

# Michael Field's *Long Ago* (1889): A Transcendental Mythopoesis of Desire and Death

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Received: 30/11/2017. Accepted: 13/09/2018.

How to cite this article: Cantillo Lucuara, Mayron Estefan. "Michael Field's *Long Ago* (1889): A Transcendental Mythopoesis of Desire and Death." *ES Review. Spanish Journal of English Studies*, vol. 39, 2018, pp. 69–96.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.24197/ersjes.39.2018.69-96>

**Abstract:** In this article, I propose a new reading of Michael Field's *Long Ago* (1889) focused on explaining how this volume of verse appropriates the figure of Sappho, rewrites her failed romance with Phaon, and amplifies her archetypal image of tragic lover through a mythopoetic narrative that refashions different classical myths of desire, despair and death. I present all these myths jointly, discuss their assonances with the Sapphic archetype, and reveal how they constitute a coherent and elaborate mythography that portrays Sappho as a tragic heroine who, through the power of myth, embodies a universal paradigm of human affectivity.

**Keywords:** Michael Field; *Long Ago*; Sappho; desire; death.

**Summary:** Introduction. Sappho, Procne, Philomela. Aphrodite as Sappho's tragic double. Sappho's dilemma and mortal awareness. Aphrodite revisited: A frail hope. The wind of death and the Moirai. Conclusions.

**Resumen:** En este artículo, propongo una nueva lectura de la obra de Michael Field titulada *Long Ago* (1889) con el fin de elucidar el modo en que este poemario se apropia de la figura de Safo, reescribe su romance fallido con Faón y amplifica su imagen arquetípica de amante trágica mediante una narrativa mitopoética que reformula diversos mitos clásicos relacionados con el deseo, la desesperanza y la muerte. Examinaré todos estos mitos de forma conjunta, analizaré sus afinidades con el arquetipo sáfico y desvelaré cómo todos conforman una mitografía compleja y cohesionada que presenta a Safo como una heroína trágica que, mediante el poder del mito, personifica un paradigma universal de los afectos humanos.

**Palabras clave:** Michael Field; *Long Ago*; Safo; deseo; muerte.

**Sumario:** Introducción. Safo, Procne, Filomela. Afrodita como doble trágico de Safo. El dilema y la conciencia mortal de Safo. El retorno de Afrodita: una frágil esperanza. El viento de la muerte y las Moiras. Conclusiones.

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## INTRODUCTION

In 1889, Katharine Bradley and her niece Emma Cooper published their first volume of poetry under the pseudonym of Michael Field. Titled *Long Ago* and based on Dr. Henry Wharton's *Sappho. Memoir, Text, Selected Renderings, and a Literal Translation* (1885), the volume aimed to appropriate Sappho's fragments, restore their textual brokenness, and rework their silences into a large collection of nearly seventy lyrics. The final product was a significant success among critics and prominent men of letters such as George Meredith or Robert Browning. For one reviewer in particular, *Long Ago* deserved to "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 360–61).

Contemporary critics such as Christine White ("Poets and Lovers Evermore"; "The Tiresian Poet"), Angela Leighton (*Victorian Women Poets*), Yopie Prins (*Victorian Sappho*), Margaret Reynolds (*The Sappho History*), Marion Thain ('*Michael Field*' Poetry), Ed Madden (*Tiresian Poetics*), Stefano Evangelista (*British Aestheticism and the Ancient Greece*) or Tracy D. O'lverson ("Libidinous Laureates and Lyrical Maenads") have mostly read *Long Ago* as an instance of queer Hellenism, lesbian writing or polymorphous sexuality with little—if any—emphasis on other major issues explored by the Fields in their first poetic volume. Francis O'Gorman is among the very few critics who have interpreted *Long Ago* not so much in terms of its sexual politics, but with special attention to its narrative of death, survival and the question of artistic immortality that chooses Sappho as "an embodiment of the artist's capacity to survive through time luminously, beyond the grave" (650). In the present article, following this interpretive shift, I propose to single out and construe a significant part of that prevalent narrative as a model of mythopoesis that reinvents the legendary figure of Sappho, revives her lost words and represents her life as an existential myth of romantic desire and despair. I particularly seek to gather and discuss the lyrics in which Michael Field turns to different classical myths in order to rewrite the Ovidian archetype of Sappho as the radical lover who suffered greatly and died for the unrequited love of a beautiful ferryman

named Phaon.<sup>1</sup> As Page duBois comments in her excellent study, this romantic representation of Sappho is “the one bequeathed to posterity, for many centuries the definitive, forlorn, love-struck and suicidal poet who has given up the love of women for an unrequited passion for a young man” (108).<sup>2</sup>

In what follows, I contend that Bradley and Cooper devote a major part of their first poetic volume to weaving a rich mythological narrative that reworks the romantic archetype ascribed to Sappho in direct dialogue with other Graeco-Roman intertexts. What emerges from this reworking is a new Sappho characterised as a tragic heroine that allows the reader to empathise on the basis, as O’Gorman claims, of “a universal sense of human emotions” embodied by Sappho herself (650). As I aim to prove, it is through her figure and her mythical analogues that *Long Ago* shapes its own mythology of pain and pleasure while tacitly defining the very concept of myth as some form of universal affective truth and as a source of intellectual legitimation for the Fields.

