

## MICHAEL FIELD'S *LONG AGO* (1889) AS A PARADIGM OF INTERTEXTUAL THEORY: FROM STRANGENESS TO METAXOLOGY

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*ABSTRACT: In this essay, I seek to tackle the question of how Katherine Bradley and Edith Cooper articulate their intimate dialogue with Sappho's poetry in their first volume of poetry, Long Ago (1889), published under the pseudonym of Michael Field. My response to this question translates into a thoroughgoing reflection that interprets Long Ago as a dense and audacious text in which the very ontology of art is revised and recast into ambivalent and open relations. The primary conclusion I reach is that the volume constitutes a paradigm of intertextual theory in use that opens up complex, unstable and fertile encounters between the English self and the Greek other, the translatable and the sublime, the mimetic and the original, the empathetic and the distant, the reparative and the fragmentary, the anti-type and the type, or the immanent and the transtextual.*

*KEYWORDS: Long Ago, Michael Field, Sappho, intertext, rewriting.*

## **LONG AGO (1889) DE MICHAEL FIELD COMO PARADIGMA DE LA TEORÍA INTERTEXTUAL: DE LA EXTRAÑEZA A LA METAXOLOGÍA**

*RESUMEN: En el presente artículo, pretendemos abordar la pregunta de cómo Katherine Bradley y Edith Cooper articulan su íntimo diálogo con la poesía de Safo en su primer poemario, Long Ago (1889), publicado bajo el pseudónimo de Michael Field. La respuesta que proponemos para este interrogante se desarrolla en una profunda reflexión que interpreta Long Ago como un texto denso y audaz donde se revisa y se reubica la ontología del arte literario en posiciones ambivalentes. La conclusión primordial a que llegamos es que el poemario en sí representa todo un paradigma de teoría intertextual aplicada que propicia encuentros complejos, inestables y fértiles ente el inglés y el griego, lo traducible y lo sublime, lo dependiente y lo emancipado, lo mimético y lo original, lo empático y lo distante, lo reparativo y lo fragmentario, lo presente y lo ausente, el ante-tipo y el tipo, lo inmanente y lo transtextual.*

*PALABRAS CLAVE: Long Ago, Michael Field, Safo, intertexto, reescritura.*

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“A word is a bridge thrown between myself and another”  
(Bakhtin/Volosinov 1986: 86)

After having read and enjoyed Dr. Henry Wharton’s *Sappho, Memoir, Text, Selected Renderings, and a Literal Translation* (1885), Katherine Bradley and Edith Cooper, both self-identified with the singular pen name of Michael Field, decided to embark on their first lyrical project, *Long Ago*. In this volume, the poets 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 (1922): “to make short dramatic lyrics out of the scenes suggested to their imagination by the Sapphic fragments” (90). With this goal in mind, the Fields, as they were called by their peers, worked on *Long Ago* with utmost excitement and pleasure: it was so special a book for them that they turned to the eminent writer Robert Browning and asked him to write the preface, but the ageing poet thought that the Fields did not need his endorsement. Eventually, on 23 May 1889, *Long Ago* was published in a hundred copies.

*Long Ago* has been one of Michael Field’s most successful works since its publication. It sold out in less than a month and convinced many influential critics. The novelist George Meredith commended its “faultless flow” and “classic concision” (Leighton 1992: 212) and recognised in its lyrics just “a voice of one heart” despite knowing the dual identity of Michael Field (Donoghue 2014: 40). 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 1933: 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” (Thain and Vadillo 2009: 360-61).

In contemporary literary criticism, *Long Ago* has attracted much attention mostly by virtue of its sexual politics. Several critics have agreed on the idea that the volume signifies “the entry of Michael Field into lesbian writing” (Prins 1999: 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 2014: 37)<sup>1</sup>. Similarly, T. D. Olverson (2009) submits that Bradley and Cooper’s Sapphic Hellenism responded essentially to

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1. For Ed Madden (2008), “Bradley and Cooper find a model of love between women in Sappho” (80). For Angela Leighton (1992), 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).

their need to find “an authoritative and scholarly discourse through which they could subversively celebrate (same-sex) sexual pleasure” (760). By contrast, Lillian Faderman (1981) 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). For her part, conciliating these contrary positions, Marion Thain (2007) cogently argues that *Long Ago* overrides the modern sexological dichotomy between heterosexual and same-sex love and manages to create “a category-defying mixture of sexual imagery” (50)<sup>2</sup>.

