light (ll. 37-54).

Selene undergoes a radical transformation in the course of poem LIX: initially, she feels impotent and fearful as her desire for Endymion grows and becomes a “tyrannous and strange” passion (l. 24) against her chaste nature. However, her fear fades and gives way to a completely different attitude of dominance. In the above sestet, Selene flies down, approaches her beloved intimately, and gives him a diluvial kiss that leaves him in a state of impotence and unconsciousness “as deep as death” (l. 42). With her monumental kiss, the lunar goddess paralyses, possesses, oppresses and enslaves Endymion. Hers is the very mythical kiss of death that castrates the shepherd and condemns him to eternal confinement in the dark cavern where Selene keeps him for her use and ravishment. The goddess secretly visits him at night, satisfies her oxymoronic “virgin frenzy” (l. 44) with him, pierces the cave where he sleeps and abuses him. Since she always goes “unespied” (l. 45) and “unseen” (l. 52) on her way to the cavern, her divine virginity remains publically unquestioned. It is her most private and secret self that reveals her violent sexual identity.

Poem LXV completes Michael Field's mythopoesis of castration by appropriating one of the Greek anthropogenic myths and thereby unveiling the “insidious heat” (l. 20) that defines Sappho's understanding of love:

PROMETHEUS fashioned man,
Then ruthful, pitying
His creature when the snowy storms began
To numb, the frost to harass and to cling,

Toward the sun's golden wheel
He clomb, and, as the blaze
Burned past, taught of Athene, sprang to steal
A scintillating fragment from the rays.

With wisdom-guided torch
Dipped in the heavenly flame
Back he returned to each unlighted porch,
And filled the homes with joy where'er he came.

Zeus marked the flickering brand,
And earthward bent to urge
Two countervailing evils through the land:
One was the fever with its fiery scourge;

One was Pandora's face,
Her smiles and luring feet—
"Woman," he said, "shall scorch man's petty race,
And fill his senses with insidious heat."

But, Phaon, tremble thou
Whom beauty cannot fire,
Who livest with no rage upon thy brow,
Unstricken by complaint or by desire.

Remember what thou art,
Think of the wrath above,
Scathless to stand is not a mortal's part:
O fool, accept the furious curse of love! (ll. 1-28).

In this long lyric, Sappho recounts how the titan Prometheus created men, lamented their inability to withstand the inclement cold, and stole a fragment from the sun's rays to provide his mortal creatures with fire. This theft, however, infuriated Zeus to such a degree that he condemned men to bear two evils associated with fire: fever and love. To inflict the latter, the supreme god created Pandora, the first woman, whose main role it was to hurt men with the "insidious heat" of love (l. 20). After retelling this story, Sappho uses its symbolism to implicitly portray herself as the very fire that Prometheus stole, the fever that Zeus sent against humankind and the malicious heat that Pandora carried with her. As the erotic personification of fire, Sappho wishes to excite and burn her beloved. Here the act of burning entails sexual gratification, ravishment, possession or even destructive combustion. Despite Phaon's indifference and affective numbness,

Sappho still wants him to be weak, fearful, vulnerable and mortal. She invites him to “accept the furious curse of love” (l. 28). By extension, it is Sappho herself that embodies such a curse: she wishes to be the fever that would kill Phaon as a result of an extreme form of love.

6.5. A Bloodless Phaon: The Imposed Being-Towards-Death

The narrative of castration and vengeance against Phaon finds its crudest expression in poems LXIV and LXVI. In the former, Sappho initially refers to an unfortunate fisher named Pelagon who died at sea and left his work tools as the only reminders of his life:

ABOVE a fisher's tomb
Were set his withy basket and his oar,
The tokens of his doom,
Of how in life his labour had been sore:
A father put them up above his son,
Meniscus over luckless Pelagon (ll. 1-6).

This sestet, rather than an innocuous and arbitrary anecdote, constitutes an implicit fatal desire against Phaon. In Sappho's view, her beloved may –and perhaps should– suffer the very same fate as Pelagon. The 'breezes' and 'the open waters' conceal a potential of doom and death that Phaon has to confront in his usual dealings with the sea. Here the sea ceases to be the space of freedom and survival that once offered Phaon the opportunity to escape Sappho's voracious desire. Now "the open waters" (l. 12) pose a direct threat to the fugitive beloved:

Phaon, thou dost consort
With the same breezes, and thy sails uncoil
At evening in the port
For midnight vigil and for perilous toil,
And, having set thy willow-plaited snare,
Forth on the open waters thou dost fare (l. 7-12).

Sappho appears to regard her beloved's demise as a highly plausible and even deserved fact owing to his "wretched" (l. 13) character and hubris. When his death comes to pass, Phaon will be neither remembered nor sung, and no memorial will bear his name. In disdaining Sappho, Phaon loses every chance to defeat death by means of the poetic word. Sappho wishes to take revenge on her beloved by depriving him of the privilege of becoming immortal in her songs. His grave, she sentences, will be a poor site of oblivion, pity and insignificance. After his death, Phaon will become nobody as a result of his refusal to love Sappho:

For wretched is thy lot,
And yet thou dost refuse my love, my fame,

Disdainful, heeding not
That thou could'st be immortal as my name;
My praises thy memorial would become,
When in the songless country I am dumb.

Instead, before thy grave
Unknown, a stranger may some pity feel,
Finding how near the wave
Thou sleepest underneath thine oar and weel,
Poor trophies of hard life: his steps gone by,
Beside the sea thou wilt forgotten lie (ll. 13-24).

More death awaits Phaon in lyric LXVI. Here, while sharing her time with one of her maidens in an atmosphere of peace, idleness and intimacy, Sappho receives a dreadful piece of news:

WE sat and chatted at our ease
Upon a wayside tomb,
When from a little grove of trees
Came Gorgo in her bloom:
Her head against my knee she prest,
And seemed to listen to the rest,
Then, looking up, said straight to me—
"Phaon is gone to Sicily" (ll. 1-8).

The tomb on which Sappho and Gorgo rest announces that the ambiance of serenity can collapse at any given moment, and in fact it does as soon as Sappho learns that Phaon has left for Sicily. The poetess takes the news as a painful "insult" (l. 9) and feels the urge to go home, since she finds herself all alone after her maidens have all run away. In the second stanza, Sappho shows a despair that will soon grow violent and vindictive:

Scarcely her insult might I hear,
For little Atthis spoke—
"A gourd! The fruit-seller is near,
O Gorgo." And they broke
Away. I looked across the town;
Ere I could set the cushion down
At home, and sob out all my woe,
How very far I had to go! (ll. 9-16).

On this occasion, Sappho's sorrow does not signify inert melancholy: it grows into a lethal medley of anger, revenge and sheer cruelty. Sappho calls upon the goddess of the underworld to paralyse and entomb Phaon with her:

Gone! Is he gone? Persephone,
Leave him not lips that kiss!
Swift! draw him earthward down to thee,
Where he may mourn and miss
The fluttering motion of his boat,
The joy of the free life afloat,
And stretch ungrasping hands to reach
Eunica's figure on the beach (ll. 17-24).

Sappho wishes to have Phaon severely punished for his departure, castrated, fettered and deprived of the “joy of the free life” (l. 22). In a declarative display of her totalitarian and cruel desire, Sappho confesses that she prefers her beloved’s death to his distance from her. Nonetheless, she perfectly knows that, although gone or dead, Phaon will continue to haunt her. Her love will linger on even if her beloved becomes a “bloodless” (l. 26) shadow in the Greek netherworld. The fourth stanza of poem LXVI claims:

Ah fool, to think love's pain could leap
Through bloodless shadows cold!
I set the pillow down, and deep
In its striped, wrinkling fold
Pour out my rage; while he to-night
Leans, softly-cushioned for delight,
And, with the wine-cup in his hand,
Turns some gay singer to command (ll. 25-32).

Sappho returns home, sinks her head in a pillow and unloads her anger at the injustice she faces: while she mourns and despairs for Phaon, he sails towards Sicily in delight, with a wine-cup in his hand and eager to hear some gay music. In the face of this unfair plight, Sappho invokes the god Apollo to intercede in her favour and satisfy her need for vengeance by subjecting Phaon to the suffering she has been undergoing all along:

Apollo, thou alone can'st bring
To Phaon's feeble breast
The fire unquenchable, the sting,
Love's agony, love's zest.
Thou need'st not curse him nor transform;
Give him the poet's heart of storm
To suffer as I suffer, thus
Abandoned, vengeful, covetous (ll. 33-40).

Sappho's love for Phaon becomes a source of malevolence against him. Unrecognised by her loved other, Sappho's desire transforms into a perverted *Mitsein* in which self and other only stand in subjection to one another and under a "real dictatorship" (164), as Heidegger would put it. Contrary to the free and fluid community of maidens, the kind of co-being Sappho applies to Phaon is a cruel form of bondage that emasculates and annihilates him altogether. In this spirit, the Lesbian lover even seems to realise, as the previous lyric shows, that since Phaon will never recognise her with equal affection, she can only hope that her desire will have to be imposed upon her beloved by some *Deus ex machina*. If he ends up trapped in this desire, Phaon will inevitably become a mere slave coerced by divine powers to recognise a penetrative and destructive lover.

In Sappho's imagination, Phaon is a Tiresian figure in that he stands in a fictive liminal ontology between the ecstatic life he confers upon Sappho and the potential death he might undergo in her hands. For one thing, Phaon represents a boundless sensuality, a nectarous kind of honey, a tempting feast and a violent fire that kindles Sappho's desire. For another, his erotic power comes to naught when confronted with Sappho's romantic idealism. In her mind, Phaon falls victim to a voracious imagination that understands Eros as possession, bondage, castration and outright annihilation. As a result, the major narrative of hetero-mortality ratifies its systemic validity: it establishes that heterosexual desire is inherently a thanatic force that harms self and other, lover and beloved, Sappho and Phaon practically in equal measure. Far from vital and fertile, heterosexuality now becomes ontologically correlated with failure, sterility, violence, and death.

Although indifferent and even unaware, Phaon is in the main a petrified subjectivity in Michael Field's verse. Assuming the most hostile form of otherness, Sappho determines her beloved and equates her love to a violent being-towards-death ideally imposed on him: he loses his autonomy and transcendence under her gaze. Hers is a reductive gaze that objectifies Phaon, robbing him of his own will and imposing upon him a role that only seeks to satisfy Sappho's desire. In this manner, the gorgeous boatman becomes a feeble and vulnerable subject appropriated by the fatal otherness that Sappho personifies. For her, Phaon must die as an individual and an independent self in order to fulfill her erotic idealism. In her lyrics, the interplay between self and other equates to a conflictual and perverse intersubjectivity that places both lover and beloved under extreme circumstances of vulnerability, helplessness and salient mortality. Together,

Sappho and Phaon form a tragic couple that reveals how the romantic idiom intrinsic to heterosexuality constitutes a language of death.

CHAPTER VII

THE METAPOETRY OF LIFE AND DEATH: BETWEEN THE MUSES AND APOLLO

The poet must dare all!
Michael Field, *Long Ago* (1889)

In *Long Ago*, the ontological duality between life and death metaphorically defines the act of rewriting, the social and spiritual status of Sappho's community of maidens, the narrative of Sappho's erotic struggle, and the subversive rethinking of heterosexuality and masculinity. Additionally, as I aim to show in this chapter, such a duality informs a consistent and elaborate metapoetic discourse that the Fields construct in several lyrics. This discourse unfolds extensively in two mythological narratives that centre around a pagan pantheon of Greek deities intimately linked with the arts in general and with poetry in particular. On the one hand, Michael Field's Sappho upholds an aesthetic vitalism that praises the Muses as the primary source of poetic power, incorporates the classical triad of the Graces as co-participants in a particularly feminine poetic dwelling, sanctifies an elite of dead poets, and redefines poetry as a sacred and yet profane endeavour, as a way of living in itself or even as the key to an existential aestheticism. On the other hand, the second mythological narrative inserted within Michael Field's metapoetic discourse revolves around the figure of Apollo, celebrates the god as an ally

for the heartbroken poetess, puts him in the centre of an aesthetic regime of life, and yet reveals through his refiguration how poetry eventually proves to be unable to redeem a hopeless Sappho and leaves her facing only one possible choice –her ineluctable death.

7.1. The (Feminine) Power of Poetry beyond Death

The metapoetic narrative of lived aestheticism, particularly focused on a harmonious feminine community guided by the Muses, starts in the paratextual words with which the Michaels introduce their Sapphic volume. In the preface, the aunt and niece reveal that their joint agency as *bricoleurs* does not merely entail a process of linguistic –or lingual– reparation, as discussed in Chapter II. The act of *bricolage* is also an “activité mythopoïétique” (419), as Derrida argues. In rewriting Sappho, the Michaels approach the Lesbian poetess not merely as an object of recomposition, a hypotextual reference or an inspiring (lack of) voice: in actual fact, Sappho becomes a myth herself and an object of apotheosis. She is deified and even transformed into “une idée théologique” (Derrida 418). The Fields carry out this deification by positioning the poetess on an equal footing to Aphrodite and implicitly proclaiming her as their goddess:

Devoutly as the fiery-bosomed Greek turned in her anguish to Aphrodite, praying her to accomplish her heart’s desires, I have turned to the one woman who has dared to speak unfalteringly of the mastery of love, and again and again the dumb prayer has risen from my heart (Preface).

Judging by this preliminary note, *Long Ago* constitutes an act of wholehearted devotion and a pagan rosary of “dumb” prayers for Sappho. In her name and for the sake of attaining her inspiration and alliance, the Fields make an imperative exhortation that closes the preface in ancient Greek: σὺ δ’ αὖτα / σύμμαχος ἔσσο –“be thyself my ally” (Wharton 50). Taken from the famous *Hymn to Aphrodite*, these lines seal the disruptive equalisation of the goddess of beauty and the archaic lyrist. The barrier between humanity and divinity breaks down. Sappho enters the Olympian realm of the gods and, in so doing, validates Plato’s judgment of her lofty status in a literal sense.¹⁴⁸ She is,

¹⁴⁸ According to an epigram included in *The Greek Anthology*, Plato is reported to have likened the ancient poetess to the Muses: “Some say the Muses are nine, but how carelessly! Look at the tenth, Sappho from Lesbos” (in Morten 97).

indeed, the tenth Muse –or, at least, the poetic avatar that the Michael Fields celebrate and invoke as their divine ally.

Alongside the divinisation of Sappho and the allusion to Aphrodite, Bradley and Cooper appeal for the presence of the nine Greek Muses in an urgent invocation:

Hither now, Muses! Leaving golden seats,
Hither! Forsake the fresh, inspiring wells,
Flee the high mountain lands, the cool retreats
Where in the temperate air your influence dwells,
Leave your sweet haunts of summer and rest,
Hither, O maiden choir, and make me blest (ll. 1-6).