## 1. SAPPHO, PROCNE, PHILOMELA

At the outset of *Long Ago*, poem X is the very first to explore the mythopoetic connections between Sappho’s existential drama and other classical figures. In this case, it is the tragic figure of Procne that lends her story of violence, infanticide and metamorphosis to be identified in a subtle and suggestive manner with Sappho. According to the traditional account of the myth, the queen, Procne, was painfully betrayed and outraged by her husband Tereus when discovering that he had raped her sister Philomela and had cut her tongue to keep his crime a secret. In retaliation, Procne murdered her own son Itys, cooked his body and gave it as food to his father. When Tereus finished his meal, Procne and her sister Philomela brought him the head of his son and gave him to understand he had just eaten his own heir. Tereus burst with fury,

<sup>1</sup> In his *Epistulae Herodiam*, Roman poet Ovid devotes the fifteenth letter to a deeply miserable Sappho who writes to her beloved Phaon to reproach his cruel behaviour and even share her suicidal inclinations. It is this romantic and tragic version that has always been a “canonic fiction” in the reception of the Sappho myth (DeJean 60).

<sup>2</sup> In the case of English poetry, the best known appropriation of such a particular version of the Sapphic archetype is perhaps Romantic writer Mary Robinson’s *Sappho and Phaon: In a Series of Legitimate Sonnets* (1796), sourced from Ovid’s epistle and particularly focused on Sappho’s vivid eroticism.

grabbed an axe and chased down the two sisters. While escaping, they called upon the gods to save them from Tereus and transform them into birds. Procne turned into a swallow and Philomela into a nightingale. In Michael Field's *Long Ago*, the encounter between Sappho and Procne-as-swallow begins with an anthropomorphic apostrophe and a problematic question:

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

The opening inquiry is not rhetorical: it seems to serve to mediate between the Sapphic subject and the invoked queen. Procne, however, does not respond in words. It is her movements that articulate the answer: "Thus flitting out and flitting in, / Thou show'st the restlessness of one love-slighted" (ll. 2–3). The miserable bird grows desperate, nervous and repetitious in her flight for a reason that Sappho understands "too well" (l. 5), as the poem claims: Procne is heartily wounded, slighted and devastated. Her husband betrayed and wronged her in the most painful manner—by raping her own sister. As a victim of love, Sappho can all too directly identify with the restless swallow.

However, the lyric voice discerns a significant ambivalence in Procne's tragedy. Sappho considers the Thracian queen fortunate in that she "dids't win / Thy Tereus" (ll. 4–5). Procne did conquer her beloved, married him, and even bore him a child. Sappho cannot help but take notice of a major difference in intensity between her own sorrows and those of the restless bird. Yet, despite this contrast, Sappho makes sure to add a capitalised "Though" (l. 5) to reaffirm and revert to the empathic analogy with Procne: "Though he loved too well / Dumb Philomel" (ll. 5–6). What Tereus perpetrated against Procne's sister seems to be sufficient reason for Sappho to reconsider the queen's tragedy and

empathise with her restlessness. As a result of this rhetorical motion from differentiation to reconnection, Procne falls within a paradoxical portrayal of herself as fortunate and unfortunate at once, as loved and unloved, luckier than Sappho, yet equally slighted and distressed.

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

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

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

SPRING's messenger we hail,  
The sweet-voiced nightingale;  
She sings where ivy weaves

Blue berries with dark leaves.

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

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

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

In this opening section, the portrayal of nature allows no room for death, destruction or sorrow: it is perhaps a natural environment that offers Sappho some solace, distraction, and escapism from her lifeless and loveless reality. The atmosphere she describes in this scene is a unanimous congress of union, freshness, delicacy, melody, and jest.<sup>3</sup> The ivy weaves garlands of blueberries and creates symbols of affective fusion. The lilies and narcissi embellish the scene and embody the powers of rebirth and perennial joy. The nightingale only sings with transparent sweetness. The bees, unlike their desperate and ravenous sisters depicted in poem III, follow their own routine in all tranquillity. The dew spreads pure delicacy over the glades. The wind, whose laughter poked fun at Sappho's misery only a poem ago, favours the activity of the fishers. Once characterised as agents of violence, the shepherds now play music, uplift their villagers, and participate in a Bacchic encounter of communal merriment. All in all, the topography that frames lyric XII constitutes a sprouting, thriving and celebration of life in all its natural aestheticism.

Ranging from the fifth stanza to the last, the second section does not interrupt the first abruptly, nor does it develop a contrary scenario. Both

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<sup>3</sup> This topography shares in the discourse of utopianism that Victorian Hellenists developed when evoking Sappho's ancient Lesbos. For John A. Symonds, a contemporary of Michael Field and a distinguished classical scholar, the island of Lesbos was home to a plethora of cultivated ladies who enjoyed all "the luxuries and elegances of life which that climate and the rich valleys of Lesbos could afford" (128).

segments form a continuum and a spatial unity that simply evolves into an affective encounter between Sappho and the nightingale with the necessary manifestation, however, of the pain they share. In the opening stanza of the first part, the spring bird appears timidly and starts to sing with her sweet voice while the surrounding nature orchestrates the idyllic atmosphere described above. Yet, the content of her song is only revealed in the second part of the poem, which reads as follows:

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

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

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

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

In the first line of this part, the violent adjectives and the iterative allusion to the tragic myth of Procne's sister suggest an important turnover towards the narrative of hopelessness and death that prevails in Michael Field's Sapphic rewriting. The nightingale, associated with the raped and mutilated Philomela, no longer partakes of the Dionysian celebration that was unfolding in the first part of the poem. Rather, she appears as the herald not of the arrival of spring, but of "Passion's supremest pain" (l. 19) and "love's defeat" (l. 24). Her news is neither jubilant nor mellifluous. Her throat is neither dumb nor sweet. The metamorphosis Philomela undergoes results in a certain form of paradox: it liberates her and restores her mutilated voice, and yet it condemns her to a prescriptive melancholy that Sappho laments through this rhetorical question: "must her herald sing / In kindly-bowered retreat / Only of love's defeat" (ll. 21–23). In becoming a nightingale, Philomela recovers

her faculty of speech, but the price for this recompense is the exclusive duty—the “must” in Sappho’s question—of composing songs of despair and misery.<sup>4</sup>