In the present article, I aim to read Michael Field's *Long Ago* in a way that transcends the dominant critical focus on sexuality and seeks to theorise on how the volume converses with Sappho, incorporates her fragments, comes to terms with her sublimity, and capitalises on her textual brokenness. I contend that, as a result of this process of appropriation, *Long Ago* develops its own ontology of art that unsettles and remaps the limits 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 anti-type and the type, the immanent and the transtextual. Put otherwise, *Long Ago* establishes itself in a liminal and experimental interspace where the imitative and the creative are intertwined, confused, and reconceptualised within the dynamics of a collaborative and dialogic model of poesis. To prove this contention, I turn extensively and systematically to different notions and theorists linked to post-structuralism and mostly preoccupied with the idea of literature as a special form of disseminated, over-determined, and essentially dialogic textuality.

### 1. The Audacious Handshake: “A Certain Strangeness” and Romantic Wonder

In *Long Ago*, the textual surface promises complexity and abundance of meaning. In the cover of the book, the title hangs enigmatically above the roundel of a woman that must have existed long ago. Under her chin hover five Greek graphemes that read “ΠΙΣΑΦΟ” (Psapho). The temporal remoteness that the title intimates gains some clarity: *Long Ago* seems a reference to the archaic era when Sappho allegedly lived. The authors sign at the bottom of the page with their pseudonymous Michael Field. Taken all together, the title, the image and

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2. In his study, Evangelista (2009) follows Marion 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” (111).

the signature foreshadow an *audacious* encounter. I use this adjective in direct allusion to what Henry Wharton 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 to *Long Ago*, par. 1).

That Michael Field’s undertaking entails a reiterated degree of audacity for Wharton is an inevitable observation. The title, the image and the signature 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 and 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 despite the centuries between one and the other. In *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 that carries with it some sense of *strangeness* in the sense that Walter Pater ascribes to the term. The famous Victorian critic 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” (1910: 57). I find this requisite element to be undoubtedly conspicuous in *Long Ago*, judging not only from Henry Wharton’s enthusiastic reply to the Fields, but also from the intellectual and aesthetic allure that comes along with the prospect of a Sapphic Graeco-English handshake. This rich juxtaposition –with Sappho, Greek and English all 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.

Walter Pater (1910) claims further: “It is the addition of strangeness to beauty which constitutes the romantic character in art” (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 2010: 250). Yet, the beautiful here

commingles with the strange straightaway. It is 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 public<sup>3</sup>, 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 (Pater 1910: 246).

Furthermore, it could be said 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 2009: 49). In light of the previous insights, it becomes clear that the beautiful, strange, and even confusing cover of *Long Ago* invokes such a spirit of wonder effectively. The title, the roundel and the obscure Greek graphemes foreshadow an auspicious encounter not only with an extremely remote past, but also with an open-eyed reader who, judging by the cover, approaches *Long Ago* in an attitude of estrangement and curiosity. As usual, Plato and Aristotle are right: everything worthwhile begins with wonder.

## 2. The Greek Sublime, the Guest-Host Language, and the Immanent Other

In *Long Ago*, ancient Greek is not a mere collection of isolated graphemes: it pervades every page, gives the volume its 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 German philosopher Martin Heidegger: “If we listen now and later to the words of the Greek language, then

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3. 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 (2014) 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).

we move into a distinct and distinguished domain [...] The Greek language is no mere language like the European languages known to us” (in Steiner 1991: 24).

