# SAPPHO IN LYRIC IV: MICHAEL FIELD'S SPATIAL POETICS OF DESIRE AND DEFEAT

# SAFO EN LA LÍRICA IV: LA POÉTICA ESPACIAL DEL DESEO Y LA DERROTA DE MICHAEL FIELD

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## Abstract

In this article, I offer a close reading of Michael Field's *Long Ago* (1889), specifically of lyric IV, with the primary aim of showing how Katharine Bradley and her niece Edith Cooper appropriate the archaic figure of Sappho, dramatise her Ovidian romantic tragedy and, in so doing, reconceptualise the notional category of space in two complementary ways: on the one hand, lyric space becomes a tense locus of contention between form-as-hope and content-as-despair and, on the other, the correlation established between space, nature and gender results in a transgressive topography in which, as I conclude, a new Sappho emerges both as a tragic heroine and as an extremely possessive consciousness laden with sheer Hegelian desire.

**Keywords**: *Long Ago*, space, Kant, Nietzsche, Hegel.

## Resumen

En este artículo proponemos una lectura exhaustiva de *Long Ago* (1889) de Michael Field, centrándonos concretamente en el poema IV, con el objetivo primordial de demostrar cómo Katharine Bradley y su sobrina Edith Cooper se apropian de la figura arcaica de Safo, dramatizan su tragedia romántica ovidiana y, al mismo tiempo, reconceptualizan la categoría nocional de espacio de dos formas complementarias:

por un lado, el espacio lírico deviene en todo un topos de tensión entre la forma-como-esperanza y el contenido-como-desesperanza, y por otro, la correlación que se entabla entre espacio, naturaleza y género culmina en una topografía transgresora en la que, según colegimos, surge una nueva Safo en calidad tanto de heroína trágica como de extremada conciencia cargada de puro deseo hegeliano.

**Palabras clave**: *Long Ago*, espacio, Kant, Nietzsche, Hegel.

## 1. Introduction

In the spring of 1889, Katharine Bradley and her niece Edith Cooper published a large collection of lyrics inspired by Sappho's original fragments under the shared pen name of Michael Field. Titled *Long Ago* and printed in only a hundred copies, the volume did very well among its small yet eminent readership. Distinguished men of letters such as Robert Browning and George Meredith applauded the collection on account of its mastery of "the uses of Greek learning" and its "faultless flow" (Field 1933: 31). However, both the Michael Fields —as Bradley and Cooper were called in their intellectual circle— and their *Long Ago* went completely unnoticed for more than a century.



It was in the nineties that feminist scholars rediscovered the Fields and brought their ingenious works to the foreground of contemporary Victorian studies —among them, Christine White (1990, 1996a, 1996b), Angela Leighton (1992), Virginia Blain (1996, 1999), and Yopie Prins (1999), to name but a few. In this initial phase of rediscovery, *Long Ago* was commonly approached as a significant instance of lesbian writing based on the legitimising authority of Sappho's original texts. Later, for other critics, the volume ceased to be a specifically lesbian literary piece and developed into a more general and subversive discourse capable of breaking away from any clear-cut sexual dichotomy in favour of a more amorphous, versatile, and "category-defying mixture of sexual imagery" (Thain 2007: 50).

What is clearly remarkable in most of the criticism devoted to *Long Ago* is that the primary interest that this volume has elicited lies chiefly —and, in my view, reductively— in its sexual politics. In their more recent studies, Madden (2008), Ehnenn (2008), Primamore (2009), Evangelista (2009), Olverson (2010), Chaozon Bauer (2018) and Thomas (2007, 2019) follow a fairly similar line of interpretation that lays inordinate stress on Michael Field's physical, sensual, Bacchic, and primarily queer Sapphism. Although I fully subscribe to some of their readings (Cantillo 2018a), I would argue for the fruitful possibility of employing other approaches that cut across the long critical narrative of sexuality so commonly applied to *Long Ago*.

Accordingly, I have previously reinterpreted the volume as a paradigm of intertextual theory, as a mythopoetic reflection on death and desire, and as a lyrical inquiry into the paradox of love (Cantillo 2018a, 2018b, 2018c). In order to continue with this cycle of reinterpretations, the present article will focus not on the over-analysed dimension of Sappho's lesbian desire in *Long Ago*, but on her romantic obsession with a handsome fisherman named Phaon. Although commonly overlooked, this particular facet of the Michaelian Sappho is hugely significant and worthy of critical attention. In fact, in one of the earliest readings of the volume, Lillian Faderman goes so far as to claim that it "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" (1981: 210). I would not say that there is *little* presence of homoeroticism in *Long Ago*, for many of its poems indeed explore Sappho's same-sex desire "as a genuine form of creativity and love" (Cantillo 2018a: 207). However, I do concur with Faderman's contention that *Long Ago* lays special stress on the heteroerotic myth of unrequited love between Sappho and Phaon.

