The trace I leave to me means at once my death, to come or already come, and the hope that it will survive me. It is not an ambition of immortality; it is fundamental. I leave here a bit of paper, I leave, I die; it is impossible to exit this structure; it is the unchanging form of my life. Every time I let something go, I live my death in writing. An extreme process; we exert ourselves without knowing whom exactly the thing we leave behind is confided to. Who is going to inherit, and how? It is a question that one can pose oneself today more than ever.

Jacques Derrida, The Last Interview

Sappho’s Fragment 55 has reached us through three sources: Plutarch quotes parts of it twice claiming, in one of the cases, that it was addressed to an uneducated woman, and, in the second case, that the addressee was a rich woman; according to Stobeus, once again, the poem was addressed to a woman of no education. In

* I would like to thank Nevena Panova for our inspiring discussions of the Greek texts.
Miglena Nikolchina Questions of Immortality in a Fragment by Sappho

this fragment Sappho, who elsewhere describes herself as having a sweet nature without malice, is rather harsh. As Anne Carson pertinently puts it, “Sappho’s poem threatens the woman with an obliteration which it then enacts by not naming her”.¹ The fragment, in fact, rather gleefully envisions the other woman dead:

καθόνοισα δὲ κείση γούδε ποτα μναμοσύνα σέθεν ἐσσετ’ γούδε ~ποκ’~ψτερον· οὐ γὰρ πεδέχης βρόδον τῶν ἕκ Πιερίας ἀλλ’ ἀφάνης κάν Ἄιδα δόμωι φοιτάσης πεδ’ ἀμαύρων νεκύων ἐκπεποταμένα.

“You will lie completely dead forever and there will be no memory of you, neither then nor later because you have no share in the roses, the ones from Pieria, but even in Hades’ kingdom you will wander unnoticed, flitting among the shadowy dead.”²

Unlike other bits, large and small, of Sappho’s writing, this one seems to present few problems for translation. The roses from Pieria must be poems – Pieria is a place at the foot of Olympus where the goddess of memory, Mnemosyne, gave birth to the Muses. Somewhat bluntly, Sappho is envisioning her interlocutor dead and forgotten because she has nothing to do with the muses.

A Share in the Roses

And yet, this transparency is misleading because it conceals the mysterious obverse of what is being said. If death and oblivion result from having no share in the roses of Pieria, whatever does the having of such a share incur? Does the fragment project the death and oblivion of the rival against the prospect of their
Identities

transcendence? If “you” will lie dead because you have no share in the roses, does it mean that “I”, granted I have a share, won’t? If I somewhat blithely remind you of your inexorable death, does it mean that I will somehow eschew the condition of ever lying dead? Or does it simply mean that there will be memory of me but not of you? It is said, further, that “also in the palace of Hades” the woman with no share in the roses will be unnoticed. She is unnoticed here and now, she is unnoticed at the moment of her death and later, but there, in hell, she will also be unnoticed. If we assume that all these things that will happen to the “you” in the poem, distinguish the “you” from the “me,” because I have a share in the roses, the poem implies the following claims:

“I will not lie dead ever and there will be memory of me now and always because I have a share in the roses, the ones from Pieria, and even in Hades’ kingdom I will not wander unnoticed.”

Еднинна или множина

Овде сеприсутна е гордоста, гордост од која се стравува, но и честопати се воспева во грчката култура. Сафо е убедена дека таа нема да го допре небото (F 52), што од друга страна посочува дека самата помисла да се допре небото ја прикажува како жена на која Афродита й приоѓа на помош, й се обраќа по име и ја слуша во нејзините соништа. Ако некогаш постоела поетеса која била убедена дека дарбата на боговите нема да ја уништи како молњата што ја запалила Семела (види ја песната на Хелдерлин „На поетите“) - тогаш тоа била Сафо. Ти си далеку, но моите стихови те враќаат овде; се разделуваме, но радоста што ја искусивме кога бевме

Singular or Plural

There is an aura of hubris here, the hubris so very much dreaded and so frequently perpetrated in Greek culture. Sappho’s assurance that she will not try to touch the sky (F 52) indicates that the thought of touching the sky, nevertheless, presented itself to the woman who had Aphrodite rush to her help, address her by name, and listen to her in her dreams. If there ever was a poet confident that the gift of the gods would not strike her down as the lightning that burnt Semele (see Hoelderlin’s poem ‘To the Poets’) – here she was. You are away but my verses bring you back here; we part but the joys we had together are forever; I am in pain but here is my voice creating moments of incorruptible bliss – how can it be
that I, who converse with the gods, should be subject to old age, death, and oblivion?