The non-mereness of Greek –its distinguished character– goes far beyond its undertones of erudition, elitism, and exoticism. There is a 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 possibility 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, alien, and noumenal 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<sup>4</sup>. From this ambivalence emerges what I would call 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 Michaels 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 meant in its fullest form<sup>5</sup>. 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.

Julia Kristeva’s terminology comes in handy here. 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 phenotext or “the part of the text bound up with the language of communication” and

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4. From this viewpoint, history becomes an object not of scientific inquiry, but of erotic desire. As Stefano Evangelista (2013) 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 (online).

5. 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 2001: 2).

“displays definable structure” (Allen 2000: 50), the Greek epigraph constitutes the genotext or 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 *signifiance*, a sublime form of language that defies “representative and communicative speech” (Allen 2000: 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<sup>6</sup>.

Nonetheless, Sappho’s Greek does not lose its irreducible otherness. 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

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6. In this context, I appropriate Paul Ricoeur’s idea of linguistic hospitality (2006), 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 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.

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*.

### 3. Interpreting the Sapphic Word: Empathy and Distance

With Sappho inside and outside, *Long Ago* raises what Hans-Georg Gadamer (1977) regards as "the general problem of making what is alien our own" (19). In the face of Sappho's otherness, the Michael Fields 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 2009: 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 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 2009: 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, the Michael Fields identify with her affectively and project themselves onto 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" (par. 1) 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" (par. 2). 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<sup>7</sup>.

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 the Michael Fields practice seems to illustrate Edith Stein's notion of *Einfühlung* or empathy, understood as "a blind mode of knowledge that reaches the experience of the other without possessing it" (Makkreel 1999: 255-56). 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 lyricist remains ideal, unattainable, always at a distance, serving as a model for Bradley and Cooper, and yet maintaining her superlative semantic mystique intact. As discussed above, Sappho is, after all, "a foreign tongue that would always remain untranslatable" (Reynolds 2003: 14).

#### 4. From the Dialogic Identity to the Liberated Space

With the sublime or mystical presence of Sappho's Greek, *Long Ago* discloses its intrinsic openness and dialogue. Sappho bequeaths her words. The Michael Fields listen and respond to them. In their poetic conversation, they seem to rely on one another to originate the creative act. Sappho (re)lives through Michael Field's responses. In turn, the Fields inaugurate 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

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7. 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 (1982), 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 "a means of prolonging the pleasure of the original presentation, [...] repeating the production of a memory" (in Sanders 2016: 33) and perpetuating the bliss of the encounter with the Lesbian lyricist.

dialogue in which self and other are mutually defined and constructed. Sappho and Michael Field come into being together in their dialogic communication<sup>8</sup>. 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 2000: 56).

Sappho and Michael Field engage in a long conversation that merges their “voices and consciousnesses” and creates “a genuine polyphony” (Bakhtin 1984: 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” (1984: 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<sup>9</sup>. 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.

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 the Michael Fields discover the *topoi*, stases, and arguments

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8. 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” (1984: 252).

9. 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 into the Fieldian text.

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" (Allen 2000: 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 Sapphic fragment conforms to a specific notion of intertextuality or co-textuality that cancels out the common logic of verticality<sup>10</sup>. 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 and syntagmatic textual field with Michael Field's reinventions, manifesting their capital condition of originators and in a way procreating at least the possibility of an extension in the simultaneous textual space that Sappho frames. *Long Ago* therefore works as a horizontal intertext where the Bloomian trope of "the poet-in-a-poet" becomes textually patent (Bloom 2003: 19). 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 opening up an agon-free space where parasitism is amply replaced by transcendence and askesis<sup>11</sup>. In their parody or misreading, the Michael Fields 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

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10. Here I depart Kristeva's (1980) 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*.

11. 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 2000: 4). In their spirit to rewrite Sappho's heritage, the Michael Fields encounter an already inhabited word whose original author, however, far from constraining or tormenting the belated writer, acts as a most generous host.