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

Standing against the backdrop of a booming and Dionysian life in Lesbos, where “all is glad” (l. 30) and “light and flowers return” (l. 26) with the beginning of spring, Sappho has to endure another kind of return: “infinite despair / Comes back” (ll. 28–29). It is suggested here that, before Philomel sings her sorrowful and “piercing” song, Sappho sidetracks herself from her own grief, immerses herself in the festive welcoming of spring, and manages to experience some escapism. However, once the nightingale initiates her threnody, Sappho is inevitably induced to remember and relive “Love’s anguish, care and care” (l. 27). For her, the overall bliss that opens the poem now comes to an end with her grief resettling again. Sappho exasperates, grows mad and pronounces a final order addressed to the sad bird: “swell the throb, the wail, / The want, O nightingale” (ll. 31–32). The swelling that Sappho demands can either mean a conclusive culmination of the threnody that is fusing her own passion with the bird’s grief or an

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<sup>4</sup> As Ferber comments in his monumental dictionary of literary symbolism, the nightingale has since antiquity been given “an almost formulaic meaning as the bird of spring, of night, and of mourning” (136). Sappho bemoans this vast tradition of literary prescriptivism that forces the nightingale to sing songs of sorrow only.

intensification that ends up consuming her with utter hopelessness and even contaminating the entire bucolic scene in Lesbos with “anguish, cark and care” (l. 27). In either case, what poem XII shows plainly is a Sappho writing herself into a fluctuant topography in which she wavers between an idyllic shelter of escapism and an “infinite despair” (l. 28) at the mercy of Philomela’s song—sweet and sanguine initially, but then piercing and disheartening.

## 2. APHRODITE AS SAPPHO’S TRAGIC DOUBLE

In poem XXV, Sappho continues exploring the filiations of her pain with classical myth and, particularly, with a special version of the Aphrodite myth. Here the goddess of love and beauty appears in her most vulnerable and precarious state, completely divested of her power, profoundly smitten with a mortal hunter named Adonis and dramatically humanised.<sup>5</sup> In the first stanza, after evoking a bucolic beauty that is to fade away in the imminent future, the lyric poem presents Aphrodite facing the death of her cherished Adonis, who never grew to love her:

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

<sup>5</sup> The most popular and fertile version of this myth is Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* X (503–60, 708–39), where Adonis plays the role of a reckless hunter who dies in the clutches of a wild boar and causes Venus ineffable grief. The goddess “sprinkled nectar over his blood, from which sprouted the flower anemone” (Segal 8).

The demise of Adonis marks the end of the spring-summer cycle and the beginning of the cold seasons.<sup>6</sup> All forms of life and fertility await their ineluctable decay, the loss of their golden splendour, the extinction of their fragrance, and the final arrival of a death-like darkness:

Ah for Adonis! Show,  
 Ye virgins, what ye know!  
 The white narcissi breathe  
 Between the grass, and sheathe  
 Their fragrance as they die;  
 From the low bushes nigh,  
 Mimosa's golden dust  
 A little later must  
 Be squandered on decay:  
 And can the fair youth stay,  
 When every lovely bloom  
 Goes to obscuring doom? (ll. 13–24)

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

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

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<sup>6</sup> Associating Adonis with the cycles of nature, Michael Field interprets the myth of the beautiful hunter, in line with other mythologists such as James George Frazer, as “a key example of the myth and ritual of the dying-and-rising god of vegetation” (Segal 67).

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

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

Ah for Adonis! Throw  
 All flowers that quickly grow  
 And perish on his bed!  
 He will come back, though dead,  
 When spring returns, and fill  
 Cythera's arms until  
 He must again depart,  
 Again her bosom smart.  
 O virgins, joy is sent,  
 And soon with sorrow blent;  
 All we have loved is made  
 To re-appear, and fade. (ll. 37–48)

### 3. SAPPHO'S DILEMMA AND MORTAL AWARENESS

While Aphrodite desperately awaits the certain return of her beloved, Sappho only bemoans the sheer uncertainty, futility and fallibility of her desire. In the first octet of lyric XIX, she portrays herself lying passively, wondering why her erotic life has been a complete failure, and trying to pin the blame on some adverse deity:

WHEN longing on my couch I lay,

The moon shone clear above the bay,  
 And whether Heaven's queen,  
 With her dread power,  
 Did come me and my love between,  
 Whether in Dian's holy air he chilled,  
 I know not: the sweet hour  
 Is unfulfilled. (ll. 1–8)

It might be that the ever-jealous Hera interfered between Sappho and Phaon to prevent their union. Perhaps, aiming to retain the Lesbian poetess amongst her virgin maids, the chaste Artemis paralysed Phaon in her “holy air” (l. 6) and kept him at bay. The lyric subject only speculates here and recognises her utter ignorance regarding her frustrated desire. As remarked above, Sappho is merely aware of one truth: her erotic bliss remains “unfulfilled” (l. 8). Much to her chagrin, Sappho knows that she cannot enjoy the splendid night that surrounds her. The moon shines clearly and powerfully. The occasion lends itself readily to pleasure and fulfilment. As the lyric voice declares, the hour is propitiously “sweet” (l. 7). However, Sappho finds herself all alone bearing the intensity of her own desire. The temporal sweetness she perceives in the night suggests that her eroticism runs high. Her sexual “longing” (l. 1) is zealous, and yet her solitude imposes dissatisfaction. As a consequence, Sappho opens lyric XIX in a state of sexual suspension and impotence. Her lust clashes with the absence of every possibility of consummation. Sappho lies on her couch in an anxious position between erotic ripeness and objective hostility.