Michael Field's Sappho urges the Muses to leave the idyllic spaces where they dwell and descend into the profane world to inspire poets, immerse them in a state of literal *enthusiasm* (or divine possession) and thereby elevate them to a mediatory position between the divine and the human. In Plato's *Ion*, Socrates describes the nature of such a state as the result of a magnetic force emanated by the Muses:

... For, as I was saying just now, this is not an art in you, whereby you speak well on Homer, but a divine power, which moves you like that in the stone which Euripides named a magnet, but most people call "Heraclea stone." For this stone not only attracts iron rings, but also imparts to them a power whereby they in turn are able to do the very same thing as the stone and attract other rings; so that sometimes there is formed quite a long chain of bits of iron and rings, suspended one from another; and they all depend for this power on that one stone. In the same manner also the Muse inspires men herself, and then by means of these inspired persons the inspiration spreads to others, and holds them in a connected chain. For all the good epic poets utter all those fine poems not from art, but as inspired and possessed, and the good lyric poets likewise (533d/e).

In *Long Ago*, the lyric voice wishes to be another link of such a suspending chain of inspired persons with the blessing of the Muses, joining their "maiden choir" (l. 6) and, more significantly, knitting what appears to be not a genderless chain of inspiration and possession, but one formed by a specifically feminine community around a deified Sappho, Aphrodite, and the Muses. With these divine figures, the Fields form their own pantheon, affiliate themselves with a matriarchal line of poetic authority and present a possible model of what Irigaray would define as *écriture féminine* that defines lyric poetry as a feminine genre, or as an essential part of a feminine vitalism.

In lyric VI, Sappho introduces the figure of Erinna as another inspired poetess within such a feminine model of poiesis:

ERINNA, thou art ever fair,
Not as the young spring flowers,
We who have laurel in our hair—
Eternal youth is ours.
The roses that Pieria's dew
Hath washed can ne'er decline;
On Orpheus' tomb at first they grew,
And there the Sacred Nine,
'Mid quivering moonlight, seek the groves
Guarding the minstrel's tomb;
Each for the poet that she loves
Plucks an immortal bloom.
Soon as my girl's sweet voice she caught,
Thither Euterpe sped,
And, singing too, a garland wrought
To crown Erinna's head (ll. 1-16).

This lyric, which reads as a fervent ode, stands as a disruption in the middle of a cycle of elegiac poems. The acute grief Sappho has manifested in poem V now gives way to the glory that celebrates Erinna's melody. The gift of immortality coffered upon the young poetess replaces the stealing death that haunts Sappho. Her romantic failures are now starkly contrasted to Erinna's achievements. While Sappho lies underneath, the sweet-voiced maiden reaches divinisation. The elegiac lyric of weary pain –poem V– is immediately followed by a festive ode of praise in a way that seems to show that the unilateral course of extreme grief must deviate into its opposite direction as if running counter to the affective regime of suffering that some of the initial lyrics were imposing. As a result, poem VI reads not merely as a deviational song, but also as a counter-song that disrupts such a regime and celebrates the feminine vitality that Sappho and her fellow poets seek.

With the succession from one regime to the other, several symbols and motifs formerly deployed in other poems are reiterated, amplified and resignified. The initial reference to Erinna's imperishable fairness recalls the final lines of poem V wherein Sappho laments: "My beauty droops and fades away / Just a trampled bosom's may" (ll. 17-18). The antithesis is self-evident here: whilst her friend Erinna radiates a beauty that is not subject to any seasonal change, Sappho deforms and decays into a decadent figure under a rain of tears that dissolve her countenance. What is more, Sappho's physical decay

represents nothing but a sign of death, which advances as a destructive power against her and her erotic desire. By contrast, in poem VI, the presence of death carries no ominousness and poses no menace at all: it is either transcended by immortality (in the figures of Erinna, the Sacred Nine, and the rose) or transmuted into a creative energy. Represented through the grave of the famous poet Orpheus, death nourishes, fertilises and even immortalises the roses resting above. Life springs then from this generous yet paradoxical act.

In the ever-lasting roses on “the minstrel’s tomb” (l. 10), whose bright birth results from a productive form of death, the Sapphic hyacinth of poem V can recognise its nemesis. Death helps the bloom germinate for posterity while crushing the hyacinth. The rose grows in the sacred land of Pieria –homeland of the Muses near the Mount Olympus– and represents a precious gift sought by the Sacred Nine and used by Euterpe to crown, glorify and deify Erinna, who is implicitly depicted as an “immortal bloom” (l. 12). On the contrary, the hyacinth –Sappho’s floral analogue– has a considerably calamitous fate: it withers, breaks, bleeds, cries, and never rises to crown anyone. Its place, like Sappho’s, is underneath –closer to Hades than to the Olympic abode.

In poem VI, the underlying topography presents a genuinely bucolic scene. The direct allusion to Pieria pictures up a place of creativity, fecundity, immortality, knowledge, art, and science, with the dwelling of the gods nearby, the spring of wisdom at its heart, the dew washing and bringing fragrance and grace, the eternal rose thriving, the Muses cultivating their arts, and Erinna singing with her sweet voice. Sappho finds herself in the antipodes of such a utopian landscape: hers is a barren field of violent shepherds, agonising hyacinths, stealthy death and profound devastation. Where Erinna embraces poetic eternity, the Sapphic lover only encounters the external mirrors of her own decline. While her ancient friend sings with the muse Euterpe in a common choir, Sappho cries out a rain of tears.

Behind the tears, in poem V, the lyric I stands all alone, objectless, in absolute isolation, and with nothing in her possession. Conversely, the subjectivity that undergirds poem VI is once again a compact *Mitsein* that includes Sappho herself, Erinna, the Muses and all those “who have laurel in our hair” (l. 3) –the artists and creators. Surprisingly, after the extreme feeling of solitude oppressing Sappho in her previous songs, the community of creative subjects offers a remarkably antithetical scenario –one of festivity, female

unity and eternal fame. It is poetry that functions as the very catalyst for such a union, enabling Sappho, her maids, the deities and even nature to replace any artificial form of epistemology with a solidly garlanded intersubjectivity, an intimate relationship to the objective world, and a lived hedonism. In this respect, poetry ceases to be a mere artistic pursuit and becomes, as Heidegger would argue, one of “Dasein’s ways of behaviour” (37) and, better still, “a disclosing of existence” (205). Not only does poetry serve as a special vehicle for “the communication of the existential possibilities” (205) and for the “articulation of the illegibility of being-in-the-world” (204): for the Sapphic community of laureates, poetry also manifests how their “*Mitsein* becomes explicitly shared” (205). In other words, the poetic word is a peculiar mode of lived discourse that possesses a high philosophical value, discloses existential truths, and even opens up a shared space of communion for Sappho’s feminine collective.

The second stanza of poem LIV illustrates how Sappho deploys poetry in her intimate relationship with her maidens:

[T]o please my maids,
Most deftly will I sing
Of their soft cherishing
In apple-orchards with cool waters by,
Where slumber streams
From quivering shades,
And Cypris seems
To bend and sigh,
Her golden calyx offering amorously (ll. 10-18).

As she claims in these lines, Sappho makes use of her melic verse to establish a genuine space of hedonism or an ideal *locus amoenus* where she herself, her fellow women, the goddess Cypris (Aphrodite), and the whole natural environment partake of a unanimous experience of pleasure and fame. As indicated above, poetry not only binds together Sappho’s feminine community: it confers honour and celebrity on all those who are blessed and crowned by the Muses. Poetry immortalises their names and becomes a monument for posterity. Indeed, a laureate poetess admired by the very Muse of lyric poetry Euterpe, Erinna experiences an apotheosis that makes her blessed. It is this blessing, as discussed in reference to the prefatory invocation, that positions her in the liminal status that poets occupied in the ancient world, as mediators between the human word and the divine word. Accordingly, poetry must be understood oxymoronically as a

sacred profanity, a spiritual materiality, and a lofty means to defeat death and enlarge life metaphysically to the very extent of immortality.

In poem XLVIII, Sappho continues to reinforce her discourse of sacred aestheticism through the figure of Erinna. The primary metapoetic notion that Sappho postulates is fairly simple and clear: poetry has the power to transform the poet in a radical and even ontological way. The poet transcends her mundane humanity and becomes a semi-deity, a model of “triumphant light” (l. 23), an eternal voice of consolation, and a prophet of the heart. For Sappho, poetry can “heal and bless” (l. 30), attain direct “knowledge how / My heart within me fares” (ll. 36-37), and “reveal / To mortals what they feel” (ll. 41-42) even when their “timid hearts” (l. 47) try to conceal “their wounds” (l. 48). On account of this affective wisdom, poetry proves to be not merely a spiritual endeavour, but also a functional and pragmatic approach to life: as Sappho claims, poetry exposes, shares, understands and eases one’s sorrows and traumas, working as a timeless form of therapy.¹⁴⁹

In poem XXVIII, the last stanza reasserts the therapeutic utility of poetry through a direct appeal to the Muses:

To him, O heavenly Muses, come!
He cannot live if he be dumb.
Leave me awhile. O let him feel
His heart set free in song;
Hasten, for ye alone can heal
A lover's wrong (ll. 19-24).

Sappho needs the Sacred Nine to assist the poet Alcaeus in his vain attempt to gain her affection. As discussed in Chapter V, Sappho has no romantic feelings for Alcaeus and unwillingly condemns him to a dreary existence that renders him powerless and silent. For this reason, Sappho imperatively urges the Muses to abandon her, support Alcaeus instead, and liberate his heart from all futile aspirations so that he can regain his poetic voice and hence his emotional health: for poetry “alone can heal / A lover’s wrong” (ll. 23-24). In lyric L, while praising the glorious figure of Anacreon, Sappho reverts once again to the motif of poetry as a remedy for the ills of love: she implicitly claims that it

¹⁴⁹ The curative potential of poetry is an ancient notion with its own mythological substratum: in ancient Greece, Apollo is not only the founder of the arts and the leader of the Muses, but also the father of Asklepios, who is in turn the god of healing. Poetry and medicine share the same divine roots and operate in tandem.

is in poetry's power to alleviate "the twin burthen of desire and song" (l. 18) that her own heart bears and to bravely defy the tyranny of "Dark Eros" (l. 21) by revealing the "sunny truth" (l. 24) that "life hath bliss enow, / Despite of age and pain, / To give us temper of eternal youth" (ll. 25-27). Thus, both Sappho and Alcaeus can rely upon their own verse to save themselves from their oppressive desire.

As a site for "the disclosing of existence" (205) in Heidegger's view, poetry can reveal and even enhance the meaning of life itself, and thus its possible absence proves utterly calamitous for Sappho. In poem XVI, she argues that if the Muses do not support her in her poetic efforts, her entire existence will decline in meaning, value, glow and joy:

Ye fair-haired Muses, come,
And bless my days,
With holy ecstasy and might
Of deathless lays;
For what were life without the glow,
The joy that crowned poets know,
When ye descend your mountain ground,
And wake the cithara's full sound! (ll. 9-16).

In this octet, it becomes fully patent that lyric poetry, in its pristine association with the lyre or the cithara, not only prevails over the absolutism of death, elevates the poet to a semi-divine stratus, and provides a cure for the afflicted heart: poetry also dismantles the traditional duality between the spiritual and the physical by conciliating them in a "holy ecstasy" (l. 12). This oxymoronic conciliation amplifies the value and power of poetry. In its ability to move the poet and reader to ecstasy, poetry acquires a mysticism of its own that involves the body in a sacred and transcendental phenomenon. Thus, spirit and body are fused and confused in the very poetic experience through a synthesis that transforms the joy derived from poetry into a pleasure of an embodied soul. In poem XX, Sappho reiterates this metapoetic oxymoron of "holy raptures" (l. 24) and concludes that, without her Muses and the existential meaning of poetry, life becomes futile and barren: her "heart grows cold" (l. 26), her wings fall off, and thus Sappho borders on a psychological encounter with death if confronted with the absence of poetry.

Nevertheless, in lyric XXI, Sappho adds that, for its effective manifestation and even for the sake of the artist's welfare, poetry calls for the presence not only of the nine Muses, but also of the Graces or Charites:

YE rosy-armed, pure Graces, come,
Daughters of Zeus, be near!
Oh, wherefore have my lips been dumb
So long in silence drear?

And why have I so cheerless been,
So sorrowful and wild?
It was because ye were not seen,
Because ye had not smiled.

Although his prayer the Muses bless,
The poet doth require
That ye, in frolic gentleness,
Should stand beside his lyre.

Ne'er will he mortal ear delight,
Nor care-vex'd spirit ease;
Except he sing with ye in sight,
Rose-flushed among the trees (ll. 1-16).

These quartets confirm that Sappho's view on poetry entails the direct interplay between mortals and gods, the monumentalisation of the poet, and the transformation of life into an aestheticised experience. In order for poetry to promote this aesthetic vitalism, the inspiration of the Muses does not suffice: the poet emotionally needs the blissful intervention of the Graces to play his lyre, amuse the "mortal ear" (l. 13) and act as himself –as a true poet. His identity depends affectively on the presence of the Charites. His brilliancy emanates from their intrinsic *charis* -grace, charisma and splendour. His voice manages to defeat dumbness and sorrow. For this same reason, if the Graces are absent, not only is the poet existentially affected, but even the whole order of life becomes a *locus horridus* where mortals can find no delight and their afflicted hearts can reach no peace. Only with the Charites in sight is it possible to practice the aesthetic vitalism or poetic dwelling that Sappho advocates.

Sappho's metapoetic discourse reaches further complexity in lyric L. Starting with yet another invocation of her Muse, Sappho deploys the first stanza to celebrate the power, diversity and origin of poetry:

MUSE of the golden throne, my griefs assuage -
 Not with fresh gift of verse—
 A listener at thy knees I would remain,
 So thou rehearse
 To me that strain
 Sung by the poet-sage,
 Manful, and crisp, and free,
 Of so undaunted style,
 It can command
 And move to clemency
 The tyrant, yet the terse,
 Clear song one feels the while,
 Ah, once was fashioned in a goodly land
 Of women fair,
 With voices soft as wood-doves' through the air (ll. 1-15).

For Sappho, poetry is now more than a remedy against her grief: it equates to a form of knowledge or wisdom that “the poet-sage” (l. 6) sings and spreads. In this regard, poetry transcends its pure aesthetic value by acquiring a serious intellectual or epistemological dimension that translates, as hinted at above, into some kind of affective wisdom –or, as Heidegger would put it, into a vehicle for “articulation of the illegibility of being-in-the-world” (204). This poetic intelligence can manifest itself in the most “Manful” (l. 7), “undaunted” (l. 8) or “terse” (l. 11) fashion, enabling the poetic word in itself to be so persuasive, powerful and authoritative that it can even “move to clemency / The tyrant” (ll. 10-11). What is most remarkable perhaps is that such lyrical wisdom, so virile and vigorous, has its origin, according to Sappho, “in a goodly land / Of women fair” (ll. 13-14). Poetry seems to be essentially feminine by birth, and I would contend that it owes its rhetorical power and vitalism to its originary feminine essence. Tied up with Michael Field’s ontology of the feminine, poetry is at bottom visionary, penetrative, intense, sensual, mysterious, and even free from mortality. Accordingly, as Sappho declares in lyric L, the poetic subject must be viewed as “the bold / Guardian of life” (l. 64-65) – a life that is gender-coded as feminine and hence lived as a Dionysian, communal, intellectual and yet erotic phenomenon.

