

Michael Field's Paratextual Poetics: Portraying a Protomodernist Sappho

Mayron Estefan Cantillo Lucuara¹

Abstract. This article offers an innovative perspective on Katharine Bradley and Edith Cooper's *Long Ago* (1889), their Sapphic volume of verse published under the Michael Field pseudonym. Rather than propounding new interpretations of the lyrics in the collection, I focus on its paratextual apparatus –from the cover and the frontispiece to the endnotes or appendix– with the aim of unveiling a significant aspect that has been overlooked by most critics: the fact that, in its rich paratextuality, *Long Ago* presents an enigmatic conflation of word and image that seduces the reader, pre-establishes a clear interpretive framework, and activates an innovative dialogue with the past. This paratextual dialogue, I conclude, results in a protomodernist reworking of Sappho as a mystifying, unstable, and radically open (para)textual figure –one that is always ready to be made new.

Keywords: paratext; Michael Field; Long Ago; protomodernist; past

[es] La poética paratextual de Michael Field: Retratando a una Safo protomodernista

Resumen. Este artículo analiza desde una perspectiva innovadora el poemario sáfico *Long Ago* (1889), escrito por Katharine Bradley e Edith Cooper bajo el pseudónimo compartido de Michael Field. Más que proponer nuevas interpretaciones de sus piezas líricas, nos centraremos en su aparato paratextual (desde la portada y el frontispicio a las notas finales o el anexo) con el objetivo último de revelar un aspecto significativo soslayado por la crítica: en su compleja paratextualidad, *Long Ago* despliega una combinación enigmática de palabra e imagen que seduce al lector, prefigura un claro marco interpretativo y activa un diálogo novedoso con el pasado. Este diálogo paratextual, colegimos, culmina en una reelaboración protomodernista de la figura de Safo como una figura (para)textual críptica, inestable, radicalmente abierta y siempre presta para revestirse de novedad.

Palabras clave: paratexto; Michael Field; Long Ago; protomodernista; pasado.

Contents. 1. Introduction. 2. From Deixis to Simultaneous Reading. 3. *Gewesenheit* and the (Proto)Modernist Debate. 4. Protomodernist Blood and Air. 5. Conclusions

Cómo citar: Cantillo Lucuara, M. E. (2023). Michael Field's Paratextual Poetics: Portraying a Protomodernist Sappho, en *Complutense Journal of English Studies* 31, 1-12.

1. Introduction

In his study *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation* (1997 [1987]), Gérard Genette articulates a complete theory around the concept of paratext, which he coined in 1981. He is the first critic to explicitly appraise the significance of paratextuality not merely as “the external presentation of a book” (3), but also as a set of elements endowed with a communicative force that “can make known an intention, or an interpretation [...] or can convey a genuine decision” (10-11). Michele Moylan (1996) follows suit and claims that paratexts “function as parts of a semiotic system, parts of the total meaning of a text” (31). Indeed, paratexts, especially those of a literary artwork, are far from fortuitous or meaningless: they often result from a deliberate authorial will to frame, orient and even condition our perception and pre-construal of a given text.² Or at least this holds unmistakably true for how the Victorians dealt with books, in their material formats, as meaningful objects of beauty and sociality.

So extensive is the scholarly literature on the Victorian industry, style, technology, designers and usage of cloth casings, leather-bound books, pictorial frontispieces, relief covers or art nouveau bindings, that a general yet clear

¹ Departamento de Filología Inglesa y Alemana, Universitat de València
ORCID: 0000-0002-1298-8496
Email: mayron.cantillo@uv.es

² In the case of Michael Field and their *Long Ago*, published in 1889, Vadillo (2019) points out: “As plastic artists, they conceptualized their books as white statues, and from 1884 to 1890 all their books except one were bound in white leather” (88).

inference can readily be drawn: the paratextuality of books in itself carried great artistic or aesthetic significance for the nineteenth-century reader (Ball 1985; Haslam 2012; King 1996; Kooistra 1995; Leighton and SurrIDGE 2016; McLean 1974; Thomas 2004). Novels or verse collections were not just potential artworks in an immanent or content-based sense, but also on the very level of their materiality, their touch, their feel, their visual surface. For the Victorians, books mattered greatly, offered aesthetic pleasure as objects-in-themselves, and even operated often as experiential, social entities. As Leah Price (2012) points out, books entailed real “meetings between reader and author” (12), interpersonal bridges, borrowings, exchanges, familial interactions, and lasting friendships, as well as tensions “between reception and rejection” (13), forces of “empathetic intimacy or satirical distance” (13), or shared “visceral energies” (18). All in all, books were rarely impersonal, cold or static objects: rather, they amounted to powerful “social structures” in permanent mobility or circulation (Price 2012: 14).