As Page DuBois states in her most recent study on Sappho, the representation of her love tragedy 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" (2015: 108). Particularly responsible for the posterity of this portrayal is Ovid's collection *Epistulae Herodium*, in which the Roman poet provides one of the earliest examples of literary transvestism in Western literature by adopting Sappho's miserable voice and by writing as such an elegiac letter to her beloved Phaon to reproach him for his callous demeanour and to share her suicidal feelings. Likewise, in their *Long Ago*, Bradley and Cooper act as literary transvestites "writing as a man writing as Sappho" (Prins 1999: 74). From this ambivalent position, the Fields tackle the Phaon myth in a dramatic revision that places Sappho in the middle of a tragic agon between hope and despair, desire and death, by embodying a multiplicity of voices, male and female, old and new, homosexual and heterosexual, seeking to reproduce the anxieties of late-Victorian poets.



In this article, my aim is to elucidate how such a revision transcends sentimentalism and rethinks the notional category of space from a twofold perspective: the Michaelian reworking of the Phaon myth shows, on the one hand, how poetic space can become an unstable locus of contention between form-as-hope and content-as-despair and, on the other, how space, nature, gender, and desire are all intermeshed and redefined in a lyrical, transgressive topography. What is perhaps most striking, as I seek to prove here, is how such a double articulation of space takes place and shape in a complex lyric identified under the Roman number IV. The poem reads in full as follows:

IV

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)

## 2. The Form and Content of Desire



Poem IV unfolds entirely in a single stanza and aligns its twelve lines in a harmonious symphony of six couplets, following an iambic tetrameter rhyme scheme that makes full sense in a poem titled "IV". The effect of formal unity is not just flagrantly transparent and well accomplished, but also highly meaningful in that it enters into 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 —the scenario of a *coincidentia oppositorum*— where such a debate develops in an attempt to find a possible resolution.

The formal junction of poem IV comes as a surprise after a sequence of two poems (II and III) in which Sappho introduces the conventional tragedy of her unrequited love for the inaccessible and disdainful Phaon. This tragic convention condemns and leaves the Lesbian lyrist facing a disjunctive reality where lover and beloved remain at a remove from one another. However, the compact body making up poem IV appears to create an unexpected sense of union that neither the previous co-texts nor its own text —on its semantic level— back up. Autonomous and hence Kantian, the form of poem IV trespasses the old boundaries of lexical or content-determined meaning: it contravenes the strictly factual by suggesting the ideal or even the sublime. The poem can, indeed, be perceived "as a totality consisting of a plurality of parts" (Thorpe 2015: 64), and yet this perception fails to produce an immediate idea of the semantic complexity intrinsic to the whole poem.

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. Here I adhere to the well-known "controversy between Kant and Hegel" in the field of aesthetic theory (Adorno 1997: 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 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 2000: 92). I would not go so far as to say that poem IV constitutes a paradigmatic illustration of Kant's radical aesthetic formalism, for its form does seem to possess a clear conceptual value of unity. What I would draw attention to 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 content of lyric IV corresponds roughly to the unhappy truth of disjunction, disdain, and desolation that the Sapphic lover has to bear in the face of her beloved's physical and emotional distance. This tragic experience does not take the shape of dismembered, fragmented or fractured lines, as one would expect. 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, or the oneiric. The content is grounded on the real, the crude, and the elegiac. As a result, what Terry Eagleton terms "the mimetic theory of form, for which the form somehow imitates the content it expresses" (2007: 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 unity 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, resonates with some aspects of Nietzsche's metaphysical thought, which the Fields themselves read, admired, and defended to the extent that, as Vadillo points out, they were among the earliest generation of British intellectuals who "recognised Nietzsche's importance for modernity" (2015: 204). In connection with poem IV, what is most evocative of the Prussian thinker is his dialectical interplay between the Apollonian and the Dionysian, which seems to operate behind lyric IV by conforming 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 as the force that Nietzsche calls *der Scheinende*. This ambivalent epithet, associated in German with the words *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 1987: 39). In this light, the form of poem IV is nothing but an Apollonian veil or an illusion: it gives an impression of unity and harmony that the content belies.