So attached to the feminine and, particularly, to Sappho’s feminine community of maids and goddesses is the art of poetry that it ceases to exercise its vitalism as soon as the feminine loses power and enters into the fatal economy of heterosexual desire. In lyric LVII, Sappho reveals that the loss of maidenhood and the entry into the social regime of matrimony result not only in the symbolic death of the free feminine subject, but also in the death or silencing of poetry itself. Indeed, the poetess claims to be “mute” (l. 1),

unheard by Apollo and in need of her “mother muse” (l. 2) due to the implicit fact that she has fallen for a fisherman and her desire has been mainly a tragic experience of despair. By way of a simile, Sappho recalls how the muse Calliope also became mute as a result of her adherence to the social conventionalisms of wifehood: she was “ailed” (l. 18) and unable to sing, as she knew that her “maidenhood would never come again” (l. 21). Sappho clearly suggests here that, as soon as the muse assumed the role of a traditional wife, she lost her virginal freedom, her Tiresian fine sense of life, and hence her poetic power. Poetry malfunctions or disappears altogether when detached from the feminine. I would go so far as to say that poetry is perhaps at its best when expressing the feminine, the homoerotic among women or the queer.

In its fully functional capacity, poetry has no ontological or metaphysical bounds for Sappho: its persuasive power transcends the human and reaches the divine. In the third stanza of lyric L, Sappho relates a mythological anecdote that involves the archaic poet Anacreon, the goddess Aphrodite and a dove that comes to represent the very art of poetry:

The reverend elder! Ah, how sweetly he
 Was wont to sing in those
 Plane-shaded noons of lovely, common things,
 Idalia's rose,
 Or the soft wings
 Of that bright bird that she
 Bartered for just a hymn
 Straight from the poet's lips,
 And breathed alone
 To her amid her dim,
 Dusk myrtles. Oh, she chose
 A favour to eclipse
 All heavenly honour unto mortals shown
 Who gave her dove
 To win from Teos' bard one song of love (ll. 31-45).

Just by addressing and celebrating the ordinary, poetry can win the favour of Aphrodite herself, identified in the above stanza as Idalia. A significant reversal of roles takes place when it is the deity who descends and negotiates with Anacreon in order to hear one of his hymns. The poet, whose voice depends on the gods for inspiration, now becomes a “reverend” (l. 31) figure sought and honoured by the very deity of love, beauty and persuasion. In this sense, Sappho casts Aphrodite in a radically new light: the goddess loses her position of tyrannous dominance and instead adopts a humble

attitude towards Anacreon, who interacts intimately with her and receives a bright dove in return for one of his compositions. Here the symbol of the dove, which Sappho describes as a “[r]are token from the sky” (l. 47), plays a significant role: it may be read as a metapoetic figure that associates poetry itself with the sacred and the profane at once. Just as the dove navigates the earth and the heavens with unimpeded access to both the land of mortals and the Olympus, so does poetry serve to mediate between divine truth and its mundane reflections. By extension, poetry is a Tiresian or prophetic art in that it functions as a form of ornithomancy: birds and poets alike can access the supreme knowledge of what the gods reserve for every human being.

In the fifth stanza of lyric L, Sappho admonishes all fellow poets to venerate Anacreon, acknowledge his authority, revive his words, and thereby enlarge the chain or tradition of inspired or possessed persons around a common ancestry:

Love him, ye bards, who would not even resign
In age the poet's thrill,
To whom his lyre through the slow, lingering night
Was never still
From whispering quite.
O feed his tomb with wine,
And let joy penetrate
The darkness, ivy-leaved,
That guards his breast
Whom Eros made so great
A lord o'er human ill
That, his full term achieved
Of years, he kept youth with him for his guest,
As a broad tree
Feels the sap course through its antiquity (ll. 61-75).

An important conception of poetry emerges from these lines. It seems that, for Sappho, poetry must be understood as an act of homage or acknowledgement that links the new poet with a reverend precursor and guarantees the perpetuity of poetry itself. It is the new generation of bards that must keep on playing Anacreon's lyre, pouring extra life into his songs, and imbuing the “broad tree” (l. 74) of poetry with fresh sap. In this way, the old is always made young, vital and relevant. The poet transforms the old word into the necessary starting point for any new lyric. The dead singer transcends death through each new poem. Poetry becomes a strange grave that is no place of rest or darkness, but rather a Dionysian symposium where the new bards revisit the old, share fresh wine and “penetrate” (l. 67) death with renewed life and joy. In its textual constitution and in its

full entirety, Michael Field's *Long Ago* partakes of such a poetic festivity of revival by regrowing or recultivating Sappho's tree of broken leaves with the new sap of complete lyrics.

7.2. The Apollonian Value of Violence, Death and Memory

Thus far I have proven that Sappho posits a vitalistic theory and mythology of poetry that revolves around the Muses, the Charites, her maids, fellow poets and ancestors, all of whom form a solid community that lives poetry as a sacred activity, a spiritual endeavour, an erotic phenomenon, a form of psycho-therapy, an intensely feminine art, and a monumental way to vanquish death. There is, however, another metapoetic figure of utmost importance in *Long Ago* –the god Apollo. His presence becomes noticeable in the very first lyric of the volume, where he loses his inherent sense of rational order, enters into a scene of Dionysian ecstasy, and shares in Sappho’s maenadic chorus of maids. On this initial occasion, Apollo is simply a co-participant, like the Graces, in the *Mitsein* of unloosed Lesbian women who embody poetry as an erotic experience fused with music, dance, wine, kissing, and weaving.

On his next appearance in lyric XX, Apollo changes his role. He no longer takes part in the Bacchic encounter of free maids, but now enters the narrative of pain and death that Sappho develops from the second lyric onwards. Heartbroken yet determined to persist in her quest for romantic fulfilment, Sappho calls on Apollo to transform her dreary reality:

Trembling I seek thy holy ground,
 Apollo, lord of kings;
Thou hast the darts that kill. Oh, free
 The senseless world of apathy,
 Pierce it!—for when
 In poet's strain no joy is found,
 His call no answer brings,
Oh, then my heart turns cold, and then
 I drop my wings (ll. 10-18).

Sappho trembles, languishes and feels helpless. Her feminine community is broken. Her subjectivity, formerly integrated into the rapturous *Mitsein* of her maids, stands as a solipsistic entity. Her heterosexual desire banishes her from the idyllic state of nature among women, transforming her into an outsider with nowhere to belong. In a tragic way, Sappho loses her intersubjectivity: she is neither with her maids nor with her indifferent beloved. In her isolation, Sappho now faces a hostile and “senseless world of apathy” (l. 13). Lost in some kind of inhospitable no-place, she seeks to take refuge in

Apollo's "holy ground" (l. 10). Here the Olympian god opposes Boreas, the deity of the north wind that Sappho invokes in lyric XVIII to defy Eros, sweep her distress away, freeze her heart, put everything under a stoic regime of apathy, and thus eradicate all sentiments towards her beloved. This apathy, however, should only affect her hetero-erotic desire and, particularly, her fruitless relationship with Phaon. It seems that, in her appeal to Boreas, Sappho wishes to abolish the type of love that has distanced her from her community of maids. Two forms of apathy emerge in this sense, one that is voluntary, professed by Sappho, directed against the opposite sex, and which can be termed hetero-apathy, and another form that is an unwanted outcome of Sappho's hetero-erotic passion and a collective attitude that her own maids adopt against her precisely due to her romantic inclinations for Phaon. It is this apathy that oppresses Sappho and makes her seek Apollo: she entreats the god to penetrate her "senseless world" (l. 13) with his lethal darts and infuse joy into her poetic songs. The underlying logic seems clear: in an act of violence against such apathy, Apollo makes joy and poetry possible in lyric XX. For Sappho, poetry occurs seemingly as a result of some alchemic process that turns her distress at the indifference of her fellow women into a rather violent, creative force.¹⁵⁰ Seen as a metapoetic figure, Apollo represents how the very possibility of poetry emerges: under his guidance, poetry amounts to a violent attack against a hostile world, a remedy for apathy, a source of bliss, and even a reformer of Sappho's community. The poetess seems to trust that poetry can pierce her women's apathy, restore their common joy, and thus rebuild their inherent *Mitsein*. For Sappho, poetry promises a reunion with her collective ego and her utopian life. Without poetry Sappho only experiences a coldness and katabasis that are but intimations of death.

In lyric XXXIV, Apollo displaces the Muses from their role as originators of art and takes centre stage as the deity that prompts poetic creation. The type of inspiration that he imparts, however, seems a forcible and even brute act of seizure different from the more delicate communication between Sappho and her Muses:

"Sing to us, Sappho!" cried the crowd,

¹⁵⁰ This association between Apollo, violence and poetry echoes an early ode written by Edith Cooper at the tender age of sixteen, in which she defends the idea of some sort of violent poetics that, according to Evangelista, replaces the lyre with the Apollonian "bow and arrows [...] as instruments of the divine power of poetry" to be used against a stale, sterile and hostile world (*British Aestheticism* 93).

And to my lyre I sprang;
Apollo seized me, and aloud
Tumultuous I sang.
I did not think of who would hear;
I knew not there were men who jeer;
Nor dreamed I there were mortals born
To make the poet's heart forlorn (ll. 1-8).

In this stanza, Sappho understands poetry essentially as an intimate self-immersion, a retreat into her interiority, and a very personal experience with the divine. It seems that, once in contact with Apollo, the poetess devotes herself entirely to her lyre and lives so intensely within herself, that she barely takes heed of her audience and even dismisses the possibility that someone may not appreciate her poetic act. However, despite her profound intimacy with poetry, Sappho appears to acknowledge that art is not only a subjective enthusiasm, but also a collective experience that can result in ecstasy, bucolic pleasure, connection with the divine, and emotional comfort. The second octet of poem XXXIV confirms this necessary Dionysian communion between the poetess and her crowd:

There is a gift the crowd can bring,
A rapture, a content;
Pierian roses scarcely fling
So ravishing a scent
As that with which the air is stirred
When hearts of heavenly things have heard—
Sigh, and let forth the odour steal
Of that which in themselves they feel (ll. 9-16).

Nevertheless, poetry fails altogether as a collective experience when the audience is formed by “men who jeer” (l. 6) and render “the poet’s heart forlorn” (l. 8), as Sappho has complained in the first stanza. The communal rapture that stems from poetry and music is mostly lived at its best as a feminine experience: as explained above, Sappho, her maids, the Muses and the Graces used to share an aesthetic vitalism, communicating freely with one another in songs and dances, and enjoying poetry as a sacred art worthy of noble reverence in their Lesbian utopia. By contrast, on one occasion when Sappho declaims her melic poems in front of an audience of men, the reaction she receives is far from favourable and appreciative:

But now no subtle incense rose;
I heard a hostile sound
And looked—oh, scornfuller than those
'Mong men I ne'er have found.
I paused: the whistling air was stilled;
Then through my chords the godhead thrilled,
And the quelled creatures knew their kind
Ephemeral through foolish mind (ll. 17-24).

The kind of public Sappho has to face here is a hostile throng of philistines who lack aesthetic sensibility and despise the sanctity of art by roaring in the middle of Sappho's recital, interrupting her intimate poetic immersion and forcing her to pause. It is at this point, Sappho recounts, that Apollo manifests himself from within the possessed poetess and uses her lyre to repress and punish the crowd of philistines by inoculating into their "foolish" (l. 24) minds a Gothic vision of themselves in the netherworld:

They saw their ghosts in Hades' grove
A dismal, flitting band;
They felt they were shut out from love
And honour in their land;
For never in the Muses' strain
Of them memorial would remain;
And spell-bound they received the curse
Of the great King's derided verse (ll. 25-32).

In his unyielding defence of poetry and music, Apollo imposes his authority over Sappho's offenders in the most vindictive manner: he forces them to envision their deaths, feel scorned and ostracised, and imagine the tragedy of having their names cast in oblivion. The god not only torments the philistines with this ominous vision: he even condemns them to such a fate and makes it brutally clear that, under his aesthetic regime, no offense can ever go unpunished. For him, poetry possesses such sacredness, that whoever dares despise it deserves oblivion and even death.

However, in *Long Ago*, death can either be the consequence of anti-poetic defiance or the original cause of poetry per se. In lyric XXXIX, Sappho brings together the figures of Apollo and the Muses, as well as the wild god Pan, to offer an aetiological account of the arts in which suffering, loss and death become the very essential principles of poetic creativity:

Of Zeus and Memory the sacred Nine
Themselves are offspring; each enduring strain
Springs from the issues of an ancient pain.

'Tis for his dead girl-love Apollo weaves
His poet's crown of deathless laurel-leaves;
By Ladon's river long must slowly bleed
Pan's heart ere music permeate his reed (ll. 14-20).

As Sappho claims in these lines, poetry stems from “an ancient pain” (l. 16). The sacred Muses came into the world in a multiple birth after their mother Mnemosyne had spent nine consecutive nights with her nephew Zeus. Undoubtedly, such an extreme act of nativity marks the original moment of pain that signifies the beginning of “each enduring strain” (l. 15) –of poetic tradition. For Sappho, this connection between art and suffering is further reinforced by two other deities. In his own mythic experience, Apollo derives art from loss and grief: he crafts his own poet’s crown with leaves from the self-same tree that was once his lost beloved Daphne. Likewise, the god Pan creates his music with the pipes he made out of the river-reed that was once his beloved Syrinx. Both gods inherit and feel the original ancient pain that Mnemosyne endured when giving birth to the nine Muses of the arts. The underlying idea is clear in these myths: the poet needs suffering, loss and death as his starting point for the very possibility of creation. Put in paradoxical terms, it is precisely what destroys or afflicts the poet that functions as the enabling condition for the emergence of artistic creation.

However, in her metapoetic verse, Sappho points out that, although its origin lies in loss and death, poetry is capable of defeating mortality by engendering a sort of life based on eternal memory: since the arts are all descendants of the titan Mnemosyne (or memory in Greek), Sappho feels that her name and songs will overpower the force of oblivion and unconsciousness that comes with death in ancient Greek eschatology. Her poetry, she trusts, will be recalled by her past lovers, and once dead, she will even be hosted in Hades with subtle smiles and honorific crowns:

With my dead lovers memory is not dead;
On me they call from many a violet-bed
Of the still country; or in cloudy throng
Fill the wide meads with my remembered song.