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 2000: 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”. Unlike the male writer, who “feels hopelessly belated” in the face of a long history of “many fathers,” the female writer can see herself as “helping to create a viable tradition which is at last definitively emerging”<sup>12</sup>. 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<sup>13</sup>, 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 2001: 2).

## 5. The Sappho Myth: Mythic Revisionism and Radical Typology

Sappho is a mythologised figure and an open myth. Given the total lack of evidence for any aspect of her life, she has become known as a fervent yet unrequited lover, a romantic suicide, a primitive lesbian, a divine muse, or even a femme fatale. In the Western tradition of lyrical verse, she has grown into a porous signifier, a fertile (arche)type, and an inexhaustible promise. The Fields adopt and rework the Sappho 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” (Ostriker 1982: 72).

However, I speak of revisionism in a loose manner, assuming that the Fieldean poems constitute transformative, expansive, and experimental revisions of the

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12. For all the quotations, see Gilbert and Gubar (1979: 50). In a later article, Gilbert and Gubar (1984) 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).

13. 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 2016: 6).

Sappho myth 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" (Ostriker 1982: 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" (73) is pervasive and promising.

Alternatively, poet and critic Adrienne Rich (1972) formulates an idea of revisionism that may be applicable here, 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 a (re)creative act, whether revisionist or not, of perpetuating her mythic 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 late-Victorian metamorphosis of her myth, a beneficiary of her mythic authority<sup>14</sup>, and a protraction of her mythopoetic tradition. Appropriating Laurence Coupe's terminology (1997), 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 mythopoetic urge being infinite. This understanding is what we are calling radical typology (108).

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14. As a consolidated myth, Sappho "confers on the writer the authority unavailable to someone who writes merely of the private self" (Ostriker 1982: 72).

*Long Ago* perpetuates Sappho's promise and mythopoetic urge by citing her original fragments, using Wharton's translations, 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 1997: 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<sup>15</sup>.

## 6. Literary For-Itself-Ness and Absence over Presence

If Sappho does not impose any considerable anxiety of influence or repressive debt upon her future ante-types, it is so mainly because she is nothing but a fragment –perhaps "the perfect fragment"<sup>16</sup>. She holds no historical status practically. Although she is believed to have lived on the island of Lesbos in the sixth 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 1994: 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 (1995) 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

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15. Here I am just paraphrasing Allen's (2000) "commonsensical argument that texts have a dual existence: as autonomous texts and inter-texts" (112).

16. This is how Prins (1999: 3-7) rightly portrays the Greek poetess 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.

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 (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. With her the long-standing *metaphysics of presence* plummets: if, according to this Derridean concept, being is understood as absolute presence and the exclusion of absence in the traditional discourse of Western philosophy<sup>17</sup>, then Sappho radically opposes the very notion of being by somehow privileging what it negates. In her fragments, absence acquires a significant ontological density, one that never exhausts itself, that renders meaning infinite, and that opens a Hegelian field of absolute becoming –of incessant transtextuality<sup>18</sup>. The Sapphic absence is generative, futural, and hence a literary model of *for-itself-ness*: it becomes 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<sup>19</sup>. What Umberto Eco calls “the poetics of the open work” is literally and directly applicable to the Sapphic fragment<sup>20</sup>.

In other terms, associated this time with Julia Kristeva's semiotic theories, the Sapphic word neatly reflects the “vision of texts as always in a state of production” (Allen 2000: 34). Given their radical openness, Sappho's fragments

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17. See W. Fuchs (1976: 6-7), who thoroughly examines Jacques Derrida's doctrine of the metaphysics of presence and discriminates all its main attributes in the light of Edmund Husserl's phenomenology.

18. Standing between being and nothingness, Sappho serves convincingly as an example of what Hegel calls *Vermittlung*: as a mediating agent between two opposites and, in consequence, as their synthesis. The Greek poetess appears to embody the very idea of becoming, as she *is* and *is not* at once –half-present and absent. In other words, she is “the resultant of ‘to be’ and ‘not to be’ [and] the unity of the two” (Hegel 1873 [1830]: §88).