Additionally, the form appears to serve a protective or even therapeutic function: 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 even death. The form opposes and suspends the content, anticipating a happy ending to the Sapphic romance, consummating the ideal of union, and opening up a possible future for desire. Sappho's desire is not oppressed by the strictures of the real content. Although still unfulfilled, her desire remains vitally hopeful in view of the ideal possibility or the transcendence that the form of poem IV enacts. Sappho occupies, as it were, a midway position between form and content or, in other words, between the possibility of conquering her beloved and the raw reality of her dejection. She thus embodies both the Apollonian and the Dionysian —unity and dismemberment.



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 1990: 579). Although Nietzsche links Dionysus mainly with the notion of a primordial oneness or a "unified source of all being" (Diethe 2007: 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 dismembered, formless, and fragmented: she is but 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 text of poem IV presents both poles as an *existentially* inseparable structure. I use this adverb in line with Terry Eagleton, who posits the idea of the inseparability between form and content "as far as our actual experience of the poem goes" (2007: 65). In lyric IV, this notion of inseparability takes on a double meaning, since 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*. Otherwise put, the poem functions as a complex semantic unity or, more precisely, as a conceptual space in which meaning is polemical, divisive, and yet inclusive of its own antimonies. The formal semantics of union clashes directly with the content-based semantics of disunion, but both cooperate within a major system of meaning that is paradoxically complete: it 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. The first two lines of the poem illustrate this paradox: "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". Here words, rhymes and couplets cooperate to create a pure sense of formal cohesion, and yet this cooperation is paradoxically created to express the ominous fact that Phaon spurns Sappho and refuses to stay.

Poem IV forms a totality in itself or, in Nietzsche's terms, a brotherhood of contraries: it asserts union at a formal level only to reject or negate it at the level of its content. A perfect symbiosis arises between the opposition between ideal union and real disunion, both of which are made textually co-present. What stems from this co-presence is a plenitude of meaning, experience, and even truth. Sappho is not merely portrayed as a disdained, mournful, passive, and suicidal lover. She verbally exposes her fragmented and vulnerable self, but simultaneously she manages to overcome this vulnerability by projecting her ideal image of romance as a formal simulation of union. A counter-dualistic dynamic takes place here: "the antithetical inheres within, and is partly produced by, what it opposes" (Dollimore 1991: 33). Here I make use of Jonathan Dollimore's timeless idea 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. Sappho's factual brokenness concurs with her ultimate aspiration of romantic fullness. At the same time as pouring out her feelings of alienation, Sappho enacts her ideal of union through the formal space of the poem. The experiences of disunion and union run in parallel, 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 complete. 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 and the possible within the intricate poetic space of a single lyric.

## 3. The Shore and the Conditional Space of Violent Transcendence

Equally liminal, contentious, and ambivalent is the Sapphic topography delineated in 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 the shore, the littoral, the border, and the point of convergence between land and sea, which proves to be more than a mere locative reference. In an illuminating study of littoral poetry, René Dietrich comes to an important conclusion: the shore "as any other boundary region, […] is not only a place where land and sea meet, but also centre and margin, inside and outside, self and other, and in which those very concepts shift, switch, dissolve, and clash" (2007: 450). This view applies readily to Sappho's littoral topography, for it is on the shore that her most loving-despairing self encounters her cruel beloved, interrupting their previous separation momentarily, and even clashing frontally in a belligerent competition, as I shall explain later.



The shore is, indeed, the space of mediation where Sappho appears to reach some degree of contact with her beloved Phaon. Personified as Sappho, 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. The whole scene constitutes an effective and dramatic 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, Eve, Pandora, Medea, Salome or Melusina, who are usually portrayed as "agents of fascination, allegories of evil and incarnations of deception, destruction and decay" (Baumbach 2015: 114). These agents have the existential purpose of enticing, ensnaring, enslaving, and emasculating men. In poems II and III, Sappho seems to pursue such a purpose with overt 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/extermination through the use of specific floral similes that lay bare the trace of the mythic woman-snake, whose sensual sinuosity resembles the movements of a creeping, entwining, and tangling Sappho-as-golden-pulse in her strenuous effort to possess her beloved. In this sense, John Collier's painting *Lilith* (1892) unavoidably comes to mind here, since it 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 loosened, and her white body embraced by a dark snake. By analogy, I 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 bears.

Nevertheless, the effort to enfold Phaon falls through altogether: he "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 perhaps many a time that Sappho attempted to capture Phaon only to receive his disdain. The solidarity of nature, which seems to act 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). In this manner, the mediatory function of the pathetic fallacy, which serves to break down the eco-ontological barriers between humanity and non-humanity, loses its sense and purpose: 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. Dietrich puts it concisely: "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" (2007: 450). Nothing stays on the shore —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 mediation, like the tireless waves, is just a transient event, an ephemeral occurrence, or even a delusion.