Victorian poets and playwrights Katharine Bradley and her niece Edith Cooper, jointly known as Michael Field, took the materiality of their own books very seriously. As Thain and Vadillo (2012) explain, “their finely printed and carefully designed volumes of poetry and plays all belong to the “Book Beautiful” tradition. They were published in rare and limited editions and thus were created as, and are, art objects in themselves” (71). A paradigmatic case in point is their *Long Ago* (1889), a Sapphic collection of verse whose paratextuality deserves greater attention than it has received to date. The volume was published as an exclusive piece in only a hundred copies, many of which ended up in the hands of friends or mentors. Its readership, indeed, included prominent men of letters such as Robert Browning, Walter Pater, John Addington Symonds, or George Meredith. The reception of the volume, although very limited to a narrow elite circle, was so positive that one critic came to assert: “the present book will take a permanent place in our English literature, as one of the most exquisite lyrical productions of the latter half of the nineteenth century” (in Thain and Vadillo 2009: 360-61).

It is no wonder that *Long Ago* circulated among few hands. As an art object, it imposed hefty conditions upon its production, edition and distribution. The British Library houses an encased copy that bears the label “fragile” and thus intimates how the volume itself seems to demand a special, delicate treatment as though it were a genuine piece of art. Although unable to reflect the artistic fragility and beauty of the material book, the copy digitised by the Armstrong Browning Library, within the 19th Century Women Poets Collection, serves as a public, reliable version of the volume that allows any reader to at least grasp some sense of its elegant, solemn, and even noble design. Vadillo (2019) eloquently captures the material beauty of *Long Ago* by defining it as a “marble work” (68), a “sculptural object” (69) or an exquisite piece of “marmoreal skin” (95).

However, the material and paratextual elements of the collection transcend the beautiful and weave a rich fabric of enigmas, symbols, and intimations. As I seek to prove in this article, the paratextuality of *Long Ago*, very much overlooked thus far by most critics (Baker and Vadillo 2019; Evangelista 2009; Leighton 1992; Madden 2008; O’Gorman 2006; Olverson 2010; Prins 1991; Thain 2007; White 1996), displays a suggestive intention, frames a potential interpretation, and therefore has both Genette’s communicative force and Moylan’s semiotic value in keeping with the opening definitions posited above. I contend that, in its paratextual surface, *Long Ago* announces, or prepares the reader for, what might be considered a protomodernist portrayal of Sappho by purposefully representing her as a malleable figure of the past, as well as an incomplete, fragmented, and open subject – always ready to be made new.

2. From Deixis to Simultaneous Reading

In *Long Ago*, the mere paratextual elements foretell that what follows is a rich, complex, and ambitious volume of verse. On the book cover (see figure I at the end of this article), the title acts as a temporal deixis that opens up an instant mystery. The long *agoness* has no possible objective measure. Put simply, the title seems to point out to a distant past that cannot be determined, pondered or measured at first glance. The reader, Victorian or contemporary, can all too simply assume that the book promises to show some uncertain past. However, in this assumption lies a significant implication already: *Long Ago* deals –at least nominally– with time, temporality and even history itself. This implication per se does not resolve the titular ambiguity, but it does reveal how the very title serves as a classical beginning for a story. The phrase “long ago” can be read as closely synonymous with the formulaic *in illo tempore* or “once upon a time” that inaugurates traditional tales. In this manner, the title is essentially a form of *captatio* or invitation for the reader to enter a distant dimension of time, an old world or even an alternative past. With their titular deixis, the Michael Fields seem to grasp and direct our attention towards a remote and intriguing past. The deixis does its job as an effective gesture of invitation, yet the mystery remains as to the length or distance of such long agoness.

Below the title is the roundel of a strange woman that must have existed long ago. Her strangeness may be attributed to the poor quality of the portrait, which fails to delineate the female profile with precision. The lines are too uniform, straight, and so tentative that the piece seems unfinished. In fact, when the Fields (1933) showed Robert Browning the roundel, the ageing poet directly said: “If I were an artist, I should like to paint what the artist strove to express but could not” (24). It is perhaps the incapacity of the original painter that accounts for the woman’s strangeness. She looks unimportant or even undignified, and yet her face occupies the very centre of a white, solemn book cover. In itself the portrait leaves us disoriented and contributes inevitably to the mystery initially created by the uncertain temporality of the deictic title.

The mystery persists and grows right under the chin of the feminine portrait. There one discerns five Geek graphemes that read ‘Ψάπρω.’ These characters offer no hints to the general Greekless reader, but at least they do ascribe a locative

specification to the opening temporal deixis. In conjunction, the graphemes and the title place us in the ancient days of Greece, circumscribe the reach of the long agoness, and even justify the golden solemnity of the cover. *Long Ago* is an invitation not to some unknown or minor period of history, but to the noble antiquity of the Greeks, the cradle of Western culture and the golden age of Homeric verses. The transliteration of the graphemes gives us further temporal specificity with the name ‘Psapho.’ Now the deictic title seems to be a more precise reference to the archaic era when Lesbian poet Sappho lived –sometime between the seventh and sixth centuries B.C.