Though I should meet them in the shadows, wet

With Lethe, they would give me welcome yet;
There would be flicker of a smile beneath
Their wan, memorial twines of myrtle-wreath (ll. 5-12).

Accordingly, for Sappho, poets can aspire to an eternal and joyful life after death only if their poetry becomes part of a collective memory that guarantees the everlasting fame of the poetic word itself. Without this memory, the artist encounters what Sappho assumes to be the disgraceful death of being forgotten. Indeed, she addresses one of her lovers – presumably Phaon– and complains that he is sentencing her to such a disgrace:

Me thou forgettest: thou alone of all
I love the sweet hours failest to recall;
My shell grew vocal for thee once—the spot
Thronged by fond echoes thou rememberest not (ll. 1-4).

Desperate and angry at the fact that her beloved has forgotten her, Sappho responds in kind by condemning him to “everlasting infamy” in the last quartet of poem XXXIX. This furious condemnation reveals an implicit anxiety: what Sappho fears *au fond* is that her songs fall into the infamy of oblivion. For her, after all, forgetfulness signifies the absolute death of any poet of whom no memory is preserved. Without its primitive Mnemosyne as guarantee of its immortality, poetry loses all power and value.

7.3. The Apollonian Forms of Death: Towards the Heroic Swan

Apollo makes a comeback in lyric LXI in which Sappho revisits one of his romances with a nymph name Dryope. As the most common version of the myth has it, the god once morphed into a tortoise, caught the nymph's attention, and ended up lying on her lap. Suddenly, he turned into a snake, and impregnated the innocent girl, who later gave birth to Amphisus. In poem LXI, Sappho retells this story:

THERE is laughter soft and free
 'Neath the pines of Thessaly,
Thrilling echoes, thrilling cries
 Of pursuit, delight, surprise;
 Dryope beneath the trees
 With the Hamadryades
Plays upon the mountain-side:
Now they meet, and now they hide.

On the hot and sandy ground,
Crumbling still as still they bound,
Crouches, basks a tortoise; all
 But the mortal maiden fall
 Back in trepidation; she
Takes the creature on her knee,
Strokes the ardent shell, and lays
Even her cheek against its blaze,

Till she calms her playmates' fear;
 Suddenly beside her ear
Flashes forth a tongue; the beast
Changes, and with shape released
 Grows into a serpent bright,
 Covetous, subduing, tight
Round her body backward bent
 In forlorn astonishment.

With their convoluted strain
His upreaching coils attain
Full ascendancy—her breast
By their passion is compressed
Till her breath in terror fails;
 'Mid the flicker of the scales,
Half she seems to hear, half sees
How each frightened comrade flees.

And alone beneath the pine,
With the serpent's heavy twine
On her form, she almost dies:
 But a magic from his eyes
Keeps her living, and entranced
At the wonder that has chanced,

As she feels a god within
Fiery looks that thrill and win (ll. 1-40).

In her rewriting of the myth, Sappho lays a dramatic emphasis on the “ardent shell” (l. 15) of the tortoise, the “compressed” (l. 28) passion of the snake upon the nymph’s breast, and the near-death experience that Dryope underwent with “a serpent bright / Covetous, subduing, tight / Round her body” (ll. 21-23). Nevertheless, Sappho soon transforms this act of sexual violence into a sublime experience of divine possession: in her version, when the nymph discovers that it is Apollo that is taking advantage of her, she feels joyous and even ‘raised above / Other mortals’ (ll. 60-61) under the belief that it is a privilege to join the entourage of those chosen and blessed by the Olympian god.

A direct question arises, however, as to why Apollo receives a particularly favourable treatment in a lyrical narrative where the masculine equates by and large to oppression, violence and even death. It seems that Sappho excludes the god from her attacks on men mainly by virtue of his intimate connection to poetry. For her, Apollo does preside over some kind of encounter with death, yet this encounter is paradoxically creative. In the sixth octet of poem LIX, Sappho writes:

’Tis Apollo in disguise
Holds possession of his prize.
Thus he binds in fetters dire
Those for whom he knows desire;
Mortal loves or poets—all
He must dominate, enthrall
By the rapture of his sway,
Which shall either bless or slay (ll. 41-48).

Apollo possesses his lovers and poets with extreme violence, virility and desire. His act of possession sinks his chosen followers in a rapture that borders closely on death itself. Indeed, the nymph Dryope loses her entire autonomy and falls into a death-like trance under the god’s aggressive and tyrannical sway. By extension, Sappho seems to note that, in order to be blessed by Apollo, the poet must run the risk of approaching his own death, since the god’s power can “bless or slay” (l. 48). It becomes clear in light of this extreme view of poetic inspiration that poetry germinates in limit situations of suffering, grief and even exposure to one’s own finitude. It is as though the poet could only write his most inspired and Apollonian songs in an ecstasy or rape that may entail death.

Nonetheless, the sort of pain that Sappho considers to be an originary force for poetic creation does not necessarily constitute a tragic feeling or an unproductive lamentation. In poem LXII, Sappho addresses her daughter Cleïs and encourages her to redefine suffering as a paradoxical experience in which some form of joy participates thanks to the alchemy of poetry:

For joy it is that makes the heart
Grow lyrical, and joy has part
In each regret and pang
Avowed in noble verse;
Of love, the bitter-sweet, I sang
Because I owned a glory in its curse (ll. 13-18).

For Sappho, pain and pleasure are not mutually exclusive. Pleasure can –and should– be found in any experience. In her hedonistic ethics, joy constitutes in itself a way of living that incorporates suffering into the fabric of life as a creative energy. This incorporation occurs particularly as a result of the workings of poetry. According to Sappho, poetry can alchemise “each regret and pang” (l. 15) into “noble verse” (l. 16) or even the curse of love into “a glory” (l. 18) –a source of immortal fame for the poet. With this poetics of lyricised pain in mind, Sappho foresees her own death as a near event and admonishes her daughter to lean on Apollo and use the healing power of poetry instead of grieving her absence in a sterile manner. For Sappho, death or loss should not silence the poet’s voice with “dissonant, untempered cries of pain” (l. 12). She writes in lyric LXII:

MY daughter, when I come to die
Thou shalt not rend thy garb nor cry:
Though Hades smite the door,
Apollo is within,
He whose pure footsteps on the floor
Would make thy grief and wailing breath a sin.

Nay, lamentation must not dwell
Within a poet's house—the spell,
The loveliness of word
And healing sound ordain
That in our chambers may be heard
No dissonant, untempered cries of pain (ll. 1-12).

Such cries must be assuaged and ennobled by poetry. With Apollo inside, the poet not only makes his pain productive and creative: he heals it with his inspired poetry. On this

account, Sappho identifies Apollo as “The Healer” (l. 20) that transcends death by offering the curative truth of poetry:

Distress befits not us who praise
The Healer, golden-browed, and raise
A paean to his might
Of gladness and of youth;
From him who overcame the night
Issues life's passionate, assuaging truth (ll. 19-24).

In Apollo's company, Sappho faces her own demise with no sentiment of lamentation or self-mourning. Her attitude is rather stoic, brave and authentic. Her being-towards-death has even a noble sense of heroism when she declares at the end of poem LXII: “I shall walk in grandeur till my death” (l. 42). Behind this heroic temper presumably lies the very lesson that Sappho is trying to convey to her daughter: that Apollonian poetry provides such pleasure and affirmation of life that even death can be embraced as a natural and certain possibility that does not preclude the poetess from realising the “grandeur” (l. 42) of her poetic dwelling. It follows from this vitalistic poetics that, for Sappho, an existence without Apollo –i.e., without music and poetry– would be quite literally a form of death in life. Indeed, in lyric LXIII, the poetess describes her tragic impotence and agony in the face of a life deprived of its necessary aestheticism:

GROW vocal to me, O my shell divine!
I cannot rest;
Not so doth Cypris pine
To raise her love to her undinted breast
When sun first warms the earth, as I require
To roll the heavy death from my recumbent lyre.

O whilom tireless voice, why art thou dumb?
To-day I stood
Watching the Maenads come
From a dark fissure in the ilex-wood
Forth to the golden poplars and the light;
My tingling senses leapt to join that concourse bright.

Passed is the crowd, passed with his buoyant flute
The Evian King:
My plectrum still is mute
Of beauty, of the halcyon's nest, of spring;
Though deep within a vital madness teems,
And I am tossed with fierce, disjointed, wizard dreams (ll. 1-18).

Without art Sappho feels mute, heavy and in profound distress, just like Aphrodite with her beloved Adonis dead in her arms. The poetess carries her lyre as a corpse. Both she and her instrument become bearers of a “heavy death” (l. 6). Not only does Sappho fail to fathom the tragic silence of her own voice: isolated and aloof, she cannot even partake of the ecstasy she used to share with the maenads-maidens. Dionysus, identified in the poem as a the Evian King, and his fellow dancers parade in front of Sappho, while she finds herself utterly excluded despite the fact that she embodies a despairing contradiction: in her intimate being, she is all music, poetry, desire and even “vital madness” (l. 17), and yet this intensity of inner life does not become externalised through her voice and lyre. As a result, Sappho feels trapped between a noisy desire for artistic creation and a silent body that cannot project out what is burning inside her. In other words, Sappho perceives herself in dualistic or schismatic terms: she is at once a Dionysian mind in a dumb and nearly dead corporality. However, in order to save herself from “the heavy death” (l. 6) she has been dragging, Sappho invokes the god Apollo and entreats him to revive her songs:

Apollo, Dionysus passes by,
 Adonis wakes,
 Zephyr and Chloris sigh:
 To me, alas, my lyre no music makes,
 Though tortured, fluttering toward the strings I reach,
 Mad as for Anactoria's lovely laugh and speech.

 For thou—where, in some balmy, western isle
 Each day doth bring
 Seed-sowing, harvest smile,
 And twilight drop of fruit for garnering,
 Where north wind never blows—dost dwell apart,
 Keeping a gentle people free from grief of heart.

 Sun-god, return! Break from thine old-world bower,
 Thy garden set
 With the narcissus-flower
 And purple daphne! To thy chariot get,
 Glorious arise as on thy day of birth,
 And spread illuminating order through the earth.

 I scan the rocks: O sudden mountain-rill,
 That sure hast heard
 His footsteps on the hill,
 Leaping from crag to crag to bring me word—
 Lapse quiet at my feet; I hear along
 My lyre the journeying tumult of an unbreathed song (ll. 19-42).

The world around Sappho follows its normal course, changes and advances while she remains mute and enclosed within a bitter solipsism divested of poetry and music. Her attempts to create her song are persistent, strenuous, and even driven by a passion that becomes as mad as her desire for Anactoria, but she falls through all the same and faces a sterile landscape. For this same reason, Sappho needs Apollo to bring her the “balmy” (l. 25) and fertile energy that abounds in the utopian land he inhabits –a *locus amoenus* ripe with life and “free from grief of heart” (l. 30). In an exclamatory tone, the poetess urges the deity to leave his idyllic resting place, take his chariot, and descend from the Olympian heavens to assist her. Eventually, Apollo responds to her invocation and climbs up the mountain where she now stands. Sappho notices his footsteps on the rocks, but her lyre remains quiet. In yet another paradoxical manner, her instrument is a tumult of songs and madness, but its contents cannot be brought out. Sappho hardly breathes at this stage. Her poetry is, as she puts it, “unbreathed” (l. 42). Without the breath of poetry, Sappho comes dangerously close to her mythical end on top of the mountain where she waits for her lyre to break its silence.

It seems fairly clear that Sappho cannot play her lyric on account of her romantic failure with Phaon. Her excessive yet unrequited passion has rendered her fatigued, breathless and even heavy with death, nearly like a bloodless shadow. In this condition, only the god Apollo appears to be able to revive Sappho. In lyric LXVI, she implores him to subjugate her beloved’s will and transform his heart into that of a poet:

Apollo, thou alone can'st bring
 To Phaon's feeble breast
 The fire unquenchable, the sting,
 Love's agony, love's zest.
 Thou need'st not curse him nor transform;
 Give him the poet's heart of storm
 To suffer as I suffer, thus
 Abandoned, vengeful, covetous (ll. 33-40).

Implicitly in this octet, Sappho suggests that Phaon represents some sort of anti-poet: he is scornful, indifferent, and altogether insensitive. Sappho thus wishes for a radically new beloved blessed by Apollo, rendered susceptible to love and endowed with the ability to live and suffer as intensely as only a poet does. In this sense, Sappho appears to intimate that only through the transformative power of poetry does life become

interesting, zestful, passionate and hence truly lived. Phaon remains oblivious to this aesthetic vitalism: his is a bloodless, apathic and empty existence. In all truth, Sappho also feels drained and bloodless, but this feeling is the result not of an insensitive life, but of a Dionysian existence spent on desire, love, genuine pleasure and poetry. Like a poet and unlike her beloved, Sappho is dying in grandeur only after having lived fully, intensely, and creatively.

Nevertheless, Sappho's existential predicament comes to its most tragic and irreversible point in lyric LXVII. Here her dreams, which used to be passionate and violent, are now haunted by death and completely hostile to Aphrodite. Love and beauty become impossible for Sappho and only make sense as experiences of the past:

DIM is the rich-wrought broidery
Athwart the Golden Throne,
Cypris no more in dreams I see
When I am lying lone:
But Atthis loved of yore
Returns, and all my hungry, sore,
Death-stricken senses close round her once more (ll. 1-7).

As Sappho confesses in this stanza, she can still dream of her beloved and presumably dead Atthis, but not with a feeling of joyful and vital affection: her memory and senses are now "Death-stricken" (l. 7). Her poetry has changed its dominant concern. In a metapoetic question, she asks her own lyre "What is thy theme?" (l. 12). The answer seems tragically self-evident: her poetry no longer has love and beauty as its chief theme, but death itself. In her surroundings, Sappho hears a flock of swans and identifies with them: like her, they are also on their journey towards death, "chaunting breast the steam" (l. 14). Nonetheless, as paradoxical as it may seem, the third stanza describes the swans as looking forward to their joint encounter with death:

They feel in their deep-feathered wings
Tremblings to soar and dive;
For all the faintness that death brings
They are so much alive,
Borne by a mighty gale
Of verse, triumphantly they sail
The great choir-master of their race to hail (ll. 15-21).

It appears that the chorus of swans sail freely towards death while enjoying “a mighty grace / of verse” (ll. 19-20), as though they were accepting their mortality through the power of music and poetry. Indeed, they appear to be carried or attracted towards death by a poetry that calls on them to sail, die and eventually join Apollo, who is the “grate choir-master of their race” (l. 21). In a way, Sappho wishes to face her own death like an Apollonian fearless and blissful swan:

I must dare all, yea, I can grope
Through Hades in desire
To hear thee on thy mountain-slope,
My King, draw from thy lyre
My bosom's stricken cry:
Conjure, tempt, hearten me to die—
Apollo, give me the great hours gone by! (ll. 22-18).