Such ephemerality manifests itself on a temporal level, causing the past and the present to follow one another at a very short distance and with an unfamiliar sense of extreme proximity. In the initial representation of nature, the principal verbs and their adjuncts are all inflected in the past tense, setting the scene in a vaguely remote space-time. Immediately afterwards, the present tense fast-forwards the action and introduces a lyrical I that identifies at a profound level with the facts and affections of nature. The succession from one field to the other —from the natural to the personal or autobiographical— is instantaneous and explicitly mediated by a colon that appears at the very centre of the poem. This punctuation mark operates exactly as a syntactic device: it arranges —τάξις— and joins the natural and the personal together —σύν— becoming, as it were, the graph of mediation, the visual threshold of two space-times, and the centre of a twofold, specular mode of writing in which different yet complementary spheres of experience are inter-written, inter-related, and thus integrated into a narrow dialogue between one another not

only at a conceptual or semantic level, but also at the level of form itself, of writing itself, of punctuation itself.

In the personal segment of the poem, which opens up in the wake of 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, stands 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 the possibility of erotic gratification, thereby liberating the Sapphic subject from her irremediable past and projecting her into the 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 space of transcendence where her aspirations remain valid. This transcendental or liberating space is dramatically claimed in poem IV by an image of Sappho stretching her arms. The previous floral imagery —in the natural segment— and Sappho's actual body intermesh now and create a simile that reinforces the motif of solidarity between humanity and nature with her arms replacing the figurative "stems and yellow flowers" (l. 5). It is now her literal arms that seek to "detain" (l. 5) the fugitive beloved, to keep her erotic quest active, and ultimately to give herself a modicum of hope.



The rhetorical question and the progressive gesture of Sappho's arms are followed by a series of conditional clauses that enact a scenario of erotic hope. Here 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 her desire touches ground —far from the unsteady shore— in the conquered presence of the erotic object. Functioning perhaps as tentative responses to the central rhetorical question, the conditional sentences disclose the richness and delicate brutality of Sappho's erotic consciousness. The opening protasis —"If that might be" (l. 7)— makes use of a demonstrative pronoun that appears to work 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 a large density of (other possible) meanings. In a way, and in spite of its inherent semantic occasionality, it becomes an emphatic and condensed expression of the plenitude of Sappho's desire. Indeed, if highlighted and assertively isolated, the demonstrative form 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 possess her loved one with her all too vicious desire.

The second protasis —"If I could win him from the sea" (l. 8)— turns the Sapphic erotic quest into a belligerent competition: Sappho becomes a contestant; the sea, her rival, and Phaon, the final trophy. In this sport-like 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. In contrast, the beloved loses his subjective transcendence altogether, falls prey to sheer objectification, and enters into the artificial categories conventionally ascribed to femininity. It is true that these gender reversals pervade most of *Long Ago*, but what does make a significant difference in poem IV is the representation of a transgressive topography of desire in which such reversals come into play. 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 and detention. On the other hand, the sea seems to represent Phaon's domain, where 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: as I have explained above, it serves as an intermediary between land and sea, yet the mediation it makes possible comes down to nothing but a momentary occasion. It is, however, in the brief course of this occasion that Sappho initiates 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 changes not into a site of peaceful confluence, but into an erotic space of competition and belligerence where the Fieldean lover seeks the ultimate conquest.



In the event of the final 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), which amount to her arms, her sinuous torso, or her entire body. It seems quite clear that the body/nature correlation, formerly evocative of the serpent-woman figure, 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 action of subjection. Some paradoxical complexity affects this discordance. Sappho's erotic desire is at least two-sided: on the surface, it appears subtle, tepid, flowery, aesthetic, driven by despair, and vehement at the most, but just a few insights into it reveal its deep undercurrents of greed, detention,

and subjugation. It is this tacit violence that becomes all the more apparent in the second apodosis, wherein 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 radical entwinement that Sappho pursues as a "thievish" lover (l. 12). The ideal of entwinement or erotic fusion that Sappho covets recalls the Ovidian myth of Hermaphroditus: in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, "the youth Hermaphroditus bathed in a fountain at Salmacis. A nymph fell in love with him, but he rejected her. The nymph (sometimes called Salmacis) wrapped herself around him like a serpent, praying that she might never be parted from him. Her prayers were answered as their two bodies became one" (Roman and Roman 2010: 220). The analogy with Sappho is self-evident: both Salmacis and Sappho profess an all-consuming love, both manifest serpentine proclivities towards their beloveds, and both pray for an erotic union that entraps, devours, and appropriates the loved other into their very physical selves. From this perspective of desire as extreme fusion and appropriation, the kind of erotic "art" (l. 11) that Sappho wishes to teach Phaon consists in robbing him of his autonomy, dominating him altogether, and plaiting him into her "crown" (l. 10). If such is her idea of art, then hers is an aesthetics 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 a kind, sweet form of intersubjectivity. The only ideology at work is, *au fond*, a radical *ars amatoria* of appropriation.