The implicit claims of F 55, remarkable for their hubris, might, however, be understood to be either in the singular, or in the plural. Due to the fragmentariness of the Greek poetry that has survived it is frequently difficult to know with certainty who is speaking – or singing. Is it the poet him/herself, or is s/he impersonating somebody? To complicate things further, Sappho’s poems might be sung by a chorus, which uses “I” as part of everybody else, or by a soloist who says “we” in order to subsume other persons in her statement. Since we are dealing with fragments, there is always a dose of uncertainty as to the way one should read the “I” or the “we”. Beyond the uncertainties, there is for sure a rotation of the singular and the plural in the intimate circle of friends that Sappho’s poetry so frequently implies. Instead of lamenting the fragmentariness, we might surrender ourselves to the fascinating plasticity, the hypnotic fluidity of “I” and “we.” This fluidity – the fluidity of the merging and separation of singing voices – gives way to a crisp and brittle aloneness in moments of crisis (“in silence my tongue is broken”, F 31) or defiance (“some say ... but I say”, F 16). Pleasure seems to pluralize the subject, pain and thinking impose the singular on it, a singular, which is then subjected to conflict and division (“I do not know what to do, I have two minds”, F 51). In F 147, which could be read as one of the explicit statements of the implicit claims in F 55 – the hope of being remembered in the future – the “I say” is juxtaposed to the “us” who will be remembered:
I say even hereafter people will remember us ...
These values as a rule exclude women from the devices that compensate men for their mortality. Women are so strikingly deprived of a “share” in those devices both in the epic world and in the subsequent system of values of the polis that in her study of Greek attitudes towards death Katerina Kolozova rightfully asks whether women (along with slaves and foreigners) had any consolation at all in the face of annihilation. The reworking of the epic priorities in Sappho’s lyric involves conceptual shifts that challenge this exclusion. It is both as a mortal being and as a woman that Sappho looks for a route beyond death and oblivion. To put it differently, she conceptualizes immortality in a manner that would make it accessible to women. The irony is that, while the trends she was the first to articulate prevailed, their relevance for women and Sappho’s role in their elaboration were practically lost.

Can One be Noticed in Hell?

Everybody will lie dead one day: Greek culture was especially emphatic about this predicament of humans. The shade of the faceless woman – unnoticed, unrecognized and, perhaps, lacking any appearance at all – flitting among the pale shades of the dead belongs to a vision of hell which we find in Homer and which persists until late into antiquity in spite of orphic trends, on the one hand, and developments in philosophy, on the other. For all that we know, it is likely that in hell the shades cannot recognize anybody at all as a matter of
principle. Rainer Maria Rilke seems to espouse this view in his poem ‘Orpheus, Eurydice, Hermes’: when Hermes says sadly to Eurydice “He turned back” (by turning back to make sure Eurydice’s dead soul is following him, Orpheus lost the chance of returning her to the world of the living), Eurydice simply answers “Who?”.

Homer, however, is not so definitive. The emphasis on Lethe and forgetfulness – which could, according to Orphic sources, be countered by the ones who knew – is not fully operative in the episode with Odysseus’ visit to Erebus. The dead souls Odysseus meets remember their own stories and are able to appreciate the news he can give them. True, they need to drink the blood of a black ram and a black ewe in order to acquire the measure of vitality that will allow them to talk to Odysseus. If Odysseus wants to communicate with the shade of his dead mother, he should allow her access to the blood, the prophet Teiresias tells him. And yet, Teiresias recognizes Odysseus even before being allowed to partake of the blood. So does Ajax who sullenly refuses to taste the blood because he is still angry with things which Odysseus did to him in his lifetime. We see Achilles’ soul stroll away happily through the fields of asphodel after he hears good news about his son: clearly, he can keep the memory of what he has been told. It is as if the shades’ refusing to speak to the rare visitors from outside is not the result of real amnesia but just a ruse to make them feed them.