Although Sappho's desire is true and ardent, its exact orientation appears somewhat uncertain in the second octet of poem XIX. By turning to the myth of Sterope and her dear Oenomaus, the lyric voice muses how the Pleiade could abandon her sisters and marry her beloved.

Athwart the grove the Pleiades  
 Beamed clear—a lovely cluster these.  
 I mused how it befell  
 That Sterope  
 Loved her Oenomaus so well  
 She flitted from her shining sisters' side,  
 And in obscurity  
 Became his bride. (ll. 9–16)

Sappho's musing is central to the sexual politics of *Long Ago*: what seems to preoccupy her is the very choice between one sex or the other, between her own community of fellow maids and Phaon or, put blatantly, between heterosexuality and homosexuality.<sup>7</sup> Sappho wishes to know how Sterope solved such a choice, renouncing her allegiance to her sisters and privileging her male beloved. Unlike the mythic star, Sappho finds herself at a loss. Her desire is dual, ambiguous and amorphous.<sup>8</sup> To all appearances, she loves her maids and Phaon in equal measure and it is this ambisexuality that complicates the direction of her desire. Sappho inhabits a problematic erotic indeterminacy that renders the ideal of romantic fulfilment utterly improbable. Whatever choice she makes, Sappho will be blessed and shamed at once:

O blessed, secret, shamed one!  
 Now e'en the Pleiades are gone;  
     Now is it full midnight:  
     Thus should I be  
 Hid in the tomb from all men's sight!  
 O Hades, take this heart, these limbs that yearn,  
     Yea, I will give them thee,  
     Ash for thine urn! (ll. 17–24)

Regardless of her decision, Sappho will feel an inevitable affective dissonance: she will experience the blessing of having attained one of her romantic aspirations, and yet at the same time she will feel the shame of having abandoned and lost her other object of affection. In any case, with Phaon, the maidens or nobody, Sappho's desire is marked by a perpetual sense of lack, incompleteness, conflict and agony.<sup>9</sup> It seems that Sappho

<sup>7</sup> It must be pointed out that, throughout its pages, *Long Ago* presents a consistent and well-detailed narrative of Sappho as a lover and protector of maidens in a utopian ancient Lesbos where same-sex desire is legitimated, celebrated and experienced in the most Dionysian manner. For a close analysis of this narrative, see Primamore.

<sup>8</sup> In this regard, I concur with Marion Thain's claim that, by means of the Sappho myth reinvented in *Long Ago*, Bradley and Cooper exhibit and construct their "amorphous sexual identity" that challenges any form of sexological rigidity (45).

<sup>9</sup> Sappho's desire seems profoundly Lacanian: for the French psychoanalyst, desire is always related to the essential lack that constitutes the human subject. Desire is, in other words, what names the gap that emerges "entre un sujet et un objet que le sujet suppose inaccessible ou perdu" ("Desir"). Sappho inhabits this gap and lives her desire as an experience of loss and frustration.

is fully cognizant of this tragic determinism and thus starts to assume a verbally explicit attitude of defeatism: she invokes Hades and wishes to be embraced by death. In her lonely and barren topography, the stars disappear and the darkness of midnight becomes full. So penetrative is the surrounding darkness that Sappho thinks with a radical illative “Thus” (l. 20) that she should be entombed, hidden and deprived of all light. Moreover, in calling upon Hades to precipitate her death, she decomposes her body into a dramatic synecdoche that will be a gift for the infernal deity: “take this heart, these limbs that yearn / Yea, I will give them thee” (ll. 22–23). Sappho phenomenalises herself into a desirous body that she does not seem to own anymore. It is an aching body that she perceives externally as mere “Ash” (l. 24) for the urn of the god below. It is, in other words, a decadent and semi-Gothic body that embodies the death-in-life that Sappho has long been leading.

Notwithstanding her gradual decomposition, Sappho urges Love as a personified interlocutor to grant her a last chance to feel the fires of passion:

Bethink thee, love, time passes by,  
 A little while before we die  
     Is Aphrodite’s own.  
 And what were life  
 Without the mystery of her zone,  
 Her rosy altars, and her heavenly fires,  
     Warm, to assuage the strife  
     Of vain desires? (ll. 25–32)

Before the arrival of her definitive demise, Sappho sees the possibility of living “a little while” (l. 28) of Aphrodite’s gifts and blessings. The goddess receives a new treatment: where she is portrayed either as an alter ego or even a tyrannous divinity in other lyrics, here her presence becomes a necessary force in life. Sappho considers the deity’s power to be existentially fundamental and celebrates “the mystery of her zone, / Her rosy altars, and heavenly fires” (ll. 31–32). In this way, Aphrodite is venerated not just as a mysterious goddess, but also as an oxymoronic one: she represents the sacredness of what is most unsacred in Western thought—the body and its carnal desires. In her erotic mysteries, the flesh becomes divine, the matter no longer opposes the spirit, and the unity between both of them materialises. For Michael Field

as well as for the French philosopher Luce Irigaray, the goddess Aphrodite embodies the counter-Christian conciliation of the body and the spirit: she is “the spirit made flesh” (95). With the authority of the beautiful goddess, the fires of passion and lust, far from posing a threat to the sacred and metaphysical dimensions of life, become “heavenly” (l. 32).

