

Michael Field, German Philosophy and Sapphic Identity: Towards Martin Heidegger

Dr. Mayron E. Cantillo Lucuara. Universitat de València

Recibido 9/11/2020

Michael Field, German Philosophy and Sapphic Identity: Towards Martin Heidegger

Katharine Bradley and Edith Cooper, also known jointly as Michael Field, took a special and enduring interest in philosophy, chiefly in its Germanic branch, but this aspect of their highly intellectualised lives has received no systematic inquiry to date. In this article, I propose to offer an integrative three-fold account of (1) how contemporary critics have approached the Fields mostly from gender-based philosophical viewpoints, (2) how the couple engaged with prominent German thinkers such as Hegel and Nietzsche, and lastly (3) how their ahead-of-time poetics can be fruitfully associated with Martin Heidegger's deconstructive ontology as expounded in *Being and Time*. The conclusions I reach, reinforced by a brief comparative study of Michael Field's *Long Ago* (1889), are audacious yet promising: the Fields and Heidegger seem to coincide at least in their reverence for ancient Greece, their radical deconstruction of Cartesian individuality, their defence of an aesthetic existentialism, their original reconceptualisation of time, and more importantly in my view, the dismantling of the artificial dichotomy between life and death.

Keywords: Michael Field; Katharine Bradley; Edith Cooper; Heidegger

Michael Field, filosofía alemana e identidad sáfica: hacia Martin Heidegger

Katharine Bradley y Edith Cooper, también conocidas conjuntamente como Michael Field, cultivaron un interés especial y duradero por la filosofía, principalmente por su rama germánica, si bien este aspecto de sus vidas altamente intelectualizadas no ha sido objeto de ningún estudio sistemático hasta la fecha. En este artículo, ofrecemos un triple comentario integrador de (1) cómo los críticos contemporáneos han abordado a las Fields principalmente desde puntos de vista filosóficos basados en el género, (2) cómo la pareja se desenvolvía con pensadores alemanes tan prominentes como Hegel y Nietzsche y, por último, (3) cómo su adelantada visión poética puede vincularse fructíferamente a la ontología deconstructiva de Martin Heidegger tal y como se expone en *Ser y Tiempo*. Las conclusiones que postulamos, basándonos en un breve estudio comparativo de *Long Ago* (1889), son audaces pero prometedoras: las Fields y Heidegger parecen converger al menos en su reverencia por la antigua Grecia, su deconstrucción radical de la individualidad cartesiana, su defensa de un existencialismo estético, su reconceptualización original del tiempo y, lo que es más importante en mi opinión, su ruptura de la dicotomía artificiosa entre la vida y la muerte.

Palabras clave: Michael Field; Katharine Bradley; Edith Cooper; Heidegger

eikasía
REVISTA DE FILOSOFÍA

Michael Field, German Philosophy and Sapphic Identity: Towards Martin Heidegger

Dr. Mayron E. Cantillo Lucuara. Universitat de València

Recibido 9/11/2020

I. Introduction

Victorian authors Katharine Bradley (1846-1914) and her niece Edith Cooper (1862-1913), who wrote most of their collaborative literary production under the pen name of Michael Field, were a prolific and intellectual couple closely connected with renowned men of letters of their time. The Fields, as they were known among their peers, published nine collections of poetry and more than thirty plays, and produced twenty-nine volumes of life-writing. Equally intense was their dedication as active readers to different authors such as St Augustine, Dante, Shakespeare, Spinoza, Flaubert, Hegel, Heinrich Heine, Paul Bourget, Christina Rossetti, Walt Whitman, Ibsen or Tolstoi, to name but a few. As Sturgeon (1922) comments in her pioneering study of the Fields, their readerly discipline and passion was “as comprehensive as one would expect of minds so free, curious, and hungry” (30). In their immediate social circle, Bradley and Cooper also cultivated fervent intellectual connections with John Ruskin, Robert Browning, Walter Pater, John Addington Symonds or John Gray. This coterie of eminent contacts represented a fertile field for artistic and academic exchange, as well as an opportunity to broaden the formal education that Bradley had acquired at the Collège de France, the Newnham College (Cambridge), and later with her niece, at University College in Bristol. Together, the Fields studied literature, ancient and modern languages, art, history and philosophy. Both women lived authentically and intensely as insatiable intellectuals.

Since the early nineties the Fields and their intellectual production have been brought to the fore by many critics in the field of gender and sexuality studies, on account of their queer biography and poetics. From Leighton (1992), White (1990, 1996) or Prins (1999) through to Thain (2000, 2007), Ehnenn (2008), Madden (2008),

Evangelista (2009), Olverson (2010) or Vadillo and Baker (2019), the kind of criticism around Bradley and Cooper has usually laid particular stress on their complex sexual identity, their intimate mode of literary collaboration, their queer desires, or their alleged proto-lesbianism. Although this critical model has signified a major push to position the Fields as original queer voices within the late Victorian poetic cannon, it has nevertheless failed to offer a systematic account of how they grappled not only with intricate gender issues, but also with profound philosophical questions. In fact, their neglected engagement with philosophy –particularly, with the Germanic tradition– should be recognised, as I aim to prove in this paper, as a constant in their highly intellectualised ways of life.