They cannot feed themselves; they are next to invisible (pale, indistinct, insubstantial); and they are deprived of touch. Odysseus is grieved by the impossibility of embracing his mother who gives him a briefing on the condition of the dead person’s soul “flitting away as if it...
were a dream”. This tasteless, colourless, flimsy manner of being is dismal enough. There is no doubt that “[…] the Hellenic world of the dead is not a site at which any sort of an ‘after-life’ is taking place.”5 Apart from his heel, Achilles is probably best remembered for telling Odysseus that it is better to be a servant in a poor man’s house but alive, rather than a king in the kingdom of the dead. Sappho’s wry comment is that if death were not an evil, the gods would choose to die. (F 201)

And yet, some manner of distinction does remain in the netherworld. Odysseus is quick to notice it. Some are punished, others are privileged. Heracles is, in fact, not there at all! In hell, there is just the semblance of his shade; he is actually up there, with the Olympian gods. And there are also the famous women – those whom the gods loved and who gave birth to famous sons. Odysseus is especially curious to hear their stories. Elysium, a very different afterlife realm of bliss and plenty, is mentioned elsewhere in the poem as the place for the lucky ones. There is, too, the still disputed issue of the precise beginnings of mystery trends that would promise to their adepts a happy life after death and the prospect of reincarnation. Some researchers believe they can be pushed back to the 7th/6th century, to Sappho’s times. It is believed, moreover, that the Western coasts of Asia Minor, Lesbos’s closest neighbour, were the centre from which such ideas emanated. In certain cases the link between Sappho’s poetry and Orphism (Orpheus’s head is said to have been carried by the sea to Lesbos) is taken for granted.6 Sappho’s longing for the cool waters of the lotus-covered hell river Acheron (F 95) is explicitly connected to her chagrin with life that opens the landscapes of the netherworld as a country of desire. Her hope that having a share in the roses might make one eminent in hell should be read literally.
Remembered Hereafter

Homer’s man had one chance to triumph over his mortality: being remembered for his excellence and, preferably, death in battle. Being remembered, however, requires yet another figure, the instrument of memory *per se*: the poet. The hero is hence necessarily redoubled: he cannot be without the poet; he is a hero-cum-poet. This redoubling is staged in *The Odyssey* where the blind poet Demodok appears at the banquet to sing of Odysseus who is actually present there and listens to the glorification of his own deeds. Odysseus then says he places Demodok “above all mortals” because of his intimacy with the muses. Exalted as he is, Demodok needs this confirmation from his hero as well as the meat that the hero cuts from his own portion to feed him. The hero-cum-poet is a symbiotic figure; they eat from the same plate and share the same deeds, but, with Homer, it is the hero who provides the food and the deeds.

Sappho re-conceptualizes this virile road to immortality by what seems to be a single stroke: she emancipates the poet from the hero. This may seem easier than it actually is. The confusions around F 16 illustrate the difficulty: in this fragment Sappho claims that some say a host of horsemen, or infantry, or ships (all items of war in the Homeric vein) are the most beautiful thing but she says it is the thing one desires. Commentators struggled with a number of details in this statement: why would Sappho mention enemy Lydian chariots as something someone would like to see as much as she
If the most beautiful thing is whatever one desires, then some may desire war, and some may desire love. Creating a value out of love marks a fundamental novelty in the Greek world. Its immediate effect is demonstrated in the poem where Helen provides a totally new perspective on the Trojan war: she, who is considered to be the most beautiful thing on earth, is no longer the pawn of contending armies but the one who forsakes everything for what she desires. Helen becomes the one who defines the most beautiful thing through her own desire; she becomes the subject of desire. By adding love to war as a possible “most beautiful” thing, Sappho clears space for female subjectivity and overwrites the Iliad story of heroes and battles with her own tempestuous story of renouncing everything for love.

Groundbreaking as this move is, Sappho’s does not stop here. In a compelling analysis of this poem Page duBois points out that Sappho wants to answer the question what is the most beautiful per se? The answer is a type of definition – the most beautiful is whatever one desires. “Sappho is progressing toward analytical language, toward the notion of definition [...] Her ability to do so coincides in time with the invention in the eastern Mediterranean, in nearby Lydia, of coined money, a step which Aristotle sees as enabling abstract thought....”