In the above-quoted stanza, Sappho longs to feel the warm influence of the lustful deity, who may “assuage” (l. 31) her agony before she takes her last breath. In this sense, Aphrodite appears involved in a paradox: it is she who, as a matter of fact, bears the responsibility for Sappho’s vain desires, and yet it solely depends on the divinity to transmute the futility of such desires into an ultimate possibility of fulfilment. Put differently, Aphrodite has it in her hands to either condemn or save Sappho—to leave her desire unfulfilled for good or to satisfy her at least for “a little while” (l. 28). However, what is profoundly tragic in Sappho’s point about the deity’s potentially salvific intervention is that it is made in the frame of a rhetorical question in the fourth octet of poem XIX. The tacit answer to the question may well be that Sappho will never know the warmth and fires of her passion. Not surprisingly, the last stanza of the lyric points towards an adverse scenario:

The moon is gone, yet he delays,  
The stars are set, but Sappho stays;  
    And can it be that death,  
        Jealous, hath sped  
To suck from me my Phaon’s balmy breath?  
I stifle in my heart the funeral moan:  
    I do not weep the dead;  
    I lie alone. (ll. 33–40)

In the course of the poem, time has flown by. The moon has come and gone away. The stars have appeared and disappeared. Everything has changed and advanced, but Sappho stays and her beloved delays. While the surrounding world follows its flux, Sappho and Phaon remain at a remove from one another. His existence is predicated upon deferral and absence. His delay, far from temporary, is a permanent condition, and his arrival amounts to nothing but a fantasy and a vain desire. Nevertheless, Sappho perseveres and performs her own *Penelopiad*. Her perseverance becomes a permanent state of indeterminacy. Her patience is a form of

affective betweenness that presupposes hope and failure: her beloved may or may not arrive. The double articulation of this possibility maintains Sappho heroically active in her quest, dragging a life that carries her imminent death intrinsically along with it. Death is all the more present in the final lines of poem XIX: in its personified form, it threatens to leave Sappho without her beloved's breath and to suffocate her own breath. Her song now comes to resemble a "funeral moan" (l. 38), but it is not the dead that she remembers and weeps. Instead, it is presumably her own ongoing death that she deplors. Hers is, indeed, a ghostly life that seems to belong more to the dead than to the living. The last line—"I lie alone" (l. 40)—lends itself to a rhymed interpretative paraphrase: I die alone.

#### 4. APHRODITE REVISITED: A FRAIL HOPE

Later on, in lyric XXIV, Aphrodite reappears as a prominent mythic figure in *Long Ago*, but this time she acts neither as a tragic double for Sappho nor as an innocent saviour. Instead, the lyric voice addresses her in a direct apostrophe to accuse her of bearing the blame for Sappho's solitary, precarious and pitiful condition. In the first stanza, Sappho pours out her anger at the fact that, despite the pious attentions she has lavished on the love goddess, all she has received in retribution is the deity's antagonism against her desire to possess Phaon:

WHY should I praise thee, blissful Aphrodite?  
 Wrong hast thou wrought  
 Thy Sappho, thy flower-weaving one, who brought  
 The fair, white goat, and poured the milky bowl,  
 Using thy mighty,  
 Malignant craft to baulk me of my goal;  
 Though all my days  
 And starless nights I crown thee with my lays:  
 Why should I praise,  
 Why should I praise thee, blissful Aphrodite? (ll. 1–10)

Repeating the same rhetorical question that challenges Aphrodite's power and moral conduct, Sappho accentuates her anger and goes on to portray the goddess as the very efficient cause behind her sentimental conflict and suffering. In the second stanza, the lyric voice insists that it

is the over-blissful deity that has denied her the bliss of being with her beloved:

Why should I praise thee, blissful Aphrodite?  
 Thou dost not guide,  
 Rather with conflict dire my mind divide;  
 For me the trembling boy grows honey-pale,  
 While for the mighty  
 Fervours of Phaon's breast, without avail,  
 My mad heart prays.  
 Win him, O Queen, who shunned to seek my gaze!  
 Then will I praise,  
 Then will I praise thee, blissful Aphrodite. (ll. 11–20)

The closing lines of this stanza offer a glimmer of hope and faith: should Aphrodite act as a mediator and help Sappho reach her beloved, the poetess will duly restore her devotion to the goddess with no further reservations. Nonetheless, the possibility of Aphrodite's mediation and assistance seems rather implausible in view of the fact that, as poem XV plainly states, the goddess pays no heed to any sentimental grievances or lamentations. Sappho is well aware that her elegiac rhetoric has no place and no effect whatsoever under Aphrodite's authority:

No angry voice is heard  
 In Aphrodite's train;  
 Rude speech, it is averred,  
 Meets there with high disdain.  
 Beside her golden throne  
 Reproaches have no place;  
 Complaint or amorous moan  
 Will scarcely win her grace.  
 But she for hours will hold  
 Persuasion at her feet,  
 Her handmaid bright as gold,  
 Than honey-bee more sweet;  
 And listen how her voice  
 As water flows along,  
 Making the ear rejoice,  
 So like it is to song,

So voluble, so sure  
     To win and subjugate;  
 Yet mortals, who endure  
     Love's torments, rail and hate,  
  
 Detract, and show their spleen,  
     Unmindful of the maid  
 Who, dear to Love's own Queen,  
     Their impotence can aid:  
  
 For, soon as on their tongue  
     Is laid her beauteous speech,  
 Their rage, their taunts are flung  
     Aside, and they beseech.  
  