However, the Greek name starts with a pi that makes us wonder whether it refers to the celebrated lyrist of Lesbos or to some other ancient woman. The exact answer appears in a final paratextual note appended by the Fields in *Long Ago*: “THE archaic head of Sappho reproduced on the cover of this volume is taken from a nearly contemporary vase, inscribed with her name, which is now in Paris” (130). This endnote not only ratifies what should be viewed as an unmistakable link between the title, the Greek characters, the female profile, and the figure of Sappho: it also makes a significant claim for authenticity. The reproduction on the cover comes from a genuine original source that confirms the identity of Sappho or Psapho in ancient Greece. In a way, the Fields seem to suggest by means of the reliable portrait that their volume is an invitation to a genuine past authenticated by ancient ceramic pieces..

Moreover, the frontal Sapphic head involves something more significant. On it Vadillo (2019) remarks:

They [the Fields] were punctilious about the cover, taking advice from Alexander Stuart Murray, the keeper of Greek and Roman Antiquities at the British Museum. At the Private View of the Royal Academy in May 1889, Murray showed them two statues of Sappho, one difficult to identify and the other a beautiful nude figure of a girl with a lyre which he called an Egyptian Sappho. The latter was Edward Onslow Ford’s *The Singer*. After much deliberation and research, and helped by Murray, they decided to engrave an archaic head of Sappho found in a nearly contemporary vase (93).

The Fields opted for the Sapphic portrait reproduced on the cover with meticulous care and even in spite of Robert Browning’s negative comments on it. This intimates that, although deficient or incomplete, the engraving proved convincing to the poets and perhaps conformed to their authorial intention. It seems that the Fields recognised a highly fertile opportunity for creation or recreation in an incomplete, fragmentary, and nearly shapeless Sappho –one that strongly reminds us of the modernist conception of the Lesbian lyrist as “the muse in tatters” (Prins 1991: 4). In other words, one could say that, in their punctilious choice of the Sapphic face, Bradley and Cooper intend to impart the cogent idea that their project consists in redrawing Sappho, completing her roundel, (re)mending her tatters or fragments, and opening her to a renewed visual and textual life.

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

The second page of the book (see figure II) features another portrait of Sappho reproducing an illustration drawn by Giovanni Battista Cipriani in 1785, engraved by Francesco Bartolozzi, and published by John Murray in London in 1845 within a large volume of plates showing figures from Graeco-Roman history and mythology. This new portrait involves a confirmation of Sappho’s openness or mutability, as well as yet another temporal dislocation. Sappho now looks more complete and elaborate, more figurative and dignified, and yet this is not her only and definitive face, but just a provisional version, a potential refiguration, and an alternative picture. Sappho remains enigmatic, unseizable and radically open to new faces, new engravings, new reproductions, or new pages. On the other hand, the presence of Cipriani’s engraving dislocates us diachronically from a pre-classical face to a late eighteenth-century reinterpretation of the same face, which can be identified as the very face of lyric poetry given the ornamental addition of a lyre. In this manner, the past is not just crossed plastically from antiquity to modernity: it is made fully dynamic and congruent by means of disparate materials dating from all too different periods.

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

The oxymoronic present or presence of the past becomes graphically patent on the frontispiece of the volume that features a new figure of Sappho sitting at ease and reading an ancient parchment (see figure IV). This illustration is yet another copy of a vase-painting dated to c. 450 B.C. and held at the National Museum in Athens (see figure V).

Not only does this image resituate us in the distant past of the Lesbian poet: it also connects the past directly with our present by simply mirroring our position of readers. In her radical position of openness to the future, Sappho reproduces what both the Fields and their readers do. The reading of her own verses coincides with our own reading of her lyrics alongside those of the Fields. With Sappho we thus share the simultaneous temporality of reading. In the act of reading, both past and present converge within the same plane or dimension. Sappho reads what we are set to read. The past of her reading becomes synchronised with our present moment of reading.

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

3. *Gewesenheit* and the (Proto)Modernist Debate

Long Ago reconceptualises the past in a way that calls for the useful distinction posited by Heidegger in *Being and Time* (1927). In his view, the past can be understood in its classical sense as an ontic, fixed or frozen set of events –as “something historical” (432) whose relevance for the present is not necessarily known. For this traditional understanding Heidegger reserves the basic term *Vergangenheit* (432), which corresponds neatly to our general idea of the past. However, there is another mode of looking at the past that Heidegger names *Gewesenheit*, which “is never past” (376) and whose differential value resides in its repercussions for the present. It is a past beyond itself or a living past that transcends its own limits and comes into direct contact with the present time. This past concerns the present, makes itself ontologically important, and becomes an integral element of our dealings with the present world. Despite its ontic distance, *Gewesenheit* feels strangely present and unfolds in “ek-stasis” or “outside-of-itself” (376).