The Greek poetess wishes to feel empowered by Apollo to descend to the underworld in grandeur and at the heartening sound of the god's lyre. Here poetry performs a special function: it has the power to make Sappho embrace her last “great hours” (l. 28) not in a state of self-projected grief, but authentically and “in desire” (l. 23)- With the aid of poetry, Sappho lives and dies assertively and even heroically.

7.4. Excluding the Anti-Poetic Leap?

In the last poem of *Long Ago*, written as an unnumbered epilogue, Sappho decides to take her mythic leap into the waters of the Ionian Sea. Before her mortal jump, she invokes Apollo to help her die:

O FREE me, for I take the leap,
Apollo, from thy snowy steep!
Song did'st thou give me, and there fell
O'er Hellas an enchanter's spell;
I heard young lovers catch the strain:
For me there is the hoary main;
I would not hear my words again.

Ah, lord of speech, well dost thou know
The incommunicable woe
Finds not in lyric cry release,
Finds but in Hades' bosom peace;
And therefore on thy temple-ground
Thou pointest lovers to the mound
Set high above the billows' sound.

Though in unfathomed seas I sink,
Men will remember me, I think,
Remember me, my King, as thine;
And must I take a shape divine
As thine immortal, let me be
A dumb sea-bird with breast love-free,
And feel the waves fall over me (ll. 1-21).

Sappho describes her death as an act of freedom from everything that she once held in high esteem. Her songs, a gift of Apollo, are now an old spell that enchanted the ancient Greeks, a legacy for young lovers, and a minor thing if compared to “the hoary main” (l. 6) –the vast ocean– lying ahead of her and promising her eternal peace. Behind her suicidal attitude and the redefinition of her own poetry as nothing auspicious lies a surprising revelation: on top of the cliff, ready to end her life, Sappho confesses that poetry has proven to be incapable of finding a release or cure for her “incommunicable woe” (l. 9). The misery that she considers ineffable refers undoubtedly to her unrequited love for Phaon, as well as her subsequent isolation from her community of maids. Deprived of any source of desire and completely alienated, Sappho chooses to die and follows Apollo’s instruction: the god sends all doomed lovers to “the mound” (l. 13) where Sappho now stands with the determination to drown her unbearable woe.

However, although poetry seems to have failed Sappho as a means to heal her romantic suffering, the poetess concedes that her songs will serve at least one of their purposes: “Men will remember me” (l. 16). In spite of being ultimately unable to communicate and assuage Sappho’s pain, her poetry will surely immortalise her name in the exact way in which the Michaels are reviving and remembering her in *Long Ago*. This form of immortality is the last will Sappho expresses, along with a request to Apollo that, if her soul must transmigrate and adopt another shape, she merely wishes to become a silent bird alien to poetry and love.

The epilogue poses a serious challenge as to the rationale behind its necessity, meaning and function within the narrative of *Long Ago*, for it mainly reads as a self-refutation against the very value of poetry firmly advocated throughout the volume and seems to suggest that the whole process that Sappho undergoes in becoming rewritten into nearly seventy lyrics has come to naught. The epilogue intimates that poetry has not been able to redeem Sappho from her tragic fate and that writing is thus a failure, a mere means to delay the inevitable, and ultimately a useless remedy against death. Accordingly, what the Fields write before the very final poem is nothing but a futile attempt to revive Sappho. Her revival boils down to a closing lyric that simply repeats the long-standing tradition of condemning the poetess to suicide on account of her tragic love experience. Her heroic and passionate life, deeply explored in *Long Ago*, is just reduced to a death dictated by the popular Ovidian myth of romantic suicide. In this sense, the epilogue seems to offer an anti-climactic coda: it closes the volume in an endnote that copies the tragic Sappho myth and contradicts the original portrayal of the poetess that the Fields have offered in the long cycle of previous poems. The aesthetic vitalism and heroism that Sappho advocates even in the face of death are abruptly replaced by a denial of the high value of poetry as an authentic and Dionysian *modus vivendi* in her relationship with the world, her lovers and the gods. Her final point that poetry proves ineffective in assuaging and curing her sentimental misery does not cohere with the major aestheticist argument that *Long Ago* makes: that poetry constitutes a fundamental way of living in itself, an absolute affirmation of life, and an embrace of death and suffering as parts of life. From this perspective, the anti-poetic reason for Sappho’s suicide turns out to be incoherent, invalid, and at the most a mere way of conforming to the conventional Sapphic archetype of romantic love.

However, it could also be argued that the final poem has its right place as an epilogue on an isolated and unnumbered page at the end of *Long Ago*. The fact that it is not integrated into the textual sequence of numbered lyrics suggests that it works as a paratext whose presence does not necessarily affect the original narrative that precedes it. Sappho's leap takes place outside such a sequence. Before the anti-poetic epilogue, she leads a heroic existence: she lives her life and her ongoing death in grandeur and in a truthfully authentic and poetic manner. Poetry enables her to live passionately as a maenad and to assume her mortality bravely as an Apollonian swan. In *Long Ago*, Sappho is an aesthete that navigates life and death in ecstasy, with erotic plenitude and with the permanent promise that her name will live countless lives and deaths in future audacious revivals.

CONCLUSIONS

As the precedent pages attest, Katharine Bradley and Edith Cooper form a fascinating literary couple whose work has become increasingly recognised and even canonised in monographs, conferences, collective editions, anthologies, digital platforms, and modest neo-Victorian rewritings. This thesis is but another contribution to the burgeoning field of reception, criticism and dissemination currently devoted to the Michael Fields and their time. The primary asset of my contribution lies in its exclusive focus on *Long Ago* with a close engagement with the poems themselves and in an attempt to go beyond the excessive emphasis that contemporary critics have placed on the sexual identity of the Fields. In engaging directly with the text and following the readings of Chris White and Ed Madden, I discover that *Long Ago* per se provides a helpful conceptual instrument for the general interpretation of the volume in the figure of the prophet Tiresias. As a classical myth, this figure is more than a primitive figment of the ancient imagination or a mere piece of fiction with no truth value whatsoever. Rather, the Tiresian myth can be treated as a form of veiled philosophy or, in Heideggerian terminology, as a clearing or site for the openness and revelation of truth on the human condition. In other words,

Tiresias can offer an epistemological value, an important existential meaning, and even a critical framework based on his philosophical attributes.

So far most critics have explored the Tiresian myth in two different ways, as an explicit textual presence throughout various European cultural traditions or as a conceptual device that constitutes a general paradigm in itself to shed light on a given text. In both cases, though, Tiresias is predominantly reduced to his Ovidian portrayal as a simplified metaphor for sexual polarities, gender ambivalences, or sexological counter-dualism. In this study, Tiresias receives a double treatment as a prominent textual figure in Michael Field's *Long Ago* and as a hermeneutical principle that serves to read and interpret this whole volume of poetry. However, what does make a remarkable difference here with respect to other studies on Tiresias is that the Theban seer becomes more particularly associated with his ontological or metaphysical attributes as presented in the Homeric *Odyssey*. There the prophet appears as a unique eschatological figure that redefines mortality as a paradoxical experience of continued life, unrestricted temporality, and eternal memory. Tiresias grows into a radical transgression of the ontological limits that separate life from death or finitude from existence. His ontology is one of resistance to conventional dualisms and of openness to extreme paradoxes.

The metaphysical Tiresias that frames this thesis is metaphysical in two senses. I focus on his Homeric version to transcend –or read beyond or after– the critical narrative that has limited Tiresias and his significance in *Long Ago* to an inordinate emphasis on the physical, the erotic, or the sexual. I appropriate this valid yet reductive narrative and integrate it within a larger metaphysics on life and death. Here lies the second, and more technical, aspect of the metaphysical Tiresias: he becomes a fertile opportunity for ontological speculation on the false dichotomy between life and death, the fragile borders between being and non-being, and the porous continuum that exists between the living and the dead. It is in this sense that Tiresias invites a direct dialogue with Martin Heidegger, one of the most prominent ontologists in the history of philosophy. His original concepts of being-in-the-world and being-towards-death allow one to elucidate how Tiresias, as a mythic yet existential truth, represents a disruptive ontology that suppresses the empirical duality between being and non-being and favours a unitary view of the human world as one that is inevitably open, porous or hospitable to the constant presence of death in life. From this point of view, I contend that, as a Tiresian text, Michael Field's *Long Ago* offers a lyricisation of such Heideggerian concepts in

dramatic ways and develops a tacit ontological narrative of the co-presence between life and death.

The choice of Heidegger's ontology to reinforce the Tiresian framework applied in this study is adequate and productive not only because it conceptualises adeptly how the Theban prophet navigates and disrupts the ontological boundaries between being-in-the-world and being-towards-death, but also because Heidegger's anti-Cartesian thought proves to be interestingly aligned with Michael Field's aesthetic project in *Long Ago*. The Fields had a general interest in philosophy and became particularly engrossed in German thought with special attention to Hegel and Nietzsche. However, I have argued that neither the Hegelian final order of absolute totality (or resolution of all oppositions) nor the Nietzschean ideal of an overly powerful subjectivity tally with the ontology of radical openness and vulnerability that the Fields put forward in *Long Ago*. In this volume of lyrics, the Fields somehow anticipate the original line of thought that Heidegger formally inaugurates in his *Being and Time* (1927) by portraying a heroic yet vulnerable and fragmented Sappho in the midst of a tragic agon where life and death are not necessarily constructed as reducible polarities, but rather as dialogic structures or open-ended relations.

In the first chapter of this thesis, I have shown how the Fields had an acute sense of their own being-in-the-world. For them life was practically an aesthetic phenomenon or a work of art in itself. In their view, the world mattered essentially because of its potential to be graceful and beautiful. Their houses, dresses and books had to appeal to the senses and convey the supreme ideal of beauty. Their only political creed, heavily influenced by John Ruskin, consisted in offering the lower classes of their society the chance to appreciate and enjoy beauty in educational settings and improved urban spaces. Further, the kind of aesthetics the Fields espoused implied not only a belief in universal beauty, but also a special inclination to look for intellectual and experiential intensity. Bradley and Cooper were always intent upon inventing themselves through their works and their grand narrative of life writing. This constant process of self-poeisis involved re-christening themselves, playing with their authorial identity, persevering in their career as playwrights despite repeated failures, claiming the noble title of poets against all gender prejudices, travelling around London and Europe as authentic cosmopolitans, intruding into the masculine realm of classical philology, and always protecting their own creative freedom with zeal. Such was their idiosyncratic

sense of free selfhood that the Fields enjoyed staging themselves as Bacchic maenads, Dionysian priestesses, and Sapphic devotees. This fervid paganism would be followed later by a heartfelt conversion to Roman Catholicism in a process that revealed how Bradley and Cooper led intense lives not only as intellectuals, writers and travellers, but also as spiritually inquisitive women.

More significant about the aestheticism with which the Fields dwelled in the world is that it not only meant a full embrace of life, pleasure and beauty, but also a brave and even creative attitude towards mortality. Bradley had to witness the deaths of her mother, her first romantic infatuation (Alfred Gérente), her sister, her friend Browning, her brother-in-law, and even her niece Emma Cooper, who also shared the pain of some of these losses. Together the Fields faced these tragic experiences not with impotence and paralysis, but rather with poetic creativity. In the face of death, both women turned to literature, revisited classical texts, and produced their own works. Tragedy became an opportunity for artistic invention. Art became, in turn, a vehicle for understanding and coping with loss. In some paradoxical manner, for the Fields, death brought about new possibilities for literary creation –new textual lives, new plays and new lyrics. Indeed, *Long Ago*, their first volume of poems published under the Michael Field pseudonym, exemplifies how some archaic fragments and nearly dead poetic words can be fruitfully revived and alchemised into complete modern lyrics under Bradley and Cooper's pen.

Such a process of alchemic revival that defines *Long Ago* at its core is the central point I have systematically explored and theorised in Chapter II. There three interrelated issues are raised and tackled, namely: (1) how the Sapphic past is revived and made relevant for the modern reader, (2) how the Michael Field signature redefines the traditional notion of authorship, and (3) how Sappho's moribund words are subjected in *Long Ago* to a radical process of transformation and original recreation. From the cover to the final paratextual note, *Long Ago* is an ongoing dialogue with the past, which becomes fully and oxymoronically present in many ways. The Fields do not seem to understand the past in line with the Victorian creed of scientific historicism, which conforms to Heidegger's idea of *Vergangenheit* and thus views the past as a set of historical, ontic and frozen events. However, in their Sapphic volume, Bradley and Cooper propose an ahead-of-time epistemology of temporality that comes close to the modernist view of the past as *Gewesenheit*, i.e., as a dynamic or ecstatic dimension that carries immense significance and relevance for the present time, so much so that the ontological limits

between past and present prove to be utterly indeterminate. It is in this special sense of agoness that *Long Ago* transforms Sappho's ancient textuality into a freshly renewed object of estrangement, wonder and temporal dislocation. To my mind, what operates tacitly in such a process of transformation is a double logic of revivalism that consists in rescuing Sappho's nearly lost poetic past and reconstructing it with the possibility or alternative of a new literary future not as a historical figure per se, but rather as an open myth under perpetual revival.

The revival Sappho undergoes in *Long Ago* involves her very presence as the voice of a sublime, irreducible and even enigmatic variety of ancient Greek. Sappho participates directly in a complex structure of textual authorship in which the traditional figure of the solitary male genius dies in favour of a model of collaborative, multivocal, and sexually ambivalent authorship –with two women writing as a man who in turn writes as Sappho. The Fields create a plural *Mitsein* of poetic invention in which writing equates to co-writing, collaboration, negotiation, citation, and even confrontation. In *Long Ago*, the myth of the individual author falls apart and gives way to a chorus of literary and academic polyphony formed by the Fields themselves, Sappho, Robert Browning, Theodor Bergk, Henry Wharton or J. A. Symonds, to name but a few of the voices that took a more or less active part in the composition of the Sapphic volume.

Implicit in *Long Ago*'s approach to the past and its structure of authorship is a symbolic connection with the dialectics between death and life. As explained above, the past is not a static and dead form of temporality, but rather a living and ecstatic force that informs, enriches, and ennobles the present through the transhistorical power of myth and poetry. With regard to its structure of authorship, *Long Ago* originates in the death of the single genius and the birth in turn of a complex authorial construct with Bradley, Cooper, Sappho, and other voices coming together as intimate collaborators. In line with this ontological symbolism of life and death, the third major issue I have examined in Chapter II is precisely how *Long Ago* develops an ontology of writing according to which literary creation is an act of reviving moribund words, overcoming their death, and transfusing them with a fresh breath of new life. In other words, for the Fields, literature seems to represent an opportunity to contribute to the continued life of the dead by revising old works and ensuring their posterity. Sappho is, in this sense, perhaps the most auspicious and fertile of all dead poets. Her corpse-like body of fragmentary poetry invites all kinds of audacious extensions and revivals. Her

biographical precariousness offers a boundless space for mythologisation and free reconstructions. Even what remains of her verse, often just a single grapheme or two, enables any belated poet to reinvent her original message in a way that can only be a dumb attempt and never a real approximation to Sappho's sublime otherness. Aware of this, the Fields appear to have recognised in her lyrics an extreme porosity to new post-meanings, an open vast field for free and radical translations, or even a way to challenge the hackneyed dichotomy between originality and imitation by means of what might be termed ontic writing, i.e., a form of authentic textuality that creates original literary life out of a direct encounter with an old heritage that, in turn, grows rich in its possibilities for futurity –for prospective revivals.