 No maiden is so coy  
     Or heartless as to spurn  
 Tones that invite to joy,  
     That sway, encourage, yearn;  
  
 And Aphrodite smiles,  
     Beholding with what speed  
 Her servant's suasive wiles  
     On human lips succeed. (ll. 1–36)

Aphrodite forbids any “amorous moan” (l. 8) and imposes a tyranny of alleged hedonism with the aid of her companion Peitho, the divine personification of persuasion. In this regard, a tenuous form of paradox defines the deity's deportment: her power is exercised with apparent grace, delicacy and joy, but *au fond* it amounts to a disguised despotic regime of subjugation in which no dissidence can emerge. The normative order only prescribes an inflexible ethics of delicacy, refinement and content. Despite its very nature, delicacy is imposed as the only valid code of morality: paradoxically, it becomes a strict divine decree.

The goddess of beauty, love and delicacy exhibits an inexorable and relentless temper. Her grace is completely immune to human suffering and despair. Founded on the norm of delicacy, her tyranny knows no sympathy: she instrumentalises sweetness to repress any expression of pain and maintain her hegemony intact. In the execution of her power, Aphrodite counts on the goddess of Persuasion as a mediator between her and mortals. Peitho does not undermine the authority of the Cyprian deity in the slightest: she merely acts as a handmaid. Her divine gift is a sweet

and golden voice that “[a]s water flows along” (l. 14). The liquidity of her speech goes against any form of explicit violence and translates into a fluid or mellifluous song. Indeed, it is literally mellifluous, for it flows like music: “So like it is to song” (l. 16). In this sense, Peitho’s verbal art blurs the very distinction between speech and song. Speaking is transformed into an artistic act. Music, by extension, becomes an effective rhetorical instrument of persuasion. In speaking-singing, Peitho manages to “win and subjugate” (l. 18) her listeners under Aphrodite’s hegemony. In the fifth quatrain of poem XV, the verb “subjugate” speaks for itself: sweetness, delicacy and melody serve to sustain a sacred tyranny that subdues all mortal lovers.

Nevertheless, forces and voices of resistance do exist and demonstrate: mortals “rail and hate” (l. 20) such a tyranny, displaying their spleen, wrath and impotence against the goddess that is both “Love’s own Queen” (l. 23) and the causal agent behind their sentimental misery. However, their acts of sedition pose no threat to the deity’s sovereignty: through Peitho’s mediation and power, Aphrodite tames the furious crowd, appeases their rage, and restores her order of normative decorum. The effect of subjugation is decidedly powerful and successful: the lover-stricken protesters go in no time from railing and hating to beseeching, surrendering and accepting Aphrodite’s regime.

In the eighth stanza, the rebellious crowd seems to be specifically identified with maids who, in spite of their grief and misfortune, cannot help but succumb to “Tones that invite to joy / That sway, encourage, yearn” (ll. 30–31). Thus, the maidens capitulate: their torments and lamentations are placated by a powerful sacred music that, while instilling peace and bliss, sways. The senses of this verb are suggestive and ambiguous here: in its possible definitions, it combines the delicacy of a rocking movement with the more violent and authoritarian connotations of such synonyms as influence, persuasion and control. Doubtless, it is this peculiar verb that defines Aphrodite’s pragmatics of power: she holds sway over all victims of love within a regime of supposedly delicate control.

Likewise, the central words “persuasion” and “suasive” featuring in the discourse of subjugation have a particular etymological substratum: they derive ultimately from the Latin verb *suadere*, which means “to urge, incite or persuade,” and share their lexical root with the adjective *suavis*—sweet or soft (*OED*). The resultant notion of suasion is thus a subtle oxymoron: verbal power and subjugation become practices of

delicacy and sweetness that guarantee Aphrodite's hegemonic triumphalism. In the closing stanza, the goddess smiles and contemplates despotically how her mortal victims cave in, extinguish their anger, and accept her graceful absolutism.

As I have formerly indicated, Sappho is fully aware that, however much she worships and praises Aphrodite, her lamentations will only meet with repression and disdain. With the aid of Peitho, the goddess will exert her paradoxical form of power, which is coercive and delicate at once, repressive and subtle, and utterly delusive. Afflicted and mournful, Sappho will be hushed and forced into the deity's totalitarian hedonism, but her pain will nonetheless remain latent and uncured. In this manner, her emotional state will be ambivalent and unstable: she will sing and embrace Aphrodite's creed of joy, yet *au fond* her heart will continue protesting, suffering and dying.

Towards the end of *Long Ago*, Sappho reconsiders her portrayal of Aphrodite in a new light. In poem LI, the lyric voice recalls a past time when she would look at herself in the mirror and discover how the goddess of beauty had endowed her with ideal attributes. However, in the present time, Sappho refuses to see her reflection in the mirror, disapproves of her own appearance, and breaks the "converse" (2) she used to hold with Aphrodite. It seems that she finds no beauty left in herself and hence nobody to seduce:

DEEP in my mirror's glossy plate  
 Sweet converse oft I had  
 With beauty's self, then turned, elate,  
 To make my lovers glad;  
 But now across the quivering glass  
 My lineaments shall never pass:  
 Let Aphrodite take the thing  
 My shadow is dishonouring. (ll. 1–8)

Despite her deteriorated appearance, Sappho retains some hope that she might still be able to attract Phaon just as Aphrodite once did under the disguise of an old lady. According to some minor myth, Phaon ferried the goddess without recognising her divinity and demanded no money. In reward, Aphrodite endowed him with "youth and extraordinary beauty," as well as a powerful ointment "to make all women fall in love with him"

(Wharton 16). In poem LI, Michael Field's Sappho rewrites this story as follows:

Ah, fond and foolish, thou hast set  
 Aside the burnished gold,  
 But Phaon's eyes reflect thee yet  
 A woman somewhat old!  
 He watched thee come across the street  
 To-day in the clear summer heat;  
 And must he not perforce recall  
 How the sun limned thee on the wall?