Critics have established general associations between the Fields and philosophy – particularly, the contemporary current of thought tied directly with sex and gender studies. In this sense, Michael Field’s Sapphic poetics has been read in light of Luce Irigaray’s idiosyncratic feminist philosophy as an example of “an unhampered woman-to-woman’s language” (Leighton 1992: 230), as a queer inquiry “beyond heterosexual opposition” and “into more fluid desire” (Prins 1999: 106), or more recently, as a subversive defence of the feminine as a marginal yet liberating principle of Bacchic vitalism (Author 2018b). Michel Foucault’s famous archaeology of sexuality has also been deployed to reveal how the Fields contested “the new scientific discourse of sex” that emerged in the late nineteenth century by favouring a model of *ars erotica* based on the fluidity of pleasure itself and opposed to the rigid “categories of sexology” (Thain 2007, 95). In a similar vein, Kate Thomas (2007) turns to Foucault –as well as Judith Butler– to explore the shadow of incest over Bradley and Cooper’s mutual love and to argue that the women may have had some “consciousness of a relationship between their excessive kinship and their sense that they were improper to their time” (345). In the most recent volume on the Fields, Sarah Baker and Ana P. Vadillo (2019) gather a collection of sundry reflections that insist upon underscoring Bradley and Cooper’s modernity and proto-modernism, and yet in so doing, the critical narrative of gender and sexuality remains explicit and prominent, at least in the way the poets are philosophically approached: their works keep inviting valid yet repetitive connections mostly with queer thought –in particular, with Judith Butler, Lee Edelman, José Esteban Muñoz or Judith Habelrstan.

It is Ana P. Vadillo that stands out as the only scholar who has looked most explicitly and thoroughly into the possible intersections between the Fields and philosophy.¹ In a 2000 article, Vadillo resorts to German thinker Walter Benjamin and applies his unique notion of translation to Michael Field's ekphrastic lyrics in *Sight and Song* (1892), convincingly arguing that, both for the philosopher and the poets, "translation is an art form whose identity is similar to the original in so far as both partake of an a priori, pure, language, and that, translations, unlike originals, function as transparent forms that enlighten the original work of art" (19). Later, Vadillo (2015) opens a long-neglected dialogue between the Fields and Friedrich Nietzsche, explaining that the poets read and admired the German philosopher and showing that their Roman plays were very much influenced by *The Birth of Tragedy*.

Following in the footsteps of Vadillo's research, I aim to make this essay serve two interrelated purposes in what follows: on the one hand, to discuss the factual affiliations that the Fields held with German philosophers, and on the other, to explore the fertile territory of connections that can be drawn between Michael Field's poetic identity and Heidegger's early philosophy on the basis of illuminating concepts and phenomena such as counter-dualism, *Eigenlichkeit*, *Mitsein*, or poetic dwelling. Here I must state the obvious straightaway: Heidegger's first published works, *Frühe Schriften* (1912-16) and *Sein und Zeit* (1927),² were published after the death of Michael Field. Cooper died of cancer in 1913 and Bradley in 1914, also of cancer. In other words, they never read Heidegger or knew of him. Perhaps the only chronological coincidence, fortuitous and curious at once, was the year of 1889, date of publication of Michael Field's Sapphic collection *Long Ago* and the year in which Heidegger was born. And yet, beyond this anecdotal evidence, there are some important points of convergence between the Michael Fields and Heidegger. As this article will prove, Michael Field's engagement with German philosophy stretches far beyond their

¹ It was under her tutorship that I attended Birkbeck College as a research visitor from September to December 2018, within the official framework of a mobility bursary granted by the Universitat de València. This article is the outcome of the illuminating discussions I shared with Dr Ana P. Vadillo.

² In the fourth section and conclusions of this paper, I will be making a systematic use of John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson's translation of *Being and Time*, originally published in 1962 and re-edited in 2008.

attested familiarity with Hegel and Nietzsche, and as I propose here, their lived poetics is interestingly aligned with Heidegger's ontological thought.

2. Hegelian Belonging: Problem of Totality

Bradley and Cooper studied philosophy at University College in Bristol and deployed this formal knowledge in varied personal and creative ways. Particularly consistent was their engagement with nineteenth-century German thought, so much so that one could place them intellectually within "the English tradition" that "absorbed a great deal, from the 1890s onwards, from the German philosophers" (Thain 2007: 36). In her study of the Fields, Mary Sturgeon (1922) mentions one of such thinkers: "evidence is clear that they appreciated genius so widely diverse as Flaubert and Walt Whitman, Hegel and Bourget, Ibsen and Heine, Dante, Tolstoi, and St. Augustine" (30). Here it is Hegel in particular that stands out for the lasting impact he had on the Fields. Thain and Vadillo (2009) include a significant letter from Cooper to American art critic Bernhard Berenson that places the philosopher of German idealism as one of the foundations of Michael Field's literary persona: "Hegel's *Aesthetic* belongs to me, though Michael rightfully claimed it, as all mine is his; but the tiresome marks on every page are by me, in early youth. Try to ignore them" (323). For the Fields, Hegel was not a sporadic interest. Cooper wrote the previous missive to Berenson in 1894, but her appreciation of the Teutonic thinker had begun in early youth. In proof of this lasting commitment to Hegel, Cooper presented Berenson with her own copy of the philosopher's treaty on aesthetics, which she had copiously annotated as a very precocious reader. Although the copy bore only Cooper's marks on every page, her aunt was not less keen on the relationship between Hegel and art.