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

What appears to be far more striking and remarkable is that the manifest and permanent engagement with Sappho's *Gewesenheit* aligns *Long Ago*, probably as a major precedent, with a later literary movement that takes its relationship to the past very seriously. As many authors have pointed out, the Fields belong to an artistic generation broadly identified with aestheticism and with the particular idea that art should only observe its own laws and ideals of beauty without seeking any allegedly superior moral truth (Thain 2007 or Evangelista 2009, to name a few). However, while the link between the Fields and the aesthetes is as close as it is self-evident, their original works have also been read as special cases exemplifying the often neglected and even rejected connection between Victorianism and modernism. Indeed, in the current field of Victorian studies, the Fields are counted among those artists “who have been labelled as aesthetic” and “have altered the contours of the aesthetic map, forcing critics to radically re-examine the nature of aestheticism and its links with modernism” (Coste, Delyfer and Reynier 2016: 4). For Snodgrass, Hughes and other critics, it is Michael Field's collection of ekphrastic poetry, *Sight and Song* (1892), that particularly anticipates “modernist experiments with improvised metres, open-ended forms and unexpected rhymes” (Snodgrass 2007: 31), and at the same time it serves “as an echo-camber and fore-glimpse of Romantic and Victorian precursors or modernist poets” (Hughes 2010: 575). Also, according to Vadillo (2015), the pre-affiliations between the Fields and the modernists materialise clearly in some of their avant-garde plays –the so-called Roman Trilogy, in particular– that should be integrated “into two new trajectories of the stage that were emerging and would be at the centre of intense debates during the first two decades of the twentieth century: modernist verse drama and ballet” (217).

In her major monograph on the Fields, Thain (2007) devotes the conclusions precisely to the vexed Victorian/Modernist divide and makes a few points that are extremely relevant here. For Thain, the Fields must be included in the “continuous lineage” between aestheticist writers and modernism “that is so often lost in a criticism too fixed within period boundaries and the modernist myth of discontinuity” (205). The inclusion of the Fields in this intersection of literary generations rests at least on three solid reasons: the direct line of influence and resemblance between Bradley and Cooper's poetics and W. B. Yeats's modernism (208); the preoccupations in the “most clearly proto-modernist” *Wild Honey from Various Thyme* (1908) with the chasms between “poet and audience, high culture and mass culture, the personal and the impersonal” (208); and more importantly for my discussion, the combination in

Long Ago of both Victorian and modernist epistemologies of the past by configuring a complex temporal “dimension in which Sappho is historically contextualised, while also being able to conjoin with Bradley and Cooper in a space which is both present and past” (213). For these primary reasons, Thain rightly concludes that the Fields “anticipate concerns that became definitive of literary modernism” and shape an idiosyncratic poetics that “combines elements more usually thought of as either Victorian or modernist in a manner that produces a rather distinctive aesthetic” (209).

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

It is true, as Thain claims, that the Fields show a historicist view in their approach to Sappho by resorting to serious classical scholarship about her, aspiring to attain the optimistic ideal of restoring her fragments, and ultimately fulfilling “the Victorian sense of obligation to give the past a voice” (213). Nevertheless, this sense of obligation, although theoretically manifest in Michael Field’s reparative project in *Long Ago*, becomes textually deconstructed. Given the fragmentariness of her corpus of lyrics, Sappho is treated as an open and nearly immediate object of the past –a direct conversant, as it were. Her portraits make up the inaugural paratextuality of the volume, as though intimating that a face-to-face dialogue with the Lesbian lyrist is taking place immediately. Her ontic temporal agoness or *Vergangenheit* is neutralised by an ecstatic visuality and an organic textuality in which her archaic Greek dialect enters into direct co-presence with Bradley and Cooper’s responsive English. Consequently, as a proto-modernist text with the ambiguity of its titular agoness and the temporal dislocations of its paratextual images, *Long Ago* proves capable of articulating, as novelist George Meredith remarked in a letter, Sappho’s philosophy “in a manner to make it new, almost convincing, as if her blood were in your lines” (Field 1933: 67). Here it is inevitable to associate Michael Field’s volume with the modernist aesthetics that Ezra Pound (1935) would later advocate under his slogan “make it new” –an aesthetics that views the past as a fertile field of *inventio* for new works or that looks for “novelty [...] in modes of decadence or revival” (34).