Undoubtedly, Hegel can be invoked here. The Fields "absorbed a great deal, from the 1890s onwards, from the German philosophers" (Thain 2007: 36). As discussed above, not only did Bradley and Cooper read and adopt Nietzschean ideas: they were also ardent Hegelians, so much so that, in a revealing letter to American art critic Bernard Berenson, Edith Cooper declares: "Hegel's Aesthetic belongs to me, though Michael [Katharine] rightfully claimed it, as all mine is his" (in Thain and Vadillo 2009: 323). This possessive subscription to Hegelianism becomes fairly patent in how the Fields portray and dramatise Sappho's desire in lyric IV. In his *Phenomenology of Spirit*, the German philosopher understands desire —*die Begierde*— as "our active will to compel objects to conform to our conceptions or wishes" or, in its crudest manifestation, as an egoistic drive "to annul the other and absolutize itself" (Magee 2010: 69). As shown above, in poem IV Sappho

manifests such an active will by displaying a powerful, possessive and even emasculating psychology of desire. If successful, Sappho's desire would result in a destructive paradox. In loving and possessing Phaon, she would annul him altogether.

However, Sappho's Hegelian desire is articulated in the conditional mood. While this mood enables her to maintain her erotic aspirations and persevere in her romantic quest, the reality she faces is rather sterile and tragic. Phaon spurns her and remains a fugitive from her conditional scenarios. His presence on the shore is but an ephemeral occasion. As a result, Sappho inhabits an existential tension, a dramatic agon or a complex liminal space between her barren reality and her possessive consciousness —between a fragile hope for extreme romantic fulfilment and a crude feeling of hopelessness.

## 4. Conclusion

In the light of Michael Field's *Long Ago*, space becomes resignified in figurative and in more literal ways. Methodologically, I have opened a critical space in which the Fields are no longer seen simply as queer voices, but as genuine intellectuals whose poems can enter into fruitful dialogues with the philosophers they admired and defended. Further, within the critical space I have created, the Fields can be imagined emulating Ovid's practice of literary transvestism, rewriting the elegiac missive that Sappho addresses to her beloved boatman, and articulating a highly ambiguous discourse of heteroeroticism in which the Sapphic lover suffers and dreams passionately at once.



Such a suggestive sense of ambiguity is structural and central to the dynamics of lyric IV. In it the Fields open an experimental poetic space of multiple dualisms. Form and content are at odds. Kant and Hegel are brought to account for different experiences of formal fantasy and content-based reality. The Apollonian imposes a fictional or illusive order, symmetry, and unity upon the formless, dismembered, and Dionysian facts that Sappho confronts. Her tragic agon is poised between a conditional dream of radical erotic possession and an all too actual state of despair. However, lyric IV compresses all these dualities into a single, synthetic, and densely meaningful poetic space where Sappho's existential tragedy is genuinely displayed with all its inherent contradictions.

In like manner, lyric IV can be viewed as a topographical poem in which each spatial element plays a significant tropological part: each space is a suggestive and dramatic trope. Nature becomes personified as Sappho's pathetic ally in her attempt to seize hold of Phaon. The shore is represented initially as a tense space

of momentary mediation and limited hope, and then as a battleground of voracious yet impossible desire. The sea turns into Sappho's nemesis and Phaon's dominion of freedom, errancy, and safety. The mainland, in contrast, can be pictured as Sappho's tragic stage of lovelessness.

In limning such a dynamic topography, the Fields depict both nature and their Greek heroine not in keeping with orthodox gender codes, but in a radical and transgressive way that renders the old feminine/masculine binary utterly invalid. While the new Phaon is now tacitly described as an objectified, elusive, and coy pseudo-subject, the new Sappho becomes a sublime, dominant, and relatively violent consciousness laden with sheer Hegelian desire. As I aim to show in my upcoming research projects, this composite treatment of gender, nature, space, and desire is not merely an original aspect of *Long Ago*, but a pervasive leitmotif in the vast Michaelian corpus of poetry and drama.

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