What both Bradley and Cooper found appealing in the German idealist was most probably his central idea that the function of art goes beyond mere recreation and moral instruction. For Hegel, art aspires to "express the profoundest interests of human nature and the most comprehensive truths of the spirit" by clothing them "in sensible form" (in Kedney 1885: 4-5). Differently put, art constitutes a creative activity in which "the elements of intelligence and sensibility are combined, and fused together" (in Kedney 1885: 14) in a way that shortens the metaphysical distance

between the spiritual and the sensuous, the abstract and the concrete, or the immaterial and the material. In a diary entry, Cooper (1933) fully embraces this view: the artist, for her, is a “lost creature between Heaven and Earth, grasping spiritual things with one hand, and with one passionate grasp the things of sense” (314). I would claim that, for both Hegel and the Fields, art performs as a combinatory mode of thinking in the sense that it looks to dismantle and conciliate traditional dualisms –the infinite and the finite, the sacred and the profane, or Heaven and Earth.

For Marion Thain (2007), the correlation between the Fields and Hegel lies precisely in the ways in which their diaries and poetic volumes articulate themselves around a holistic system of paradox, deconstructing conventional dichotomies and constructing a sense of selfhood unstably “founded upon contradiction” (17). From a less generalising stance, Dustin Friedman (2019) sees Hegel at work specifically in *Sight and Song* (1892), an ingenious volume in which the Fields manifest how they come to experience erotic negativity through special encounters, spiritual and sensuous at once, with art objects that disclose hidden desires and allow for a greater degree of “erotic self-knowledge” (147). In my view, these positions regarding the Field/Hegel connection miss one significant point: both Thain and Friedman fail to notice that, beyond his methodical emphasis on the fluid dialectics of opposition and conciliation, Hegel orients his system of thought, including his philosophy of art, towards the ideal of a definitive order in which all poles and contradictions become synthesised and totalised into a stable structure. For him, as Kedney (1885) explains, the ultimate mission of history, thought and art is to fix and reduce all binary oppositions into a final “individuality” or a “unique synthesis” (59) that puts an end to every dialectical confrontation.

Such a final search for absolute fixity does not tally with Bradley and Cooper’s literary identity and production. A fluid, ambiguous and irreducible self, their Michael Field is far from being a totalised, homogenous and “univocal product,” as Blain claims (1996, 239). Their literary identity rests upon a “dynamic dialogic structure” (239) and never yields to closed totalisations. Questioned and scrutinised by critics time and again, their sexuality appears to be equally variable and resistant to standard sexological labels. In constructing their poetic identity, as I seek to demonstrate later on, the Fields articulate a complex philosophical idiom that addresses radical polarities

between life and death or desire and pain in a way that does not adhere to a Hegelian paradigm of ideal closure or totality, but rather to a more critical attitude that approaches such alleged polarities as porosities, dialogic structures, or open-ended interrelations. It is my contention, in this regard, that the Fields seem to anticipate a line of thought that surpasses Hegelianism and points towards an anti-dualist philosophy much closer to Martin Heidegger's phenomenology of existence as radical openness –what the philosopher calls “a constant lack of totality” or closure in *Being and Time* (286).

3. Nietzscheans *Avant La Lettre*: Problem of Overhumanity

Apart from Hegel, the other major German thinker that influenced the Fields was Friedrich Nietzsche. In their intellectual career, the aunt and niece developed a precocious understanding of the essential principles of art that they would later discover in Nietzsche's thought. As Sturgeon (1922) sees it, the Fields knew their Nietzsche before their first contact with his actual works in 1895:

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

This excerpt suggests that Michael Field's proto-Nietzscheism was their own version of aesthetic theory to which they gave shape in their very Dionysian play *Callirrhoë* (1884). They would later find that their philosophy mirrored Nietzsche's view of Greek attic tragedy as the supreme model of art. As Cooper herself acknowledges: “I am kindled to find that before I read a word of Ni[e]tzsche, before I heard anything, borrowed or really his own from Bernhard, I had reached so many of Ni[e]tzsche's positions” (Vadillo 2015: 205). The name of American critic Bernhard Berenson stands out here as the first direct link between the Michael Fields and the German philosopher. Their inadvertent Nietzscheism was increasingly mediated and fuelled “through discussion with Bernhard Berenson” (Thain 2007: 36). It was in 1895

that both poets read Nietzsche for the first time and realised that he had expressed precisely what they believed in. The poets were furious with Berenson “for not having owned up earlier to the source of the ideas he had been presenting to them” (Thain 2007: 37).

The discovery of Nietzsche was momentous for the Fields. As Cooper says in their diary, they found in him “a real Bacchic voice crying in the wilderness” (Vadillo 2015: 204). On reading his opera prima, *The Birth of Tragedy*, the Fields came to the realisation that what was once an accidental mirroring between his philosophy and their own now became a patent intellectual and even affective symbiosis: “We are reading *Die Geburt der Tragödie* the only prose statement of the Dionysian attitude towards Life that Exists. This book is the mirror in which we see our naked errors and offences exposed. Our achievements revealed, our hopes tested” (Vadillo 2015: 205).