4. Protomodernist Blood and Air

The newness Meredith acknowledges in *Long Ago* is the primary effect of its treatment of the past as *Gewesenheit*, which seems to involve a “historical sense,” as T. S. Eliot (1920) writes, “not only of the pastness of the past, but of its presence” –in other words, “a sense of the timeless and the temporal together” (44). The value of the past-turned-present is transparently asserted through an explicit form of juxtapositive intertextuality that brings timeless ruinous texts together with their potential message for modernity. In *Long Ago*, this renewed message results precisely from an ahead-of-time epistemology of the past. Although relatively faithful to a historicist will in its scholarly inception and its optimistic restorative intentions, the volume nevertheless seems to replace the Victorian fixation on history with a more protomodernist idiom of novelty, revival and pastness made present. Indeed, Michael Field’s volume is fundamentally an act of revival in many senses: it revives the past, Sappho, her fragments, her archaic Greek, her faces, or even her blood (in the form of the vivid red ink on the title page), as Meredith would put it. *Long Ago* makes possible the revival of a new Sappho in its very paratextual apparatus, in its material aesthetics, and in its ultimate will to communicate with a distant past, to work as its echo-chamber, and to revitalize its significance. This far-reaching dynamic of revitalisation is central to the ontology of writing underlying the volume, which appears to derive its own poetic life from the dead matter of old faces and words. Indeed, for the Fields themselves and for many critics, the *inventio* of *Long Ago* emanates from an organic, resurrective or promethean alchemy that reanimates dead words, overcomes their death, infuses them with a fresh breath of life, and transforms them into fully renewed poems.

In their first letter to Walter Pater, the Fields refer to their Sapphic work as a mode of evoking “the most exciting charm” of Renaissance, an aesthetic attempt to “live as in continuation of the beautiful life of Greece,” or even an investment “in the survival of human things” (Vadillo 2014: 38-39). In his reply, Pater confirms how the volume captures an ancient “Attic wisdom” and fulfils its purpose of “returning, by conscious effort, to distant worlds of thought or feeling” (39). This epistolary exchange has significant theoretical implications: to fully understand the concept of poetry behind *Long Ago* or its fundamental ontology, the book must be approached as an act of renaissance that implies, as Pater (1873) would put it, not only “the discovery of old and forgotten sources of [...] enjoyment, but the divination of fresh sources thereof –new experiences, new subjects of poetry, new forms of art” (12). In this sense, the renaissance of *Long Ago* operates in a double temporal direction: it looks back on Sappho’s textual past and projects it directly towards the possible future of a new Sappho, thereby endowing her old and nearly dead faces and red Greek graphemes with an abundant afterlife in innovative forms.

Similarly, in its contemporary critical reception, *Long Ago* has been approached within a critical narrative around life and death. Paraphrasing an early poem written by Edith Cooper in 1878, Evangelista (2009) holds that the volume represents a form of awakening of the past meant to reanimate “a world that has been made old and heavy by stale moral convention and intellectual stagnation” (93). For Ehnenn, the idea of renaissance or awakening amounts to the “new breath” (3) of life that the Fields infuse into Sappho’s moribund words. For her part, Thain (2007) would replace this respiratory metaphor with a plainer description of *Long Ago* as a narrative of “the immortalisation of Sappho” or even as a metaphysical project of overcoming her death through the forces of “desire and poetry” (64). Much more explicit with regard to the revitalizing aesthetic of Michael Field’s Sapphism is O’Gorman’s reading (2006). For him, *Long Ago* is essentially a “matter of galvanism,” a “calling back into the present of the lost forms of distant lives” (649), a textual paradigm of “the conundrum of the dead immortals” (653), or a literary proof of “the continued life of the dead” (657). My reading follows exactly this line of criticism, and so I reassert the validity of the protomodernist label to define the aesthetic project that the Fields undertake in their Sapphic lyrics. However, I would argue that there is a relevant point missing in most of such criticism: the logic of protomodernist revival operates not only on the textual or intertextual level of the lyrics themselves, but even on the paratextual level of the highly evocative cover and the frontispiece.

The visual paratexts chosen by the Fields serve to illustrate the implicit ontology not just of poetry but of art in general as revival. The profile on the cover is a reinvention of a much more elaborate vase-painting that, according to the source consulted by the Fields, presents “une seule figure, la célèbre Sappho, désignée par son nom et jouant de la lyre à sept cordes. Elle est vêtue d’un chiton talaire et d’un péplos” (De Witte 1886: 33, see figure VI). In *Long Ago*, the celebrated figure of Sappho is revived to be re-celebrated in a recreative tête-à-tête. For their cover, the Fields only retain her face and her name as the only fragments of the vase needed to identify the famous Lesbian poet. The very fragmentation of the painting suggests that it is the volume’s task to reconstruct it once again or even to repaint what Browning saw as a deficient representation of Sappho. In *Long Ago*, the lyre, the dress and the peplum of the original image are to be redrawn with new songs, new robes and new ornaments—all in all, with a new literary portrait of the ancient lyrist.