I sigh—no sigh her bosom smote  
 Who waited 'mid the crowd  
 Impatient for his ferry-boat,  
 An aged woman bowed  
 And desolate, till Phaon saw,  
 Turned swiftly, and with tender awe  
 Rowed her across, his strength subdued  
 To service of decrepitude.

Beneath a beggar's sorry guise,  
 O laughter-loving Queen,  
 Thy servant still must recognise  
 A goddess—pace and mien.  
 He loved thee in thy fading hair,  
 He felt thee great in thy despair,  
 Thy wide, blue, clouded eyes to him  
 Were beautiful, though stained and dim. (ll. 9–32)

In Sappho's reworking of the myth, Aphrodite goes undercover as an old woman and catches Phaon's attention in the street. The fisherman finds the goddess in distress, all alone, and desperately waiting to be ferried across the sea. Phaon attends to her disinterestedly and takes her to her destination. In *Long Ago*, however, Sappho makes sure to add that her coy beloved does recognise the goddess on their short journey: Phaon discerns her genuine identity, feels her greatness and even falls for her in spite of her deceitful decrepitude. Noticing that her beloved can see beyond appearances and even develop romantic feelings, Sappho wishes to be as fortunate as Aphrodite and attract Phaon despite her enfeebled beauty:

Daughter of Cyprus, take the disk  
 That pride and folly feeds;  
 Like thee the glorious chance I risk,  
 And in time's tattered weeds,  
 Bearing of many a care the trace,  
 Trusting the poet's nameless grace,  
 Stand unabashed, serene, and dumb,  
 For Love to worship, if he come. (ll. 17–24)

Sappho longs impatiently for the “glorious chance” (l. 19) that Aphrodite once had when Phaon assisted and treated her with affection. The rationale behind Sappho's wish for such a chance is clear: she seems to wonder why she cannot attract the beautiful boatman *with* or *despite* all her afflictions and physical frailties when the goddess had no difficulty arousing sympathy and eroticism in him despite her decrepit appearance. If Sappho and Aphrodite share a vulnerability that could be romantically auspicious, this should entitle the poetess to enjoy her “glorious chance” (l. 19) with Phaon—or so she thinks and hopes. In poem LI, the closing lines point to a scenario of promise and hope against the backdrop of Sappho's fatal despair: completely self-exposed and mute, she simply waits for the unlikely opportunity to be loved in return by Phaon.

## 5. THE WIND OF DEATH AND THE MOIRAI

Assuming that her romantic cause is practically lost and facing her utter loneliness, Sappho elaborates on the consolidated narrative of her death-in-life and invokes the fierce god of the North Wind, Boreas, to resolve her tragedy by acting as an agent of destruction and death:

BOREAS, leave thy Thracian cave,  
 Cross the grey, up-tossing wave;  
 With thy lips, rough-bearded, swell  
 All the voices of thy shell.  
 Chase the wheat-producing mist,  
 That the teeming furrows kissed;  
 With thy morning breath drive forth  
 Every dense cloud of the north;  
 Let thy chilly blasts prevail,  
 Make the shivering olive pale,

Hold the sailor in the bay,  
 Sweep distress and care away!  
 Let thy winds, wide-wandering, bleak,  
 Dry the tears on Sappho's cheek!  
 Buffeting with gusts, constrain  
 Woes of love to quit my brain:  
 Bind them on thy pinions strong,  
 Bear them on thy course along.  
 Come, stern god, and set me free;  
 Rival Eros' tyranny!  
 Then, exultant, I will praise,  
 Now at banquets, now in lays,  
 Thee, fierce Thracian, gentle grown,  
 And thy mighty godhead own. (ll. 1–34)

Boreas is represented here in his commonest role: he inhabits the region of Thracia, governs the course of the most violent winds, wears a rough beard and a conch shell, and possesses the power to chill all that comes his way. Aware of his divine faculties and ethereal presence, Sappho addresses him in a short lyric that implies some level of self-consciousness that she is making direct contact with the deity. A long sequence of imperative forms marks the rhythm of the poem, shows the despair of the lyric voice, and transforms Boreas into an immediate listener. Sappho expresses herself with imperative urgency, letting go of her desperate words in the air and hoping to be heard by the god of the North Wind.

The lyric voice urges Boreas to leave his homeland, cross the sea and reach her. Sappho implores the god to unleash all his power, impose its “chilly blasts” (l. 9), interrupt the fertile cycle of nature, sink everything in the “dense cloud of the north” (l. 8), turn the olive trees pale, and keep the sailors from putting out to sea. Likewise, in her own reality, Sappho asks Boreas to extinguish all emotions, eradicate all suffering, dry out all tears, and ventilate the sorrows of love out of her life. In a desperate tone, Sappho implores the god to “set me free” (l. 29). The freedom she covets, however, is far from active, vital and optimistic: it equates essentially to a form of paralysis, emotional sterility and death. Sappho longs for a subjective and objective reality neutralised, desensitised and reduced to virtual nullity. In short, she longs for self-extinction.