Naturally enough, Bradley and Cooper transposed such an overinvestment in Nietzscheism to their aesthetics and particularly to their closet dramas, most of which were now articulated, according to Vadillo (2015), around the “strife between the Apollonian (principle of form, unity, rationality, restraint, representing the visual plastic arts) and the Dionysian elements of life (rapture and rupture, the world of dreams, excess and musical arts)” (206). Yet, more important than the conceptual debts to Nietzsche was the fact that, as Vadillo (2015) rightly proves, the Fields deployed his theory on Greek tragedy for an ambitious purpose: “to re-invent the genre” of poetic drama “with the power of breathing life” (207). Although their contemporaries failed to recognise the originality of their project, the Fields should be credited as avant-garde authors that contributed to opening future debates on modernist verse drama. As Nietzscheans and as themselves, they were very much ahead of their time.

As their diary and plays reveal, the links between the Fields’ philosophy and the writings of Nietzsche are clear and diverse. Chris Snodgrass (2007) has identified several elements that are common to the poets and the philosopher: an intellectual commitment “to accept curious differences, to entertain passionately the odd and disparate and unfamiliar, and to embrace what others would exclude” (172); a serious conviction that “form and frenzy, the Apollonian and Dionysian, must coexist, even if human survival dictates that they dare not ever merge” (178), and a vitalistic affirmation of suffering and tragedy as experiences that are “inescapable yet altogether

necessary” (178). Undoubtedly and judging solely from this summative account, the Fields can be regarded not just as authentic Nietzscheans, but more fairly as belonging to the earliest generation of British intellectuals who, in Vadillo’s words (2015), “recognised Nietzsche’s importance for modernity” (204).

Nietzschean ideas can certainly be placed in direct conversation with Bradley and Cooper’s corpus, especially when addressing key themes such as the significance of the Dionysian or the vital value of suffering. However, I would argue that Nietzsche does not fully accommodate to Michael Field’s aesthetics mainly because of his ultimate idea or ideal of over-powerful selfhood. Although he inaugurates his thought with a clearly anti-Cartesian notion of the self as a liquid and visceral being, he nevertheless seems to direct this conception towards an ideal version of subjectivity that, after all its becoming and self-overcoming, stands as a heroic, superior, self-made, and hyper-masculinised creature (*Übermensch*).³ This final anthropological construction would enter into stark opposition with Michael Field’s literary personae and heroines like Sappho, who does embody fluidity and resilience, and yet embraces tragedy and self-defeatism, and never comes to develop the courageous over-humanity that Nietzsche prescribes precisely as the only antidote for such self-defeatism.

222

Nº 98
marzo
2021

4. Towards Heidegger: A Prospective Mirroring

If Nietzsche is the German thinker that first puts life itself in the centre of philosophy, debunks the theoretical myths of Western epistemology and sees human existence as a fluid phenomenon inevitably engaged with the world,⁴ it is Martin Heidegger who continues such a line of thought, systematising it most adeptly in *Being and Time*. This landmark work presents an exhaustive ontology that deconstructs

³ In his work on Nietzsche, Heidegger (1981) claims that his predecessor’s philosophy of fluidity or becoming “undergoes a transition to the concept of Being” (75) in the sense that it gradually develops into a more solid and unequivocal conception of human existence.

⁴ I take my cue here from traditional interpreters of Nietzsche’s thought, for whom his is clearly a philosophy of life (or *Lebensphilosophie*), as it is concerned with the emotions, paradoxes, and vicissitudes of real life itself. As Michelman (2010) claims, Nietzsche’s thought can be read as “a critique of philosophical and scientific abstraction” and “an alternative conception of human life to that offered by scientific materialism” (157).

worn-out dualisms, invalidates Cartesianism altogether, discloses the intimate embeddedness between human existence and the misnamed object-world, and even spells out the vital significance of death as a necessary constituent, and not the opposite, of life. In more precise terms, *Being and Time* constitutes one of the finest holistic inquiries into human existence, its rootedness in the world, its lived experience, and its relationship to death. This “fundamental ontology,” as Heidegger calls it (34), postulates the notions of being-in-the-world and being-towards-death as the two most essential structures of Dasein –a byword for human existence.

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

However, Heidegger’s *Being and Time* not only centres on being itself, its direct appeal to Dasein and its lived dimension. In Division Two (274-488), the German philosopher transforms his phenomenological study of our lived experience in the world into an original and exhaustive thanatology articulated around the concept of *Sein-zum-Tode*. As Mark Wrathall (2014) clearly explains, this notion effectively addresses the anti-dualistic question of how “the nature of human life and the nature of human death are tied inextricably together” and how death itself “shapes and guides the way we humans exist, the way we live our lives” (62). For Heidegger, death is a phenomenon of life that has great existential significance mainly “because of Dasein’s unique capacity to anticipate it, a capacity that structures everyday existence by making it an existence moving towards death” (Carel 2006: 69.) In this sense, we are always already immersed in the process of dying, in a permanent relation to the certain possibility of death, projecting ourselves constantly towards a future that is “a continuous movement towards extinction” (Carel 2006, 79) and sometimes facing death anxiously as a limit situation, an inability to project ourselves into new

possibilities or a “condition of being cut off from the world and therefore being incapable of action” (Carel 2006: 80).