In like manner, the frontispiece featuring Sappho with an ancient book roll in her hands (see figure IV) is yet another revival and fragmentation of an ancient vase-painting attributed to a group of painters known as the Group of Polygnotos (see figure V). The original scene shows three women standing around Sappho, one holding a wreath of ivy leaves, another wielding a six-stringed lyre, and the third looking attentively towards the poet. *Long Ago* disposes of the standing girls, zooms in on the figure of Sappho seated on her *klismos*, and seems to understand that the interest of the vase-painting lies primordially in the act of reading. In this sense, The Fields revive the ancient poet not only as an author, but also as a reader that gives voice and life to the silent words on the scroll that she has in her hands. The frontispiece hints at this power of life-infusion implicit in the act of reading by inserting three Greek letters floating between the seated poet and the manuscript as if they were coming directly from her mouth. The letters form a partial version of her name that is undergoing a sequence of diachronic revivals. In the illustration, Sappho revives her own words as she reads them from the scroll. The Fields occupy her position of reader, complete the name that she has only half-uttered, and revive what is left of the words she once authored. The reader of *Long Ago* revives Sappho once again through Bradley and Cooper’s new revival. In this diachrony of revivals, it is the foundational act of reading that initiates poetic life and guarantees its survival over time.

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

In the reconstruction of what Sappho reads, the most legible part—the first eight lines—provides some fore-glimpses of the type of revival that *Long Ago* is going to carry out. The opening line makes a vocative address to the ancient *theoi* or gods whose presence here, although obscure and nearly unnoticeable, is an early indication of the polytheistic paganism that the Fields’ volume revives. The Greek gods are indirectly invoked, invited to the immediate dialogue with Sappho, and hosted as post-classical exiles in a poetic work that turns its back on Christian faith. Within this pagan framework, the Fields seem to experiment poetically with a particular Romantic tradition whose origin is attributed to Heinrich Heine in his seminal essay effectively titled “the Gods in Exile” (1853). In this tradition, Evangelista (2009) explains:

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

I would not go so far as to claim that *Long Ago* conforms to the gods in exile subgenre by virtue of a mere invocation in a paratextual illustration. As a matter of fact, the volume does not even follow the usual ways in which such a subgenre presents the Greek deities as leading characters fully retransformed into modern subjects, reinvented with a new suggestive name, and resituated in haunted and uncanny places. However, what *Long Ago* does evoke time and again is a pantheon of divinities that represent universal human affections, partake of Sappho's tragic experiences, become necessarily involved in the genesis of her verses, or simply offer the promise of an end to her tragedy (Cantillo 2018). In this sense, I would state that, although it does not comply strictly with the conventions of the gods in exile tradition, *Long Ago* nevertheless appears to be preparing the ground for the Fields to explore that tradition in their unpublished series of Paterian short stories called *For That Moment Only*, which revive Bacchic figures as central characters that symbolise, among other things, "modernity's frustration of a type of individual freedom associated with ancient paganism" (Evangelista 2009: 120).

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

However, Sappho's words may entail some degree of contradiction. Their etherealness appears to carry connotations of fragility and even perishability that clash with the self-evident fact that their significance has passed the test of time with flying (red) colours, as *Long Ago* attests. To resolve this apparent contradiction, I would ascribe different connotations to the air of Sappho's words and interpret them not as frail or vaporous, but rather as fluid, expansive, receptive, dynamic, and particularly feminine. I genderise the airy words deliberately for one particular reason: Sappho is believed to bequeath her lyrics not just as one of the most primitive testimonies of female writing in the history of humanity, but also as an alternative (her)story to the patriarchal Homeric heritage. In fact, the book roll that she reads gives its centre to her airy words and marginalises those of Homer. Inscribed and capitalised on both margins of the scroll are the words *ITTEPOENTA EIIEA* ("winged words"), which directly evoke the formulaic phrase *ἔπεα πτερόεντα* that Homer repeats constantly both in the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*. His glorious poetic birds/songs, however, are not to be repeated or revived in *Long Ago*. Homer ends up decentralised, ostracised to the periphery and replaced by the Lesbian lyrist. The solid and solemn stature of Homer's epic verse falls under the shadow of Sappho's airy, fragmented words. It seems that, for the Fields, the Homeric question, a distinctive concern of nineteenth-century classical philology, loses its gravity in favour of "the Sapphic question," as Wharton calls it (1885: xii).

Enabled by their feminine etherealness, Sappho's words flow freely from ancient scrolls to modern volumes. Her lyrics generate fluid, plural and diverse revivals due to their lack of solid and complete sets of semantic elements. Their fragmentariness allows the Fields to engage in a free, plural and productive relationship with a Sappho whose legacy is founded on airy yet powerful words. Far from fragile or perishable, her words derive their power from their inexhaustible potentiality to be reanimated not as fixed Homeric lines, but as fluid counter-lines that emanate from the half-extinct breath of a dead poetess and her corpse-like body of poetry. Accordingly, *Long Ago* constitutes a revival of a feminine heritage of sighs/words that know no firm ground, lie suspended in the air, fly freely towards modernity, and develop into new textualities.

Nevertheless, in the book roll Sappho reads, her words reach a point where they become excessively obscure, fugitive, illegible, and ultimately resistant to perception or knowledge. Her breath comes to a halt and her poems are left in suspense like the unfinished floating name between her and the ancient scroll. Indeed, after the eighth line of the scroll, Sappho vanishes into solitary meaningless letters and eventually into thin air. Here is where the Fields dare intervene in their protomodernist spirit. In the final note they append to *Long Ago*, Bradley and Cooper provide a complete reconstruction of such solitary letters into an entire phrase that reads: "ἄγγ[ελοῦ] ν[έων] ὕ[μ]ν[ων]" ("new hymns of a poet"). The thin air of Sappho's letters acquires semantic density with the reconstitutive breath of new affixes.