The death of the individual as a Cartesian self-contained subject not only occurs at the level of *Long Ago*'s authorial structure: as I have argued in Chapter III, such a symbolic death also becomes thematically manifest in the solid community of Bacchic maidens that the Fields portray in their first Sapphic lyric. Here the traditional notion of subjective atomism collapses altogether and gives rise to a compact and even erotic being-in-the-world shared by Sappho's entourage of maids. The dichotomy between self and other is thus superseded by an intimate form of *Mitsein* that transcends the limits of epistemology and makes the subject/object relation a much more affective, organic and symbiotic structure –far beyond the mere scope of cognitive or mental knowledge. The Sapphic *Mitsein* is essentially characterised by an intense sense of communal affection, aesthetic hedonism, creativity, and freedom. This intense philosophy of life derives from a theory of the feminine tacitly postulated in *Long Ago*. In their Tiresian lyric, the Fields reconceptualise the feminine as the essential principle of vitalism, the very plenitude of being, and the highest expression of ecstatic freedom. Conversely, in this ontological subversion of gender categories, the masculine becomes equated with violence, destruction, and even death. The Fields even go further: while redefining homoeroticism as the most natural, free and creative form of desire, they present heterosexuality, marriage and maternity as threatening and tragic phenomena that can put an end to Sappho's utopian community. However, it seems that it is precisely in the face of such phenomena that the Sapphic maiden experiences the feminine with sheer authenticity as though her Bacchic ecstasy were only possible due to the proximity of her death as a free woman in the hands of her potential husband. *Long Ago* gives shape to a central although somewhat paradoxical idea here: life in its most intense or

authentic form takes place in its closest encounter with death –whether factual or symbolic.

In Chapter IV, the focus of analysis falls on yet another modality of how the ontological porosity between life and death prevails consistently all throughout *Long Ago*. This time what comes to the fore is an extensive and consistent narrative of what might be called hetero-mortality, a basic coinage that conceptualises the notion that heterosexual desire, as pointed out above, is far from productive, procreative and fecund: rather, it becomes a source of violence, oppression, and death. Indeed, Michael Field's Sappho relives her traumatic Ovidian romance with a disdainful man named Phaon. This love plunges her in a tense agon between life and death, breaking her intimate *Mitsein* with her maidens, destroying her ontological independence, making her resemble some violated hyacinth or some agonising Ophelia, and even transforming her body into a ghost that sings its own requiem. In this manner, *Long Ago* reads systematically as a lyrical and dramatic account of Sappho's being-towards-death or, better still, as a thanatography of how the ancient poetess lives and writes her own death as a result of lovelessness. Nonetheless, the Sapphic narrative of hetero-mortality not only deals with loss, despair, and agony. In her ongoing encounter with death, Sappho comes to be a heroin that combats the crude facticity of her failed desire with an authentic ethics of resilience, hope and persistence. In spite of her beloved's disdain, she clings sanguinely to her dreams, lies, fantasies and illusive vocatives in order to survive her oppressive feeling of love-as-loss and assume her painful mortality with dignity, authenticity, and even poetic creativity.

Bradley and Cooper amplify the dramatic account of Sappho's being-towards-death through a rich mythopoetic narrative that re-articulates her fatal heteroeroticism in an analogic dialogue with different classical figures such as Procne, Philomela, Sterope and Aphrodite. These analogies, as proven in Chapter V, serve primarily to confirm that Sappho's desire is determined by a permanent sense of defeat, conflict, lack, and loss. It is true that she often waits, hopes, prays and wishes for a favourable denouement of her sentimental crisis, yet this optimism does not imply that she has lost sight of the crude fact that her desire will surely remain unfulfilled and her life will come to an end as soon as every erotic hope has vanished. Her love for Phaon equates to the paradoxical senses of passion as intense desire and as great suffering. In other words, her conception and experience of love, which is explicitly detailed in a cycle of lyrics on the divine figure of Eros, entails a tragic contradiction: love turns Sappho's being-in-the-world

into an elevated experience of beauty, delicacy and even spiritualised pleasure, and yet it also condemns her to an anxious mode of being-towards-death in the absence of her beloved. Inevitably she ends up invoking the god of the North Wind and the Moirai for help. The kind of help she asks of them, however, is destructive and irreversible: in the face of her lovelessness, she can only wish to be paralysed, emotionally sterilised, and even annihilated. In her direct address to Boreas and the Moirai, Sappho has come to hold no hope and see no transcendental meaning in her life. Her life now seems to become its own negative polarity—as though she were more defined by her non-being than her factual existence. In her mythography of failed desire, Sappho assumes that she must embrace her death as the only possible and even desirable outcome of her tragic love.

However, in the narrative of tragic heteroeroticism, Sappho not only plays the part of the disdained yet optimistic lover: as I have explained in Chapter VI, *Long Ago* also portrays her as a genuine *femme fatale* who wishes to imprison, devour, dominate, and even castrate her beloved Phaon. In a few lyrics, Sappho comes to occupy an entrenched position of power, deploys an extreme idiom of erotic subjugation, and situates her ideal of love within a savage economy of desire based on aggression, competition, conquest, and absolute possession. Sappho turns into a sublime menace against Phaon's virility and freedom, a voracious predator, a penetrative bee, and even an aestheticised vampire dying to drain her beloved. To this violent Sappho *Long Ago* attaches a mythology of castration that likens her to different feminine figures such as Lilith, Medea, Daphne, Selene or Persephone, all of whom are represented as powerful women who use and abuse men for their ravishment. Accordingly, Phaon is left in an extremely vulnerable position under Sappho's totalitarian regime of desire. He becomes a passive object, an oneiric prisoner, a feminised elusive beloved, and a death-haunted prey. His masculinity is severely compromised and even castrated in Sappho's erotic imagination. Indeed, his presence within her possessive economy of love is possible only if he dies as a man. His symbolic death is yet another consequential piece in Michael Field's narrative of hetero-mortality, in which both Sappho and Phaon victimise one another in equal measure and embody heteroerotic desire as an experience of failure, violence, and tragedy.

In a final reading of *Long Ago* as an ontological revision of the life/death dualism, I have traced and explored a series of poems that show how the volume develops its own metapoetic theory through two different mythological narratives. On the one hand, the

first narrative revolves around the Muses, the Graces, and other divine women that form a matriarchal line of poetic authority, placing Sappho amongst them and inviting the Fields to be another link in their chain of inspired poets. It is under the influence of this pantheon of female divinities that poetry emerges as a gift from the grave of Orpheus, a tribute to dead poets, a way to enlarge their lives to the very extent of immortality, a uniting force for Sappho's female community of aesthetes, and even a form of psychotherapy against the sorrows of love. The second narrative, on the other hand, focuses on the god Apollo as a particularly violent source of poetic inspiration. He blesses poets by possessing, penetrating and even putting them in an extreme state of ecstasy that verges on death itself. It appears that in this limit situation poetry germinates at its best and provides a mighty weapon against pain, apathy, and suffering. Such is the power of Apollonian poetry that Sappho witnesses how her own verse enables her to embrace her finitude and prepare for her imminent death with the reassuring certainty that she has always lived fully, intensely, and poetically.

The closing poem of *Long Ago* is rather problematic and even illogical. Sappho decides to take her own life by jumping off the Leucadian cliff. The reason lies in her romantic tragedy with Phaon. The Ovidian image of Sappho as a suicidal lover retains its validity in *Long Ago*. However, an inevitable question arises as to why, if poetry has usually offered her a remedy for suffering, Sappho chooses to take her mythic leap all the same. It appears that poetry fails her and leaves her with no other choice. Although her death is an ongoing process in *Long Ago* and its ultimate materialisation comes as no surprise, what does seem contradictory is the fact that the Apollonian metapoetic theory I have formerly explained proves to be fallible. Despite its curative and vitalistic power, poetry fails to prevent Sappho from committing suicide. Perhaps this failure is the outcome of following the Ovidian convention of tragic romanticism in a paratextual poem that falls out of the central narrative of Sappho's heroic vitalism, which predominates throughout *Long Ago*.

Predictably enough, Sappho dies at the close of the volume, but her process of being-towards-death is what most originally and dramatically characterises *Long Ago*, together with other significant aspects such as her radical porosity to new textual revivals, her intimate and aesthetic *Mitsein* with her maidens, her anxiety over masculinity, her voracious desire for a passive Phaon, her assonances with different classical myths, and more importantly, her deep ontological understanding of life and death as porous

processes, confluences, or Tiresian interrelations. The Fields seem to have transposed this special understanding from their own personal vision and experience to their Sapphic volume in the form of various theories, narratives and mythologies that present human existence as a liminal phenomenon whose conceptual borders with death are blurred and even absent. In the present study, I have articulated such an ontological understanding by putting together the Tiresian myth and Heidegger's early thought in an audacious yet fruitful dialogue with the Fields. which has served to disclose how *Long Ago* manages to poeticise concrete and symbolic forms of open convergence between life and death. What now seems promising is the possibility of establishing this same dialogue with other works of Michael Field's large corpus and reading them in light of how death and life maintain or break their ontological boundaries.

APPENDIX

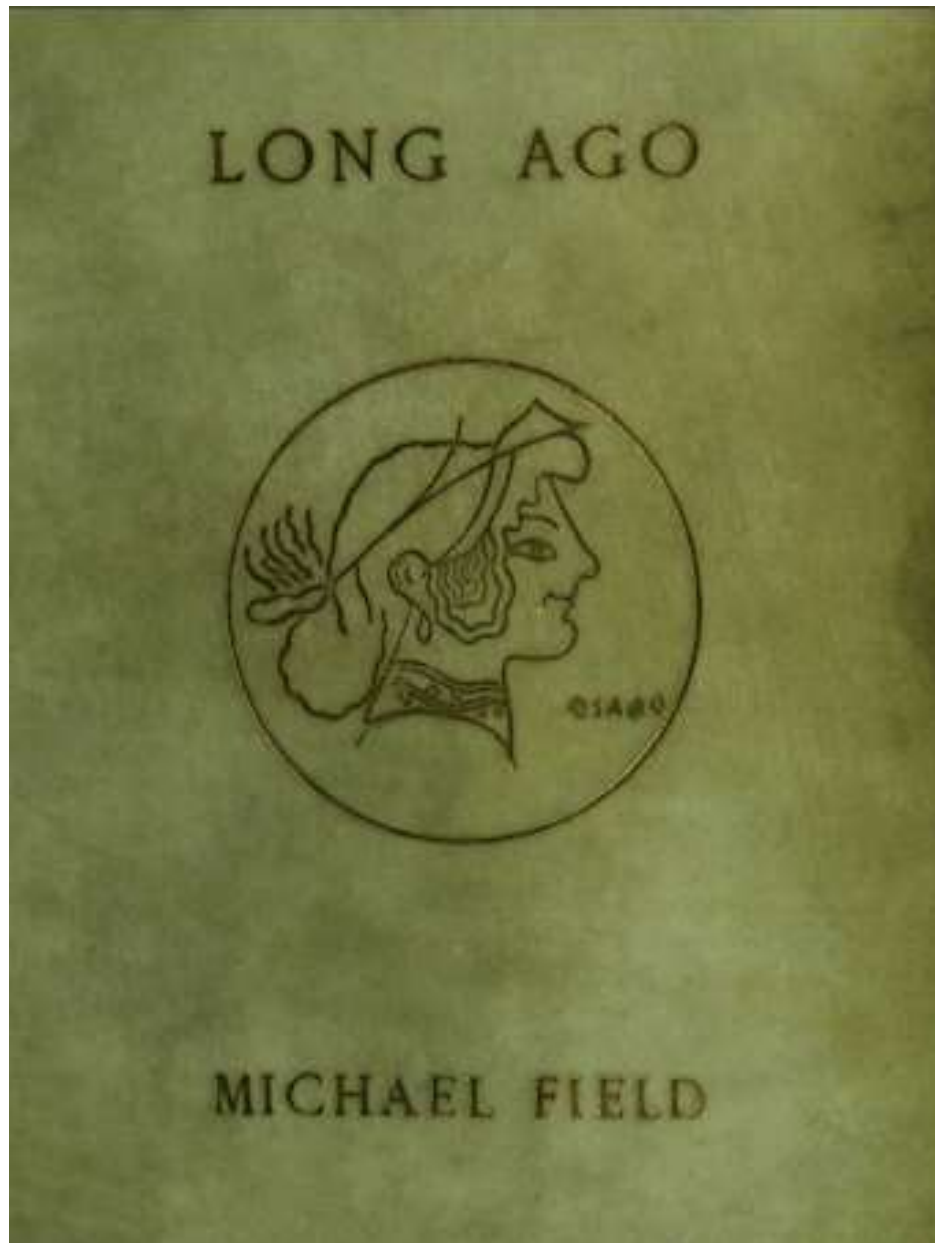


Figure I. Front cover of Michael Field's *Long Ago* (1889).



Figure II. Second illustration of Sappho in *Long Ago*.