I contend that, just as there was an accidental and retrospective mirroring between Nietzsche and the Fields, so too there is a prospective mirroring between them and Heidegger in different senses and directions. For a start, both the Fields and Heidegger coincide in an essential anthropological position: the modern subject for them is ontologically unfinished, fragmentary, uncertain, and radically open or excessive in that it exists always beyond its alleged Cartesian individuality. In their basic condition of co-writers, Bradley and Cooper bring themselves into existence as literary collaborators by causing, as Jill R. Ehnenn (2008) points out, “the death of [...] traditional modes of thinking about subjectivity and authorship” (5). The author dies not in the Barthesian manner (as an external subject that becomes utterly irrelevant to the text), but in the Cartesian sense of his solitude. The author ceases to be a being-in-himself and comes to experience poetry or art as part and parcel of his *Mitsein* –or being-with. I resort to this Heideggerian term for its usefulness in capturing the intrinsic entanglement between self and other or the fact that “the world is always the one that I share with others. The world of Dasein is a with-world” (155). For Heidegger, Dasein exists as being-with or *Dasein-with* in such a way that the other partakes of its most essential and basic constitution. This ontological sociality, routinely and artificially dissociated from the idea of authorship, comes to the fore in Michael Field’s creative partnership. Their writing is an authentic experience of co-writing with all the richness and complexity involved in any instance of sociality. Their work forms, as they explain in an 1886 letter to Havelock Ellis, “a perfect mosaic: we cross and interlace like a company of dancing flies; if one begins a character, his companion seizes and possesses it; if one conceives a scene or a situation, the other corrects, completes, or murderously cuts away” (Sturgeon 1922: 47). In this regard, Bradley and Cooper’s authorial experience is a genuine scenario of *Mitsein* characterised not only by their personal and aesthetic affinities, but also by their murderous discrepancies. Their literary *Mitsein* enables us to imagine their works as fields for “shared intimacy and intellectual jouissance” (Ehnenn 2008: 2), as well as for negotiation and even confrontation.

Their creative *Mitsein* is, additionally, an assertive space of freedom in which the very pseudonym “Michael Field” not only seems to have served them to gain public recognition as artists, to circumvent prejudices against women writers, and to receive genuine critical appraisal “such as man gives man” (Field 1933, 7). Their pseudonym appears to have become more than just a mere mask over time: it was a subversive strategy against their inherited ontologies of gender and sexuality. Their ‘Michael Field’ works as a long-sustained way to present themselves as an authentic and dissident example of self-creation. In this respect, Thain (2000) rightly states:

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

It is such a possibility of identity play that shows the vital creativity and plasticity with which the Fields constructed themselves as authentic self-authors –poets not only of poems or dramas, but also of their own name, their own public presentation, their own gender sensibilities, and their own life as a whole. This insistence on their ownmost personality evokes the Heideggerian concept of *eigentlich*. For Heidegger, Dasein tends to live in the most average, anonymous, and disowned manner by simply complying with societal conventions and expectations in an ordinary world where “everyone is the other, and no one is himself” (165). However, in the case of the Fields, it seems rather clear that they made every possible effort to live authentically (*eigentlich*), to overlook conventionalities and to cultivate, as Heidegger would put it, their ownmost *Freisein* or “being-free for the freedom of choosing” themselves and “taking hold of” themselves (232). The Fields were extremely creative in shaping their literary identity and playing with other names (Henry, Puss or Sim, to name a few); they owned up to the Michaelian persona even after being outed as women, and their onomastic inventiveness was a reflection of their fervent sense of radical independence. Simply put, one might say that they held such a creed of creative and personal freedom that even their name had to be of their own choosing.

Such a sense of freedom most probably meant for the Fields the uninterrupted possibility of living their lives artistically. Both women embraced life as an aesthetic phenomenon to the extent that they came to embody aestheticism itself in their works, as well as in their most ordinary affairs and customs. Rather than a professional activity, art became for them a *modus vivendi* per se. Their letters, diaries, books, contacts, pets, houses or even holiday trips were all deeply networked within a holistic artistic vision. In 1888, when they moved to Reigate, Bradley and Cooper intensified their existential immersion in the arts, withdrawing gradually from society, dedicating their time almost exclusively to their work and relegating life itself, according to Charles Ricketts (1975), to “a second place” (5). Nevertheless, I would suggest that such a withdrawal did not necessarily entail an impoverished degree of vitality. Rather, the Fields committed themselves to a more ontological, contemplative or intellectual lifestyle.⁵ Perhaps more than ever before, their being-in-the-world became an overly conscious and meditated experience. This acute consciousness of life soon manifested itself in a long series of diaries that the Fields started to write in 1888. In them life is made into art, dramatically aestheticised and even shaped “with the narrative craft and control of autobiography” (Thain 2007: 24-25). In other words, life transforms for the Fields into a source of rhetorical *inventio* or literary material constantly mediated by writing and even, according to Marion Thain, by “contemporary models for thinking about history” (Thain 2007: 35).