19. In Derridean terms, the Sapphic fragment reads as a type of writing that “opens the sign up to an explosive, infinite and yet always already deferred dimension of meaning” (Allen 2000: 65).

20. The words the Italian philosopher (1989 [1962]) employs to define Kafka's work can readily be transposed to Sappho: for her corpus of fragments also “remains inexhaustible insofar it is open” (9).

are not finished products endowed with stable or unified structures: rather, they are transformations or productions 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 discloses 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.

Still from a poststructuralist perspective, I would define the Sapphic fragment as a writerly or blissful text that, as Roland Barthes (1975) 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. Sappho engages Michael Field precisely in this way: the Victorian couple seems to experience the Sapphic text as a blissful one or as a source of *jouissance* (in Barthesian parlance), setting as their goal “the blissful apprehension” of the Sapphic ideal (Preface to *Long Ago*, par. 2), and aspiring to ultimately become rewriters of the ancient poetess.

## 7. The Broken Tongue and the Fieldean *Bricoleur*

Bradley and Cooper are well aware of Sappho’s open and broken subjectivity and the productive character of her songs. Two suggestive images, besides the cover, preside over *Long Ago*: the first shows a female profile identified as ΣΛΦ, whilst the second features a seated woman reading from a manuscript and apparently half-pronouncing her name. In both cases, Sappho is represented as an unfinished subject. Her identity seems to fracture and be left hovering in the same position of suspension as the Greek graphemes she tries to utter in the second picture. Sappho is suspended, “standing outside of a self” (Prins 1999: 38), speaking with incomplete words, and anachronistically embodying the poststructuralist model of subjectivity as “a fragmented being who has no essential core of identity, and is to be regarded as a process in a continual state of dissolution rather than a fixed identity or self that endures unchanged over time” (Sim 2001: 367).

Just like her fragments, her voice is broken, nearly voiceless, and inarticulate at best. In fact, in one of her own lyric poems, she explicitly declares: ἀλλά κὰμ μὲν γλῶσσα ἔαγε. According to these words, her tongue breaks and her faculty of speech fails outright as a result of an abrasive desire –of “a subtle fire [that] has run under my skin” (Wharton 1907: 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 –this in-betweenness– that Bradley and Cooper inscribe their poetic unitary voice in a restorative fashion: they repair, stretch and fill out the apocope –the broken speech– in what might well be likened to an aesthetic exercise of Derridean *bricolage* that consists fundamentally in the transformative appropriation of a Sapphic “*héritage plus ou moins cohérent ou ruiné*” (Derrida 1967: 418)<sup>21</sup>.

The *héritage* the Michael 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 1999: 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 remain “les résidus de constructions et de destructions antérieures” (Lévi-Strauss 1962: 27), where brokenness reaches its zenith, where a generous possibility for recycling and restoration shows itself most overtly, and where silence offers ample room for reparative words. In a Derridean spirit of subverting the hierarchical dichotomy between presence and absence, the Michael Fields decide wittingly upon the latter and profit from its prospective richness. After all, the Sapphic lacuna, as pointed out earlier on, proves more promising, generative, fertile, and transcendent than the most complete songs of the ancient lyricist: absence outweighs –or *outsignifies*– any abundance of presence.

## 8. Translating the Sapphic Seed: From Shelley to Quine

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

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21. Here I deliberately choose the term *bricolage* –over more or less similar notions such as rewriting, parody, adaptation, pastiche, or palimpsest– for its explicit original connotations of reparative composition and reconstruction: it stems, indeed, from the French verb *bricoler*, meaning “arranger, réparer ou fabriquer quelque chose” (Dictionnaire Larousse).

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 2006: 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 (2000) 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 Field 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 2013: online), 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, *Sight 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, par. 1).

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 the Fields practice 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<sup>22</sup>.

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

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22. Simplifying Quine's theory of radical translation, Peter Hylton (2016) 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" (online).

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.