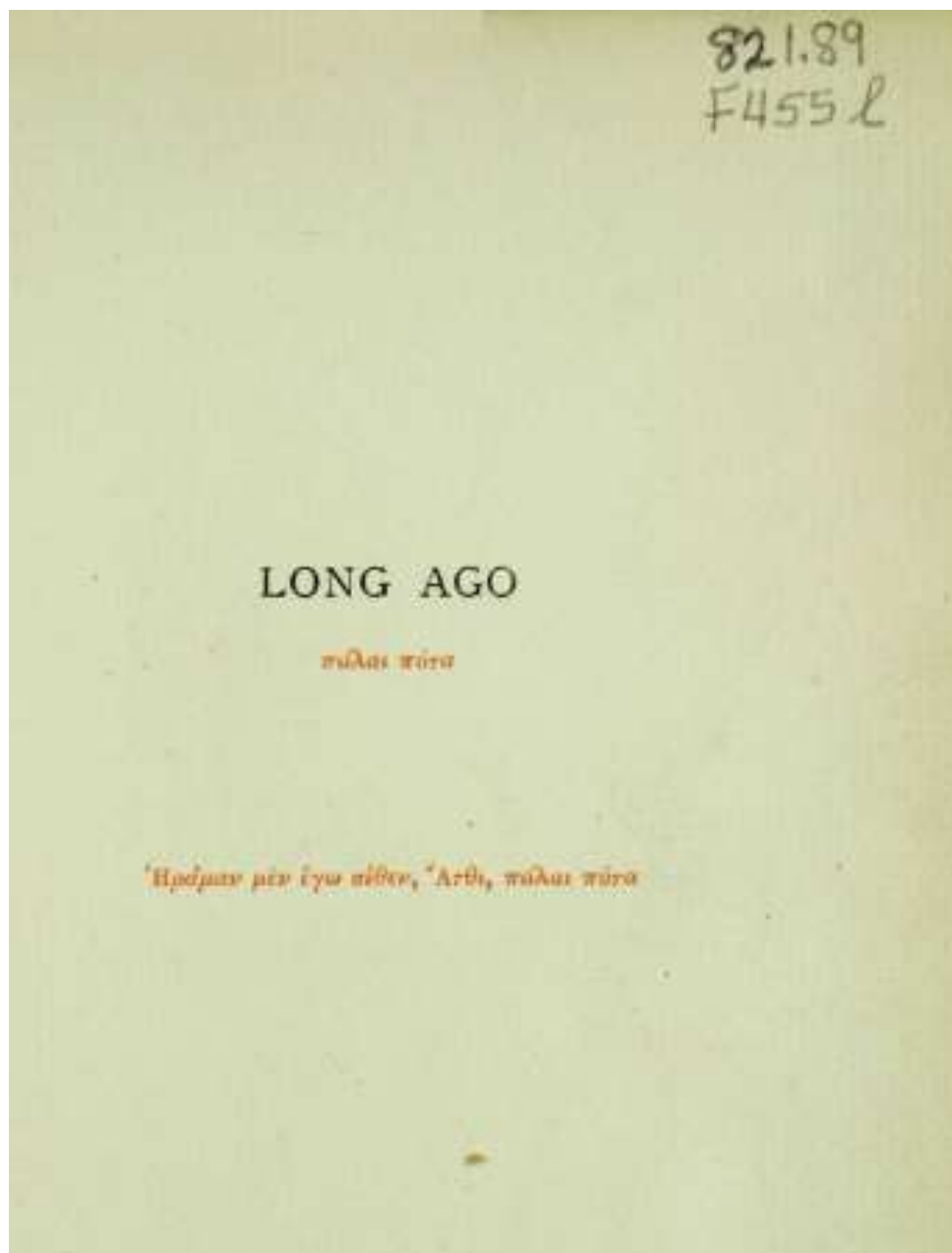


Figure III. Title page of *Long Ago*.



Figure IV. Frontispiece of *Long Ago*.



Figure V. *Sappho* (De Witte, *Description des collections d'antiquités conservées à l'Hôtel Lambert*, planche III, p. 119, 1886).



Figure. VII. Μαρσύας. *Sappho lisant*, red-figure vase by the Group of Polygnotos, ca. 440–430 BC. National Archaeological Museum in Athens. Wikimedia Commons, commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:NAMA_Sappho_lisant.jpg.



Figure VIII. Simeon Salomon. Sappho and Erinna in a Garden at Mytilene. 1864. Tate Britain. Wikimedia Commons, commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Sappho_and_Erinna_in_a_Garden_at_Mytilene.jpg



Figure IX. John Everett Millais. *Ophelia*. C. 1851. Tate Britain. Wikimedia Commons, commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:John_Everett_Millais_-_Ophelia_-_Google_Art_Project.jpg



Figure X. John Collier. *Lilith*. 1892. The Atkinson Art Gallery. Wikimedia Commons, [commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Lilith_\(John_Collier_painting\).jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Lilith_(John_Collier_painting).jpg)

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RESUMEN

El safismo de Michael Field: una ontología tiresiana de la apertura entre la vida y la muerte en *Long Ago* (1889)

Esta tesis constituye una aportación original al reciente pero fecundo campo de estudios consagrados a la obra de Michael Field (pseudónimo de Katharine Bradley y su sobrina Edith Cooper). Nuestro principal objetivo consiste en ofrecer el primer estudio pormenorizado del poemario sáfico *Long Ago* (1889), analizando cada una de sus piezas líricas y trascendiendo el modelo crítico que desde un inicio ha estudiado a las Fields de manera exclusiva y acaso contumaz a la luz, cegadora en muchos sentidos, de su compleja identidad de género y del reflejo de esta misma en su poesía y dramaturgia. Nuestro método de análisis, basado en las interpretaciones de críticos como Christine White o Ed Madden, toma como punto de partida el texto poético en sí mismo y se detiene en la prominente figura mítica de Tiresias para transformarla en todo un instrumento conceptual o precepto teórico capaz de iluminar hermenéuticamente nuestra propia lectura de *Long Ago*. En su condición fértil de mito clásico, Tiresias representa mucho más que un mero desvarío de la imaginación de los antiguos helenos o una mera fantasía sin ningún valor epistemológico añadido. En realidad, el mito del adivino

tebano puede entenderse como un modo de filosofía velada o, en términos más heideggerianos, como un claro (*Lichtung*) o un espacio de apertura para la verdad sobre la condición humana. En otras palabras, Tiresias alberga el potencial de aportar todo un contenido epistemológicamente valioso, un significado existencial importante y hasta un paradigma conceptual emanado de sus atributos filosóficos.

Hasta ahora la mayoría de estudiosos han abordado el mito de Tiresias de dos maneras: bien como una presencia textualmente explícita en las diferentes tradiciones culturales europeas o bien como un dispositivo conceptual que se erige en una especie de marco interpretativo para arrojar luz sobre un determinado hecho literario. En ambos casos, Tiresias queda reducido a su caracterización ovidiana como metáfora simplificada del binarismo sexual, la ambigüedad de género o el anti-dualismo sexológico. En nuestro estudio, abordamos la figura del adivino tanto por su presencia textual en *Long Ago* como por su capacidad de constituirse en todo un principio hermenéutico capaz de permitirnos leer e interpretar el volumen sáfico en su integridad. No obstante, a diferencia del resto de trabajos en torno a Tiresias, el nuestro se aparta de su retrato ovidiano y se centra primordialmente en sus atributos metafísicos y ontológicos tal y como se presentan subyacentes en la *Odisea*. En la epopeya homérica, el profeta tebano deviene una figura escatológica especial que redefine la mortalidad como una experiencia paradójica de vida continua, como temporalidad ilimitada o como memoria perpetua. Tiresias se convierte en una transgresión radical de las fronteras ontológicas que separan la vida de la muerte o la finitud de la existencia. Su ontología representa una ruptura de los dualismos tradicionales y una apertura a paradojas extremas.

El Tiresias metafísico que hace las veces de marco crítico de nuestra tesis es precisamente metafísico en dos sentidos. Nos basamos en su versión homérica con el fin de elaborar una meta-lectura o una post-lectura que trascienda la narrativa crítica que ha limitado la figura de Tiresias y su capital importancia en *Long Ago* a un relato casi exclusivamente centrado en lo físico, lo erótico o lo sexual. En nuestra lectura, no refutamos este válido relato crítico, sino que más bien nos lo apropiamos y lo integramos dentro de un esquema interpretativo englobador que apunta hacia una metafísica de la vida y la muerte implícita en todo el volumen sáfico. De este modo se da el segundo aspecto, ya más técnico, de nuestro Tiresias metafísico, que pasa a encarnar un espacio fértil para la especulación ontológica en torno a la dicotomía artificiosa entre la vida y la muerte, a las fronteras frágiles entre el ser y el no-ser y al

continuum poroso entre los vivos y los muertos. En este sentido, estimamos que Tiresias propicia un diálogo directo con Martin Heidegger, uno de los ontólogos más renombrados de la historia del pensamiento occidental. Sus originales propuestas conceptuales sobre el ser-en-el-mundo o el ser-para-la-muerte nos permiten dilucidar cómo Tiresias, en tanto que verdad mítica y existencial, representa una ontología transgresora que anula la dualidad meramente empírica entre el ser y el no-ser, favoreciendo así una visión más unitaria de la vida humana entendida como un magno fenómeno siempre poroso y abierto a la presencia misma de la muerte. Desde esta perspectiva, argüimos que, como texto tiresiano, *Long Ago* plantea tácitamente un lirización de dichos conceptos heideggerianos y desarrolla su propia narrativa ontológica en torno a la co-presencia entre la vida y la muerte.

La presencia metodológica de Heidegger como refuerzo al paradigma tiresiano propuesto en este estudio es adecuada y productiva no sólo porque conceptualiza perfectamente el hecho de que el profeta tebano transgrede y redefine los confines ontológicos entre el ser-en-el-mundo y el ser-para-la-muerte, sino también porque el pensamiento anti-cartesiano de Heidegger se alinea de manera sorprendente con el proyecto estético que las Fields emprenden en *Long Ago*. Bradley y Cooper, de hecho, cultivaron ampliamente su interés por la filosofía y mostraron una especial predilección por la tradición germánica (fundamentalmente por Hegel y Nietzsche). Sin embargo, en nuestra tesis, defendemos que ni el ideal hegeliano de totalidad absoluta (o de cierre de todo binarismo) ni el prototipo nietzscheano de una subjetividad prácticamente todopoderosa casan del todo con la ontología de apertura radical y de vulnerabilidad heroica que las Fields formulan en *Long Ago*. En este poemario, Bradley y Cooper parecen anticipar de algún modo sorpresivo la línea de pensamiento que Heidegger inaugura formalmente en su magno *Ser y tiempo* (1927), y lo hacen retratando una nueva Safo heroica pero vulnerable y fragmentada en medio de un agón trágico en que la vida y la muerte no se representan necesariamente como constructos antitéticos, sino más bien como fenómenos dialógicos o incluso correlatos abiertos.

En el primer capítulo de nuestra tesis, demuestro que las Fields tenían una conciencia plena y aguda de su propio ser-en-el-mundo. Para ambas, la vida discurría prácticamente como un fenómeno estético o una obra de arte en sí misma. A su modo de verlo, el mundo importaba esencialmente por su potencial inherente de belleza. Sus hogares, vestidos y libros debían cautivar siempre los sentidos y cumplir con el máximo

ideal de perfección estética. El único credo político que promovían las Fields, una especie de esteticismo misionero, profesaba brindar a las clases trabajadoras la oportunidad edificante de apreciar y disfrutar de la belleza en entornos educativos y espacios urbanos renovados. Además, el esteticismo de Bradley and Cooper implicaba no solo una creencia en la belleza universal, sino también una proclividad especial hacia una vida intelectual y experiencial verdaderamente intensa. Las Fields se empeñaron siempre en inventarse a sí mismas mediante cada obra que escribían y, particularmente, mediante una gran narrativa autobiográfica. Este continuo proceso de auto-creación significaba rebautizarse con nombres distintos, jugar con sus identidades autorales, perseverar en sus carreras como dramaturgas pese a múltiples fracasos, reivindicar para sí mismas el noble título de poetas en contra de todo prejuicio sexista, viajar constantemente por Londres y Europa como auténticas cosmopolitas, incursionar en el campo tradicionalmente masculino de la filología clásica y proteger con celo su propia libertad creativa. Tal era su sentido idiosincrático de libertad y creatividad que las Fields gustaban incluso de vivirse como ménades báquicas, sacerdotisas de Dionisos o devotas de Safo. Este paganismo férvido más adelante vendría seguido de una convencida conversión al catolicismo romano tras un proceso existencial que revela cómo Bradley y Cooper llevaron unas vidas intensas no sólo como intelectuales, escritoras y viajeras, sino también como mujeres espiritualmente inquietas.

Más significativo por lo se refiere al esteticismo que definía el ser-en-el-mundo de las Fields es el hecho de que este no sólo entrañaba una afirmación plena de la vida, el placer y la belleza, sino también una actitud valiente y hasta creativa frente a la tragedia y la mortalidad. Bradley tuvo que sobrellevar las muertes de su madre, su primer amor (Alfred Gérente), su hermana, su amigo Browning, su cuñado y hasta la de su amada sobrina Edith, quien compartió con ella muchas de estas pérdidas. Juntas, las Fields afrontaron estas experiencias trágicas no con impotencia o parálisis, sino con suma creatividad poética. Ante la muerte, ambas recurrían a la literatura, se refugiaban en los clásicos y componían obras propias. La tragedia se convertía, de esta forma, en una oportunidad para la invención artística. A su vez, el arte les servía de vehículo precisamente para comprender y arrostrar la pérdida y el duelo. De alguna extraña manera paradójica, la muerte conllevaba para las Fields posibilidades nuevas de creación literaria (nuevas vidas textuales, nuevas piezas dramáticas y nuevos versos líricos). En efecto, *Long Ago*, el primer poemario que compusieron bajo el pseudónimo

de Michael Field, ejemplifica justamente cómo ciertos fragmentos arcaicos y palabras poéticas prácticamente moribundas pueden renacer de tan fructífera manera hasta transformarse en creaciones líricas completamente modernas.

Tal transformación o renacimiento, definitorio del modo en que funciona *Long Ago*, constituye el foco primordial que indagamos y teorizamos sistemáticamente en nuestro segundo capítulo. En él abordamos tres cuestiones interrelacionas, a saber: (1) cómo el pasado sáfico se revive y se vuelve relevante para el lector moderno, (2) cómo la firma de Michael Field quebranta la noción tradicional de autoría y (3) cómo las palabras agónicas de Safo se someten a proceso de transformación radical y recreación plenamente original. Desde la cubierta hasta la última nota paratextual, *Long Ago* se articula como un diálogo constante con el pasado, que deviene paradójicamente vivo y presente de distintas maneras. Las Fields no parecen entender el pasado en consonancia con el credo victoriano del historicismo científico cuyas premisas coinciden con la idea heideggeriana de *Vergangenheit* y, por ende, con una concepción del pasado como una serie fija, óntica y ya muerta de sucesos. Por el contrario, en su poemario sáfico, Bradley y Cooper plantean una epistemología del tiempo que se aleja del sentir victoriano y se acerca más bien a la visión modernista del pasado como *Gewesenheit*, esto es, como una dimensión dinámica y extática que reviste absoluta relevancia para el tiempo presente, tanto es así que los límites ontológicos entre pasado y presente quedan ya difuminados o prácticamente borrados. Es en este sentido especial de anterioridad que *Long Ago* transforma la arcaica textualidad de Safo en un objeto reinventado de extrañamiento, asombro y dislocación temporal. A nuestro juicio, lo que opera de modo tácito en este proceso de dislocación de una temporalidad a otra es una doble lógica de revivalismo que consiste, por un lado, en rescatar el pasado casi perdido de Safo y, por otro, en reconstruirlo con vistas a conferirle una vida nueva o un nuevo futuro literario no tanto como hecho histórico, sino más bien como un suceso mítico abierto y disponible para renaceres perpetuos.

El renacer que protagoniza Safo en *Long Ago* implica su propia presencia como la voz textual de un griego antiguo sublime, irreductible y profundamente enigmático. Safo participa directamente en una compleja estructura de autoría textual en que muere la figura tradicional del genio creador solitario y masculino a favor de un modelo de creación colaborativa, explícitamente polifónica y hasta sexualmente ambigua (con dos autoras que escriben bajo el pseudónimo de un hombre que, a su vez, escribe como

Safo). Las Fields construyen un *Mitsein* plural de invención poética donde el acto de escritura equivale automáticamente a co-escribir, colaborar, negociar, citar y hasta confrontar. En *Long Ago*, el mito del autor individual se invalida y cede su lugar a un coro de polifonía literaria y académica formado por las propias autoras, Safo, Robert Browning, Theodor Bergk, Henry Wharton o J. A. Symonds, por mencionar tan solo algunas de las voces que hicieron parte, de manera más o menos activa, del proceso de composición de *Long Ago*.

Implícita en el tratamiento que las Fields dan al pasado y al hecho autoral yace una conexión simbólica con la dialéctica ontológica entre la vida y la muerte. Como ya hemos explicado, el pasado deja de ser una forma de temporalidad estática o muerta para convertirse en una fuerza extática que dinamiza, enriquece y ennoblece el presente mediante el poder transhistórico del mito y la poesía. Con respecto al fenómeno autoral, *Long Ago* se origina precisamente en la muerte del genio clásico solitario y en el consecuente alumbramiento de una compleja estructura de autoría con las Fields, Safo y otras voces distintas funcionando como colaboradores íntimos en el acto poético. Siguiendo con este mismo simbolismo entre la vida y la muerte, nuestro tercer punto de indagación refleja cómo *Long Ago* elabora una ontología propia de la escritura según la cual la creación literaria entraña un esfuerzo por revivir palabras moribundas, superar su muerte y transfundirlas con un soplo fresco de vida nueva. En otras palabras, para las Fields, la literatura parece encarnar siempre una oportunidad para contribuir a la vida continuada de los muertos revisitando obras del pasado y garantizando su posteridad. En este sentido, Safo es tal vez la voz más fecunda y auspiciosa de todos los poetas muertos. Su corpus/cadáver de poesía fragmentaria propicia todo tipo de reescrituras y renaceres audaces. Su precariedad biográfica abre un espacio vasto para toda suerte de mitificaciones y reconstrucciones libres. Incluso lo que queda de sus versos, a menudo tan solo un grafema o dos, permite a cualquier poeta reinventar un posible mensaje original de una manera que solo puede ser un intento modesto y nunca una aproximación certera a la otredad insondable que encarna Safo. Conscientes de esto, las Fields parecen haber descubierto en la poetisa de Lesbos una porosidad extrema a nuevos post-significados, una invitación a traducciones radicalmente libres o incluso un modo de contravenir la dicotomía clásica originalidad e imitación mediante una escritura óntica, es decir, una forma de escritura auténtica que crea vidas literarias

plenamente originales a partir de un encuentro directo con un legado antiguo que, a su vez, se enriquece con nuevas posibilidades de futuridad (de renaceres prospectivos).

La muerte del individuo como sujeto cartesiano aislado no sólo se da en el espacio autoral de *Long Ago*: conforme detallamos en el capítulo tercero, dicha muerte simbólica se manifiesta también temáticamente en la comunidad sólida de jóvenes báquicas que nos presentan las Fields en el primer poema de su volumen. En él se quiebra por completo la noción tradicional de atomismo subjetivo y se reemplaza por un modo de ser-en-el-mundo compacto y hasta erótico compartido colectivamente por Safo y su séquito de mujeres. La dicotomía entre el yo y el otro se disuelve, dando origen a una forma íntima de *Mitsein* que traspasa los límites de la epistemología y hace de la relación sujeto/objeto una estructura mucho más afectiva, orgánica y simbiótica (más allá del ámbito limitado del conocimiento puramente cognitivo o mental). El *Mitsein* sáfico se caracteriza esencialmente por un sentido intenso del afecto comunitario, un hedonismo estético preponderante, una creatividad ubérrima y una defensa omnímoda de la libertad. Esta intensa filosofía de vida emana de una teoría de lo femenino subyacente en las páginas de *Long Ago*. En su poema tiresiano, las Fields reconceptualizan lo femenino como el principio máximo del vitalismo, como la plenitud misma del ser o como la expresión más álgida de una libertad extática. Por el contrario, en esta subversión de la ontología de las categorías de género, lo masculino pasa a equipararse con la violencia, la destrucción e inclusive la muerte. Las Fields van más allá todavía: al tiempo que redefinen el homoerotismo como la forma de deseo más natural, libre y creativa, presentan la heterosexualidad, el matrimonio y la maternidad como fenómenos trágicos y amenazantes que pueden destruir la comunidad utópica de Safo. No obstante, parece que es precisamente ante estos fenómenos que las jóvenes sáficas experimentan lo femenino con absoluta autenticidad como si su éxtasis dionisiaco solo fuera posible gracias a la proximidad de sus muertes como mujeres libres en las manos de sus potenciales maridos. *Long Ago* plantea, en este sentido, una idea clara aunque paradójica: en su expresión más intensa y genuina, la vida justamente se enfrenta a la antítesis directa de la muerte, factual o simbólica.

En nuestro capítulo cuarto, ponemos el foco de atención en otra modalidad de cómo la porosidad ontológica entre la vida y la muerte prevalece en todo *Long Ago*. En esta ocasión, nos centramos concretamente en una narrativa extensa y coherente de lo que podríamos denominar hetero-mortalidad, un término nuestro que simplemente pretende

conceptualizar la idea de que el deseo heterosexual, lejos de ser productivo, procreativo y fecundo, se convierte en una fuente de violencia, opresión y muerte. De hecho, la Safo de Michael Field encarna esta trágica vivencia erótica en su famoso pero fallido romance ovidiano con el pescador Faón, cuya única actitud hacia la poetisa es la más dolorosa indiferencia. Es este deseo fatídico lo que sume a Safo en un difícil agón entre la vida y la muerte, quebrantando la integridad de su *Mitsein* con sus seguidoras, anulando por completo toda su independencia ontológica, asemejándola a un jacinto pisoteado o a una Ofelia agonizante, e incluso transformando su cuerpo en una suerte de fantasma que canta y baila su propio réquiem. De esta forma, *Long Ago* puede leerse sistemáticamente como una narración lírico-dramática del ser-para-la-muerte de la nueva Safo o, mejor aún, como una tanatografía de cómo la poetisa griega vive y escribe su propia muerte por desamor. Sin embargo, en la narrativa sáfica de heteromortalidad no sólo tienen cabida la pérdida, la agonía y la desesperanza. En su encuentro progresivo con la muerte, Safo llegar a erigirse en una heroína que se enfrenta a la facticidad de su deseo infructuoso con un sentir ético genuino de resiliencia, persistencia y esperanza. Pese al desprecio de su amado, nuestra heroína se aferra con optimismo a sus sueños, mentiras, fantasías, vocativos ilusorios y súplicas paganas con el propósito de sobreponerse al sentimiento opresivo del amor-como-pérdida y de asumir su mortalidad penosa con dignidad, autenticidad y hasta creatividad lírica.

Bradley y Cooper amplían el relato dramático del sáfico ser-para-la-muerte mediante una sugerente narrativa mitopoética que rearticula el hetero-erotismo trágico de Safo en un diálogo analógico con diferentes figuras clásicas, tales como Procne, Filomela, Estéropo o Afrodita. Estas analogías, como demostramos en el capítulo quinto, cumplen la función de ratificar cómo el deseo sáfico se ve trágicamente determinado por un sentido permanente de carencia, conflicto, derrota y pérdida. Ciertamente que Safo a menudo espera, persevera y suplica por un desenlace favorable a sus aspiraciones románticas, pero este optimismo no conlleva que pierda de vista el hecho de que su deseo permanecerá muy seguramente insatisfecho y su vida se truncará tan pronto como se desvanezca su última esperanza erótica. En este sentido, su amor por Faón engloba las acepciones contradictorias de la pasión, entendida como deseo fervoroso y a la vez como martirio. En otras palabras, su concepción y vivencia del amor, explícitamente expuestas en un ciclo de poemas dedicados a la figura divina de Eros, entraña una trágica paradoja: el amor transforma el ser-en-el-mundo de Safo en una experiencia

elevada de belleza, delicadeza y hasta placer sacralizado, pero al mismo tiempo la aboca a un estado ansioso de ser-para-la-muerte ante la ausencia de su amado. Inevitablemente, Safo acaba invocando al dios del viento del norte y a las mismísimas Parcas para que la auxilien. El tipo de auxilio que busca es, sin embargo, destructivo e irreversible: frente a su desamor, la poetisa solo desea quietud, parálisis, esterilidad afectiva y muerte. En su deprecación a Boiras y las Parcas, Safo ya ha perdido toda esperanza y todo apego a la vida. Ésta parece fundirse en su otro negativo como si pasara a definirse por su no-ser más que por su ser factual. En su mitografía del deseo, Safo acata su finitud ineluctable como el único resultado posible y deseable ante su amor trágico.

Sin embargo, en la narrativa de hetero-erotismo trágico, Safo no sólo hace las veces de amante desdeñada pero optimista: según argumentamos en nuestro sexto capítulo, *Long Ago* también la retrata como una auténtica *femme fatale* deseosa de aprisionar, devorar, domeñar y hasta emascular a su amado. En unos cuantos poemas, Safo ocupa una afianzada posición de poder, articula un lenguaje extremo de subyugación erótica y emplaza su ideal amoroso dentro de una economía del deseo basada en la agresión, la competencia, la conquista estratégica y la posesión absoluta. Safo se transforma en una amenaza sublime contra la virilidad y libertad de Faón, una depredadora voraz, una abeja penetrante y una suerte de vampiresa estetizada que se desvive por alimentarse de su amado. A esta Safo implacable *Long Ago* le atribuye una mitología de la castración equiparándola con diversas figuras femeninas tales como Lilit, Medea, Dafne, Selena o Perséfone, todas ellas representadas como poderosas féminas que utilizan y abusan de los hombres para su macabro contento. En consecuencia, Faón queda reducido a una posición de extremada vulnerabilidad bajo el régimen totalitario del deseo sáfico. El bello pescador pasa a ser un mero objeto pasivo, un prisionero onírico, un amado feminizado y una presa amenazada ya de muerte. Su masculinidad se ve seriamente afectada e inclusive castrada en la imaginación fogosa y mortífera de Safo. De hecho, su presencia dentro de la economía sáfica de la posesión amorosa es posible sólo si muere en su condición de hombre. Su muerte simbólica no es más que otro elemento consecutivo de la narrativa de hetero-mortalidad que tejen las Fields en *Long Ago*. En este esquema, tanto Safo como Faón se victimizan mutuamente y personifican el deseo hetero-erótico como una experiencia de fracaso, dolor y tragedia.

En una lectura final de *Long Ago* en tanto que revisión ontológica del dualismo vida/muerte, rastreamos y analizamos toda una secuencia lírica que revela cómo el poemario construye su propia teoría metapoética a partir de dos narrativas mitológicas. La primera, por una parte, se articula en torno a las figuras de las Musas, las Gracias y otras mujeres divinas que conforman una línea matriarcal de autoridad poética, situando a Safo entre ellas e invitando a las Fields a vincularse a esta cadena de poetas inspiradas. Es bajo la influencia de este panteón de deidades femeninas que la poesía surge como regalo proveniente de la tumba del propio Orfeo, como tributo sagrado a los poetas del pasado, como garante de la inmortalidad de estos, como remedio contra las penas de amor y como fuerza unificadora de la comunidad femenina de estetas presidida por Safo. La segunda narrativa, por otra parte, gira en torno a la figura de Apolo y lo caracteriza como una fuente particularmente violenta de inspiración poética. El dios bendice a los poetas poseyéndolos, penetrándolos y sometiendo a un estado extremo de éxtasis que linda prácticamente con la muerte. Parece ser que es en esta situación límite donde la poesía germina en su máxima belleza y se presta como arma portentosa contra el desamor, la apatía y el sufrimiento. Es tal el poder de la poesía apolínea que Safo siente cómo sus propios versos la capacitan para aceptar su finitud con la tranquila certeza de que siempre vivió su vida plena, intensa y poéticamente.

El poema final de *Long Ago* resulta bastante problemático y hasta incongruente. Safo decide quitarse la vida saltando al mar desde un precipicio. La razón estriba en su tragedia romántica con Faón. La imagen ovidiana de Safo como una amante suicida mantiene su plena vigencia y validez en *Long Ago*. Sin embargo, se nos plantea una pregunta inevitable con respecto a por qué, si la poesía siempre le ha servido de remedio contra el dolor, Safo opta aun así por dar el salto mítico hacia su muerte. Parece que la poesía no cumple con su labor terapéutica en última instancia y deja a nuestra poetisa sin opciones. Si bien su muerte constituye un proceso continuo a lo largo de *Long Ago* y no adviene por ende como un suceso sorpresivo, advertimos cierta contradicción en el hecho de que la propia teoría metapoética que las Fields desarrollan en torno a la figura de Apolo resulte, al fin y a la postre, falible e incierta. A pesar de su poder curativo y vitalista, la poesía no impide que Safo elija el suicidio. Tal vez este fracaso poético responda a una mera voluntad de preservar la convención ovidiana de romanticismo trágico por medio de un poema paratextual que se desmarca de la narrativa central de vitalismo heroico que predomina en todo el volumen sáfico.

De manera predecible, Safo muere al final del poemario, pero es su proceso de ser-para-la-muerte lo que mejor y más originalmente define a la nueva Safo de las Fields, junto con otros aspectos tan significativos como su apertura radical a nuevos renaceres textuales, su *Mitsein* íntimo y estético con sus seguidoras báquicas, su aguda ansiedad ante lo masculino, su deseo voraz por Faón, sus afinidades múltiples con otros mitos clásicos y, sobre todo, su profundo entendimiento ontológico de la vida y la muerte como procesos porosos, confluencias y correlatos tiresianos. Las Fields parecen haber trasladado este mismo entendimiento desde su propia experiencia vital a su volumen sáfico en clave de teorías, relatos y mitologías diversas que presentan la existencia humana como un fenómeno liminal cuyos límites conceptuales con la muerte resultan cuanto menos indeterminados. En este estudio, hemos articulado dicho entendimiento ontológico integrando el mito de Tiresias y la fenomenología primera de Martin Heidegger en un diálogo audaz pero fructífero con las Fields, que nos ha servido para desvelar cómo *Long Ago* consigue poetizar formas concretas y simbólicas de convergencia abierta entre la vida y la muerte. Ahora nos parece especialmente promisorio la posibilidad de entablar este mismo diálogo con otras obras de Michael Field a fin de determinar si la vida y la muerte mantienen o quebrantan sus fronteras ontológicas más allá de *Long Ago*.