Moreover, their vision of life covered not only a divine landscape of joy and Bacchic pleasure, but the vastness of nature with “her vicissitudes” and “terror” (Field 1933: 6). This interest in the terrifying facets of life is perhaps what most appealed to the Fields –or at least what they wished to explore fearlessly in their work. In an 1884 letter to Browning, Bradley (1933) clarifies her intentions as a women writer and remarks that her refusal to abide by the conventionalities of her day is nothing but a strategy to avoid being “scared away, as ladies, from the tragic elements of life” (8). The Fields faced tragedy with creativity. Their *Long Ago* was finished in the midst of Emma Cooper’s agony and followed after its publication by the death of Browning.

⁵ By ontological I denote what Heidegger defines as that which is most “distinctive of Dasein” (61), i.e., our ontological faculty to raise the question of the meaning of being, to take issue with how the world makes sense –if it even does at all– or to transform existence into an issue in itself.

As attested in the diaries, the unfavourable reception of their works affected the poets with feelings of utter incompleteness or lost hope, and yet their ultimate reaction was a greater commitment to art. This artistic tenacity helped the Fields cope with the initial disappearance and death of James Robert Cooper in Switzerland. According to Bradley (1933), it was literature and, in particular, classical drama that served them as therapy against despair and uncertainty: “Our Sophocles taught us patience. Thank God for literature, the literature of the dark days, with its long reaches far into the world to come” (224). After the discovery of Robert’s body, the Fields wrote a play titled *The Viewless Fields* in his name. For them, notwithstanding its devastating effects, death seemed to have an inner potential for poetic transformation. In the diary, when dealing with her sister’s terminal condition, Edith (1933) solemnly noted: “Death always comes to us with the poetry of an event, big with battles for the soul” (291). Such battles were fought with a pen in hand and with an eye to always seeking the poetry of any event –whether joyful or dreadful.

In 1906, when the Fields lost their most cherished Whym Chow, the loss translated into a spiritual rebirth, a series of religious works, and a serious interest in theology. Their new Catholic faith, according to Charles Ricketts (1975), “enriched their daily lives and proved a source of infinite consolation when Henry [Edith] was smitten with cancer” (6). Not only, however, was their conversion a useful coping mechanism, but also an infinite source of creativity. Towards the end of their lives, “between attacks of pain, both poets continued to write” (Thain 2000, 16), and more than ten works saw their publication in the final period of Michael Field’s career. It seems that, for both women, the experiences of loss, pain or vulnerability were all fertile opportunities to enrich their *poetic dwelling*.

I purposefully use the late Heideggerian concept of poetic dwelling above, for it clearly serves to encapsulate Michael Field’s philosophy of life. Bradley and Cooper lived their life as a poetic event and trusted poetry –and writing in general– to fashion themselves, to make sense of their experience and, more Heideggerianly, “to preserve the force of elemental words and disclose the significance of things” (Michelman 2010: 267). For the Fields, the world made and gained complete sense in poems and plays. The world mattered to them within a holistic framework of understanding and meaning that was created by means of the poetic or dramatic word. Their creative

concern with life made them acutely aware of the world's potential for beauty even in its most fatal forms. In other words, it is no stretch to state that the Fields were ontologically concerned with things not as mere ordinary and detached objects, but as aesthetic events. Their understanding of the world implied, to a large extent, an ontological aestheticisation of things. The being of things appealed to the Fields in that such things were transcendently possibilities for the emergence of beauty. In Heideggerian terms, Bradley and Cooper somehow put into practice a certain sense of "fundamental-ontological transcendence" (87-88) that meant understanding the world not as an objectivity to be known or epistemologised, but rather as an encounter with what is always already transformable into all possible "forms of art and poetry" (Field 1933: 54). What is more, this aesthetic engagement with the world was part of a larger sense of aesthetic self-engagement: the Fields had a particular mode of being-in/with-themselves that, as a matter of fact, entailed a very conscious process of self-renaming, self-reflection, self-creation, or self-poeisis mediated by language itself –by reading, writing, rewriting and self-writing.

The (self-)poetic being-in-the-world that the Fields cultivated was not only hospitable to the joys of life, but also to its tragic elements. In a way, Bradley and Cooper developed an aesthetic awareness of being-towards-death that was not at odds with their heartfelt vitalism. Certainly, the experience of loss or death afflicted both poets on many an occasion, but never to the point of making them incapable of persevering in their artistic efforts. Instead, in encountering tragedy, they channelled their afflictions into a large number of written or read books, and acquired a more authentic understanding of life that encompassed the phenomenon of mortality not as an antithesis but as a closely interrelated dimension. This integrative ontological view was to inevitably inform their vast work and endow it with a fine sense of philosophical profundity.