In such reconstructed pseudo-words, the original resistance to meaning is mitigated, yet never neutralised, by the hypothesis of provisional characters between reparative square brackets. The hypothesis is as audacious as the entire ideation of *Long Ago* in that it goes so far as to derive an entire word from a single grapheme and create the cohesive illusion of a syntagm out of separate and virtually empty lines. However, as with each lyric in *Long Ago*, the audacious reconstruction proposed by the Fields in their endnote finds its legitimacy in the fact that it results directly from their serious research, their committed Hellenism, and their plural authorial space of *inventio*. No wonder the exact same reconstruction can be found in academic works such as J. Henry Middleton's *Illuminated Manuscripts in Classical and Mediaeval Times: Their Art and Their Technique* (1892), where the airy inscription undergoes a re-assemblage that involves "supplying missing letters and correcting blunders" (25). Here Sappho's words are not only revived and restored, but even corrected under the philological authority of a Cambridge erudite. In *Long Ago*, though, what Middleton sees as blunders are instead creative occasions for new hymns—or ν[έων] ὕ[μ]ν[ων]. The Fields do not work within a logic of error detection and correction. Their logic is based rather on the horizontality—or sorority—of collaboration in an act of making the past—however broken it may be—new again.

5. Conclusions

As I have proven in this article, Michael Field's *Long Ago* showcases a highly suggestive and elaborate fabric of paratexts. These elements, beyond their clear ornamental and sculptural aesthetics, possess a pragmatic communicative force that renders them powerfully meaningful. On the book cover, the title itself creates an enigmatic temporal dislocation with no possible measure, as well as a persuasive effect of *captatio*. In the middle of the cover, the Sapphic roundel looks like an undignified and incomplete portrait but reveals an efficient authorial intention: the Fields aim to redraw Sappho and reweave her tatters. The Greek graphemes inside the roundel reinforce the persuasive effect of *captatio*, mystery or enigmatic agoness, notably for the Greekless reader. The second page shows us a more complete Sapphic portrait, and yet carries on with the titular dislocation in time. Taken together, these paratexts manage to convey the idea that *Long Ago* deals with time, with the past, and its interaction with the present. It becomes clearly patent that the past is re-presented, made present again, rendered significant, and even brought into greater pre-eminence than the present.

The frontispiece where Sappho appears as a self-absorbed reader is all the more suggestive. Her act of reading breaks the ontological barrier between past and present. Her position mirrors our own, making us her double. Her sedentary action seems timeless, transcendent, and unitive. With Sappho we share the synchrony of poetic reading –the same temporality in the act of reading. In this sense, and yet again, *Long Ago* manifests its original dealings with time. The past is not understood as static history or alien territory. Instead, it conforms to what Heidegger terms *Gewesenheit*: it is ontologically relevant for the present or an ecstatic phenomenon that imposes itself upon modernity. As a consequence, in its treatment of the past as a living structure that informs the present, the Fields seem to anticipate the modernist idiom of renewed tradition, pastness-made-present, or revival.

The protomodernist idiom of revived past, rebirth or renewal is not alien to *Long Ago*. Since its publication in 1889, the Fields themselves, Walter Pater, and later critics have continually referred to the volume with homogenous terms such as renaissance, reanimation, reawaking, immortalisation, new breath, or galvanism. However, what has been overlooked in these critical approaches is the fact that such a protomodernist idiom of revived pastness finds its most effective materialisation in the volume's paratextual apparatus. On the threshold of the book and in its appendix, Sappho is systematically presented as an enigmatic face, a foundational co-reader, an amplified scroll, a reconstructed hymn, a pagan survivor, an ethereal feminine voice, a counter-Homeric question, and more generally, as an open textual figure –one that is fluid, free and always ready to be made new. The paratexts I have analysed here reveal that Bradley and Cooper were aware of Sappho's only possible existence as revival, as an eternally new voice. In the title, the roundel, the frontispiece, and the airy scroll, the lyricist is cogently represented as an unfinished subject, suspended, floating in ecstasy, only existing in incomplete words and embodying a fragmentary model of subjectivity with no fixed core of identity, always in tatters, in an ethereal process of renaissance.

Inventory of figures

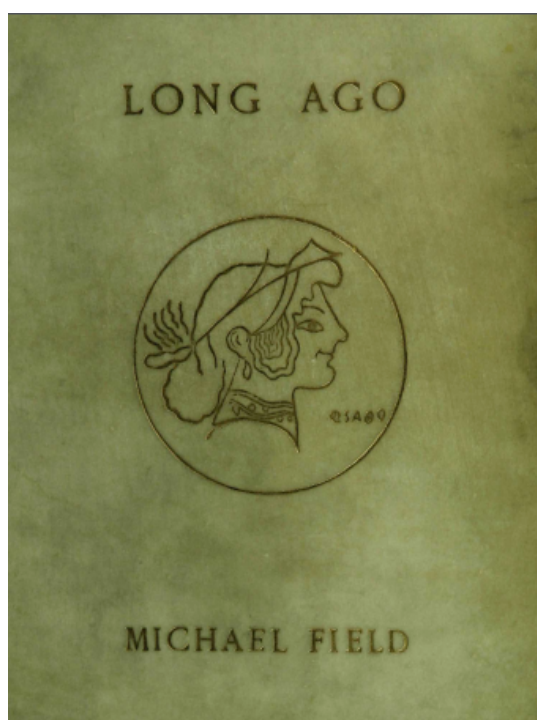


Figure I. Front cover of *Long Ago* (1889), as digitised by Baylor University within the Armstrong Browning Library - 19th Century Women Poets Collection (Digital ID ab-wpc-bkk_xbl-821-89-f4551).



Figure II. Second illustration of Sappho in *Long Ago* (1889), as digitised by Baylor University within the Armstrong Browning Library - 19th Century Women Poets Collection (Digital ID ab-wpc-bkk_xbl-821-89-f4551).

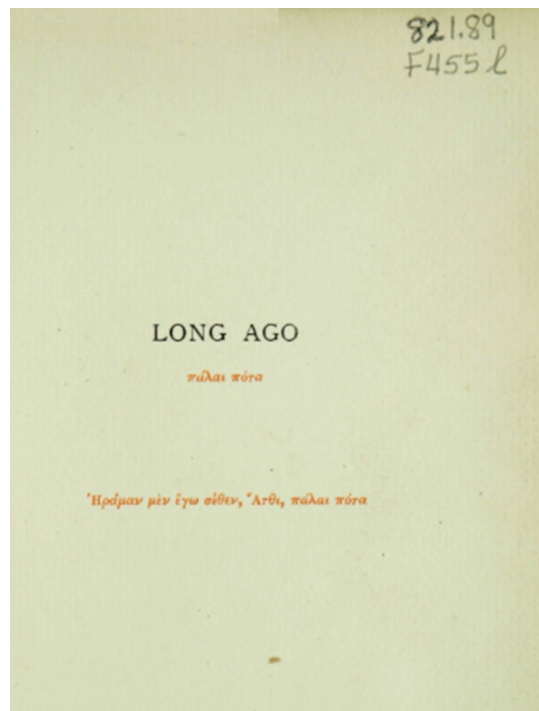


Figure III. Title page of *Long Ago* (1889), as digitised by Baylor University within the Armstrong Browning Library - 19th Century Women Poets Collection (Digital ID ab-wpc-bkk_xbl-821-89-f4551).

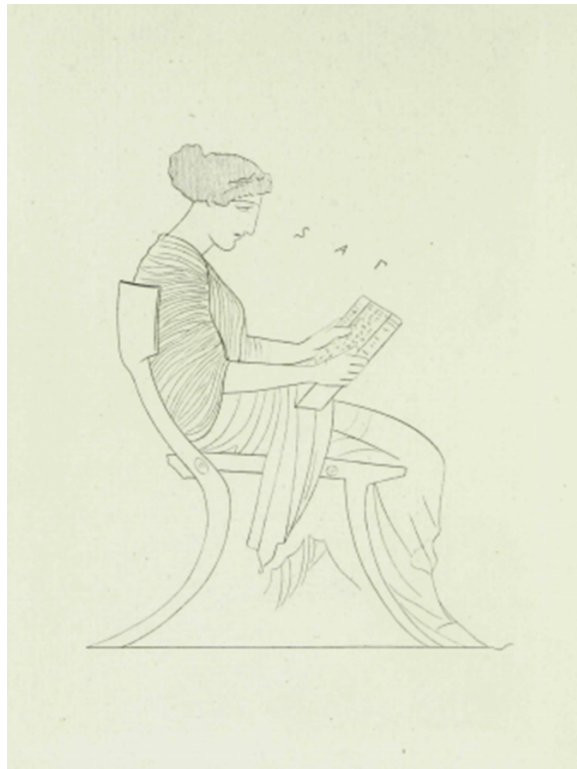


Figure IV. Frontispiece of *Long Ago* (1889), as digitised by Baylor University within the Armstrong Browning Library - 19th Century Women Poets Collection (Digital ID ab-wpc-bkk_xbl-821-89-f4551).



Figure V. *Sappho lisant*, red-figure vase by the Group of Polygnotos, ca. 440–430 BC. National Archaeological Museum in Athens. Wikimedia Creative Commons BY-SA 2.5.



Figure VI. *Sappho*, as reproduced in De Witte's *Description des collections d'antiquités conservées à l'Hôtel Lambert*, planche III, p. 119, 1886.

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