In her dystopian vision, Sappho envisages a confrontation between Boreas and Eros and expects the defeat of love, the triumph of a

hegemonic frigidity, and the establishment of a lifeless peace. Sappho promises that, if the cold god makes this dystopia possible, she will celebrate his power and victory with banquets and songs. What is significantly striking and tragic about such a promise is that Sappho's celebration will not rest on affirmative grounds of hedonism: it will be a Decadent celebration of infertility, generalised apathy and affective numbness. In this manner, Sappho has gone very far in her autobiographical mythopoesis of death: she now seems to have grown to embrace the paradoxical phenomenon of death-in-life as her ideal of subjectivity and objectivity—as the most efficient antidote against a loveless and hence meaningless life.

Sappho's mythological narrative of despair and death reaches its culminating point in lyric XL with the direct evocation of the Moirai, who are responsible for controlling the life and destiny of every mortal from birth to death with sheer impartiality and severity. Sappho depicts them in very precise terms:

SISTERS doom-weaving, dread,  
Ye Moirai incorruptibly austere  
From cradle to the bier,  
By whom the goings of our life are led. (ll. 1–4)

At this point of her tragic consciousness, Sappho knows that her own life is approaching its very final destination. Her attitude, however, has now evolved from acute despair into a serene sense of stoicism. Assuming that she cannot find a solution to her emotional crisis and existential perplexity, Sappho not only confronts the imminent arrival of her death with serenity and silence, but she even confesses that she herself would cut the thread of her own life with a decision, paradoxically rational yet self-destructive, guided by her own brain:

I strive not, nor complain,  
And what ye will accomplish with no sigh.  
For surely I should die  
If my own guidance issued from my brain.

I know not what to do,  
Divided is my mind 'twixt love and hate;  
Perplexity so great  
Can reach no end, and finds not its own clue. (ll. 5–12)

Sappho only wishes to die. Her breast, once the centre of attraction and affection for all her Lesbian maidens, now harbours nothing but permanent sorrow, and her mind finds no way of peace. For this reason, Sappho calls upon the Fates to sing her death and allow her to rest once and for all. As lyric XL comes to a close, it seems that Sappho listens to her own funeral song, dispels all her fears and doubts, and discovers that her demise is already decreed. In fact, one may suppose that she is dying while hearing the Moirai's song. Her "wild suspense" (l. 20) ceases. Her actual death is happening.

And thus from all delight  
My weary breast is severed day by day;  
I find not any way  
Of peace, until, O daughters of the night,  
  
I think how, as ye sing,  
All is decided: then my doubts grow still;  
Your undiverted will  
Concludes my wild suspense and wavering. (ll. 13–20)

## CONCLUSIONS

In *Long Ago*, Bradley and Cooper appropriate the figure of Sappho, rewrite her failed romance with Phaon and amplify her archetypal image of tragic lover through a mythopoetic narrative that refashions different classical myths of desire, despair and death. In this appropriation, Sappho articulates her romantic tragedy in a specular or analogic dialogue with Procne, Philomela, Sterope and Aphrodite only to confirm that her desire is fatally marked by a permanent sense of defeat and lack. It is true that, as I have discussed above, Sappho often waits, hopes, prays and wishes for a favourable denouement of her sentimental crisis, yet this optimism does not imply that she has lost sight of the crude fact that her desire will surely remain unfulfilled and her life will come to an end as soon as every erotic hope has vanished.

Sappho can only act to the extent of her mortal power. She calls upon Aphrodite to favour her romantic quest, but her invocation proves to be fruitless: Sappho knows deep down that the goddess, who is ultimately responsible for her misery, will silence her grievances and impose her unquestioned order of hedonism. Aware that Aphrodite will

never assist her in her vain efforts to reach the object of her desire, Sappho prefers to turn to the god of the North Wind and the Moirai for help. The kind of help she asks of them, however, is destructive and irreversible: in the face of her lovelessness, she only wishes to be paralysed, emotionally sterilised and annihilated. In her direct address to Boreas and the Moirai, Sappho has come to hold no hopes and see no transcendental meaning in her life. Her life seems to become its own negative polarity—as though she were more defined now by her non-being than her factual existence. In her mythography of failed desire, Sappho assumes that she must embrace her death as the only possible and even desirable outcome of her unfulfilled life.

As I have shown above, *Long Ago* is a mythopoetic text that reworks the figure of Sappho in direct dialogue with other Graeco-Roman motifs. What is most significant in this dialogue is that it rests upon a timeless notion of human affection that derives from the very semantic density of myths. The myths that Michael Field revisits in the poems analysed here form a consistent narrative of pain and desire that not only resonates with Sappho herself and her tragic romance, but also with the ancient and modern reader. It is in the nature of myths to evoke a sense of empathy or emotional recognition given their extraordinary competence as universal signifiers of human feelings. In this respect, I have readily agreed with O’Gorman that *Long Ago* somehow propounds a universalist theory of emotions, but what I have also added is that such a theory becomes possible thanks to a well-woven fabric of myths that inserts the figure of Sappho into a major ancient tradition of tragic texts that transcend history and cultures.

By appropriating and adapting different Graeco-Roman myths in *Long Ago*, the Michael Fields not only demonstrate their vast classical culture and their legitimacy as experimental Hellenists: they also make the most of those same myths by associating them with Sappho in dramatic ways and by exploiting their affective depth in ways that can appeal to any sensitive reader. In this sense, *Long Ago* works cogently as a mythopoetic narrative of transhistorical feelings of pain and pleasure.

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