5. Applied Conclusions: The Case of *Long Ago*

A special case in point of how Michael Field's work can be aligned with Heidegger's ontological thought, the Sapphic collection *Long Ago* (1889) illustrates how both the poets and the thinker were strongly interested in the originary writings

of Western philosophical and lyrical thought. Where the Fields rescued the archaic figure of Sappho as a fully modern heroine, Heidegger engaged with pre-Socratic philosophers such as Heraclitus and, particularly, Parmenides. In both cases, the return to pre-classical Greece seems to be motivated by a modernist spirit grounded on revisiting Western traditions at their very roots to make them new again and to reveal their importance for modernity. At a more profound level, the Fields' Sapphism and Heidegger's ontology share several points of conceptual confluence. In its preface, *Long Ago* is described as an "audacious" attempt at revising Sappho's archaic fragments, and indeed it is an audacity, because it poses a major challenge to what Heidegger understands as Dasein's "essential tendency to closeness" (140). Logically enough, the German thinker holds that things only gain significance as long as they enter into one's spatial or cognitive nearness and, by extension, into one's care structure. The motion of appropriation or approximation is a necessary condition for the emergence of understanding. The meaning of things emerges when one feels some kind of closeness to them. Sappho's original words, quoted as epigraphs in ancient Greek on top of every lyric in the Fields' collection, put such a condition to the test and raise daunting questions such as how they can be approached in/despite their long agoness, how accessible their texts can be and what enduring meaning can be derived from them. The Fields embrace the audacity of answering these questions in a volume that brings the archaic Sappho in a close and direct dialogue. In *Long Ago*, the nearness to the Lesbian poetess is radical and diverse. Sappho not only inaugurates and authenticates the book with one of her possible faces and her name on the cover: her original words also appear on every page in an intimate interplay with Michael Field's words. This textually patent nearness is as audacious as it is puzzling.

Such textual nearness, which can also be understood as an explicit case of intertextuality or co-textuality between the Sapphic fragment and Michael Field's lyrical rewritings,⁶ generates a diverse and even excessive authorial *Mitsein* (with the implicit idea of the death of the individual author discussed above), including not only Bradley, her niece, and Sappho, but also direct or indirect collaborators who contributed in one way or another to the composition of *Long Ago*. Among these

⁶ For a thorough study of *Long Ago* as a paradigmatic work in which several poststructuralist and postmodern theories of (inter)textuality come into play, see Author 2018a.

collaborators is none other than Robert Browning, who revised the initial manuscript of the volume thoroughly and left “his mark in places upon the text itself” (O’Gorman 1998, 32). His intervention alone inevitably leads us to regard the mere signature on the cover of the collection as a complex space of polyphony and multiple authorship.

I make no casual use of Jack Stillinger’s concept of multiple authorship (1991) in my approach to the authorial agency behind *Long Ago*. In fact, as the Fields themselves attest in a final paratext, their Sapphic volume owes two important debts, one to the German philologist Theodor Bergk for his *Poetae Lyrici Graeci*, which served as the reliable source of the Sapphic texts, and another to Dr Wharton for his *Sappho: A Memoir and Translation*, which the Fields found to be of the highest value. Moreover, according to Stefano Evangelista (2009), John Addington Symonds’s *Studies of the Greek Poets* is also “an influential precedent for *Long Ago*” (103). All in all, the kind of literary anti-Cartesian space of creation that the Fields opened –their idiosyncratic poetic *Mitsein*– when working on their Sapphic book was both multiple and strategic in that the poets engaged eminent and academic minds in their authorial activity, thus authorising or legitimating themselves as experimental Hellenists.

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

In *Long Ago*, the reader enters such temporal ecstasy that fuses past and present, Greek and English, Sappho and the Fields, or ancient graphemes and modern lyrics.

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

Moreover, in the critical act of reading each poem, the dialogue with Martin Heidegger's fundamental ontology sheds abundant light at least in two directions. On the one hand, as I have proven elsewhere, the central figure of the Sapphic maid has a special relationship with the pseudo-polarities of life and death. The maiden inhabits a space of transition in which her vital freedom and intensity are just a product "of the anticipation of her death as a free virgin –as though her rapturous life were, or had to be, indeed rapturous because of the proximity of death" (Author 2018b: 221). In this sense, Heidegger's notion of anticipation or resoluteness as "the possibility of authentic existence" (307) comes in handy. "For the German philosopher, it is when we assertively and seriously anticipate the possibility of our death that our life opens up as a whole, becomes liberated, and diversifies into infinite possibilities available for each of us [...]. One could say that Sappho and her maids live their genuinely existential or ecstatic being-alongside or togetherness with the full awareness, however, that their blessed condition is fragile, vulnerable, and bound to an ineluctable end" (Author 2018b: 221).

On the other hand, in a forthcoming essay, I argue that the presence of death lurks behind every romantic effort made by Sappho throughout *Long Ago*. Her mortal awareness manifests itself through the symbolism of bees and honey, the cryptic language of flowers, the anthropomorphisation of nature, and even the lyricisation of a decaying body that sings its own death. Although Sappho lives on, her life not only integrates the certainty of death as her most inevitable possibility: it is consubstantial and concurrent with death itself. In Heideggerian terms, Sappho is always already

dying. In living she dies. Her ongoing death does not constitute a mere natural and general fact of existence: it is lyrically represented as a lived experience. Put otherwise, Sappho is living her death throughout *Long Ago*. As she speaks and sings her lyrics, she composes her own decomposition. Accordingly, it would be no exaggeration to state that *Long Ago* could be read as a narrative of being-towards-death or as a thanatography whereby Sappho lives and writes her own death as though the very act of living-as-writing were concurrent with the process of dying.

