Loss Created: H.D.’s Translation of Sappho’s Fragments

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Sappho’s influence on the poetry of Hilda Doolittle, alias H.D., has received much critical attention,¹ and various scholarly works on this topic have shed light on such themes as H.D.’s indebtedness to Hellenism, the function of Sapphistry in her work, as well as its bisexual poetics, among others.² Largely characterized as modernist “refabrications”³ or “expansions,”⁴ H.D.’s translation of Sappho’s fragments has garnered little examination as an actual work of translation, but precisely because it operates at the extremity of licentiousness,⁵ H.D.’s translation reveals much more about the nature of translation than is commonly assumed. Under the assumed continuity of a unitary Western literature that spans from classical Greek to modern English, such as is envisioned by the likes of T. S. Eliot, Sappho fits in neatly as H.D.’s lyrical predecessor; the Hellenistic and Sapphistic connections are intuitive enough. But one must also not elide the inherent problem in any translation of Sappho: namely, her work survives only in fragments, and many of her lines still remain lost. Remarkably, the lyrics of Sappho that H.D. chooses to translate—Fragments 113, 36, 40, 41, and 68—are perhaps the most fragmentary of the fragments. Furthermore, even when the fragments retain a relatively larger number of lines intact, H.D. tends to fragment them into smaller pieces by excising the original with ellipses and then extrapolates or extends those small pieces, prompting
the aforementioned critical characterizations of her translation as creative refurbishings rather than genuine translations. In a sense, the problem of translating Sappho is similar to the one Jonathan Abel describes in his essay on *The Tales of Genji*; just like the case of *The Tales of Genji*, translations of Sappho too “disallow presumptions about translation that posits the translated as superior, sacred, and original” despite many translators’ claims of their intent to recapture the “original.” Translation has long been discussed in terms of loss—as Emily Apter states, it is one of the “primal truisms of translation” that “something is always lost in translation,” whereby the act of translation becomes synonymous with an act of compensation that is bound to fall short of the original—and Sappho literalizes this figurative loss that translation entails: her fragments represent the consummate absence of the very original that the translation is supposed to redeem. Given this literalized loss of the original, H.D.’s translation of Sappho effectively calls into question the conventional understanding of translation as a compensatory mechanism in which the translation somehow “makes up” for the illegibility of the original work; instead, it proposes a conception of translation as a creation—a creation of loss that gives birth to the original through signification of its privation, or a creation of “afterlife” that creates the life past.

This “afterlife” expresses itself throughout H.D.’s translation of the Sappho fragments. One of the recurring themes in H.D.’s Sappho fragments translations is the impulse to create a state of loss as a method of holding off the totalizing absence: the poems forge the fiction of loss, rather than resigning themselves to a
state of nothingness, as though to suggest that, if we could make a claim that we had “lost” something, that object could plausibly be imagined to have existed in the past.\textsuperscript{9} This theme of the desire to inscribe a loss is the most immediately visible element in Fragment 113, which starts with an epigraph, “Neither honey nor bee for me”:

Not honey,  
not the plunder of the bee  
from meadow or sand-flower  
or mountain bush;  
from winter-flower or shoot  
born of the later heat:  
not honey, not the sweet  
stain on the lips and teeth:  
not honey, not the deep  
plunge of soft belly  
and the clinging of the gold-edged  
pollen-dusted feet\textsuperscript{…} \textsuperscript{10} (1-12)

Because of the placement of the word of negation, “not,” either at the beginning of the line or right after the caesura, the word gains a strong stress throughout the poem, given the metrical property of the line break or line breakage, such as caesurae, that often act as a weak-stressed syllable to be followed by a strong stress. In other words, the poem underscores through its syntax the theme of negation and privation. In fact, the word “not” is the one constancy that keeps haunting the poem; the objects of negation—
honey, the bee, the sweet stain on the lips and teeth, the deep plunge of soft belly, the clinging of the feet, all merely enumerated and catalogued by a conjunctive word “or,” which equalizes them and makes them, in effect, indistinguishable from one another—keep shifting, blurring into one another and passing through the scenery like a phantasmagoria.

This sense of loss is inherent in the very fragment on which this translation is based, due to the circumstances of the fragment’s survival; reportedly, only the epigraph “Neither honey nor bee for me” is all that has survived of the poem, and only in quotations by later authors, since its “main body… was burned by the medieval church.”¹¹ This translation, in a sense, issues forth from the practical void of the original, and even the germ of its original, the epigraph, survived in the works of other authors as a quotation, like a transplanted organ inside someone else’s body. If, through miracles of stem-cell research and science fiction, we were to have a way of reconstructing a whole person from his or her sole surviving organ inside someone else’s body, the newly constructed person would not, by all means, be the same individual as the deceased who left that organ; he or she will have a mind of his or her own and, despite some likely resemblance of appearance, will be a completely different person: a new person. Similarly—since translations of historical nature “emerge from a past no longer directly accessible, and at the same time reach toward a future where a cultural survival is sought”¹²—a translation that issues from the death of the original is neither a reconstruction nor a recapitulation of the original but instead a construction, a creation.
This sense of a created something, of a presence in the midst of all the losses and absences—similar to that of the Cartesian cogito after all things are stripped down and negated, a sense that “body, shape, extension, movement, and place are all chimeras” and that “nothing is certain”\textsuperscript{13}—is what the closing stanza of Fragment 113 captures:

not iris—old desire—old passion—
old forgetfulness—old pain—
not this, nor any flower,
but if you turn again,
seek strength of arm and throat,
touch as the god;
eglect the lyre-note;
knowing that you shall feel,
about the frame
no trembling of the string
but heat, more passionate
of bone and the white shell
and fiery tempered steel. \textsuperscript{(131-132: 31-43)}

After the negation of all things in the preceding lines, the last three lines confirm a presence through a kind of double negative syntax of “not… but...”. The first two lines of the stanza compartmentalize each of the “old” elements—desire, passion, forgetfulness, pain—in isolation inside dashes, effectively putting them to death through disconnection from all meaningful matters. Although the rest of the stanza too consists of sentence fragments, they are supplied
with a number of grammatical markers that indicate a sustained syntax—such as conjunctions like “but” and subordinations like “if” —and their integration into the system of meaning, as well as their interconnection between one another. Through the death of the old and through the reconstruction of senses, the one thing that the speaker insists “you” will feel, the one ascertainable thing amidst all the other chimerical matters that are negated, is the “heat” —the essential kind that is like a bone, a kind of fire that tempers and gives birth to steel. From this ending, one gleans a sense of steadfastness, of certain loyalty: an unwavering core stripped of all inessentials.

The language of loyalty in this poem is that of marriage; in fact, Sappho’s fragment 113 is compiled in the “Epithalamia, Bridal Songs” section in Wharton’s text, which is the text H.D. used herself. Wharton’s text annotates that the fragment is a “wish for good unmixed with evil” usually by the bride: an expression of faithfulness. Fragment 113 has been conventionally interpreted as a love poem, which is hardly a surprise; as Charles Martindale states, “our current interpretations of ancient texts, whether or not we are aware of it, are, in complex ways, constructed by the chain of receptions through which their continued readability has been effected,” and this “chain of receptions” as regards to Sappho is that she “has been traditionally seen as the consummate poet of eros, specifically, of eros crisis,” as evident in Swinburne’s characterization of her as “Love’s priestess, mad with pain and joy of song, / Song’s priestess, mad with joy and pain of love.” H.D.’s refabrication or expansion of Sappho’s fragment 113 is, therefore, in keeping with the conventional interpretations and translations.
of Sappho: an unwavering, faithful love.

Regardless of whether H.D. is conscious of it or not—and one should always be judicious in deducing any authorial knowledge or intent—the language of love and marriage is, and has been, a metonym for the language of translation: that is, in translation theory, we commonly assess translations in terms of their “fidelity”—a word with a strong marital connotation—and “license”—also a word with a less but still unmistakable overtone of extramarital sexuality, as in its variant, “licentious.” Furthermore, it almost goes without saying that the language of love and the language of poesy have always been interconnected through conflation. Whether or not H.D. intended this effect can be debated, likely without any firm resolution, but nonetheless, this marital language opens up a possibility for a reading of Fragment 113 as a kind of a statement about translation. Just like the unwavering core of love stripped of all inessentials, H.D.’s translation is an attempt to strip of all inessentials and to pare Sappho’s fragment down to its very essence, to which her translation will be faithful like the fire that tempers the steel. H.D.’s Fragment 113 expresses a fiery, steely kind of devotion to the effort to find the object of faith, analogous to Descartes’ stringent self-negation that uncovers the undeniable core of oneself.

The real question in translation theory, of course, is: what is it in the original that a translator is being, or trying to be, faithful to? For sometime, the question of “fidelity” was a discussion between the word-for-word approach and sense-for-sense approach, but with the discovery of Walter Benjamin in the latter half of the twentieth century, we have come to be cognizant of another
kind of fidelity, which makes obsolete the debate between fidelity and license in the conventional sense: “Sie besteht darin, diejenige Intention auf die Sprache, in die übersetzt wird, zu finden, von der aus in ihr das Echo des Originals erweckt wird” [The task of the translator consists in finding that intended effect upon the language into which he is translating in it the echo of the original]. In short, the true “fidelity” of translation is directed toward the “intended effect” or essence of the original.

In the absence of the original to be redeemed, H.D.’s Fragment 113 creates the original and remains faithful to it. For H.D., translation is “the basic formulation of her writing practice”; writing a poem of her own and translating a poem of someone else are, somehow, parts of the same enterprise. There is, in other words, in H.D.’s translations a sense of loyalty or adherence to that which begs to be created—faithfulness to a kind of Benjaminian “essence” or “universal language” that, in his vision, all translations should participate as a part of. Mysticism is no doubt a part of Benjamin’s view of translation, and the same appears to apply to H.D., who articulates her own vision of the “task of the translator” in her novel, *Bid Me to Live*:

She brooded over each word, as if to hatch it. Then she tried to forget each word, for “translations” enough existed and she was no scholar. She did not want to “know” Greek in that sense. She was like one blind, reading the texture of incised letters, rejoicing like one blind who knows an inner light, a reality that the outer eye cannot grasp…

Anyone can translate the meaning of the word. She
wanted the shape, the feel of it, the character of it, as if it had been freshly minted.20

The explicit message of the passage is the rejection of word-for-word translation; thinly masked as a feminine bashfulness that is characteristic of the modernist period—“she was no scholar”—H.D.’s portrayal of “translations” in quotation marks is dismissive enough, since, after all, anyone “can translate the meaning of the word.” In place of the conventional, faithful word-for-word approach, the image of translation as an act of creation abounds in this excerpt; although the first reptilian image of birthing—“hatch”—ends in a redoing and she would try “to forget” those words that are hatched out of her brooding, H.D. appears to find an expression she looks for in the second image of creation, of minting something “freshly”: a creation of something new, with an echo of the modernist slogan, “make it new.” Minting, however, is a peculiar kind of creation; the process of creating a new “freshly minted” material involves, especially in the manufacture of monetary coins, a presence of its source or essence, such as a stamp or a frame. The relationship between the stamp and a coin in minting is similar to Plato’s idea and form: an existence of a hidden, unmentioned model becomes the source of all created forms. This theme of a hidden or incommunicable model that exists outside of our immediate ken manifests itself in the persistent image of blindness, to which H.D. calls attention by repeating the phrase “one blind”—something inaccessible by “outer eyes” and only available to those who possess the “inner light.”

If we compare H.D.’s description of the activity of a translator
with that of Benjamin’s task of the translator, many of the same themes adumbrate themselves:

In all languages and their creations there remains, beyond the communicable, something incommunicable, something symbolizing or symbolized, according to context. Symbolizing only, in the ultimate creations of the languages; symbolized, in the evolutions of the languages themselves. And what seeks to come forward, indeed to come to birth, in the evolution of the languages is the germ of universal language. But if this germ, though hidden and fragmentary, is nonetheless present in actual life as that which is symbolized, it exists in works of art only in the form of its symbolic representation. If the final essence, which is universal language itself, is in individual languages confined to the linguistic and its transformations, then in works of art it suffers from the burden of an alien sense. To free it… is the unique power of translation.21

The images similar to those of the H.D. passage are imminently visible in the Benjamin passage: the ubiquitous birth image; the image of a larger essence, or the source of all things, described as the “germ of universal language”; the image of something beyond the communicable, beyond the reach of one’s cognition or awareness. Particularly H.D.-esque in the passage is the distillation of the plural “languages” into a singular “germ” of “universal language.” That the translators omit any article in front of “universal language” signifies that they interpret the intended effect of
the phrase “universal language” as something that embodies conceptuality, as opposed to particularity: like the stamp in minting, or the Platonic “idea.” The dialectical syntheses between individuals and the collective, between the plurals and the singular core, suggest, on one hand, a drive toward minimalism—a current of modernist aesthetics of which H.D. was a prominent part—and, on the other hand, the multiplicity or heterogeneity within the singular. This sense of an “alien” other is what Benjamin expounds on in the last two sentences of this passage; “universal language” manifests itself in individual languages as a kind of foreign other, for it contains within it the elements that are not native in that particular language. The task of translation is to give this vague foreignness a clarity and coherence that unburden the language, thereby bringing it closer toward the essence that is “universal language.”

This presence of the foreign other within the thing that is supposed to be a unified self becomes the main theme and crisis of Fragment 36. Like Fragment 113, Sappho’s fragment 36 is another piece that survived in quotes, by the Stoic philosopher Chrysippus; all that remains of the original is the line, “I know not what to do; my mind is divided.” In H.D.’s rendition of the poem, the line from the original becomes the refrain at the beginning of each stanza, highlighting the sense of bewilderment and self-split that paralyzes the speaker:

I know not what to do,
my mind is reft:
is song’s gift best?
is love’s gift loveliest?

I know not what to do,
now sleep has pressed
weight on your eyelids...²² (1-7)

The situation described in the poem is straightforward enough; gazing at the beloved who sleeps beside her, the speaker debates with herself whether to pursue the beloved or stop. The internal debate stems from the self-split: there is a self that wants one thing, and there is the other self that wants something else. There is, however, a further split: namely, the self that observes and speaks of the self-split, otherwise known as a state of dedoublement.²³ In other words, the lyric speaker’s utterance about herself reveals the seed of self-fragmentation, sowed in the enlightenment definition of the modern subject as a self-defining agent; when the self has the agency to define itself, the self becomes divided into the self that creates and the self that is created. In this manner, the subject becomes both a subject and an object, simultaneously self and other:²⁴ a native self and a foreign self that the native self recognizes as alien.

This sense of an unrecognized self, or a self outside of the control of the self, is captured by the word choice, “reft,” which replaces the word “divided” in the Wharton edition. The word “reft” carries a stronger connotation of the forcible nature of the act and a keen awareness that there is an active agent who has taken that action; whereas the word “divided” is imminently compatible, and even comfortable, with a passive tense and a
lack of the agent who effects the act—that is, when reading the line “my mind is divided,” not many of us would wonder who is dividing the speaker's mind—the word “reft” forces us to look for the agent of that action, and it is a highly uncomfortable word in a passive tense without the subject. In other words, “reft” inevitably invokes a sense of some unknown force that controls the self. This sense of the incontrollable is partly a love-lyric cliché; we have heard it so many times, in pop-music and love songs and the like, the phrases along the line of “I can't help but keep loving you” or “I feel so crazy” or “fly me to the moon and let me sing among the stars.” Suffice it to say, it is rather quite astonishing that those seemingly unthinking teenagers and soap-opera watchers and robotic financial analysts are daily exposed to the process of dedoublement and self-fragmentation, perhaps without knowing. But more to the point, the poem foregrounds the sense of the alien other within the self through its rendition of the divided mind.

The crisis of the poem’s self-division occurs in stanza 7, when the poem goes into an allegorical wrestling match that portrays the mind in a divisive paralysis:

My mind is quite divided,
my minds hesitate,
so perfect matched,
I know not what to do:
each strives with each
as two white wrestlers
standing for a match,
ready to turn and clutch
yet never shake muscle nor nerve nor tendon;
so my mind waits
to grapple with my mind,
yet I lie quiet,
I would seem at rest.²⁶

The speaker’s singular “mind” turns into a plural “minds” in the first two lines of the stanza, following her proclamation that her mind is “divided”; with the addition of the word “quite,” the poem signals the height of tension in self-fragmentation. The mystical wrestling match—the one that turns into a stalemate, for the two are “so perfect matched”—recalls the image of Jacob and his wrestling match with a mysterious figure, a stalemate, one in which he “wrestled a man with him until the breaking of the day” and from which Jacob pries out a blessing from the mystery figure;²⁷ the poem hints at the speaker’s feeling that, somehow, if this deadlock were resolved, she would move toward some type of blessing, some type of a desirable outcome. Nevertheless, the speaker’s mind “waits / to grapple,” hesitating to engage with itself. In this scene, too, we see another layer of self-fragmentation: the self that wants to engage, and the self that hesitates; the self that foresees a blessing, and the self that, despite it, withdraws. The closing line of the stanza—“I would seem at rest”—is an irony, since, despite the appearance of rest and peacefulness, the mind, broken into multiple fragments, remains at war with itself.

This sense of hesitation or avoidance mirrors H.D.’s practice in translation of Sappho. Eileen Gregory notes “how scrupulously
H.D. avoids engagement with Sappho as a translator,” and asserts that H.D.’s attachment to the Wharton edition and its compendium of translations, despite the uncovering of Sappho manuscripts and publications of more complete editions, is a kind of avoidance in itself.\textsuperscript{28} On the Wharton edition, H.D. comments, “For myself I am superstitious. I feel that in the gallery or galaxy of translations of Sappho that particular translation of Swinburne is forever and ever wedded to that particular fragment.”\textsuperscript{29} H.D.’s remark suggests that there is a certain otherworldly, “superstitious” force at work in her attachment to the obsolete, anthologist Wharton edition that contains fewer lines of the “original” but more of past translations in its compendium. In fact, the reception of H.D.’s translation of Sappho as “expansion” or “refabrication” is strikingly similar to the charges thrown at Robert Lowell’s \textit{Imitations}, on which critics have variously commented as: “Nobody… is going to take this as straight translation”;\textsuperscript{30} “These were no ordinary translations but poems that just happened to closely resemble the originals”;\textsuperscript{31} or “many reviewers and critics have regarded \textit{Imitations} as a collection of more or less free translations.”\textsuperscript{32} In a way, just as Lowell attempts to come to terms with the condition of linguistic alienation and displacement in \textit{Imitations} by being “almost as free as the authors themselves in finding ways to make them ring right for” him\textsuperscript{33} and by avoiding the shackles of word-for-word or sense-for-sense notions of fidelity, H.D. prefers to work from a condition of privation of the original, in which the original is pared down to its bare essence and in which Sappho becomes more spectral and mediated than living and immediate.

H.D.’s preference for privation stems from her keen awareness
of the lost-ness of the original; there is a sense of stoic abstinence about avoiding an enticing, tantalizing illusion of presence, as exemplified by her translation of Fragment 40. H.D.’s Fragment 40, a poem about the bitter-sweet nature of love, states:

Keep love and he mocks,
ah, bitter and sweet,
your sweetness is more cruel
than your hurt.34 (9-12)

The sentiment here is one of classic lovesickness: the kind of “he won’t stay with me anyway so the false hope of sweetness is more cruel in the end” feeling. Hope, in a sense, becomes a spice that intensifies the taste of despair. To put it bluntly, the poem risks becoming a cliché; for that matter, any love poem can potentially be a cliché, but especially when words like “bitter-sweet” are used to describe “love” in a poem, it is hard to escape banality, no matter how best the writer tries to redeem the poem. Fragment 40 may not be one of H.D.’s stronger poems, but it does explain a sentiment that underlies her avoidance of straight translation, as well as her general sense of withdrawal and forbearance: in the face of a totalizing absence, the false or illusory hope for a presence is more hurtful than comforting.

This aspect of H.D.’s translation practice—the premise that the original is absent, and that its loss must be created in an effort to give a spectral birth into this realm of privation—foregrounds itself further in Fragment 68. In perhaps the most dramatic ellipsis of all fragments, H.D. reduces the entire Sappho fragment into one
line of epigraph. The Sappho fragment reads as follows in a prose translation:

But thou shalt ever lie dead, nor shall there be any remembrance of thee then or thereafter, for thou hast not of the roses of Pieria; but thou shalt wander obscure even in the house of Hades, flitting among the shadowy dead.35

H.D. distills the whole of the Sappho fragment into just six words by using an ellipsis: “… even in the house of Hades.” H.D. then expands the epigraph into a three-page poem, which has largely been interpreted as an expression of death wish; having already been slain both by love and by a rejection of her love, the speaker tells her soldier-lover how she envies him for his chance of death, for she herself would welcome her actual death.36 Critics have commented on the poem as “uncharacteristic of Sappho” because Sappho would never embrace death,37 but before branding the poem as a licentious fabrication, we may benefit from a closer examination of what “death” means in the poem. The poem consists of three parts: the first section narrates the speaker’s willingness to embrace death despite what it will bring to her; in the second section, the poet-speaker muses what death can bring to her that has not been brought about already; and in the third section, the speaker apparently speaks from the house of Hades, having been slain by the goddess. The “death” the poet-speaker envies seems to differ from her present condition of “death.” In the first section, H.D. writes:
I envy you your chance of death,
how I envy you this.
I am more covetous of him
even than of your glance,
I wish more from his presence
though he torture me in a grasp,
terrible, intense.

Though he clasp me in an embrace
that is set against my will
and rack me with his measure,
effortless yet full of strength,
and slay me
in that most horrible contest,
still, how I envy you your chance.

Though he pierce me—imperious—
iron—fever—dust—
though beauty is slain
when I perish,
I envy you death.

What is beauty to me?
has she not slain me enough,
have I not cried in agony of love,
birth, hate,
in pride crushed?
What is left after this?
what can death loose in me
after your embrace?
your touch,
your limbs are more terrible
to do me hurt.

What can death mar in me
that you have not?38

(I.1-32)

The first three stanzas narrate the tortuous nature of death, sandwiched by the speaker’s desire for death in spite of it: the classical images of torture abound, including clasping, rack, slaying, piercing, and other acts that mar her beauty. The organizing principle of this free verse is, aside from anaphora, the irregular but strategic placement of off-rhymes. The anaphora keeps placing the same words at line ends, such as “death” or “me,” to create rhyming effects, and in addition to producing sound-echoes throughout, the off-rhymes link several words and their ideas to create a kind of imagistic syncopation. For instance, in stanza 4, the words “love” and “enough” are linked by the off-rhyme, which carries across the sense of “enough”-ness—a sense of plentitude, exhaustion, and weariness—from the suffering of being slain in line 21 to the act of crying in agony of love in line 22; even though the word “enough” modifies “slain” and not “cried,” we feel as though the speaker is saying that she has cried in agony enough, on top of being slain enough. In other words, through the off-rhyme, the two actions merge into one, like the piano sounds blurring into
Likewise, there is another set of words that a rhyme interconnects: “presence” and “intense.” The intensity of the torture and the intensity of presence blur into one another, as though to say: death endows the speaker with a presence she covets, in the process of torture—death enables the speaker to exist, even if only as an object of torture. Although death is commonly seen as something that causes a loss, the idea of death as a proof of life is not so counter-intuitive; as a transitive verb, the word “torture” presupposes the presence of an object, and, furthermore, we know from countless reports of wartime journalism that torturers tend to hold onto evidence of their torture, allowing the tortured to exist if only as objects of torture—such as in the Nazis’s meticulous documentation of their atrocities against the Jews, which, ironically, was used against the Nazis as evidence for their crime against humanity in Nuremberg, or in the infamous picnic-photos of the Abu Ghuraib, which, ironically, had practically no meaningful consequences. But Nazis and Abu Ghuraib aside, the speaker’s wish for “death” appears rooted in her desire for “presence”—her desire to exist. Her attachment to presence, along with her fear of losing her existence, is mirrored in her question in stanza 5: “What is left after this?” Death creates a loss, which becomes a signification for privation; even if its object of signification has been lost, the word “loss” becomes a sign or trace of existence, a kind of commemoration in a sense, for something that has completely been erased out of sight would not be felt as a “loss.”

This preference for a “loss” that creates the self over the
“absence” of the self becomes precisely the reason for the speaker to envy the addressee for his “chance of death,” in spite of all the suffering associated with it. The speaker’s desire for presence is intensified in section 3:

So the goddess has slain me
for your chance smile
and my scarf unfolding
as you stooped into it;
so she trapped me
with the upward sweep of your arm
as you lifted the veil,
and the swift smile and selfless.

Could I have known?
nay, spare pity,
though I break,
crushed under the goddess’ hate,
though I fall beaten at last,
so high have I thrust my glance
up into her presence.

Do not pity me, spare that,
but how I envy you
your chance of death.39 (III. 1-18)

The speaker tells us that an unidentified “goddess” has slain her, and we infer that the speaker is the one who is speaking from the
“house of Hades.” Whether or not the speaker is metaphorically or actually dead is hard to tell, but in the first stanza, the line that stands out for its prosodic peculiarity is the last line: “and the swift smile and selfless.” With its alliteration and three strong stresses on alliterated words, in a stanza in which most of the other lines receive two or fewer strong stresses, the line presents itself as the height of tension in the poem: the fear of becoming “selfless” in death.

Because of this fear, the second stanza expressly resists the loss of self. In her description of the goddess’ slaying of the speaker, H.D. insistently uses the word “I” as the subject of the sentences, whereas the “I” speaker is in fact the object of those actions. When “I break,” the reality is that the goddess is making the speaker break; and when “I fall beaten,” it is the goddess who beats her and causes her downfall. This subject-object inversion suggests an urgent impulse to reclaim agency, to reclaim a subject position and to regain the ability to stave off disappearance. For instance, if H.D. had phrased the line “I fall beaten” as “the goddess keeps beating” and omit the object “me,” it still passes as perfectly fluent English that would communicate meaningfully and convey, for a close reader, a desire to repress the speaker’s victimhood or reticence about her victim status; it would be a way to escape from the goddess’ aggression through disappearance of the self. But by turning the “I” into the subject and refusing to effect the disappearance of the self, the speaker asserts the presence of the self. In fact, the only active action in the stanza—“I thrust my glance”—looks toward precisely what she desires: “presence.” Even in the house of Hades, what the speaker wishes
to forestall is the prospect of total self-erasure; death becomes desirable only if it serves as a commemoration—if it becomes a loss that signifies the lost object.

There are, in other words, several layers to the notion of “death” in this poem, aside from the actual, physical, biological, medical death that is the loss of life: first, a figurative death, as in line 21 of section 1 when the speaker claims to have been “slain” by beauty; secondly, a signifying death, which is a physical or figurative loss of life whereby death becomes a sign or proof of past existence, as in the refrain of “I envy you your chance of death”; and lastly, a totalizing absence, an erasure, of which the Sappho original speaks in the line, “thou shalt wander obscure even in the house of Hades, flitting among the shadowy dead.” It is the third type of death that the speaker fears—a complete erasure of existence, a fate that was handed to Erostratus after he burned the temple of Ephesus in an attempt to make his name immortal—and it is the second type of death that the speaker yearns for. The speaker desires the second type of death because she believes that it cannot be any more hurtful than the predicament she finds herself in her relationship to the addressee, which is the first type of death: a metaphorical state of death, in which she might as well be dead to the addressee because the addressee would not care for her and his life would go on as though she does not exist at all.

In a sense, what H.D. attempts to create in her translation of Sappho is the second death: a creation of a state of “loss” that would signify, by referencing privation, the presence of a trace of existence. The effect of H.D.’s translation of Sappho through
ellipsis and expansion is to bring about the second type of death in an attempt to stave off the third type of death. H.D. acknowledges that “Sappho has become for us a name, an abstraction as well as a pseudonym for poignant human feeling.” ⁴⁰ Sappho has, in other words, become for us an item of signification, an emptied signifier or a convenient stand-in for something else; the “real” or “authentic” Sappho, whatever “real” or “authentic” means, does not exist for us, and if not for the chain of quotations and translations, Sappho would have suffered the third type of death, left unbeknown to us without a trace of “loss.” The task of the translator, then, is to enact the second type of death—to create a state of loss—in order to bring into being, by extension, the life that had previously not existed.

Sappho may be a case of extremity in that much of her “original” is literally lost to us, and any translation of her must start from its inscription of that loss. Nonetheless, this conception of translation as a creation of loss that creates the past life applies to all practices of translation, merely to a varying degree; sometimes, the “loss” we speak of is a literal loss like that of Sappho’s fragments, but at other times, it could refer to metaphorical losses, such as a phenomenological loss of the Husserlian ilk, or Erich Auerbach’s “if I don’t remember it, it doesn’t exist” brand of loss, or, more commonly, the metaphorical “loss” of the mythical “original” in the translation practice. However counterintuitive it may seem, translation exists before the original as much as the original precedes translation; that is, much in the same way that, in the words of Wordsworth, the child is the father or mother of the adult,⁴¹ translation is the father or mother of the original. It
is through this reversibility of ascendancy that the translation comes to assume the Benjaminian “kinship” with the original—kinship, that is, with its full connotation of the lack of inequality among its members, unlike master-slave relationships or father-son relationships or other relationships in which one party’s ascendancy over the other is a built-in assumption. As Jonathan Abel asserts, translations “do share something with the translated, but this sharing is not the communicating of one text’s message to another, the erasing of one by another, the domineering of one over another, or the embellishment of one text at the expense of the other”: the sharing is the “being-in-common, the standing-in-relation between two texts.” On one end of the relationship, a translation may signify something “lost” from the original, but on the other end of the relationship, a translation creates this “loss” that creates the original.

The original and translation come to stand on equal grounds because of this reversibility of ascendancy that H.D.’s translation of Sappho’s fragments reveals through her distillation-expansion practice. But such revelation would not come about if not for our awareness of the state of absence and the subsequent creation of loss that the translation starts with; in a sense, it is a dialectic of hide-and-seek, what James Longenbach calls the co-existence of “the urgent need to communicate and the still more urgent need not to be found” that is at the heart of the process of poetic articulation. H.D.’s translation of the Sappho fragments illuminates for us that this process of creation takes us through the occluded “foreign other” in the original that the Benjaminian “universal language” manifests itself as, through hesitance and silence that our
encounter with this “foreign other” induces in us, before reaching its destination and becoming available as a finished product of translation; in a psychoanalytic language, it is a process of transference, projection and introjection, the casting the self to the other and casting inside of the other, which are simultaneously both an act of interpretation and an act of self-discovery, a kind of decoding of the “hieroglyph of the unconscious.”

If this portrayal of translation seems mythical or mystical, it likely means that it is; however hazy or wobbly our understanding of translation is, we continue to translate because it is the one way we know how to stave off the third type of death, the definitive absence that does not leave even a trace or hint of loss. What H.D.’s translation reminds us is that translations create a fictive narrative of loss as a way of bringing the original into existence, and that this forgery of loss is imminently more preferable to utter nothingness.


2 A term coined by Susan Gubar, “Sapphistry” describes an “erotic union between women writers, founded on a beneficial and restorative access to their ancient female lyric precursor, Sappho” (Lucy Elizabeth Frank, *Representations of Death in Nineteenth Century U.S. Writing and Culture* [Burlington: Ashgate Publishing


5 That is, in terms of the conventional fidelity-license spectrum, the concept of which has itself been problematized in the recent translation theory.


8 The term, “afterlife,” is a famous phrase from Walter Benjamin’s seminal essay, “The Task of the Translator,” but the contention of this present paper is to suggest that an “afterlife” is itself created—or fabricated—as a means of creating, rather than recreating, the original that in fact does not exist.

9 Here, a distinction between “loss” and “absence,” such as proposed by Dominick LaCapra, is instructive. In a nutshell, a “loss” is a state in which one can say that the object had existed and has since disappeared, while “absence” is a state in which such an object had not existed in the first place. For more detail, see LaCapra, “Trauma, Absence, Loss,” in *Critical Inquiry*, 25: 4 (Summer, 1999), 696-727. The claim here is that “absence” can be transformed
into a “loss” when one can make a true or fabricated claim about a prior existence of an object.


16 Gregory, 153.


Dedoublement is defined as the capacity to observe oneself as if it were an other, without necessarily effecting a synthesis of the self or unifying the self, as delineated in Paul de Man, “The Rhetoric of Temporality” in *Blindness and Insight: Essays in the Rhetoric of Contemporary Criticism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983), 187-228.


Gregory, 149.


Robert Lowell, *Imitations* (London: Faber and Faber, 1958), xii-xiii. In many ways, one can see many resemblances between
Lowell’s *Imitations* and H.D.’s Sappho fragments, both for their respective licentious translation practices and for the similar criticisms both writers have received for their translation.

35 Sappho, 113.
37 Swann, 116.
39 Ibid., 189.
41 As Wordsworth famously states in “My heart leaps up” and repeats in “Ode: Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood”: “The Child is father of the Man.” In a sense that an adult can only come into being as a result of the child growing into one, a child gives birth to an adult as much as an adult does to a child.
42 Abel, 155.
44 H.D., *Tribute to Freud*, 93.

References


Directions, 1983.