## 9. The Motions of Translation: Towards a Redefined Sapphic Restitution

*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 (2000). 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 alterity 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" in her fragments (186), and acknowledge them to be inspirational, meaningful, and promisingly expressible in English verse. The Fields 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.

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—with apparently no critical hesitation—Dr. Henry Wharton's translations of the Sapphic fragments as authoritative and trustworthy. This fundamental bias inevitably conditions the Fields in their access to the Sapphic word: they penetrate it not strictly on their own, but through the mediation of a prior interpreter whose understanding of Sappho's songs is assumed to be thoroughly reliable. In this sense, I construe such a mediation as "an act, on the access, inherently appropriative and therefore violent" (187). The

Michael Fields access and appropriate the Sapphic word by means of a previous appropriation, laden with its 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" of the translated artefact (188). Both incorporative modalities appear at work in *Long Ago*. Bradley and Cooper write a large ensemble of lyrics where Sappho's fragments merge with derivative yet new words and acquire a full sense of "at-homeness" within an organic (188), 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*: Bradley and Cooper 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). No doubt, *Long Ago* constitutes a precise example of *incremental literature*, whose "aim is not replication as such, but complication, expansion," and restitution (Sanders 2016: 15).

## 10. Metaxological Aesthetic: "Neither Imitation nor Self-Creation"

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 liminal text, finding its own place in the midst of irreducible dualities and bridging the gaps between the old and the new, the original and its continuity, or the traditional and the modern.

In a compendious and summative effort, I approach Michael Field's Sapphic collection as a potent example of what Irish metaphysician William Desmond would name *metaxological aesthetic*. By this term I refer to what is intimated by the title of the present section –taken over from Desmond's latest book to date (2016: 60). The Fields take issue with the dualism between imitation and creation, "two fundamental ideas in the tradition of reflection on art" (Desmond 2012: 152). If understood as a type of imitation, *Long Ago* poses some radical challenges. Its textual complexity disavows any presumption against imitation as a debased form, a second-rate artefact, and a mere parasitic duplication of "an original already complete in itself" (152). 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 identifying with the Sapphic other, the Fieldean subject develops the extraordinary "capacity to be other to itself" (153). In the act of imitation, the Michael Fields are no longer merely Michael Field: they become Sappho, while remaining themselves. Their identity is "*imaginatively doubled* through a creative appropriation of an other" (153). As a result, the Fieldean imitation constitutes "a form of imaginative acting, an opening to and mediation of otherness in which we become the other, giving ourselves up to its difference" (153). *Long Ago* opens to the Sapphic other, empathises with it, partakes of its potential meanings, and yet leaves its ultimate differentness untouched.

With respect to its status as creation, *Long Ago* is not to be regarded as an independent and self-referential text that obeys its own norms, extinguishes all form of otherness, and "encloses itself within a shuttered selfhood" (154). Instead,

what the Michael Fields sing in their lyrics is an act of cooperation in creation: it is with Sappho that they share and co-write the act/art of creation. This means that, in *Long Ago*, “imitation and creation need not be radically opposed; imitation is an incipient form of creation; creation is imitation completing itself” (154). The Fields initiate themselves into artistic creation by imitating the Sapphic word and end up creating something new as a result not of a self-enclosed origination, but of a cooperative synergy.

I would claim, then, that *Long Ago* works as a “creative double” or a metaxological “togetherness of imitation and creation” that invalidates the traditional duality between “passive representation and sheer creativity from nothing” (155). The Fieldean poem enacts an ambivalent interplay between creative immanence and imitative transcendence in which “neither side is reduced to the other” and both form, instead, a community “in their very distinctness” (155) –a community between the Fields and the Sapphic sublime. For this reason, it seems consequential to describe *Long Ago* pleonastically as a liminal metaxography, a radical text that destabilises and redraws the boundary lines that separate traditional forms of dichotomous thinking. *Long Ago* establishes itself in a liminal space of its own where the imitative and the creative are intertwined, confused, and reconceptualised within the dynamics of a “cooperative and collaborative model of creativity” (Sanders 2016: 6).

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