It follows from this essay that the Michael Fields had such a profound ontological understanding of poetry, authorship, life and death, that they transcended the thinkers with whom they were most familiar and even anticipated a *Weltanschauung* that can be put into a fruitful dialogue with Heidegger's fundamental ontology on the basis of several commonalities: reverence for Greece, deconstruction of individuality, defence of aesthetic existentialism, original reconceptualisation of time, and more importantly in my view, dismantling of the artificial dichotomy between life and death. I suspect that what seems very promising now is the possibility of re-opening such a fecund dialogue with other works of Michael Field's large corpus and reading them in the light of Heidegger's deconstructive philosophy.

Works Cited

- Baker, Sarah and Ana P. Vadillo, eds. 2019. *Michael Field: Decadent Moderns*. Ohio: Ohio University Press.
- Bergk, Theodor. 1882. *Poetae Lyrici Graeci*. Vol. 3. Leipzig: Teubner.
- Blain, Virginia. 1996. "Michael field, the two-headed nightingale: Lesbian Text as Palimpsest." *Women's History Review* 5 (2): 239-257.
- Carel, Havi. 2006. *Life and Death in Freud and Heidegger*. Amsterdam: Rodopi.
- Author. 2018a.
- Carel, Havi. 2018b.
- Ehnenn, Jill R. 2008. *Women's Literary Collaboration, Queerness and Late-Victorian Culture*. London: Routledge.
- Evangelista, Stefano. 2009. *British Aestheticism and the Ancient Greece: Hellenism, Reception, Gods in Exile*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Feild, Michael. 1889. *Long Ago*. London: George Bell and Sons.
- Feild, Michael. 1933. *Works and Days: From the Journal of Michael Field*. Edited by T. Sturge Moore. London: John Murray.
- Friedman, Dustin. 2019. *Before Queer Theory: Victorian Aestheticism and the Self*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Heidegger, Martin. 1962 (1927). *Being and Time*. Translated by John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson. New York: Harper Perennial.
- Heidegger, Martin. 1981. *Nietzsche*. Vol. 1. Translated by David Farrell Krell. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.

- Kedney, John Steinfort. 1885. *Hegel's Aesthetics: A Critical Exposition*. Chicago: S. C. Griggs & Co.
- Leighton, Angela. 1992. *Victorian Women Poets: Writing Against the Heart*. Oxford: Harvester Wheatsheaf.
- Madden, Ed. 2008. *Tiresian Poetics: Modernism, Sexuality, Voice, 1888-2001*. Madison: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press.
- Michelman, Stephen. 2010. *The A to Z of Existentialism*. Plymouth: Scarecrow Press.
- Nietzsche, Friedrich. 1999. *The Birth of Tragedy and Other Writings*. Edited and translated by Raymond Geuss and Ronald Speirs. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- O'Gorman, Francis. 1998. "Browning's Manuscript Revisions to Michael Field's *Long Ago* (1889)." *Browning Society Notes* 25: 38-44.
- Olverson, D. Tracy. 2010. *Women Writers and the Dark Side of Late-Victorian Hellenism*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Prins, Yopie. 1999. *Victorian Sappho*. New Jersey: Princeton University Press.
- Ricketts, Charles. 1975. *Michael Field*. Edited by Paul Delaney. The Tragara Press.
- Snodgrass, Chris. 2007. "Keeping Faith: Consistency and Paradox in the World View of Michael Field." In Margaret Stetz and Cheryl A. Wilson. 2007, 171-180.
- Stetz, Margaret D. and Cheryl A. Wilson, eds. 2007. *Michael Field and Their World*. Birmingham: The Rivendale Press.
- Stillinger, Jack. 1991. *Multiple Authorship and the Myth of Solitary Genius*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Sturgeon, Mary. 1922. *Michael Field*. London: George G. Harrap & Co.
- Thain, Marion. 2000. *'Michael Field' and Poetic Identity*. London: The Eighteen Nineties Society.
- Thain, Marion. 2007. *'Michael Field' Poetry, Aestheticism, and the Fin de Siècle*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Thain, Marion and Ana Parejo Vadillo, eds. 2009. *Michael Field, The Poet. Published and Manuscript Materials*. Toronto: Broadview Editions.
- Thomas, Kate. 2007. "What Time We Kiss": Michael Field's Queer Temporalities." *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 13 (2): 327-351.
- Vadillo, Ana Parejo. 2000. "Sight and Song: Transparent Translations and a Manifesto for the Observer." *Victorian Poetry* 38 (1): 15-34.
- Vadillo, Ana Parejo. 2015. "This hot-house of decadent chronicle': Michael Field, Nietzsche and the Dance of Modern Poetic Drama." *Women: A Cultural Review*, vol. 26 (3): 195-220.
- Wrathall, Mark. 2014. *How to Understand Heidegger*. New York: Granta Books.
- Wharton, Henry T. 1885. *Sappho: Memoir, Text, Selected Renderings and a Literal Translation*. London: John Lane Company.
- White, Christine. 1996. "The Tiresian Poet: Michael Field." *Victorian Women Poets: A Critical Reader*. In Angela Leighton 1992, 148-61.
- White, Christine. 1996. "Flesh and Roses: Michael Field's Metaphors of Pleasure and Desire." *Women's Writing* 3 (1): 47-62.
- White, Christine. 1990. "Poets and Lovers Evermore": Interpreting Female Love in the Poetry and Journals of Michael Field." *Textual Practice* 4 (2): 197-212.