Ако најубавото нешто е она што човек го посакува, тогаш едни можеби посакуваат војна, а други посакуваат љубов. Создавањето вредност од љубовта е суштинска новост во грчкиот свет. Ефектот од овој пристап е прикажан во песната каде Елена дава соема инакво видување на Тројанската војна: таа, која се смета за најубавото нешто на светот, не е повеќе пион на освојувачките војски; таа остава сè за она што ја посакува. Елена е таа која дефинира што е најубаво преку своите сопствени желби, таа станува предмет на желба. Додавајќи ја љубовта кон војната како „најубаво“ нешто, Сафо отвора простор за женската субјективност и ја испишива приказната за хероите и битките од Илијадата преку својата бурна приказна за одрекување од сè во име на љубовта.

Иако овој потег е вистинска новост, Сафо продолжува понатаму. Во својата мощно интересна анализа на оваа песна Пејџ Дибуа (Page duBois) посочува дека Сафо бара одговор на прашањето што е убаво само по себе? Одговорот е еден вид дефиниција - најубавото е она што човек го посакува. „Сафо се стреми кон аналитички јазик, кон поимот за дефиниција [...] Ваквата нејзина способност временски се совпаѓа со изумот на кованите монети во источното Средоземје, во блиското кралство Лидија, чекор на
put it differently, Sappho does not simply replace war with love or add love to war as yet another most beautiful thing. As a poet she does not, consequently, replace the hero with the beloved in the symbiotic vein described above. Later ages will do it – of course, not naively but sentimentally, in a more or less mauvais fois.

Sappho is interested in a further move. Whatever one desires is whatever one remembers – in this case, it is Anactoria whom Sappho would see rather than “your” Lydian chariots. Whatever one remembers is whatever one sings. This “whatever” is empty in itself. It can be filled by the hero or by the beloved – in itself, it is open. It is the loving – the desiring – that makes it. By shifting the emphasis onto whatever one desires, Sappho displaces it onto the poet who desires, remembers, and sings.

It has often been claimed that it is not yet love, the thing that Sappho sings, that it is just physiology and sensuous pleasure. The answer is that, perhaps, it is not ultimately love that Sappho is after. Centuries later, a priestess, Diotima, will appear in Plato’s Symposium to assert that whatever we desire beyond this or that beautiful thing is immortality.

Now we can go back to the roses of Pieria. For memory, mother of the muses, is the poet’s share. It is not the having a share in just any roses that guarantees being remembered. More specifically, it is not the having a share in the roses of Aphrodite, of the pains and pleasures of love, although Sappho’s poetry refers constantly to these roses. It is the having a share in those roses,
the ones from Pieria, that will make people remember you *hereafter*. Sappho utilizes her position as a female subject of desire in order to emancipate the poet.

**I will not Lie Dead**

This discovery will stand, although not for women. Could “woman” be the symbolic reservoir propelling the struggles for the always shifting horizons of human freedom? Sappho, in any case, goes yet another step further, a step which is, from a certain point of view, even more dramatic. While emancipating the poet from his symbiosis with the hero, she tries, also, to reject the tragic aspect of the solution to human mortality, exemplified by Achilles’ choice to die young and famous rather than old but unknown. He *has to* die young if he wants to earn glory, the only type of immortality allowed to humans – the hero is a dead hero; heroic beauty is epitomized by the beautiful corpse.

The mere replacement of war with love cannot purge this tragic ambiguity: love, after all, is at least as “bitter-sweet”, ambiguous, monstrous, and ultimately tragic, as the wager of the hero.

By placing immortality under the sign of the muses rather than love, Sappho tries to do away with ambiguity. Sorrow is out of place where the muses dwell. (F 150) If the muses favour you – and if you want to be favoured by them – you should stay clear of misery.
Now, this is a difficult, an impossible precept – difficult for Sappho, to begin with. Pindar seems to have majestically followed it; Hoelderlin went mad under its light, thunderstruck. “Alas, if my heart bleeds wounded by itself.” With the hero gone, his ambiguous lot stayed with those who live their death in writing.

Notes:


4. Ibid., 71.

5. Ibid., 13.


9. Кажано со типичната терминологија на рускиот научник А. Ф. Лосев во јазикот на Сафо постојат елементи со „физиолошка, суштинско еротска содржина” (цит. во Т.Г. Мякин, op.crt., 64).

References:


