

Forms of Sapphic Silence

by

Sarah E. Ensor

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A thesis presented for the B.A. degree

with Honors in

The Department of English

University of Michigan

Spring 2003



To the students and staff of NELP XXVII,
who taught me not only how to read literature, but how to live it as well.
You know the depth of my gratitude.
This is for you...

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Acknowledgments

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*S.E.E.
Ann Arbor, Michigan
March 14, 2003*

Abstract

This thesis investigates silence in a number of different forms—as a force of *eros*, as an aesthetic, as a space to inhabit, and as a language—by tracing the role of Sappho’s blankness in modern invocations of her work and legacy. Consequently, it also complicates the way in which we conceive of Sappho, the female poet believed to have written in the 7th c. BCE on the isle of Lesbos. By emphasizing the centrality of silence in her fractured canon and demonstrating the way in which her blankness has been used productively by three modern poets, this thesis challenges popular conceptions of Sappho as a figure of voice.

The introduction examines the treatment of silence in Sappho criticism—and highlights the fragmentary nature of the discussions of silence present therein. This section also considers the intrinsic difficulties of speaking of silence. Chapter 1 examines two pieces of writing by Anne Carson. First I discuss Carson’s 1986 work *Eros the Bittersweet* and examine the way in which her theory of *eros* combines with her reading of Sappho’s Fragment 31 to create a useful paradigm for an investigation into Sapphic silence. I then turn to Carson’s 2002 Sappho translations *If Not, Winter* to examine a more pragmatic connection between silence, Sappho, and *eros*. By examining the aesthetic of blankness produced in her work and comparing her renderings to earlier English translations, I demonstrate the centrality of silence in Sappho’s poetic legacy and the role of her blankness as an engendering force in *eros*.

Chapter 2 discusses the writings of H.D. (Hilda Doolittle). By engaging in a close reading of her critical essay “The Wise Sappho” and her poems “Fragment 113” and “Fragment Thirty-Six” (each of which begins with and is inspired by a Sapphic fragment), I show the way in which H.D. depicts Sappho as a blank slate onto which the desires and emotions of modern women writers can be projected. I also analyze the way in which her writings cast silence as a space that can be precariously yet productively inhabited by the woman poet seeking to carve her niche.

Chapter 3 focuses on the work of Eavan Boland. In her critical essays, Boland’s relationship with silence is tumultuous at best; however, through her engagement with the figure of Sappho, she reimagines the possibilities of silence in her own work. I then move to Boland’s poem “The Journey,” wherein she uses a complex narrative structure to cast silence as a form of communication that can connect women across time and place. Finally, the conclusion discusses silence’s role in the thesis as a whole and gestures toward connections to other critical works and potential future projects.

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“‘Sappho’ is not a name, much less a person. It is, rather, a space. A space for filling in the gaps, joining up the dots, making something out of nothing.”

*--Margaret Reynolds, *The Sappho Companion**

“Under all speech that is good for anything there lies a silence that is better. Silence is as deep as eternity; speech is as shallow as time.”

--Thomas Carlyle

Preface

On a dusty library shelf in the basement stacks of the University of Michigan's Graduate Library, accessible only by a narrow staircase or a grumbling elevator that falls reluctantly from more brightly lit floors, lies a book whose words—and lack thereof—exemplify the complexities of this project. The pages of Monique Wittig and Sande Zeig's reference volume *Lesbian Peoples: Material for a Dictionary* are peppered with succinct yet careful explanations of important terms in lesbian history, ranging alphabetically and thematically from "age" to "yam." In between detailed entries for "Samos" and "savage" falls the listing for "Sappho": a blank page.¹ Whereas Wittig and Zeig rely on language to express the importance of every other figure in the volume, they employ silence to reveal Sappho's. When I told a friend of this find, his only partially facetious response was that my thesis already had been written, that Wittig and Zeig had performed simply in one page what I am struggling to do over the course of many. And yet that seems too easy. For their blankness raises more questions than answers, highlighting the uncertainties of this project without making any strides toward their resolution. Who is this figure whose legacy is perhaps best represented by a blank page? How do we decipher this blankness that clearly communicates yet gives us little information from which to work? It is fairly simple to look through pages of her fragmentary verse and notice Sappho's blankness, to read invocations of her work and call Sappho a figure of silence. What is profoundly more difficult is to investigate the import and meaning of such a claim in the context of the criticism that has been written on her lyric for generations. My project of words picks up where Wittig and Zeig's page of silence leaves off. I write not into their blankness but alongside it, my lines of

¹ Monique Wittig and Sande Zeig, *Lesbian Peoples: Material for a Dictionary* (New York: Avon Books, 1976), 136. Hereafter cited in the text. For a reprinted image of this page, see Appendix 1.

prose serving to explain and illuminate the forms of what they—and Sappho—both do not and cannot say.

By focusing on various forms of Sapphic silence in modern poetry, this thesis seeks to complicate the way in which we—students, poets, and scholars alike—read Sappho.² It aims not only to highlight the presence of silence in her canon, but also to examine its role as a productive force in transmission, re-vision, and poetic invocation. Silence is as significant as voice in Sappho's complicated legacy; it not only frames and fragments her words, but also claims a central function in the way that her canon has been used as inspiration for subsequent poetic forays. Its polyvalent role in her legacy becomes most evident in the work of three modern women writers: Anne Carson, whose works of theory and translation demonstrate silence's role as a force in desire (*eros*), H.D., whose prose and poetry cast blankness as a space that can be precariously yet productively inhabited by the female poet seeking to carve her niche, and Eavan Boland, who boldly casts silence as women's common language, emphasizing the active, communicative role of a component of Sappho's legacy that has typically been conceived of as

² When I was midway through the process of writing this thesis, one of my housemates asked me if Sappho existed, if she was a real person or simply the fictional name for a body of work. I did not have a firm answer. Contemporary Sappho critics typically are reluctant to make assumptions about the poet's existence, emphasizing that the figure they discuss is not a biographical Sappho but rather a literary one. Their methods of articulating this distinction vary; some use the terms Sappho and "Sappho," others simply voice the tension inherent in any study of the poet's work and legacy. In her article "Sappho's Afterlife in Translation," Yopie Prins acknowledges the arguments of critics who have debated Sappho's authenticity (42) and asserts that "Sappho proves to be an imitation for which there is no original" (37). Similarly, in the introductory chapter to her book *Sappho is Burning*, Page duBois explains: "When I use the proper name 'Sappho' I mean only the voice in the fragments attributed to her, only the assembly of poems assigned to her name. She is not a person, not even a character in a drama or a fiction, but a set of texts gathered in her name" (6). Though I make no claims to write about a biographical Sappho—or even to affirm one's existence—neither am I comfortable viewing her simply as a disembodied set of texts. Though her biographical authenticity is in doubt, she is a literary and historical *figure* and has been important as such to women poets who have written in her (potentially fictional) name. Perhaps she is disembodied, perhaps she is mythical, perhaps she is little more than the stuff of legends—the specter free-falling off the Leucadian cliffs in a bout of heterosexual fury, the teacher instructing eager schoolgirls in the arts of music and lyrical verse. And yet when poets write as and to Sappho, they are not simply inhabiting an anonymous broken canon, but rather gesturing toward their vision of a woman who might in fact turn out to be little more than the sum of our collective visions. So unlike duBois, when I use the proper name Sappho, I mean both the fragmentary texts and the complicated figure whose authenticity is in constant doubt. In my study, the texts—and the spaces between them—do indeed take priority, yet the figure of Sappho herself looms behind it all, casting a mythical shadow on contemporary invocations and criticism alike.

largely unproductive. Though their forms of Sapphic silence certainly do not represent the full extent of silence's poetic role, their writings do begin to indicate the complexity of a force frequently depicted simply as a passive background entity. It is through their words that the importance of Sappho's silence becomes clear.

I first encountered Sappho not as an autonomous poet, but rather as a spectral figure, a woman ventriloquized by H.D. in "Fragment Thirty-Six" and re-visioned by Eavan Boland in "The Journey." Before I ever had laid eyes on a line of Sapphic verse, I knew how her words and presence had been imagined, expressed, and re-told by her successors in a poetic tradition. I had no sense of who she was in ancient Lesbos (nor did I know whether to believe that such a figure even existed there) or what her fragmentary words meant on their own, but I recognized her centrality in contemporary poetic invocations. In many respects, the same holds true today. I still view Sappho centrally not as a lyricist, but as a weaver of silences. Though her blankness was not a conscious component of her composition process, it is an undeniably central aspect of her poetic legacy. Most critics read her silences in the context of her words, viewing her blankness as an inhibitory force that separates us from a full understanding of her verse; I continually find myself reading her verse in the context of her silences. While I find many of her lines intriguing and revealing, I spend most of my time fixated on what follows and separates the words on her page, my eyes drifting over the bi-colored Greek and English fragments in Anne Carson's 2002 translation *If Not, Winter* and settling onto the blank space that surrounds them. Sometimes I wonder—if I stare long enough, will something appear to fill those spaces? If I remain quiet, will the blankness engulf me?

Though this project works little with Sappho's lines themselves, their impact is foundational to it. Countless scholars have meandered their way through her fragments in the

centuries that have intervened between her poetry and my prose; my role in the conversation falls elsewhere. Certainly Sappho's words could inspire a lifetime's work; lines like "I would not think to touch the sky with two arms" (fr. 52) and "I long and seek after" (fr. 36) serve as fertile ground for translators, scholars, and poets alike. It is easy to understand the pleasure that surrounds translators' seemingly divine processes of lingual reconstruction, and to see the material for literary analysis inscribed in Sappho's oblique lines. And yet in my reading, Sappho's words are secondary. Though her lines are crucial and have served as inspiration for generations of female writers, their impact cannot fully be understood if they are divorced from the space that surrounds them. Her lines are placeholders for silence, are the forms that structure the blankness and add import to that which lies between. I return time and time again to Sappho, unable to get the auditory silence and visual blankness of her poetry out of my mind. They hypnotize me.

Ultimately, this is a study of Sappho that deals little with the lines of the ancient poet herself. It is a study of silence that consists of pages of carefully crafted words. It is a thesis about the seemingly paradoxical fact that there is, here, no primary text. It is about neither Sappho nor H.D., neither the poetics of antiquity nor the poetics of modernity. Instead, it is about the complicated connection between the two—about the way in which silence has fueled and inspired the processes of transmission and poetic connection across generations. It is also about the conversation that exists on these and other pages of Sappho criticism—and about the way in which silence has been censored or overlooked in such exchanges. I add my voice to a discussion that exists only in fragments, while also acknowledging the logical impossibility of its ever being whole.³

³ For more on the difficulties of speaking of silence, see pp. 12-15.

Introduction: How to Speak of Silence

The role of silence in Sappho's legacy is profound. The dynamic process of loss and partial recovery in the nearly 3000 years between her ancient composition and our contemporary readings renders her a figure of silence, someone about whose words and legacy there can be much speculation but little definitive resolution. Out of nine complete volumes of Sapphic poetry catalogued in an Alexandria library in the third century BCE (one of which ran more than 1320 lines), only 200-some fragments remain, many of them consisting of only a few words. It is a catastrophic loss by anyone's calculation. A glance through many modern translations of Sapphic verse, from Mary Barnard's landmark 1958 edition to Anne Carson's 2002 work, will demonstrate this fact, the blank spaces surrounding Sappho's fragmentary verse frequently serving to visually overwhelm even her most radiant lines. These silences, however, are strikingly active and productive, often making more of a statement than do the words that they separate. H.D. composes "fragment poems," each one beginning with an enigmatic epigraph from Sappho and proceeding to speak both to and as the ancient poet in absentia. Boland envisions a silent communication with her poetic forebearer in "The Journey," casting Sappho as her guide through a world of silences and non-lingual speech. In each of these cases, female poets reach out through temporal distance and textually inscribed silences to attempt to catch hold of Sappho. Though women poets often feel sanctioned by her words and legacy of writing, they frequently feel inspired by her silences, using the gaps between her fragmentary verse and the mysteries about her original meaning and intent as the impetus for their own creative discourse.

And yet in my reading of Sappho criticism, I have never found the term “silence” used to describe the poet’s fractured and fragmented canon. When I first encountered Sappho, silence was the word that immediately came to mind, and it continues to be the concept that pervades my reading of her verse. However, it is a term that is strikingly absent from the commentary on Sappho that comprises the critical canon. Although many scholars make mention of the gaps in Sappho’s verse and the silences resulting from them, their discussion of the impact of such spaces is minimal at best; the lack of coherent arguments produces gaps in their discourses that strikingly parallel her own. While critics frequently figure silence and loss as the background against which transmission takes place, few if any highlight its full role in that process. Furthermore, whereas critics frequently have used other elements of Sappho’s poetic and historical identity as lenses through which to view and trace modern invocations, no one has yet employed silence or loss in a similar manner. Their arguments hence inscribe spaces that are simultaneously puzzling, frustrating, and enticing. Just as the gaps in Sappho’s lines inspire H.D.’s and Eavan Boland’s words, these gaps in the critical discourse inspire my own.

Critical examinations into Sappho’s silence read much like her fragments. Just as scholars begin to inquire into the role of blankness and silence in Sappho’s legacy, their words tend to trail off, their arguments falling into the symbolic illegibility of Carson’s brackets⁴ or fading away like the faint rubbings on an ancient sheet of papyrus. It would be nearly impossible for a reader of Sappho criticism not to recognize the presence of silence, and yet so too would it be nearly impossible for that reader to recognize the full extent of its impact. In the opening chapter of *The Sappho Companion*, a comprehensive overview of Sapphic invocations across

⁴ In her 2002 translation *If Not, Winter*, Carson inserts brackets into the English verse to represent the illegibility so prevalent in the Greek.

time and place, Margaret Reynolds highlights the intrinsic allure of blankness, suggesting that the gaps in Sappho's discourse have been a more than incidental feature of her appeal:

Like the enigmatic smile of the Mona Lisa, Sappho seems known to us, familiar, capable of being translated into our everyday lives. Yet she still remains utterly remote—if anything, all the more insinuating and full of meaning because she is, and always will be, absent. Just as thousands of tourists came to stare at the blank space on the walls of The Louvre when the Mona Lisa was stolen away during the early part of the 20th century, so we still make up stories about the emptiness that is S----o.⁵

Though Reynolds's introduction highlights the importance of Sapphic blankness, the rest of her text focuses not on Sappho's absence, but rather on her presence; she traces the way in which contemporary poets have brought Sappho's legacy to the forefront of the critical and poetic conversation. Silence is the force that has fueled such invocations; Reynolds acknowledges its presence in the broad Sapphic canon yet does not use it as a trope through which to discuss the process of transmission. Furthermore, she ends her book with Sappho's fragment 147:

“Someone, I say to you,/will think of us/in some future time” (391). In a book about Sapphic invocations, Sappho herself has the last word, proclaiming in advance the power that her legacy will carry. The work as a whole reads as a triumphant account of the survival and flourishing of Sapphic voice; silence becomes a mere sideshow in the context of invocations of Sappho's words.

Similarly, in her book *Sappho's Immortal Daughters*, Margaret Williamson skips over the issue of textual blankness in order to reach what she considers more salient and potentially productive points of discussion. On the first page of her introduction, Williamson explains that “[o]nly a fraction of [Sappho's] output has survived, and almost all of what now exists is in

⁵ Margaret Reynolds, *The Sappho Companion* (London: Chatto & Windus, 2000), 7. Hereafter cited in the text. A note on form: Because of the length and formal specificity of my textual citations (many of which are full stanzas or poems), I have chosen not to double-space my block quotations. Although this decision may pose a challenge to readers desiring to inscribe their notes in between the lines, it made the most sense aesthetically and logistically.

fragments. On this bare statement most scholars would be able to agree.”⁶ She casts the fragmentation and silences that surround the poet’s voice as incidental and largely inconsequential factors in Sappho’s legacy; the word “bare” suggests that there is little fertile ground for inquiry in this aspect of the poet’s canon. Similarly, by asserting that Sappho’s blankness is something about which “most scholars would be able to agree,” Williamson implicitly argues that the poet’s fragmentation and silences are straightforward elements of her legacy whose interpretation bears little potential controversy or productivity. Furthermore, later in the introduction, Williamson again passes by the issue of silence, seemingly eager to get to more interesting aspects of Sappho’s poetry. She writes: “The texts of her poems have not been revealed to us in a state of pristine wholeness, as the merest glance at a page of their fragmentary remains shows. But the gaps in the texts reveal only one aspect of their history. Another is discussed in Chapter 2...” (3). Here again she seems to demean—or at least marginalize—the study of Sapphic blankness, suggesting that its full import can be ascertained with a mere glance at the page and is hence not worthy of further investigation. In addition, her diction suggests her discomfort with blankness and silence as literary entities; she describes wholeness as a pristine force whose logical converse, then, is a state of impurity. In Williamson’s paradigm, not only is blankness a simple, straightforward force not worth discussing, it is also an unfortunate byproduct of the poet’s prolific writing.

Just as the gaps in these critical works give the scholar interested in Sapphic silence ample space in which to work, the comments of those critics who feel compelled to address the issue yet inadvertently degrade it provide inspiration for production of a more nuanced discussion of the topic. In the introduction to *Fictions of Sappho 1546-1937*, Joan DeJean

⁶ Margaret Williamson, *Sappho’s Immortal Daughters* (Cambridge: Harvard U P, 1995), 1. Hereafter cited in the text.

addresses the issues of selection and analysis that emerge in any longitudinal study of Sapphic invocations. However, the introduction contains several troubling assumptions; DeJean even justifies her Francophone focus by asserting that “[t]he English discovery of Sappho reproduces so closely the structure of her entry into the French tradition a half-century earlier that an analysis of its unfolding would have been repetitive, without being essential to an understanding of the future of Sapphic fictions” —a statement that Yopie Prins’s *Victorian Sappho* readily refutes.⁷ Perhaps no comment in DeJean’s introduction creates as great an impetus for response, however, as one of her early assertions about the challenges of transmission. In discussing invocations of Sappho by French male writers, she explains:

The male poet who is able to speak with an ‘authentic’ Sapphic voice, to continue an argument developed by Anne Freadman, finds himself in the disquieting position of having elected a muse with an independent existence in her own poetry, a muse who has no need of his voice in order to speak. (8)

While it is perhaps true that Sappho’s once-prolific speech does not fit the mold of the archetypal muse (even though no less of an authority than Plato titled her the Tenth Muse⁸), it is an oversimplification to say that Sappho “has no need” of an exterior voice in order to speak. Although her words sing out with passion and fervor despite their fragmentation, her silences make her an ideal source of inspiration and her blankness calls out for contemporary intervention.

Indeed, in “Sapphistries,” an article on modern invocations and incorporations of the Sapphic voice, Susan Gubar discusses the idea of a “fantastic collaboration” between Sappho and her successors and indicates the need for precisely such intervention. In this paradigm, Gubar casts the process of invocation not as a unidirectional affair, but rather as a form of artistic give

⁷ Joan DeJean, *Fictions of Sappho, 1546-1937* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1989), 5. Hereafter cited in the text.

⁸ Plato: “Some say that there are nine muses...but how careless, look again;...Sappho of Lesbos is the tenth” (Reynolds 70).

and take in which the “ancient precursor is paradoxically in need of a contemporary collaborator.”⁹ Furthermore, Gubar asserts, this collaboration “links [women poets] to an empowering literary history they could create in their own image” (202). In Gubar’s schema, not only do contemporary writers receive sanctioning and inspiration from Sappho’s words, silences, and spectral presence, but Sappho’s voice is fully audible and resonant only because of the invocations performed by her successors. Part of what makes Sappho an ideal muse, then, is the opportunity that she provides for contemporary writers to perform a recuperative function, to enhance an ancient voice just as they mold their own. To invoke Sappho and to use her as a muse produces speech that is doubly strong. Out of the oblique stanzas of “Fragment 113” emerges the poeticism of both Sappho and H.D., each party involved in the fantastic collaboration adding her strength and passion to the affair. In many respects, Sappho’s silences require contemporary intervention in order to be heard. Part of what makes Sappho such a natural muse in the post-Plato era is this blankness. Her poetic form is there to be filled in, the silences resonant in their own right and yet also inspiring the words of future poets.

Lawrence Lipking creates a similar mandate for an exploration of silence in the course of highlighting other elements of the poet’s legacy. In the chapters on Sappho in his book *Abandoned Women and the Poetic Tradition*, Lipking discusses Sapphic invocations through a trope of abandonment. Tracing the ways that Sappho has been put to use across cultures, time, and genders, he paints a comprehensive portrait of the ancient poet’s effect on subsequent poetic traditions. However, like DeJean’s, his commentary on the role of silence in the Sapphic legacy often seems to overlook its inherent complexities. On the first page of his chapter on contemporary invocations, he states that “what women have asked of Sappho, in the past

⁹ Susan Gubar, “Sapphistries,” *Re-Reading Sappho: Reception and Transmission*, ed. Ellen Greene (Berkeley: U of California P, 1996), 202. Hereafter cited in the text.

hundred years, has not been an image to worship but a speaking voice....Hers is the voice when all others fall silent—the founding muse, the mother of us all.”¹⁰ Lipking qualifies his statement by asserting not that this is who Sappho is, but rather that this is who women poets have wanted her to be; however, by classifying her poetry as a force that speaks “when all others fall silent,” he simplifies her legacy. Rather than acknowledging and analyzing the complicatedly conjoined role that speech and silence have played in Sappho’s poetic legacy, Lipking chooses to place her in an uncompromised realm of voice, thereby dismissing a central element of her importance. Although Sappho does speak boldly and powerfully, and though her voice does serve to inspire women poets in moments of silence, this relationship is neither straightforward nor unambiguous. Just as Sappho’s is occasionally the voice to speak when all others fall silent, her fractured yet lyrical words inspiring (and sanctioning) the woman poet who opens a book of her verse, so too are others’ frequently the voices that sing out when hers falls silent. H.D. writes of and through her silences in “Fragment 113” and its companion fragment poems; though Lipking later acknowledges the productive role that Sappho’s spaces play in those very pieces, his introductory remarks disregard their impact. He emphasizes a falsely uniform view of voice; his statement suggests that to understand Sappho, we need to read only the words on a page of Carson’s translations and can in good faith simply skim over the blankness that follows.

* * * * *

Although the gaps in these critical conversations are initially puzzling, one of their likely causes suggests larger issues that color this discussion. To speak of silence is inherently paradoxical. Even those theorists who embrace the potential power of silence as a productive or subversive form praise it tentatively, couching their words of support in the language and

¹⁰ Lawrence Lipking, *Abandoned Women and the Poetic Tradition* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1988), 97. Hereafter cited in the text.

terminology of voice. I similarly find myself making arguments that inadvertently demean silence's impact. Silence speaks, I argue. The gaps between Sappho's fragmentary lines are worth acknowledging because of their communicative potential. And so it goes. It is technically impossible to discuss the virtues of silence through an organic discourse of silence, and yet there is something haltingly artificial—even condescending—about praising the form in terms of its similarity to voice. To voice silence is to erase it, to privilege the act of speech even as we praise the virtues of a radically different textual form. Our language has no means by which to discuss this force, a fact that further marginalizes its impact and causes it to be overlooked in the academic conversation. Without speaking, we cannot convey our argument. Yet once we begin to speak, to vocalize and express our assertions, we potentially erase the very entity that we wish to discuss. Silence becomes, like Roland Barthes's bliss, that which "cannot be spoken except between the lines."¹¹ Is this project, this attempt to speak of Sapphic silence in the lines themselves, then a hoax?

This seems to be the challenge silently addressed by Wittig and Zeig's dictionary entry, perhaps the most dramatically effective example of Sappho commentary in the contemporary canon. While their blankness effectively speaks both of and like Sappho, however, its limitation is clear. By saying nothing, they manage to say much, and yet their description of the poet can contain none of the nuances that one would hope to see in a study of Sappho's legacy and impact. Though we cannot easily speak of silence in this setting, a realm of coherent sentences that become coherent pages that become coherent chapters, neither is it adequate (or accurate) to resort to blankness alone. As we struggle to find the means by which to accurately encapsulate the poet's legacy, we must also confront the nature of her silences themselves, a move that

¹¹ Roland Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text*, Trans. Richard Miller (New York: Hill and Wang, 1975), 21. Hereafter cited in the text.

throws us into an intellectual and artistic conundrum. Discussions of Sapphic silence are indisputably incomplete—perhaps inevitably so. How can this one be any different?

One possible answer comes from Barthes, whose notions of textual pleasure and bliss provide potential recourse. In metaphorizing the reader's intrinsic, nearly physiological attraction to the pleasurable text, he writes:

Is not the most erotic portion of the body *where the garment gapes*? In perversion (which is the realm of textual pleasure) there are no "erogenous zones" (a foolish expression, besides); it is intermittence, as psychoanalysis has so rightly stated, which is erotic: the intermittence of skin flashing between two articles of clothing (trousers and sweater), between two edges (the open-necked shirt, the glove and the sleeve); it is this flash itself which seduces...." (10)

Perhaps here too it is intermittence that seduces and inspires. Perhaps the relevant issue in this and other works of criticism is neither silence nor speech, but rather the glimpses that we catch of the complicated interaction between the two. In such a paradigm, we can speak not paradoxically of silence but instead productively about the edge between it and voice. This edge, the site of pleasure in *The Pleasure of the Text*, the site of *eros* in Carson's *Eros the Bittersweet*, is a space of friction and energy.¹²

Indeed, in his work *Image, Music, Text*, Barthes defines significance as "the very friction between the music and something else."¹³ If we employ friction as a similarly powerful trope, we then must inquire not about silence and voice in isolation, but rather about the way in which they rub up against each other, creating a dynamic force through their electrified interaction. Ultimately, this project is about the energy—the pleasure—that lies between silence and speech and about the attempt to join the two in an intellectual conversation. It is not only about what Sappho does not say, but also about what I (and established Sappho critics) do not—and

¹² For an extended discussion of *Eros the Bittersweet*, see chapter 2.

¹³ Roland Barthes, *Image, Music, Text*, Trans. Stephen Heath (London: Fontana, 1977), 185. Hereafter cited in the text.

cannot—say. This thesis is as much about interstices as it is about lines and words. It is about what happens when I, like Barthes, look up from the text. It is about what happens when the reader of my thesis looks up from this page. It is about what happens when we begin to listen to the silences that our readings produce. It is about things that need to be said without being said.

In the chapters that follow, then, I speak of Sappho's silences not in and of themselves, but as they appear and resound in the context of 20th century verse. When I discuss the forms of Sapphic silence, I implicitly and inherently refer to the way in which the ancient poet's blankness shapes—and is shaped by—modern texts. Although silence clearly can be an autonomous force, its strength is most accessible and most clearly noted when we observe its impact on speech. The interactions between the ancient silences of Sappho and the modern words of Anne Carson, H.D., and Eavan Boland demonstrate the polyvalent nature of a force traditionally defined simply as the absence of speech. It is this edge that most productively allows us to inquire about the impact of Sapphic silence and to come to terms with the irony that the clearest path into the ancient poet's blankness is through the words of her successors. By examining the lines of others, we can speak most fluently about the pleasure of Sappho's text, about the spaces between her lines that give the words said by and about her their power and resonance.

Chapter 1. The Eros of Sapphic Silence: Anne Carson

The writings of Anne Carson, a contemporary classicist, poet, and translator, provide entrée into this intersection between silence and voice. Carson's 1986 work *Eros the Bittersweet*, an extended essay discussing the role of *eros* in the classical world, implicitly reveals much about the allure and communicative potential of Sappho's blankness. Beginning with her discussion of Fragment 31, in which she uses the poem's rhetorical structure to explain and exemplify her musings about desire, Carson's book contains a subtle yet influential strand of Sapphic analysis. Her main argument centers around the inextricable connection between *eros* and lack; she asserts that desire requires a fundamental distance between subject and object to exist. In one of the book's introductory chapters, she explains that "[t]he Greek word *eros* denotes 'want,' 'lack,' 'desire for that which is missing.' The lover wants what he does not have. It is by definition impossible for him to have what he wants if, as soon as it is had, it is no longer wanting."¹⁴

After citing a variety of Greek epigraphs that illustrate this idea and explore the resulting paradox, she turns to Sappho's most famous text to take these notions one step further. Based in this trope of lack and desire, her analysis of Fragment 31 focuses on the structure and purpose of the familiar love triangle invoked therein.

He seems to me equal to gods that man
who opposite you
sits and listens close
to your sweet speaking

and lovely laughing—oh it
puts the heart in my chest on wings
for when I look at you, a moment, then no speaking
is left in me

¹⁴ Anne Carson, *Eros the Bittersweet* (Princeton: Princeton U P, 1986), 10. Hereafter cited in the text.

no: tongue breaks, and thin
 fire is racing under skin
 and in eyes no sight and drumming
 fills ears

and cold sweat holds me and shaking
 grips me all, greener than grass
 I am and dead—or almost
 I seem to me
 (Anne Carson, trans.)¹⁵

Initially, this poem's contribution to a discussion of silence seems entirely textual.

Speechlessness becomes a predominant theme over the course of the poem's 12 lines; the central figure loses her capacity for speech because of her feelings for her beloved and is ultimately consumed by her silent rapture. As the poem progresses and the intensity of her attraction magnifies, the woman apparently begins to lose proper function in many of her senses—there is no sight in her eyes, her ears fill with the persistent sound of drumming rather than the typically productive input of the world around her, and even her internal thermostat loses its ability to regulate temperature. Although her entire body becomes possessed and consumed by her attraction, however, her loss of speech is the most immediate, the most pronounced, and the most profound of all said effects. Not only can she no longer construct words, but her lingual paralysis is also presented as absolute and eternal—the breaking of her tongue ostensibly will prevent her from ever again engaging in meaningful verbal communication. Because she paradoxically “speaks” the poem after no speech is left in her, the entire verse hence reads as a peculiarly silent utterance, as a piece of writing that must be conceived of and analyzed as belonging to a realm separate from traditional discourse. In her 1996 article “Sappho's Afterlife in Translation,”

¹⁵ Note: This is the translation posited by Carson in *Eros the Bittersweet*. A similar translation is presented in *If Not, Winter*, albeit with a different spatial layout and an additional final line: “But all is to be dared, because even a person of poverty” (63).

Yopie Prins examines the way in which the figure's broken tongue relates to her loss of subjectivity, explaining the disappearance of the speaker through a close reading of the poem's evolution.¹⁶ The woman's loss of speech, which is clearly contrasted with her beloved's sweet laughter and the third figure's calm, pleasurable listening, ultimately results in the obliteration of her sense of self.

While Prins's work focuses on the textual imprints of silence, Carson's discussion of the poem moves Fragment 31's silent significance to a more symbolic realm. Her reading focuses on the triangulating figure prominent therein; she challenges traditional conceptions of the man's role by casting him not as a conventional third party but instead as the force that distances the speaker from her beloved and thereby makes present the absence that engenders *eros*. Carson explains that "where eros is lack, its activation calls for three structural components—lover, beloved, and that which comes between them. They are three points of transformation on a circuit of possible relationship, electrified by desire so that they touch not touching. Conjoined they are held apart" (16). In this reading, the man becomes not a rhetorical feature, an intermediary object of desire, or a site of jealousy, but rather an integral part of (and necessary obstacle to) the erotic situation. Without him, the speaker potentially has immediate access to her desired. Without him, *eros* disappears. His presence keeps desire alive, as he somehow both conjoins and holds apart.

Initially, Carson's use of Fragment 31 feels simply illustrative, as she uses Sappho's text to explore the connection between *eros* and triangulation that becomes a dominant theme throughout her book. However, as she proceeds, her argument becomes as applicable to Sappho and silence as it is to *eros* and classicism. Fragment 31 becomes emblematic not simply of the

¹⁶ Yopie Prins, "Sappho's Afterlife in Translation," *Re-Reading Sappho: Reception and Transmission*, ed. Ellen Greene (Berkeley: U of California P, 1996), 46. Hereafter cited in the text.

theoretical process of triangulation but also of the historical process of poetic transmission that so strongly links Sappho and contemporary poets. Carson's musings on and inquiries into this idea of lack relate intrinsically to Sapphic blankness and silences; the gaps in and among Sappho's verse complicate the process of poetic transmission just as the man in Fragment 31's opening lines complicates the process of erotic attraction. Throughout her discourse on *eros*, Carson links lack and space with desire, arguing that "[a] space must be maintained or desire ends" (26). Sappho's appeal throughout time, then, arguably relates most directly not to her words themselves but to the blankness of her verse. It is the silence inscribed within her text that makes her absence present to the contemporary poet and engenders the powerful forces of *eros* in the process of transmission. Transferring Carson's theory from its roots in classical discourse to our contemporary discussion of poetic invocation, Sappho's silence becomes the charged figure that connects contemporary women writers to their literary predecessor as it simultaneously distances them from her. Just as the poem's erotic situation would dissolve without the "man who listens" (to use Carson's epithet), so too would the electricity of transmission fizzle without the silences that keep contemporary poets distanced from a conception of the "true" or originary Sappho.

In my re-visioning of Carson's schema, then, silence is the force that infuses the connection between ancient and contemporary poets with the necessary desire and energy.¹⁷ Silence becomes an active figure, a tantalizing boundary between two distinct voices that allows one to flourish and proliferate through its obscuring of the other. In addition, when viewed through this lens, Fragment 31 does not merely serve as an illustrative addendum but instead

¹⁷ In her 1997 book *Lesbian Desire in the Lyrics of Sappho*, Jane McIntosh Snyder proposes a similar form of triangulation in the process of Sapphic transmission, arguing that contemporary invocations of Sappho become tri-directional collaborations between ancient poet, contemporary poet, and contemporary reader.

functions as a synecdoche for the entire process of Sappho's silent transmission, its inscription of *eros* and examination of erotic triangulation demonstrating the centrality of lack and absence in desire. Sappho's construction of the amorous situation presented therein serves as a paradigm through which to view the complicated processes of invocation and incorporation contained within her own legacy. In the world of Fragment 31, there can be no desire without an intermediary figure—the man whose presence separates the speaker from the object of her affection. So too in the world that surrounds Fragment 31 and transmits it to present day readers, there can be no desire without an equally important intermediary force—the silence whose presence separates contemporary poets from Sappho's original voice.

It is not solely in her theory that Carson highlights the centrality of Sapphic silence. Her 2002 volume *If Not, Winter: Fragments of Sappho*, a translation of Sappho's verse, highlights the erotic power and aesthetic appeal of the poet's blankness in ways that other versions simply do not. Carson's bilingual volume spreads the fragments out over the course of 355 pages, devoting entire sheaves to two- and three-word lines, allowing the white space around the words to reflect, expand, and complicate the fragments' glow. She embraces an aesthetic of blankness throughout the text; for Carson, it seems, not only is blankness interesting and productive, it is beautiful as well. She visually represents the silence of *eros*; the blank page becomes the force that distances us from Sappho's words as it connects us to them. Our literally insatiable desire to see the words originally inscribed in those spaces—or to create such words for ourselves—is part of what attracts us to the shape of the volume. It is in the context of *eros* that the translation's blankness leaves its lasting mark.

Carson's aesthetic of blankness emerges even before the reader first encounters the translations themselves; the cover design of *If Not, Winter* sets the tone for the treatment of

silence throughout the volume. The jacket art superimposes an ancient fragment, its delicate characters barely legible because of the papyrus's torn condition, over a solid white background. The visual palimpsest created by the black writing inscribed on the shattered papyrus atop the white backdrop parallels the palimpsest of meaning and interpretation present in the volume's succeeding pages—and in modern female poets' invocations of Sappho's verse. Beyond this image of the palimpsest, the jacket celebrates blankness in much the same way as the text itself. The front cover is at least two-thirds blank, the white background punctuated only minimally by understated typescript. This blankness peeks through the papyrus image at various points; the visual continuity between those gaps in the verse and the whiteness of the majority of the cover serves to highlight the spaces in Sappho's verse even as it faithfully renders the beauty of the original text. As we stare at the fissures in the papyrus, we experience desire for what we do not—and cannot—have, while at the same time sensing Carson's reverence for the fragments' conjoined system of silence and speech.

The title of the volume performs a similar function in a discussion of silence. "If not, winter" is one line of Fragment 22, a segment of text punctuated by illegibility in the original and brackets in the translation. The content of the lines surrounding this one is nearly entirely indiscernible; the contemporary meaning of "if not, winter" is thus contingent not on what precedes and follows it, but rather on how we interpret its oblique statement. If not what? What is the object being negated? Why is winter the ultimate affirmation? The puzzling title is a representative opening for the volume not because of its meaning, but because of its blankness and the questions that it raises. It inscribes the possibility inherent in the entire Sapphic canon and highlights the mystique inherent in Sappho's verse before the reader even opens to the first translation.

Carson's aesthetic of blankness becomes even more pronounced as her text begins. In the prefatory and concluding notes that bookend the volume, blankness and absence are primary topics of discussion. In her introduction to the translations, she highlights the role that Sappho's fragmentation and blankness play in the translator's task—and in the reader's ultimate experience of the finished work. While Carson's overview of Sappho's "biography" and explanation of corresponding textual issues compose the two opening pages of the book, she spends the rest of her introduction addressing both the volume's symbolic representation of fragmentation and the role of blankness in the translator's task. She writes:

When translating texts read from papyri, I have used a single square bracket to give an impression of missing matter, so that] or [indicates destroyed papyrus or the presence of letters not quite legible somewhere in the line. It is not the case that every gap or illegibility is specifically indicated: this would render the page a blizzard of marks and inhibit reading. Brackets are an aesthetic gesture toward a papyrological event rather than an accurate record of it.¹⁸

Beyond illuminating the technical elements of the translation, Carson's words also gesture toward the extent of fragmentation in Sappho's verse. She suggests that the fragmented text symbolically represented in her volume is even more fragmented in its physical reality, that the brackets that pepper the pages of *If Not, Winter* can only partially reveal the extent of the mystery and obliqueness of the surviving Sapphic canon. In both Carson's translations and the Greek from which she works, the "missing matter" simultaneously illuminates and overshadows the words themselves. Similarly, Carson's endnotes juxtapose conventional discussions of semantic decisions and intertextual references with investigations into the spectral words obscured by the trials of transmission. For example, in her note to Fragment 95, she writes that "[i]n between 'mostly' and 'came in' are traces of letters that might be reconstructed to form the

¹⁸ Anne Carson, *If Not, Winter: Fragments of Sappho* (New York: Alfred K. Knopf, 2002), xi. Hereafter cited in the text.

name of Hermes, who traditionally guided souls to the land of the dead” (370). Carson’s description of this active detective work, where she wears caps of both scholar and sleuth, demonstrates the productive excitement and inspiration that can emerge from the gaps in Sappho’s canon. Over the course of the book, Carson frames Sappho’s oblique lines with references to and explanations of the poet’s blankness; as a result, the entire volume reads not only as a careful reconstruction of ancient words, but also as a deliberate preservation of ancient silences.

Furthermore, *If Not, Winter* is an experiential volume. Unlike other texts in which the reader feels distanced from experience by the mediating barrier of language, Carson’s work places the readers in the midst of the translating act, allowing us to inhabit the challenges, difficulties, and pleasures that she encountered throughout her process of composition. One central component of that process is the difficult yet artistically productive procedure of meandering through Sappho’s silences, a task that poses a challenge to even the most skilled lingual translator. Carson’s introduction suggests that she wants her readers to experience the same episodes of visual and textual translation that she did as we first work through the volume’s bi-colored words. She explains:

Brackets are exciting. Even though you are approaching Sappho in translation, that is no reason you should miss the drama of trying to read a papyrus torn in half or riddled with holes or smaller than a postage stamp—brackets imply a free space of imaginal adventure. (xi)

For Carson, blankness causes and inspires her literary adventure. She sifts through lines of Sapphic verse, scattered like the leaves of Sibyl, struggling to find the means by which to discover and then express the impact of the “original” words and silences alike. By reading her bracketed English, we too engage in a similar process of sifting. We cannot read these lines the way that we would read more conventional poetry or prose; as we stop at the gaps and

contemplate the possibilities inherent in such spaces, our brows furrow like Carson's must have as she struggled with incomplete segments of Greek poetry. As we look at the Greek, marked by the brackets of obscurity and the dots of multiplicity, we can envision ourselves surrounded by the papyrus itself, its markings smudged, its structure torn, and its gaps mysterious. Just as by handling the thick, textured, uneven pages of *If Not, Winter*, we consciously experience the act of reading, by facing the overwhelming white space that radiates around burgundy and black fragments, we actively experience the power of silence.

The fragments themselves are a fascinating testament to the conjoined role of silence, *eros*, and aesthetic appeal. These visual and textual representations of Sappho's verse reveal as much about her blankness as they do about her words; Carson's translations can hence be read through a double lens of presence and absence, each of which shades into and colors the other. Fragment 24D, for example, demonstrates how even the letters remaining on a sheet of papyrus can be a form of blankness.¹⁹ In Carson's translation, seven lines of fractured Greek verse become one line of English poetry and six lines of brackets; the striking solitude of "[i]n a thin voice" demonstrates the incomprehensibility of the letters that surround it. There are silences and absences here that transcend the blank spaces around and between words; Carson's extensive use of brackets in place of nonsensical strings of letters demonstrates that the extent of Sapphic blankness extends far beyond the spaces where nothing has been preserved. For those readers who do not know Greek, Carson's translations reiterate and elucidate the extent of a fragmentation that would not ordinarily be noticeable in a foreign tongue. Hence, she inevitably translates not only Sappho's words but her silences, her obliqueness, her obscurity, her blankness, and the like. Though she makes complete Greek words and phrases decipherable for

¹⁹ See Appendix 1 for two images of Carson's rendering of Fragment 24D

those who do not know the language, she also makes fractured Greek legible as absence for those who cannot understand the intricacies of the original text.

Carson's translations also demonstrate the liberation and imaginative freedom created by the fractured Sapphic canon. At many points, she rearranges the shape or flow of the Greek text so as to create a verse that is more interesting and potentially more faithful to the fractured original. In her introduction, she asks the reader to:

[C]onsider the third-century-B.C. philosopher Chrysippos whose treatise *On Negatives* includes this negation from Sappho:

Not one girl I think who looks on the light of the sun will ever have wisdom like this.

--Chrysippos *On Negatives* 13=Sappho fr. 56 Voigt

...In translating such stranded verse I have sometimes manipulated its spacing on the page, to restore a hint of musicality or suggest syntactic motion. For example the sentence cited by Chrysippos becomes:

not one girl I think
 who looks on the light of the sun
 will ever
 have wisdom
 like this (xi-xii)

Carson defends her formal adjustments by quoting Walter Benjamin's imperatives about the intention of the original.²⁰ The question of intent is a difficult one for all translators and theorists, yet is perhaps most salient in a situation like Sappho's where evidence for purpose, context, and intent is so dramatically limited. In cases like this fragment, preserved not in an unmediated form, but rather in the citation of another author, there is no indication of original authorial conception of the verse's shape or musicality. Because of the textual and contextual silences inherent in the fragments, Carson is free to pursue her "imaginal adventure," a process of visual

²⁰ "The task of the translator consists in finding that intended effect upon the language into which he is translating which produces in it the echo of the original....Unlike a work of literature, translation does not find itself in the center of the language forest but on the outside; it calls into it without entering, aiming at that single spot where the echo is able to give, in its own language, the reverberation of the work in the alien one."—W. Benjamin, 'Die Aufgabe des Übersetzers,' originally a preface to Benjamin's reading of Baudelaire (Heidelberg, 1923), 77" (Carson xii).

and lingual reconstruction that creates one possibility for the verse's original form while not dismissing any others.

In the book's endnotes, Carson demonstrates the extent of such other possibilities, playfully explaining that Fragment 146 ("neither for me honey nor the honeybee" [295]) could have been translated as

mellowsmelling honey
yellowstinging bee
honey, Honey?
no not me (379)

Though this alternate translation initially feels somewhat facetious, like the work of a clever poet and translator playing games with language, Carson's second version bears the same theme of negation as her more formal translation. Interestingly, then, the humorous version is perhaps no less viable than any other possibility; the creative enterprise of the translator is bolstered by the blankness inherent her subject's verse. Furthermore, Carson's re-visions of Fragments 56 and 146 are not anomalies—she engages in a similar creative process with Fragment 116. The Greek version consists of six words arranged linearly; the English translation becomes

farewell
 bride
 farewell
 much-honored bridegroom (237)

Clearly, this translation not only creatively poeticizes and re-imagines the line cited in another ancient text, it also inscribes blankness into an otherwise straightforward (literally and figuratively) line. By breaking the phrase into four separate segments, Carson maximizes the importance of the spaces between the words and of the silence that pierces the utterance. Her conscious decision to insert formal space reiterates her attraction to the aesthetic of blankness, creating silence even where it seemingly is not mandated.

The possibilities of Carson's aesthetic of blankness become even more pronounced if we read the spaces around her translations as extended, multidimensional margins of the sort that we normally see only along the extreme edges of the page. In his article "Holderlin's Marginalization of Language," Hans-Jost Frey discusses the productive role of marginal silence in the German poet and translator Friedrich Holderlin's writing process, investigating the times when Holderlin composes poetry in the margins and between the lines of pre-existing verse. He explains that:

Marginalia...indicate a conception of the text that allows continued writing of it, because no border that the text comes to is the end: rather, it is a border precisely because it can be crossed....The parts of the sheet that have no writing on them are lent significance by the marks that appear elsewhere on the page. Language is what is on the paper, but the paper itself is also a language because its silence also becomes included in the system of language and starts to speak.²¹

Though conventional prose texts inscribe space for reflection and composition beyond the left and right edges of their typescript and traditional poetry supplements such gaps by inserting blankness between stanzas and occasionally within lines, Carson's conception of Sappho's verse takes such notions one step farther. She creates a marginal space that consumes most of the page, that challenges our typical notions of writing and silence, that becomes a language through its lack of speech.²² Her blankness opens our minds to the possibility of marginalia of the most creative sort; the space around Sappho's words fuels and inspires our own musings which, whether articulated or not, comprise a composition process. Our reflections on Sappho's text and our own reactions to it have space to grow precisely because of the contextual limits of Carson's lines.

²¹ Hans-Jost Frey, "Holderlin's Marginalization of Language" in *The Solid Letter*, ed. Aris Fioretos (Stanford: Stanford U P, 1999), 357-358. Hereafter cited in the text. Special thanks to Prof. Anne Carson for providing me with this article.

²² For more on textual blankness as a form of language and a prominent force in discourse, see Howe, 1985 and McGann, 1993.

In his landmark work *Treatise on Painting*, Leonardo daVinci expresses a similar notion of the possibility inherent in blank space:

You should look at certain walls stained with damp, or at stones of uneven color.... You will be able to see in these the likenesses of divine landscapes, adorned with mountains, ruin, great plains, hills and valleys in great variety; and then again you will see these battles and strange figures in violent action, expressions of faces and clothes.... In such walls the same things happen as in the sound of bells in whose stroke you may find every named word in which you can imagine.²³

Leonardo's instructions to aspiring artists can easily be applied to *If Not, Winter's* audience. By providing her readers with blank pages, the textual equivalent of walls stained with damp or polyphonic peals of bells, Carson invites us to derive artistic and linguistic inspiration from the gaps between Sappho's words. In the blankness that follows, precedes, and surrounds her faithfully sparse renderings, we can see the likenesses both of "authentic" Sapphic themes and of the musings of our own consciousness. We imaginatively project onto Carson's pages the same kind of radiant images that Leonardo ultimately painted on his walls stained with damp. Because we long for the words originally cast by Sappho, we create for ourselves lines and words and messages that could satisfactorily fill that space.

Carson's attention to silence is notable not only in its own right, but also in its departure from previous translations. Other English renderings of Sappho's verse have overlooked or at least marginalized the role of blankness; they cast the translator's role as one of recreation or explanation, and only partially represent the fragmentation that threatens the poetic wholeness of her canon. Guy Davenport's 1976 work *Seven Greeks*, which includes translations of Sappho and six male poets, and 1965 volume *Sappho: Poems and Fragments*, which focuses solely on the title figure herself, inscribe the internal fragmentation of the poet's verse through their use of

²³ Berel Lang, "The Representation of Limits" in *Probing the Limits of Representation: Nazism and the "Final Solution,"* ed. Saul Friedlander (Cambridge: Harvard U P, 1992), 302. Hereafter cited in the text.

brackets, and yet omit any sense of external or marginal possibility. Whereas Carson's fragments comprise a 300 page volume, Davenport fits his Sappho translations into a 47 page section of *Seven Greeks* and a 64 page segment in *Sappho: Poems and Fragments*. The reader of his texts cannot envision Sappho as a blank page waiting to be inscribed; instead, her legacy becomes an unbroken series of lines that is no more enticing visually than a grocery list. His form cannot inscribe *eros*, there are no spaces that cause the reader to long for an impossible lingual fulfillment.²⁴ Whereas Carson's multidirectional margins allow space for imaginal adventure, Davenport's dense columnar translations limit the reader to the conventional edges of possibility. Davenport's sensitivity to Sappho's words is notable; when it comes to recording and highlighting her silences, however, his work falls short.

Denys Page's 1955 bilingual edition of Sappho similarly expunges possibility. He fills the margins of his text and the blankness of Sappho's with his own words and interpretations; the poet's fractured verse becomes visually and conceptually overwhelmed by his extensive footnotes and lengthy commentaries.²⁵ Though his work does much to enrich our understanding of the text's lingual subtleties and the intertextual connections between Sappho and her contemporaries, her voice is overshadowed by his and her silences are all but obliterated by his attempts to fill in both the visual and the informational gaps. Whereas Carson implicitly invites her readers to infuse her pervasive margins with their own readings, voices, or personal reverie for silence, Page precludes all such responses by inscribing the page with his own voice.

Mary Barnard's 1958 translations, by contrast, have been celebrated for exhibiting simple restraint, and for demonstrating the beauty of what remains rather than trying to turn Sapphic

²⁴ See Appendix 1 for a reprinted page from *Seven Greeks*.

²⁵ See Appendix 1 for a reprinted page from *Sappho and Alcaeus: An Introduction to the Study of Ancient Lesbian Poetry*.

fragments into something else. Dudley Fitts, whose words preface Barnard's translations, praises the volume for precisely this fact. He writes:

From the tiny part we are tempted to imagine the whole: a generous exercise, if we remember that it is intended as nothing more conclusive, and one that is admirably rewarding in Miss Barnard's book. What I chiefly admire in Miss Barnard's translations and reconstructions is the direct purity of diction and versification. There are perilous guesses, audacious twists, and inevitable flights to the authority of intuition alone; but there is no spurious poeticism, none of the once so fashionable Swinburne-Symonds erethism.... What Miss Barnard perceives, and what no one would ever have guessed from the general run of talk about Sappho, is the pungent downright plain style.²⁶

This praise could have been written about Carson's volume—indeed, many of *If Not, Winter's* most effusive reviews celebrate the translation's clean lines and simple tone.²⁷ However, despite its lingual sparseness and verbal restraint, Barnard's volume does not highlight or respect blankness in the same way as Carson's. Though her English fragments are short in length and spaced widely apart, they bear a sense of completeness that Carson's lack. Barnard assigns each fragment a title, making claims for Sapphic intent, and fills in the lexical gaps with words of her own. Similarly, Barnard superimposes a sense of narrative structure and progression to her translated fragments. She seems insistent that Sappho's canon tell a story and is apparently uncomfortable with the notion that its boldest characteristic is its incompleteness. Furthermore, while the blank space around her lines tentatively indicates the mystique and uncertainty that surrounds the poet's canon, Barnard's translations do not include any indications of internal blankness or fragmentation.²⁸ Her bracket-less verse reads as isolated utterances that bear an internal logical integrity; the volume as a whole reads as a book of poetry that could have been written cogently in modern English. Whereas Barnard's translations are clean, tidy, and

²⁶ Mary Barnard, *Sappho: A New Translation* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1958), viii-ix. Hereafter cited in the text.

²⁷ See especially Campos, D'Agata, Fitzgerald, Smith, 2002.

²⁸ See Appendix 1 for a reprinted page from *Sappho: A New Translation*.

untroubling, Carson's are dynamically messy, their wholeness ruptured by brackets and their interpretative consistency challenged by the beautiful blankness that she highlights and celebrates throughout.

It is in the context of her predecessors' work that Carson's contribution becomes clear. Her translations are stunning because of their materiality, their fidelity to the original fragmentation, their inscription of possibility, their illumination of silence. She embraces the biographical and textual mystique of the Sapphic canon in an unprecedented manner, using the aesthetic appeal of her pages to indicate the beauty and productivity inherent in blankness. Her translation demonstrates a respect and reverence both for what Sappho's fragmented remnants say and what they fail to communicate. She creates for the readers not a representation of original authorial intent, but instead a visual and experiential celebration of the conjoined role of silence and voice, blankness and speech in the Sapphic canon. Her volume becomes a necessary touchstone not only for any student or scholar wishing to read Sappho's words but also for those who wish to experience the extent of her blankness. Though critical conceptions of Sappho's silence are limited at best, Carson's theory of *eros* in *Eros the Bittersweet* and practical representation of blankness in *If Not, Winter* contribute greatly to our understanding of the issues involved—the challenges, the aesthetic beauty, and the inspiration alike. With the background of silence provided by Carson's words and pauses, we put ourselves in a position to investigate the role of Sappho's silences in the lines and spaces of modern female poets.

Chapter 2. The Space of Sapphic Silence: H.D.

While Carson's theory and translations demonstrate the potential creativity inherent in Sappho's fragmentary canon, modern poets (Carson herself included) have employed that potential in their own written works. One of the poets who takes full advantage of this ancient blankness is H.D., a writer whose style and content alike demonstrate the productive power of Sapphic silence.²⁹ She envisions herself as a modern-day Sappho, her themes, forms, and language inscribing the tendencies and preoccupations of her ancient predecessor. From her minimalist style to her fixation on Greek mythology to her descriptions of natural and (homo)erotic scenes, H.D.'s collected works read as a tribute to and re-visioning of the fractured Sapphic canon. Furthermore, like Sappho, H.D. is a figure of fragmentation; her oblique name, shortened from Hilda Doolittle to an set of initials by Ezra Pound in 1912, and her poetry, consisting of short lines and snapshot images, embody the ideals of the imagist movement of the early 20th century which was, itself, based on a Sapphic aesthetic.³⁰ Ultimately, both H.D.'s self-definition and the labels imposed upon her indicate her intimate connection to Sappho; the allusions to the poet in H.D.'s prose and poetry suggest the inhabitability of Sapphic blankness and cast silence as a site of rupture on which poetic productivity can be perilously perched.

Interestingly, H.D.'s interest in Sappho extends from the poetic to the academic; her essay "The Wise Sappho" is a telling accompaniment to her lyric invocations of Lesbos's most famous resident. In the essay, H.D. presents Sappho as a woman whose biography, poetry, and

²⁹ For more detailed biographical information about H.D. see Guest, 1984.

³⁰ In the early 1900s, Ezra Pound, H.D., and Richard Aldington frequently read Sappho's fragments in the tearoom of the British Museum in London. It was at one of these reading sessions that H.D. first presented two of her earliest Greek-inflected poems to Pound, at which point he titled her "H.D. Imagiste," a designation that followed her throughout her prolific poetic career. Indeed, in *The Sappho Companion*, Margaret Reynolds address the profound Sapphic influence in Pound's formulation of imagism: "seeing how Sappho's silences spoke volumes, Pound stripped down to the essentials" (311).

mystique make her a complicated and potentially contradictory figure, someone whose identity and legacy contain multitudes.³¹ Her representation of Sappho is consequently expansive, spanning a range of physical, psychological, and spiritual characteristics that describe not only the poet herself, but also all those female readers whose curiosity breathes life into her verse. Beginning by disputing an Alexandrine poet's assertion that Sappho was "little, but all roses," H.D. makes it her mission instead to demonstrate what Sappho both was and was not—and to explain the difficulties of describing her identity with any precision.

Proceeding through a series of metaphors that describe Sappho with varying levels of confidence, H.D. ultimately settles on the notion of multiplicity, suggesting that the poet's identity encompasses more than it excludes and thus must be represented as such. She casts Sappho's words as simultaneously sophisticated and petulant, sensitive and bitter, nervous and overpowering. Sappho is both passion and wisdom. She sings of both love and jealousy. She is a spirit. She is a poet. She is a goddess. She is a woman. She is a mystery. She is "not all roses—":

not roses at all, not orange blossoms even, but reading deeper we are inclined to visualize these broken sentences and unfinished rhythms as rocks....Not flowers at all, but an island with innumerable, tiny, irregular bays and fjords and little straits between which the sun lies clear...or breaks, wave upon destructive passionate wave. Not roses, but an island, a country, a continent, a planet, a world of emotion; a world of emotion that could only be imagined by the greatest of her countrymen...who themselves confessed her beyond their reach, beyond their song, not a woman, not a goddess even, but a song or the spirit of a song. A song, a spirit, a white star that moves across the heaven to mark the end of a world epoch or to presage some coming glory.³²

H.D.'s descriptions of Sappho span the abstract and the concrete, the expansive and the minuscule. By simultaneously describing her as the individual breakers on the waves and an

³¹ "Do I contradict myself?/Very well then I contradict myself/(I am large, I contain multitudes.)" from "Song of Myself" by Walt Whitman.

³² H.D. "The Wise Sappho" in *Notes on Thought and Vision* (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1982), 58-59. Hereafter cited in the text.

entire world of emotion, as the rocks of the sea and the stars of the heaven, as the physical planet and the spiritual heavens, H.D. suggests that the ancient poet is anything that we want—or need—her to be. Because Sappho’s biography and poetry contain few certainties and many ambiguities, H.D.’s prose tribute becomes an exercise in imagination as she projects traits and emotions onto the blankness in which Sappho is shrouded.

After weighing more specific alternatives, H.D. ultimately envisions Sappho as everything and nothing alike: “I think of the words of Sappho...transcending colour yet containing (as great heat the compass of the spectrum) all colour” (58). In H.D.’s conception, Sappho’s obliqueness separates her works from the rest of the lyric canon and yet her biographical and textual blankness also allows her to embody various—and often contradictory—elements of a poetic tradition. Writing more than 50 years after H.D., feminist critic Susan Gubar echoes and expands upon this idea, applying it to the works of a contemporary author. In her essay on the subversive potential of silence in Isak Dinesen’s story “The Blank Page,” Gubar observes that “the blank page contains all stories in one story, just as silence contains all potential sound and white contains all color.”³³ H.D. and Gubar both highlight the possibility inherent in blankness, the textual and biographical anonymity of Sappho serving, like the blank page in Dinesen’s tale, to create a space for later expression. Sappho is that white light or blank space that seems to contain everything and nothing simultaneously, a space of possibility whose brilliance and obliqueness alike inspire a multitude of responses and invocations by her poetic successors.

Although H.D. makes little direct mention of the process of loss so fundamental to Sappho’s legacy, she does explain the potential of Sapphic blankness. She writes: “We have no

³³ Susan Gubar, “‘The Blank Page’ and Issues of Female Creativity” in *Writing and Sexual Difference*, ed. Elizabeth Abel (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1982), 89. Hereafter cited in the text.

definite portraits from (Sappho's) hands....They are left to our imagination, though only the most ardent heart, the most intense spirit, and the most wary and subtle intellect can hope even in moments of ardent imagination, to fill in these broken couplets" (62). In her poetry, H.D. positions herself as someone courageous enough to do just that, culling broken segments from the fragmentary Sapphic canon and building upon them in her own poetic voice. Similarly, in her essay "The Blank Page: H.D.'s Invitation to Trust and Mistrust Language," Kathleen Fraser acknowledges the allure of blankness in H.D.'s verse. She writes:

Born from doubt and extreme privacy, [H.D.'s] own tentative language invented itself out of silence. Her gift was an ability to see an empty page waiting to be inscribed and to imagine—beyond the parchment metaphor of "palimpsest"—a contemporary model for the poem that would recover a complex overlay of erotic and spiritual valuing variously imprinted, then worn away, then finally rediscovered and engraved inside her own lines.³⁴

Certainly, the empty page metaphor here refers not solely to the notebooks in or papers upon which H.D. scribbled her poetic musings, but also to the startling blankness that pervades many translations of Sappho's verse. By inserting her words into the spaces on the Sapphic page and allowing her own poetic voice to resonate in the spaces where Sappho's fell silent, H.D. creates a natural palimpsest, her own verse enlivening—and enlivened by—another's. Her words speak of, alongside, and in place of Sappho's, creating a multi-layered construct of silence and voice alike.

The thematic and lexical connections between Sappho and H.D. have been discussed extensively by contemporary scholars. The appendix to Diana Collecott's *H.D. and Sapphic Modernism* catalogs the most pronounced Sapphic references in H.D.'s oeuvre, listing 58 distinct moments from Henry Thornton Wharton's 1898 translations that appear in the modern poet's imagistic lines. Collecott carefully traces H.D.'s appropriation and expansion of Sappho's verse, ultimately reading her entire canon as "a creative dialogue with Sappho" that is "persistently

textual.”³⁵ She makes concrete and explicit the linkages between ancient and modern words, demonstrating how H.D. derives inspiration and sanction from her predecessor’s fragmented verse. Collecott is not the only scholar to trace these connections that link poets separated by oceans, continents, and more than 2500 years. Many recent critics have played sleuth, searching for Sapphic references within H.D.’s canon and analyzing the Hellenism that pervades her modernist lines in manners both subtle and straightforward.³⁶ The echoes of Sappho’s words in H.D.’s verse have been analyzed carefully; I find myself concerned instead with the echoes of Sappho’s silences, with the way in which the modern poet performs fragmentation and embraces blankness. Though the legacy of silence is subtler and slightly more evasive than the role of voice, it pervades and influences H.D.’s imagistic verse in a variety of ways that are no less profound.

The most intriguing examples of Sapphic silence in H.D.’s canon appear in her fragment poems, each one of which begins with an oblique line from Sappho and proceeds to expand on its themes and intimations. The central conception of silence foregrounded by “The Wise Sappho”—the notion that Sappho is a blank slate onto which the characteristics of her successors can be inscribed—becomes strikingly salient in these poems, particularly in “Fragment 113,”³⁷ a work whose epigraph is the Sapphic fragment “Neither honey nor bee for me”:

Fragment 113
“Neither honey nor bee for me”
 —Sappho.

Not honey,

³⁴ Kathleen Fraser, “The Blank Page: H.D.’s Invitation to Trust and Mistrust Language” in *H.D. and Poets After*, ed. Donna Krolik Hollenberg (Iowa City: U of Iowa P, 2000), 163. Hereafter cited in the text.

³⁵ Diana Collecott, *H.D. and Sapphic Modernism* (Cambridge: Cambridge U P, 1999), 3. Hereafter cited in the text.

³⁶ For a more extensive discussion of the lexical and symbolic links between Sappho and H.D., see Gregory, 1997; Rohrbach, 1996; Kenner, 1971; Fraser, 2000.

³⁷ Note: H.D. based her fragment poems on Henry T. Wharton’s translations, which employ a different numbering system than do contemporary translations. What H.D. calls “Fragment 113” is now customarily referred to as Fragment 146.

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;

not so—
though rapture blind my eyes,
and hunger crisp
dark and inert my mouth,
not honey, not the south,
not the tall stalk
of red twin-lilies,
nor light branch of fruit tree
caught in flexible light branch;

not honey, not the south;
ah flower of the purple iris,
flower of white,
or of the iris, withering the grass—
for fleck of the sun's fire,
gathers such heat and power,
that shadow-print is light,
cast through the petals
of the yellow iris-flower;

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;
neglect 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.

H.D.'s authorial intent here is fascinatingly unclear: does the verse serve as H.D.'s response to Sappho's line or as one poet's attempt to enter the mind of another? Is H.D.'s approach to re-visioning Sappho one of rereading or rewriting? Is she Sappho's critic or Sappho's voice? Does H.D. write *to* the Greek poet or *as* her? Does she observe her predecessor or become her? Is there a difference? Ultimately, it is not the answers but the possibility for the questions themselves that demonstrates the productive potential of Sappho's silence and proves the inextricable connection between ancient blankness and modern verse.

Beyond the lack of clarity regarding the text's subjectivity and intent, several more concrete aspects of "Fragment 113" relate to Sapphic blankness. In many respects, the poem reads not as a wholly independent work but rather as a piece designed to fill pre-defined spaces. It seems to begin *in medias res*, the introductory phrase ("Not honey,/not the plunder of the bee") sounding more like the response to an inquiry or a mid-sentence declaration than a unified statement of its own. H.D.'s verse is dependent on the Sapphic fragment to frame its exposition and elucidate its opening; in that way, the poem serves to exemplify Susan Gubar's idea of the fantastic collaboration that exists between lyricists of antiquity and modernity. In a unique example of co-dependence, Sappho's fragment needs a contemporary poet's text to regain its wholeness, while H.D.'s modern interpretation is incomplete without Sappho's oblique preface. Strikingly, then, H.D.'s form symbolically inscribes Sappho's fragmentation; "Fragment 113" becomes merely one segment of a larger conversation and is a partial discourse about which much more has been—and is still yet to be—said.

Furthermore, the theme of the work also relates to the invocation of voice and the appropriation of silence. Throughout the poem, the speaker glorifies desire yet resists realization of her impulses, choosing instead to remain in a sphere of craving and want. She speaks of desire

as both emotionally and physically consuming yet casts the entire poem as a series of negations of potential fulfillment. The lyric ends before desire is consummated, a fact that echoes Carson's praise of *eros* and exemplifies the logic of women poets' attraction to Sappho. The speaker's self-imposed distance from the objects of her desire correlates with the contemporary woman poet's forced distance from an originary Sapphic voice, and the fragment's privileging of desire over fulfillment ultimately exemplifies the erotic appeal of Sappho's silences and fragmentation. The entire poem functions as a negation, as the repeated negative of Sappho's quotation is reiterated in each of H.D.'s four stanzas. By beginning every stanza with the word "not" (which appears 15 times throughout the poem) and peppering her verse with similar terms of negation like "nor" and "neglect," H.D. makes present the absences that pervade this piece. Her words focus on those objects that do not exist—and brings to the forefront the forces of restraint and hesitation that keep her from them. Alongside her thematic discussion of this deferral, H.D. also inscribes such postponement in her form. Her careful use of enjambment—most prominently in the opening stanza—serves to perform for the reader the same kind of deferred satisfaction that the speaker so profoundly experiences. As the reader's eyes jump from lines seven to eight to juxtapose the broken adjective-noun coupling "sweet/stain" and traverse the gap between lines nine and ten to combine and logically complete the phrase "deep/plunge," (s)he experiences the speaker's privileging of desire over fulfillment. For the split second in which the normally conjoined terms are separated from one another, the reader's desire to resolve the split parallels the central figure's desire to succumb to her rapture—and H.D.'s desire to reach the Sapphic voice.

Beyond reiterating the tension between desire and fulfillment, H.D.'s formal techniques also create a powerful aesthetic of fragmentation, her words and the spaces between them

paralleling the structure of Sappho's fractured verse. The poem reads as a catalog of incomplete ideas or utterances; the appeal of these stanzas is not so much narrative flow or resolution as it is the possibility inherent in H.D.'s abstract lines and the intellectual energy required to meander through her circuitous verse. Because the first three stanzas consist solely of negations without positive counterparts, it is strikingly difficult to determine what this poem is about; H.D.'s elaborate words thus are nearly as ambiguous as Sappho's fractured lines. In addition, H.D.'s formal variations in the final stanza further contribute to this aesthetic of fragmentation. By using dashes to connect a series of related phrases ("not iris—old desire—old passion—/old forgetfulness—old pain—"), H.D. not only reiterates the sense of deferral that pervades the poem, but also inserts formal and lyrical gaps. Her dashes, like Emily Dickinson's, are a space of possibility; the breaks created by them are as enticing as the blank space surrounding Sappho's verse. The dashes that separate and fragment incomplete ideas also can be read as parallels to the brackets in *If Not, Winter*, as symbols that represent a space where words are expected, but none can accurately be defined. Though Carson's brackets are the result of unintentional errors in transmission while H.D.'s are the product of her own poetic license, their impact on the reader is much the same. Each textual imprint seems to represent a space where words could be voiced yet are not, where the audience has the opportunity to fill the spaces between words with its own internal musings. Ultimately, then, the title "Fragment 113" seems to relate not only to the numbered line in Wharton's volume but also to H.D.'s conception of her own writing. Her fragments have been layered upon Sappho's, creating a poem that, though it is a much more expansive discourse than the ancient line on which it is based, is still characterized by incompleteness.

Furthermore, the short line lengths and long, columnar stanzas of “Fragment 113” maximize the white space on H.D.’s printed page; the shape and visual import of the poem is determined as much by what is not said as by what is—an observation reiterated by a subtle thematic trope present herein. The entire piece can be read as a description of a photographic negative, its vacillation between—and reversal of—traditional light and dark imagery suggesting that, in this poem, negative space is as important as the symbolic negations present throughout. Central to such a reading is the peculiar line “that shadow print is light,” an image that confounds our expectations by suggesting that the mark left by the iris as it interferes between the sun and the ground is not the amorphous black of a conventional shadow, but rather a strangely radiant print of light that has the power to “[wither] the grass.” Similarly, H.D.’s insistence on light imagery in the second stanza (“nor light branch of fruit tree/caught in flexible light branch”) emphasizes this perception; the light trees against an apparently dark background can exist only in a realm where traditional light-dark expectations are reversed. In this inverse world, where darkness is the background norm and white forms suggest the presence of foreground shapes, the black typeface is less central than the white space that surrounds it, the blank page takes priority over the mark of a pen, and silence prevails over speech. H.D.’s content and form alike indicate a comfort with blankness—she pays tribute to a Sapphic aesthetic while also creating it anew through her own poetic text.

H.D. ultimately seems to reach an affirmation through her repeated refusal of fulfillment. As the poem comes to a close, she enacts negations of her negations, effectively creating a positive assertion through a double negative. She writes: “not this, not any flower,/but if you turn again,/seek strength of arm and throat,” and “no trembling of the string/but heat, more passionate,” each denial of a negation suggesting a positive action or the emergence of a present,

existing entity. After listing all of the desires that she has denied herself, her words take a turn and out of the void of the poem comes a strong, fiery heat. From a repeated process of negation emerges a mysterious force, not the traditional music of a lyre note derived from a vibrating string, but instead a more primal and passionate tone that originates from some place more organic. The identity of this force is indeterminate—nothing in H.D.'s words suggests precisely what emerges from the otherwise immobile frame—yet its power is indisputable. Out of a negative emerges a positive, out of an absence emerges a presence, and out of a void emerges a force. The affirmative conclusion of the poem strikingly parallels the result of H.D.'s process of Sapphic invocation. H.D.'s poetic canon emerges from the silences of Sappho's; she demonstrates the productive potential of blankness by constructing a text in the spaces between the ancient poet's words yet also demonstrates her respect for silence's power as an autonomous force by re-inscribing it into her own verse. Her re-visioning of the Sapphic canon, as exemplified by her work in "Fragment 113," demonstrates silence's power both as a means to an end and as an end in and of itself; her simultaneous use and preservation of Sappho's silences prove her respect for the form. Her collected works cast her as a poet who knowingly and lovingly inhabits an ancient silence; her individual poems bring to the forefront that aspect of Sappho's legacy that is frequently invoked yet rarely extensively discussed.

H.D. reiterates and complicates this trope of inhabitation in another one of her fragment poems. The dramatic situation of "Fragment Thirty-six," wherein a woman struggles to choose between the mutually dependent yet ostensibly opposed forces of love and lyric, rests precariously on an edge—demonstrating the productive potential of residing in a silent space between two alternate realms, but also reiterating the difficulty of remaining in such a tenuous

locale.³⁸ H.D. creates an aesthetic of breaking in her lines, inscribing the challenges of coming to speech alongside the strains of remaining trapped between two spheres (two spheres of voice or, alternatively, distinct realms of silence and voice). Though this poem is much less silent formally than some of H.D.'s other works, lacking the dashes and gaps and radical enjambment of "Fragment 113," it inscribes silence in its content and its tone alike. The entire poem is composed of a silent rumination, the lines seemingly composed internally or muttered to oneself, the reader's role apparently one of eavesdropper rather than intended audience. The central figure, then, is not even a speaker per se; the words of "Fragment Thirty-six" do not seem to be uttered aloud or destined for anyone, while the figure defines herself as "[quiet]" in the sixth stanza and as a "[listener]" in the final line. H.D.'s poem, then, serves as an example of poetry without speech, a poetic situation without a speaker. The fact that the poem does not constitute a traditional speech act, however, does not undermine its complexity. The intricacy of the images and ideas that permeate the poem instead demonstrate the depth of thought that underlies silence, suggesting that the absence of pronounced or deliberate speech does not indicate an absence of internal rumination.

Furthermore, the trope of breaking, introduced in "The Wise Sappho" as a synecdoche for Sappho's fragile permanence, reappears here and contributes its many possible meanings to our reading of blankness. Throughout the poem, H.D. couples the image of breaking with various modes and forms of silence. In the fourth stanza, she prefaces the potential action "press lips to flesh/that shudders not nor breaks?" with its adjoining instruction "press lips to lips that answer not." These bodily connections comprise a strange form of silence, the gestures initiated but not reciprocated, the physical communication emitted but not returned in a parallel "voice." The woman's imagined gestures seem like a letter sent into a void, potentially received but

³⁸ Please see Appendix 2 for the full text of "Fragment Thirty-six."

unacknowledged, read but unanswered. Similarly, near the end of the poem, immediately following her image of the breaking wave, H.D. writes:

so my mind hesitates
above the passion
quivering yet to break,
so my mind hesitates
above my mind,
listening to song's delight.

In addition to inscribing the indecision that pervades the piece, these lines also reiterate the symbolic confluence of breaking and silence. As her passion threatens to break (and/or break her) and her intellect attempts to gain control over its strange doubling, the woman casts herself as a silent presence, producing no sound or definitive response, and instead simply listening to her disembodied song. This coupling of silent listening/silent rapture with the process of breaking is again echoed in the poem's final stanza. The woman explains:

I know not what to do:
...
will the sound break at last
as the wave hesitant,
or will the whole night pass
and I lie listening awake?

The joint role of the two forces becomes evident simply through their correlative relationship. Silence accompanies the act of breaking, seeming to both precede and engulf it.

Though the joint presence of breaking and silence is clear, the precise relationship between the two is not. Part of this ambiguity arises from the many possible meanings of break, which combine to give the poem's images their full import. When H.D. wonders at the end of the verse "will the sound break,/.../will the sound break at last," her meaning seems deliberately oblique. Break here most prominently signifies beginning, the sound breaking the woman's silence and marking her entrée into a world of speech (as she speaks either directly to her lover

or symbolically on the pages of her lyric). Although this is the most likely meaning, however, break could also mean rupture; in such a situation, the woman's broken sound could be a fractured tongue similar to that discussed in Sappho's Fragment 31. Her ability to survive in either realm of decision—love or lyric—depends on her ability to voice herself; following Prins's reading of the fractured tongue, this breaking hence threatens the woman's very subjectivity and autonomy. Furthermore, continuing the theme of waves developed earlier in the verse, break could also mean disappear, suggesting simply that the woman will be forced to make a decision by the erasure of her silent space. In any event, the act of breaking makes silence a dynamic force, a presence actively developed rather than passively endured.

This trope of breaking in "Fragment Thirty-six" demonstrates the precariousness of the silent space that H.D. seems to inhabit rather comfortably by the end of "Fragment 113." As the woman debates whether to embrace love or lyric, she sits on a cusp of silence that will be broken either by her interactions with her beloved or by her decision to turn her pen to paper. As she rests on the crest of the wave, her indecision suspending her in between two choices, her fall into one of the two options lying before her and out of her silent meditation seems inevitable. Although the white "flake on flake of foam" rises beautifully off the wave and "rends the light" with its reflective radiance, it cannot last forever. Similarly, the woman cannot resist the break, but rather is simply "(waiting for its falling)." Interestingly, in "The Wise Sappho," H.D. casts the ancient poet as embodying this same wave; however, unlike the figure in "Fragment Thirty-six," she is "breaking...but never broken." (67). It is as if (our vision of) Sappho permanently inhabits this precarious tension through her fragmented and complex legacy. She is perched between the realms of silence and voice, passion and lyric, able to inhabit a tenuous space and contain contradictions because of the silence and blankness of her legacy. Because she can be

anything and nothing all at once, because her words can be interpreted extensively and her blankness can be read infinitely, her wave never breaks. She, unlike H.D. or any other poet who invokes her words, can remain and flourish in this intermediary space between two spheres. Through her complicated trope of breaking—and her implicit allegiance of that break with the realm of silence, H.D. reveals much about Sappho's legacy—and the complicated role of silence therein—as she ruminates on the challenges of her poetic situation.

H.D.'s invocation of Sappho throughout her collected works—and particularly in her fragment poems—demonstrates that she understands poetically what scholars have frequently overlooked and oversimplified critically: the central role of silence in Sappho's legacy and the specific ways in which the gaps in Sapphic verse have fueled the proliferation of subsequent poetic voices. She simultaneously employs and inhabits Sappho's silences; the words and form of her poetry pay tribute to silence's diverse roles, to its purposeful use and autonomous power. Furthermore, they also lend greater depth and complexity to our reading of Sapphic silence, demonstrating the way in which Sappho's biographical and textual blankness allow her to encompass all possibility and embrace contradiction. H.D.'s poems (and one essay) become a central component in a discussion of this topic, their subtle gestures speaking volumes and beginning to fill the void in the critical conversation. By writing in lyrical lines, the form *of* Sappho, she is more easily able to speak about Sappho, her words bearing many of the same formal subtleties as her predecessor's verse.

Chapter 3. The Language of Sapphic Silence: Eavan Boland

Like Carson and H.D., the contemporary Irish-American poet Eavan Boland makes significant contributions to the study of Sapphic silence. In both her poem “The Journey” and her prose essays on various topics, Boland broaches the topic of women’s common language, suggesting through words, images, and form alike that women have access to a dialect all their own: silence. She implies that this language, a force simultaneously stifling and liberating, oppressive and empowering, emerges through the absence of sound and conventional discourse. At the same time that she champions the potential strength of the form, however, she also reiterates its oppressive past, revealing silence as a form that contains inherent contradictions. Interestingly, Boland seems most comfortable embracing silence when she writes about and in tandem with Sappho; the ancient poet’s legacy both bolsters and sanctions her arguments about non-lingual discourse as a communicative force. Although she does not explicitly cast herself as someone whose work includes a conscious re-visioning of Sappho’s work and legacy, the ancient poet’s role in Boland’s verse is both purposeful and powerful, revealing much about Sappho as a figure of silence at the same time that it makes broader gestures toward the complicated poetic role of blankness and space. Ultimately, Boland’s words emphasize the communicative potential of silence—a component of its role that is, for her, bolstered and highlighted by Sappho’s complicated legacy.

Boland’s treatment of silence divides her canon. Like Adrienne Rich, a poet with whom she expresses a sense of kinship in many of her writings, she frequently demonstrates discomfort with the form in her prose while praising and tentatively embracing it in her poetry. Throughout her prose writings, Boland explores her distrust of silence, often representing it—as do her

feminist contemporaries—as a force symbolic of women’s literary and social oppression. She casts her own development as a poet as a process of overcoming the historical pressures of women’s silences, suggesting that her words demonstrate a triumph over the societal forces that encourage her not to speak. However, each of her essays treats silence slightly differently, suggesting that it is a force so complicated that it cannot be represented in a consistent or universal manner. In her 1997 article “Eavan Boland: Letter to a Young Poet,” a piece self-consciously based on Rilke’s famous volume of similar name yet pointedly directed toward a female audience, Boland casts poetry and silence as antithetical forces, intimating that writing is the means by which she combats an oppressive and barren legacy. In discussing the differences between men’s and women’s historical experiences with poetry, she writes:

But the past I want to talk about is more charged and less lyrical than that for women poets. It is, after all, the place where authorship of the poem eluded us. Where poetry itself was defined by and in our absence....Then why go there? Why visit the site of our exclusion? We need to go to that past: not to learn from it, but to change it. If we do not change that past, it will change us....The only danger to poetry is the reticence and silence of the poets. This piece is about the past and our right as women poets to avail of it. It is about the art and against the silence.³⁹

Boland’s words here easily could have come from an essay by Rich, Audre Lorde, Hélène Cixous, or the like, as she clearly views silence, absence, and exclusion as intimately linked traits of women’s history in writing. She rails against the historical silences in which women’s voices have drowned, suggesting that women’s absence in the literary canon is a past that they are destined to repeat unless individual female poets take it upon themselves to let their voices sing out with passion and fervor. In her conception, silence is a sign of oppression and verbal stagnancy that must be overcome at all costs if her female contemporaries are to make names for

³⁹ Eavan Boland, “Eavan Boland: Letter to a Young Poet” *The American Poetry Review* 26.3 (May/June 1997): 23. Later reprinted as “Letter to a Young Woman Poet” in *By Herself: Women Reclaim Poetry*, ed. Molly McQuade (St. Paul: Graywolf Press, 2000), 331-344. Hereafter cited in the text.

themselves in the world of writing. Boland's distrust of the form feels unequivocal; never does she make gestures toward its potential productivity or imply that it has any redeeming qualities that women poets possibly could embrace.

In "The Woman Poet: Her Dilemma," Boland again presents the centrality of silence to a female conception of writing, this time suggesting that wordlessness is the simultaneous heritage and legacy of the woman poet. The chapter from her book *Object Lessons* makes silence a distinct theme, a topic that preoccupies Boland even in the midst of her career as a prolific writer. She observes:

But women have a birthright in poetry. I believe, though an antitraditional poet may not agree, that when a woman poet begins to write, she very quickly becomes conscious of the silences which have preceded her, which still surround her. These silences will become an indefinable part of her purpose as a poet.⁴⁰

These statements seem deliberately ambiguous. It is unclear whether the silences that "still surround" women poets are the permanent scars of centuries of marginalization or, contrarily, a productive mode of discourse in which they have been wrapped throughout their history of clandestine verse. In the first instance, silence is to be recognized so that it can be corrected and erased; in the second, to be embraced as a band of commonality and power. The deliberate lack of resolution present in Boland's carefully chosen words suggests that ultimately the answer is both, that the paradox is a solution in and of itself. While silence is a language shared by women writers across history, they embrace it precisely because it traditionally has been their only option, because they have chosen to create presence through absence rather than to live in a world devoid of expressive possibilities. Silence thus becomes both their captor and their liberator, a simultaneous negative burden and positive birthright. Boland's words in favor of

⁴⁰ Eavan Boland, "The Woman Poet: Her Dilemma" in *Object Lessons: The Life of the Woman and the Poet in Our Time* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1996), 245. Hereafter cited in the text.

silence are conditional at best, but she seems willing to consider the positive potential of a force that she had elsewhere conceptualized in solely negative terms.

Importantly, Boland's comfort with silence increases when she couples the term with her conceptions of and investigations into Sappho's legacy. In an introductory essay to her poem "The Journey," Boland combines a discussion of Sappho's role therein with an explanation of the formal decisions that governed her process of writing. In the midst of her specific discussion of the poem and its components, she takes a step back to explain and highlight Sappho's role in her verse, explaining in general terms her attraction to the ancient poet. When describing the time that she spent studying Greek at Trinity College, she writes:

But I took away from that year or so a powerful curiosity about Sappho: a woman poet born in an oral culture who died in a literate one. A woman who mobilized the formal, religious, and conventional elements of Ionic poetry into a visionary sexuality. A woman whose fragments of poetry about her daughter were so beautiful and memorable that my own mother would quote them to me when I was a child.⁴¹

From this and other references to Sappho in "On 'The Journey,'" it becomes clear that Boland's "powerful curiosity" about the ancient poet deeply colored her process of writing the poem. Although it is most centrally a work about the period surrounding her infant daughter's battle with meningitis, "The Journey" also reads as an inquiry into Sappho's role in the female poetic tradition—or, at least, in Boland's conceptualization of that tradition. Her abstract queries about Sappho affect her composition of "The Journey" just as deeply as the concrete details of her daughter's illness, a fact that her words in this essay begin to elucidate. In addition to highlighting Sappho's overarching presence during her writing process, Boland also deliberately emphasizes the absence and the mystery inherent in the poet's legacy. Later in the essay, she explains her non-verbal process of imagining and re-visioning Sappho: "Who was she?...And

what, finally, were the small human details about her that I, as a woman poet thousands of years later, could put my hand out and touch, like a blind reading of a face?" (188) This determined, perpetual quest for the details seemingly can occur only where none are readily accessible—or, perhaps more profoundly, where none can be said to exist. Though her initial attraction to the poet arose as the beauty of Sappho's words rolled off her mother's tongue, Boland's sustained interest seems to stem from the blankness that surrounds Sappho's verse, from the way in which she is forced to grope blindly for details in the midst of a fractured and fragmented canon. The *eros* of lack, at work in the Sapphic writings of both Carson and H.D., comes into play here, attracting yet another woman poet to Sappho's figure, engendering yet another set of poems that follow in the ancient poet's legacy.

Strikingly, alongside the discussion of Sappho in "On 'The Journey'" appears an explanation of Boland's formal decisions throughout the piece—decisions that both implicitly and explicitly champion the power of silence. In discussing the topic and form of the poem, she remarks that "[t]he more I thought about it, the more it seemed necessary to me to subvert that relation between what is left out of the poem and what is included in it" (189). While this statement clearly refers to multiple contextual and formal elements of the poem, it also bears great implications for Boland's choice to make silence a topic of her prose and poetry alike. Her verse, like Sappho's, highlights blankness and foregrounds silence, making what is left out as central as what remains. By including silence in both her words and her form, she proves its centrality in poetic discourse, like Rich in her 1975 poem "Cartographies of Silence," refusing to "confuse it/with any kind of absence."⁴² While silence is traditionally excluded from our

⁴¹ Eavan Boland, "On 'The Journey'" in *Dwelling in Possibility: Women Poets and Critics on Poetry*, ed. Yopie Prins and Maera Shrieber (Ithaca: Cornell U P, 1997), 188. Hereafter cited in the text.

⁴² Adrienne Rich, *The Fact of a Doorframe: Poems Selected and New 1950-1984* (New York: W.W Norton & Company, 1984), 233. Hereafter cited in the text.

conceptions of poetry because of its seeming opposition to written or verbal communication, Boland suggests through the content and form of “The Journey” that silence and language are complementary and even potentially collapsible. Just as ineffective dialogue is often criticized for its relative “silence,” so too can powerful silence be transformed into language. By including the excluded and embracing the marginal, Boland makes silence notable not for what it fails to be, but rather for what it is, casting it in terms of presence that grant it a newfound meaning and literary authority. Her conjoined discussion of Sappho and silence—and the comfort with which she embraces each—sets the stage for her poetic praise of silence’s power and authority.

This joint embrace of Sappho and silence fuels Boland’s writing in “The Journey.”⁴³ Despite her clear ambivalence about the nature and role of silence throughout her prose pieces, Boland’s poetics suggest a conditional embrace of the form and a desire to endorse silence as a common language useful for the interchange among women writers. She casts her entire journey as an exploration of silence, as the opportunity for a woman poet to embrace aspects of her discourse that she may have always carried with her yet never fully recognized. From the poem’s first image, wordlessness becomes a prominent, if complicated, theme. Boland’s decision to employ a scene from Vergil’s *The Aeneid* as an epigraph, ostensibly no more than her mode of subverting male literary history by incorporating a mythological dream sequence into her distinctly female poem, steers the poem toward conceptions of silence before her own narration even begins. She opens with Vergil’s words: “Immediately cries were heard. These were the loud wailing of infant souls at the very entranceway....” By prefacing her poetic articulation with the inarticulate cries of infants, Boland suggests that there may be alternative modes of communication as poignant and profound as the vocalized speech with which she

⁴³ Please see Appendix 2 for the full text of “The Journey.”

covers the following three pages. The word *infant* itself inscribes this notion of wordlessness, as it is etymologically derived from the Latin phrase *in fans*, meaning not speaking or not able to speak.⁴⁴ Boland allows nonverbal discourse to open the poem, casting this form of silence as the gateway into true communication. Furthermore, after beginning the narration with weeping, she symmetrically concludes the poem with both nature's and the speaker's tears—"The rain was grief in arrears; my children/slept the dark out safely and I wept"—thereby casting silence (or, at least, nonverbal communication) as both the predecessor and the ultimate end of traditional spoken dialogue. It is not forms of voice but forms of silence that frame the poem, implicitly sublimating the verbal discourse traditionally associated with artistic productivity.

Boland's choice of characterization in "The Journey" similarly reflects her reverence for silence as a potential mode of communication. By making Sappho the central figure in her poem, she highlights the simultaneous tension and connection between sound and silence, presence and absence. Sappho's role as a mediator between traditional conceptions of silence and speech enables her to be a representative of both realms, as earlier chapters of this thesis have indicated at length. She is someone whose silence communicates and whose voice resonates most strongly because of her blankness; Boland uses this complicated aspect of Sappho's legacy to champion the role of silence in tandem with other communicative forms. Lest the reader overlook these dichotomies that Sappho symbolically embodies, Boland casts the ancient poet's entrance into her verse in a similarly paradoxical way. Sappho first appears in the poem after the female speaker stops talking and falls silent, emerging when the speaker halts her narration and sets her thoughts and pen at rest. However, she also figures within the pages of a book, originating in this poem from spaces both silent and illuminated by voice.

⁴⁴ *Oxford English Dictionary*

I finished speaking and the anger faded
and dark fell and the book beside me
lay open at the page Aphrodite

comforts Sappho in her love's duress.

In presenting Sappho's entrance through a metaphorical conjunction of speech and silence, Boland casts her as an allegorical figure for the woman writer's quest to incorporate two ostensibly oppositional entities into one effective mode of communication. Just as Sappho's mystique and authority derive from her commingling of presence and absence, so too, Boland implies, should the modern female poet derive strength and motivation from her language of silence, being moved to share ideas in terms both verbal and nonverbal alike. While her own formal, rhetorical, and even lingual devices throughout the poem emphasize the communicative potential of silence, Boland allows Sappho's presence to sanction silence, to embody and symbolize its power in a subtle yet significant way.

After her entrance, Sappho continues to be silence's guardian, working to guide the speaker through a realm of non-verbal discourse. Boland describes their initial meeting as a wordless exchange, their mutual familiarity and comfort originating from a non-verbal realm: "and I would have known her anywhere/and I would have gone with her anywhere/and she came wordlessly/and without a word I came with her...." Their sense of kinship and camaraderie is seemingly bolstered by the absence of language, as the two women known for their voices manage to understand each other in spite of—or perhaps because of—their silences. That the speaker can so clearly recognize both Sappho's identity and her intent despite the absence of verbal communication suggests that women have the ability to relate in other ways, to—like Sappho's fragments—speak through their silence. However, Boland can't seem to escape the paradox of silence inherent in her poetics, as she relies on distinctly verbal techniques to convey

the significance of this silent interchange. To emphasize its importance, she repeats ideas and tones alike, writing “and she came wordlessly/and without a word I came with her.” Yet repetition and alliteration are distinctly non-silent techniques, dependent on the duplication of sounds and words to achieve their aim. By using traditional literary techniques to emphasize silence’s authority, Boland highlights the dilemma of silent speech, suggesting that, despite its metaphorical power, it cannot pragmatically operate completely separate from voice. Just as this thesis as a whole cannot avoid the paradox of articulating silence, Boland’s Sappho must deal with a similar conundrum. “The Journey” hence echoes subtly the fragmentary form of Sappho’s fractured canon: a conjoined system of silence and speech, each half only meaningful when coupled with its counterpart, each word and space able to resonate only in the presence of the other. Boland’s modern poem thus highlights the importance of both halves of Sappho’s legacy, forcing her readers to acknowledge the power of silence and affirm the ways in which it can infuse a discourse with communicative meaning.

As the journey proceeds, Boland further reiterates another duality of silence. Initially, Sappho leads the speaker on a quest through silence, serving as a tour guide in realms in and about which women have been historically unable to write. Sappho shows the speaker the “women who went out like” her, instructing her to observe and understand their silences while not defining them solely by their domesticity. Sappho must call attention to these women because they have been unable to immortalize themselves; her actions illuminate the way in which female writers throughout history have found their voices muted if not silenced by the expectations of a traditionally male society. However, Sappho also serves as the speaker’s translator, teaching her how to converse in and understand these female silences, ultimately urging her to “remember” the scene because what she has seen is “beyond speech,/beyond song,

only not beyond love.” She suggests that the speaker—and, implicitly, all women writers—have the capacity to record and discuss their experiences through nonverbal means. Though the specific modes of this silence (love? memory? sight? imagination?) are never enunciated or explained, Sappho intimates that women can transform the absences of their oppression into the presences of their contemporary language and verse.

Ultimately, Sappho’s statements suggest that though silence has been evidence of women’s unnatural suppression of their creativity, it is also somehow intimately connected to their very essence: “I have brought you here so that you will know forever/the silences in which are our beginnings,/in which we have an origin like water.” While silence may be the outgrowth of oppression, it is also as natural, as organic, and even as replenishing as water. As the journey proceeds, both Boland’s speaker and Boland’s fictionalized Sappho grow increasingly comfortable with silence, viewing it as a natural and meaningful form of communication. By the time the speaker’s vision ends, silence has seemingly become a viable supplement to speech, intriguing and effective despite its inherent challenges and contradictions. It has begun to be assimilated as a common language, perched tenuously in the midst of verbal dialogue and literary forms, but making its presence known all the same. Ironically, silence has the “final word” in the extended narrative, its images and significance resonating long after the speaker’s—and the reader’s—journey comes to a close.

The strength of silence is further emphasized through the non-linguistic aspects of Boland’s poem. She moves beyond her verbal discussion of silence to represent the idea in nonverbal terms, employing form, enjambment, and stanzaic structures to further highlight silence’s central role. Just as the spaces between Sappho’s fragmentary lines allow for the endless contemplation of possibility, the enjambment of Boland’s verse encourages similar

reflection. The absence of resolution provided by these gaps in the discourse force the reader to consider multiple alternatives, to take note of the silences of meaning and sound created by the seemingly premature line breaks. The ambiguity created in such lines as “Depend on it, somewhere a poet is wasting/his sweet uncluttered meters on the *obvious/ emblem* instead of the real thing” and “I whispered, ‘*let me be/let me be* at the least their witness’” (my emphases) demonstrate the ways in which silence can become a form of presence as well as of absence. As we consider the possibilities of what “the obvious” could entail or contemplate the inherent double meaning of the speaker’s command “let me be,” the auditory silences and visual absences become catalysts for our thoughts and musings. The power of enjambment becomes even more pronounced when Boland severs key phrases and divides them between stanzas. At the beginning of the poem, she juxtaposes the powerful stanzaic enjambment of “the *obvious/emblem*” with “so every day the language gets *less/for the task* and we are less with the language” (my emphases). The musings inspired by the brief visual gaps between lines become even more profound when lengthened and enlivened by the white space between stanzas. As readers, we have more time to ruminate on meaning as we leap from one stanza to the next; at moments like these, poetic space, like Holderlin’s margins, becomes a language all its own.

Furthermore, Boland’s use of form incorporates silences into the vocal impressions of her verse. The halts in speech that result from the visual breaks between lines and stanzas become part of the poem’s metrics, the spaces between ideas potentially bearing as much importance as the words themselves. Just as the auditory gaps between words and syllables are central to a verbal unit’s meaning, the blank page around and between Boland’s stanzas gives the form its visual and auditory shape, molding black typeface into a work of art. The breaks between stanzas mold and frame Boland’s strongly symmetrical four-line blocks, while the expansive blank

spaces on each edge of the page reiterate create a bold, square, columnar form. Silence hence becomes a force in tandem with sound, serving not as a wholly independent alternative to spoken language, but as a powerful—and necessary—accompaniment to it.

Through her linguistic discussion of nonlinguistic silence, Boland becomes both silence's critic and its champion, using her position as a wordsmith to contemplate the potential of wordless communication. The poem that begins with the inarticulation of infants concludes with the speaker's own silence and weeping, ultimately casting the journey not as a linear route from absence to presence or silence to speech, but as a quest from silence through speech and back to silence again. Silence ultimately figures as a powerful choice rather than a burdening resignation, as the means by which women can simultaneously converse about their present and reclaim their oppressive past. Through her interactions with and manipulation of the paradoxes of silence, Boland portrays wordlessness as women's common language, endorsing a form of silent poetics through her narrative verse. By interweaving the lyricism of her poetry with the silence of her journey, she suggests that women can benefit from the combination of the two, cultivating, like Sappho, the striking ability to communicate through their silences.

Ultimately, it is Sappho's legacy that sanctions the contemporary poet's silences and allows her to embrace their productive potential even as she maintains a distrust of their oppressive past. Boland's poetry emphasizes the way in which silence can be employed communicatively, her own blankness demonstrating the force of Sappho's and revealing the polyvalent nature of the silences that are typically overlooked theoretically and poetically alike. Though she does not re-vision or inhabit Sappho's verse in the same way that H.D. does, Boland's words and spaces highlight the communicative potential of Sapphic silences. She

employs and showcases the communicative form of Sapphic silence, suggesting that the blankness and fragmentation of the ancient canon can say as much as any writer's prolific words.

Conclusion

As I prepare to put this thesis to rest, I realize how deeply my project is haunted by the ghosts of pages written and then erased, of ideas recorded and then deleted. The lines remain in my mind, on my hard drive, on the desks and floors and kitchen tables of friends who agreed to read early drafts, yet they did not make their way here. That too is a form of silence—the expunged, the unsaid, the back story of reading and writing that lies behind carefully composed pages. There are stories between these lines that cannot be told. There are stories here that must be shared elsewhere. And that is fine. As we learn to appreciate silence, we also learn to feel its reverberations in the midst of our words and utterances. The silence that lingers here foreshadows words still to be written, ideas still to be developed, arguments still to be formed. My work with silence promises to be a lifelong project; what has been presented here is simply the first installment in a much broader pursuit. Just as I have used the silences inscribed in the critical discourse as inspiration for my thoughts in this thesis, and H.D. and Eavan Boland have used Sappho’s blankness as a source of their poetic productivity, what remains unsaid in this project promises to set the stage for future writing—even if, ultimately, it is simply my own.

* * * * *

In my encounters with the writings of Anne Carson, H.D., and Eavan Boland, I have been most struck by their embrace of blankness, by the way in which their words and gaps serve as a testament to the complexity of silence in its varied incarnations. Carson’s critical volume suggests that silence can be a fueling force in *eros* and transmission, while her translations demonstrate both the extent of blankness in Sappho’s canon and the aesthetic power of silence. H.D.’s fragment poems and critical essay cast silence as a space for habitation; her varying

approaches to silence throughout her canon ultimately demonstrate the joint productivity and precariousness of such a realm. Eavan Boland casts silence as a means of communication, suggesting through the evolution of her essays and the form and content of her poem “The Journey” that women can productively embrace silence as their common language. Together, their poems and essays and translations serve to complicate and enliven our perceptions of silence; their words work to illuminate a force typically characterized by its lack thereof. The many ways in which these writers employ Sapphic silence demonstrate the complexity of the form as a literary entity; silence is at least as polyvalent as the ways in which it is used in poetic invocations. It is a language, a space to inhabit, the inspiring and sustaining force in desire, a visual and textual aesthetic, a powerful entity both in conjunction with language and on its own. It is both the means to an end and an end in and of itself. It is both a supplement and an alternative to voice. It is a force that emerges in many forms.

While this thesis has primarily analyzed the words of Anne Carson, H.D., and Eavan Boland, among others, it has ultimately been an attempt to comment upon—and alter—the way that we read Sappho. In some respects, Wittig and Zeig beat me to the punch in 1976 and Carson did it again in 2002, powerfully reiterating through the forms of their texts the extent of the blankness in the ancient canon. Yet their versions of Sapphic silence are performative rather than inquisitive; while they seek to illustrate the centrality of blankness in the poet’s legacy, I seek to analyze what this centrality means and how it functions poetically.⁴⁵ It is here, in pages of prose, that the forms of silence can be most clearly articulated. It is through this paradoxical project that

⁴⁵ In her 1995 book *Sappho is Burning*, Page duBois makes strides toward a similar critical inquiry. In her “Fragmentary Introduction,” she explains that “Sappho’s legacy lies in fragments, and we can use her fragmentary corpus as a supplement to destabilize a reading of Greek antiquity, . . . interrupting a mainstream of the representation of Greek thought and culture” (26). Through this paradigm of interruption and its accompanying trope of burning, duBois considers the self-consumption of Sappho and discusses how our understanding of such a phenomenon promises to alter (and destabilize) the way that we read fragmentation. Although my project’s governing trope and

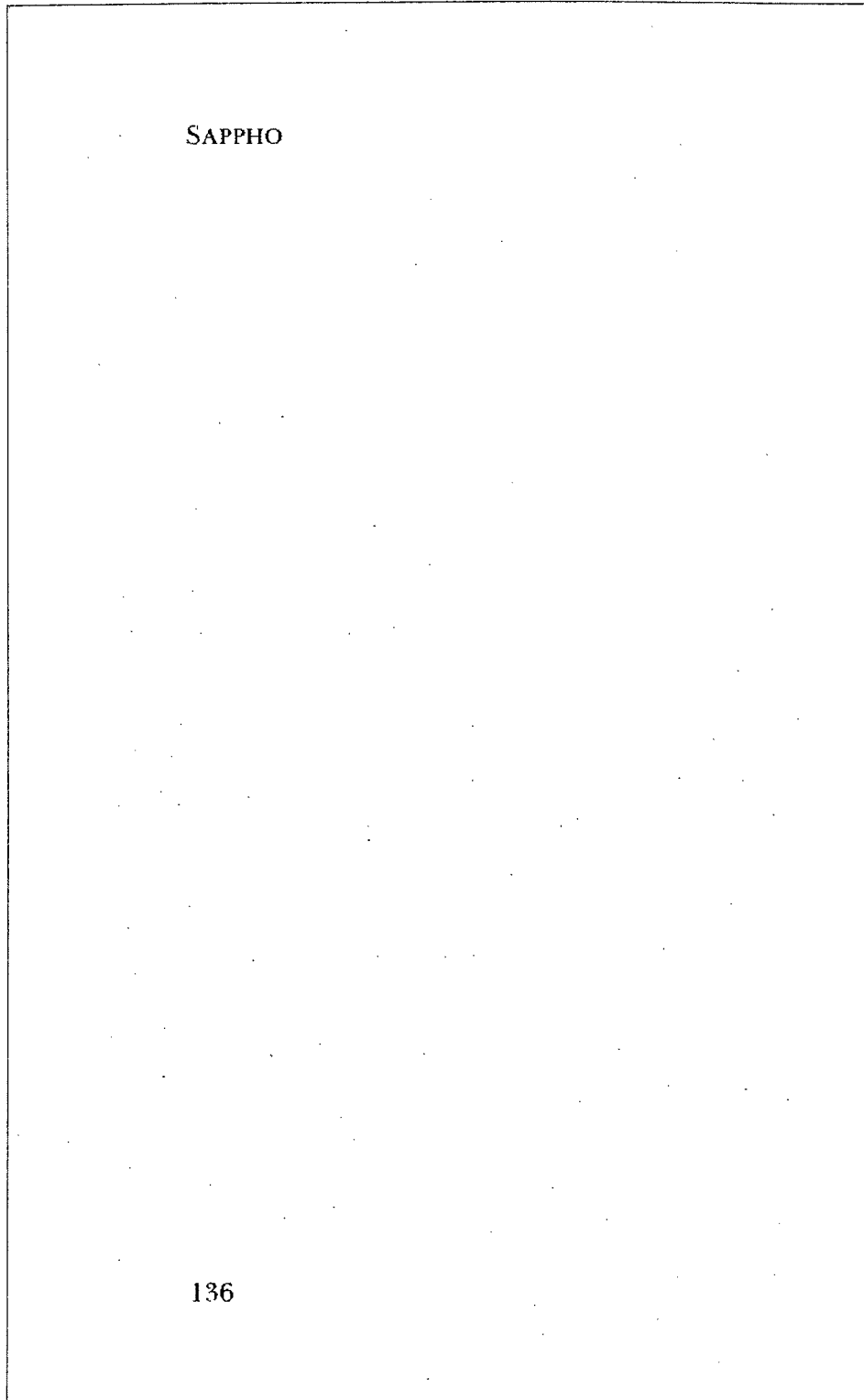
we can ask these difficult questions and struggle to illuminate a component of Sappho's legacy that thus far has received insufficient attention.

Just as there is always more to say about silence, so too is there always more to say about Sappho, a figure whose complexity and mystique are at times overwhelming. At various points in literary history, she has been viewed as a threatening force, her free sexuality and authoritative feminine voice serving as a dangerous challenge to the poetic status quo. And perhaps she is threatening—but not for the reasons traditionally conceived. Her legacy threatens to deconstruct the binary opposition of silence and voice established by the early feminist theorists in their treatment of women's writing.⁴⁶ It threatens to re-prioritize our readings of black typescript and the white space on which it is printed. It threatens to force us to read elements of a text that we have previously viewed as unreadable and to re-read other sections in conjunction with this newly decipherable force. It threatens both to affect our encounters with ancient texts that we comfortably view as static and to force us to revisit our conceptions of a figure whose voice has for years stood alone. Sappho is a figure not easily contained within any of our tidy rubrics: just as our reading of her legacy has challenged our notions of sexuality, gendered poetic traditions, and _____, so too can—and does—it challenge our conceptions of silence.

theoretical approach differ from duBois's, my words speak alongside hers and serve as a parallel examination into the productive function of Sapphic fragmentation.

⁴⁶ For more extensive discussions of feminist views on silence, see Cixous, 1980; DeShazer, 1986; Jacobus, 1979; Olsen, 1965; Ostriker, 1986; Rich, 1984.

Appendix 1: Images



Wittig and Zeig's blank page dictionary entry.

24D

] , έδαφο[

]αικατε[

]ανέλο[

]

] , [] , αι

λ]επτοφών[

] , εα , [

46

Anne Carson's 2002 rendering of Fragment 24D in Greek.

24D

]

]

]

]

]

]in a thin voice

]

47

Carson's translation of Fragment 24D.

- 49 Where do the butler's big feet go?
 Fourteen yards from heel to toe!
 Five red oxen gladly died,
 Ten frantic cobblers stitched the hide,
 That stylish slippers trim and neat
 Besplendor those important feet.
- 50 High in the chariot,
 As when the mastersinger of Lesbos
 Against all the outlanders.
- 51 Violet breasted daughter of Kronos.
- 52 As once in Crete,
 A round dance of girls
 In that antique time.
- 53 She taught the champion runner,
 Hero of Gyara.
- 54 Arkheanassa and Gorgo
 Sleep together as married folk,
 Wherefore she is called her wife.
 And Pleistodiké, she was her wife
 In between Gongyla and Gorgo.
 They've given themselves a name
 Together and [] Pleistodiké
 [] shall be known as
 [].
- 55 With that island-born
 Holiness of Kypros

CHAPTER VI

Sappho, Fr. 17

§ 1. THE TEXT

- πλάσιον δὲ μ' ἐρχομένην φανεῖν,
 πότνι' Ἥρα, εἰ χ[α]ρίεσσα μοῖρα,
 τὴν ἀράταν Ἀτ[ρεΐδαι] κλή-
 4 ται βασιλῆες.
 ἐκτελέσαντες μ[ό]δα πολλ' ἄεθλα,
 πρώτῳ μὲν πέρ' Ἰ[λίου], ἐν τεύτῳ
 τυδ' ἀπορμύθε[ντες, ὁδὸν περαινῆ-
 5 ον ἐκ δύναντο.
 πρὶν γὰρ καὶ Δί' ἀντ[ίστα]τον κέλευσεν
 καὶ Θυάνας ἡμε[ρόν]τα παῖδα·
 κῆρ δὲ κ[αὶ] ἄμυν προημένης ἀρηξοῦ
 12 καὶ τὸ πάλ[ιν] αἶαν.
 ἄγνοι καὶ κα[ὶ]
 π[ρ]οῖεν-
 ἀμφι[]
 16 []
 []
 []
 ἔμμεν.
 20 []
 []

§ 2. TRANSLATION

Close to me [while I pray, be your gracious form revealed
 O lady Hera, to whom the Atreidae, [illustrious] king
 made prayer(?)]:

They, having accomplished [many labours],—first around
 [Ilium, then on the sea] after they departed hither,—could
 not [fulfil their journey]

38

TWELVE POEMS

Until [they summoned] you and Zeus [Antiaeus] and Thyone's
 daughter [son];—Now [to me too be gracious and bring
 aid, according to that ancient use.

§ 3. COMMENTARY

PSI 1224. P. Oxy. 1231 fr. 1, col. ii, 2-21+256 (4) 3, and
 1224.
 The supplements in 2, 3, 21, 22, 23, 24 have a higher degree of likelihood
 than the remainder serve no purpose but to indicate the general sense
 and to be suggested by the legible text. It is to be observed that
 π[ρ]ο in v. 6 demands an answering ἔπειτα ἢ or equivalent (π[ρ]ο ἢ in v. 12
 which would give that answer; I have suggested π[ρ]οῖεν μὲν answered by 14,
 now in old poetry, in the same line). If Lobel's suggestion ἀντ[ίστα]τον in v. 9
 is correct, it will be likely that the line offered as example of the rare use of
 ἀντ[ίστα]τον after a negative antecedent; no other example of a π[ρ]ο-construction
 in the Iliad (except perhaps Alc. F 6. 9). The supplements in 5,
 10, 11, 12, 13, 14, 15, 16, 17, 18, 19, 20, 21, 22, 23, 24, 25, 26, 27, 28, 29, 30, 31, 32, 33, 34, 35, 36, 37, 38, 39, 40, 41, 42, 43, 44, 45, 46, 47, 48, 49, 50, 51, 52, 53, 54, 55, 56, 57, 58, 59, 60, 61, 62, 63, 64, 65, 66, 67, 68, 69, 70, 71, 72, 73, 74, 75, 76, 77, 78, 79, 80, 81, 82, 83, 84, 85, 86, 87, 88, 89, 90, 91, 92, 93, 94, 95, 96, 97, 98, 99, 100, 101, 102, 103, 104, 105, 106, 107, 108, 109, 110, 111, 112, 113, 114, 115, 116, 117, 118, 119, 120, 121, 122, 123, 124, 125, 126, 127, 128, 129, 130, 131, 132, 133, 134, 135, 136, 137, 138, 139, 140, 141, 142, 143, 144, 145, 146, 147, 148, 149, 150, 151, 152, 153, 154, 155, 156, 157, 158, 159, 160, 161, 162, 163, 164, 165, 166, 167, 168, 169, 170, 171, 172, 173, 174, 175, 176, 177, 178, 179, 180, 181, 182, 183, 184, 185, 186, 187, 188, 189, 190, 191, 192, 193, 194, 195, 196, 197, 198, 199, 200, 201, 202, 203, 204, 205, 206, 207, 208, 209, 210, 211, 212, 213, 214, 215, 216, 217, 218, 219, 220, 221, 222, 223, 224, 225, 226, 227, 228, 229, 230, 231, 232, 233, 234, 235, 236, 237, 238, 239, 240, 241, 242, 243, 244, 245, 246, 247, 248, 249, 250, 251, 252, 253, 254, 255, 256, 257, 258, 259, 260, 261, 262, 263, 264, 265, 266, 267, 268, 269, 270, 271, 272, 273, 274, 275, 276, 277, 278, 279, 280, 281, 282, 283, 284, 285, 286, 287, 288, 289, 290, 291, 292, 293, 294, 295, 296, 297, 298, 299, 300, 301, 302, 303, 304, 305, 306, 307, 308, 309, 310, 311, 312, 313, 314, 315, 316, 317, 318, 319, 320, 321, 322, 323, 324, 325, 326, 327, 328, 329, 330, 331, 332, 333, 334, 335, 336, 337, 338, 339, 340, 341, 342, 343, 344, 345, 346, 347, 348, 349, 350, 351, 352, 353, 354, 355, 356, 357, 358, 359, 360, 361, 362, 363, 364, 365, 366, 367, 368, 369, 370, 371, 372, 373, 374, 375, 376, 377, 378, 379, 380, 381, 382, 383, 384, 385, 386, 387, 388, 389, 390, 391, 392, 393, 394, 395, 396, 397, 398, 399, 400, 401, 402, 403, 404, 405, 406, 407, 408, 409, 410, 411, 412, 413, 414, 415, 416, 417, 418, 419, 420, 421, 422, 423, 424, 425, 426, 427, 428, 429, 430, 431, 432, 433, 434, 435, 436, 437, 438, 439, 440, 441, 442, 443, 444, 445, 446, 447, 448, 449, 450, 451, 452, 453, 454, 455, 456, 457, 458, 459, 460, 461, 462, 463, 464, 465, 466, 467, 468, 469, 470, 471, 472, 473, 474, 475, 476, 477, 478, 479, 480, 481, 482, 483, 484, 485, 486, 487, 488, 489, 490, 491, 492, 493, 494, 495, 496, 497, 498, 499, 500, 501, 502, 503, 504, 505, 506, 507, 508, 509, 510, 511, 512, 513, 514, 515, 516, 517, 518, 519, 520, 521, 522, 523, 524, 525, 526, 527, 528, 529, 530, 531, 532, 533, 534, 535, 536, 537, 538, 539, 540, 541, 542, 543, 544, 545, 546, 547, 548, 549, 550, 551, 552, 553, 554, 555, 556, 557, 558, 559, 560, 561, 562, 563, 564, 565, 566, 567, 568, 569, 570, 571, 572, 573, 574, 575, 576, 577, 578, 579, 580, 581, 582, 583, 584, 585, 586, 587, 588, 589, 590, 591, 592, 593, 594, 595, 596, 597, 598, 599, 600, 601, 602, 603, 604, 605, 606, 607, 608, 609, 610, 611, 612, 613, 614, 615, 616, 617, 618, 619, 620, 621, 622, 623, 624, 625, 626, 627, 628, 629, 630, 631, 632, 633, 634, 635, 636, 637, 638, 639, 640, 641, 642, 643, 644, 645, 646, 647, 648, 649, 650, 651, 652, 653, 654, 655, 656, 657, 658, 659, 660, 661, 662, 663, 664, 665, 666, 667, 668, 669, 670, 671, 672, 673, 674, 675, 676, 677, 678, 679, 680, 681, 682, 683, 684, 685, 686, 687, 688, 689, 690, 691, 692, 693, 694, 695, 696, 697, 698, 699, 700, 701, 702, 703, 704, 705, 706, 707, 708, 709, 710, 711, 712, 713, 714, 715, 716, 717, 718, 719, 720, 721, 722, 723, 724, 725, 726, 727, 728, 729, 730, 731, 732, 733, 734, 735, 736, 737, 738, 739, 740, 741, 742, 743, 744, 745, 746, 747, 748, 749, 750, 751, 752, 753, 754, 755, 756, 757, 758, 759, 760, 761, 762, 763, 764, 765, 766, 767, 768, 769, 770, 771, 772, 773, 774, 775, 776, 777, 778, 779, 780, 781, 782, 783, 784, 785, 786, 787, 788, 789, 790, 791, 792, 793, 794, 795, 796, 797, 798, 799, 800, 801, 802, 803, 804, 805, 806, 807, 808, 809, 810, 811, 812, 813, 814, 815, 816, 817, 818, 819, 820, 821, 822, 823, 824, 825, 826, 827, 828, 829, 830, 831, 832, 833, 834, 835, 836, 837, 838, 839, 840, 841, 842, 843, 844, 845, 846, 847, 848, 849, 850, 851, 852, 853, 854, 855, 856, 857, 858, 859, 860, 861, 862, 863, 864, 865, 866, 867, 868, 869, 870, 871, 872, 873, 874, 875, 876, 877, 878, 879, 880, 881, 882, 883, 884, 885, 886, 887, 888, 889, 890, 891, 892, 893, 894, 895, 896, 897, 898, 899, 900, 901, 902, 903, 904, 905, 906, 907, 908, 909, 910, 911, 912, 913, 914, 915, 916, 917, 918, 919, 920, 921, 922, 923, 924, 925, 926, 927, 928, 929, 930, 931, 932, 933, 934, 935, 936, 937, 938, 939, 940, 941, 942, 943, 944, 945, 946, 947, 948, 949, 950, 951, 952, 953, 954, 955, 956, 957, 958, 959, 960, 961, 962, 963, 964, 965, 966, 967, 968, 969, 970, 971, 972, 973, 974, 975, 976, 977, 978, 979, 980, 981, 982, 983, 984, 985, 986, 987, 988, 989, 990, 991, 992, 993, 994, 995, 996, 997, 998, 999, 1000.

§ 4. INTERPRETATION

For those of vv. 3-10 was, in general terms, the sojourn of the
 Iliad fleet at Lesbos on the way home from Troy.
 In the third book of the *Odyssey* (130 ff.) Nestor tells the story
 quarrel between the sons of Atreus. After the fall of Troy,
 Nestor was in favour of sailing home at once; Agamemnon
 thought it wiser to stay until the wrath of Athena had been
 appeased by sacrifice. Half the Achaean army stayed with
 Agamemnon in the Troad; the other half departed with Men-
 claus, Nestor, and Odysseus. These arrived at Tenos, where
 another quarrel broke out; Odysseus led a part of the army
 to Agamemnon; Nestor and his company sailed to Lesbos,
 where Menclaus later followed them. At Lesbos they stayed
 and thought about their further voyage, and prayed to
 Athena for a sign:

ἡμετέροισιν δὲ θεὸν δοῦναι τέρας· ἀντάρ δ' ὅ γ' ἡμῖν
 εἰπέ . . .

59

Facing pages from Denys Page's translation of and commentary on Fragment 17 in 1955's
Sappho and Alcaeus.

70. My lovely friends
71. I ask you, sir, to
72. Of course I love you
73. Yes, it is pretty
74. I hear that Andromeda
75. Well!
76. Sappho, when some fool
77. Strange to say
78. I taught the talented
79. Really, Gorgo
80. As you love me
81. Greetings to Gorgo
82. Rich as you are
83. Don't ask me what to wear

PART SIX

84. If you are squeamish
85. Before they were mothers
86. Experience shows us
87. We know this much
88. Say what you please
89. Then the god of war
90. As for the exiles
91. In memory
92. Do you remember
93. Be kind to me
94. You remind me
95. When they were tired
96. The gods bless you
97. I have often asked you

84 If you are squeamish
Don't prod the
beach rubble

Barnard's translation of Fragment 84.

Appendix 2: Poems

H.D.

Fragment 113

"Neither honey nor bee for me"

—Sappho.

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;

not so—
though rapture blind my eyes,
and hunger crisp
dark and inert my mouth,
not honey, not the south,
not the tall stalk
of red twin-lilies,
nor light branch of fruit tree
caught in flexible light branch;

not honey, not the south;
ah flower of the purple iris,
flower of white,
or of the iris, withering the grass—
for fleck of the sun's fire,
gathers such heat and power,
that shadow-print is light,
cast through the petals
of the yellow iris-flower;

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;
 neglect 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.

Fragment Thirty-six

*I know not what to do:
 My mind is divided.* –Sappho.

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.

Shall I break your rest,
 devouring, eager?
 is love's gift best?
 nay, song's the loveliest:
 yet, were you lost,
 what rapture
 could I take from song?
 what song were left?

I know not what to do:
 to turn and slake
 the rage that burns,
 with my breath burn
 and trouble your cool breath?
 so shall I turn and take
 snow in my arms?
 (is love's gift best?)
 yet flake on flake
 of snow were comfortless,
 did you lie wondering,
 wakened yet unawake.

Shall I turn and take

comfortless snow within my arms?
press lips to lips
that answer not,
press lips to flesh
that shudders not nor breaks?

Is love's gift best?
shall I turn and slake
all the wild longing?
O I am eager for you!
as the Pleiads shake
white light in whiter water
so shall I take you?

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.

I know not what to do;
strain upon strain,
sound surging upon sound
makes my brain blind;
as a wave-line may wait to fall
yet (waiting for its falling)
still the wind may take
from off its crest,
white flake on flake of foam
that rises,
seeming to dart and pulse
and rend the light,
so my mind hesitates
above the passion
quivering yet to break,
so my mind hesitates
above my mind,
listening to song's delight.

I know not what to do:
 will the sound break,
 rending the night
 with rift on rift of rose
 and scattered light?
 will the sound break at last
 as the wave hesitant,
 or will the whole night pass
 and I lie listening awake?

Eavan Boland

The Journey

For Elizabeth Ryle

Immediately cries were heard. These were the loud wailing of infant souls at the very entranceway; never had they had their share of life's sweetness for the dark day had stolen them from their mothers' breasts and plunged them to a death before their time.

Vergil, The Aeneid, Book VI

And then the dark fell and "there has never"
 I said "been a poem to an antibiotic:
 never a word to compare with the odes on
 the flower or the raw slow for fever

"or the devious Africa-seeking tern
 or the protein treasures of the sea bed.
 Depend on it, somewhere a poet is wasting
 his sweet uncluttered meters on the obvious

"emblem instead of the real thing.
 Instead of sulpha we shall have hyssop dipped
 in the wild blood of the unblemished lamb,
 so every day the language gets less

"for the task and we are less with the language."
 I finished speaking and the anger faded
 and dark fell and the book beside me
 lay open at the page Aphrodite

comforts Sappho in her love's duress.
 The poplars shifted their music in the garden,
 a child startled in a dream,

my room was a mess—

the usual hardcovers, half-finished cups,
clothes piled up on an old chair—
and I was listening out but my head was
a loosening and sweetening heaviness,

not sleep, but nearly sleep, not dreaming really
but as ready to believe and still
unfevered, calm and unsurprised
when she came and stood beside me

and I would have known her anywhere
and I would have gone with her anywhere
and she came wordlessly
and without a word I went with her

down down down without so much as
ever touching down but always, always
with a sense of mulch beneath us,
the way of stairs winding down to a river

and as we went on the light went on
failing and I looked sideways to be certain
it was she, misshapen, musical—
Sappho—the scholiast's nightingale

and down we went, again down
until we came to a sudden rest
beside a river in what seemed to be
an oppressive suburb of the dawn.

My eyes got slowly used to the bad light.
At first I saw shadows, only shadows.
Then I could make out women and children
and, in the way they were, the grace of love.

“Cholera, typhus, croup, diptheria,”
she said, “in those days they racketed
in every backstreet and alley of old Europe.
Behold the children of the plague.”

Then to my horror I could see to each
nipple some had clipped a limpet shape—
suckling darknesses—while others had their arms
weighed down, making terrible pietas.

She took my sleeve and said to me "be careful.
Do not define these women by their work:
not as washerwomen trussed in dust and sweating,
muscling water into linen by the river's edge

"nor as court ladies brailed in silk
on wool, and woven with an ivory unicorn
and hung, nor as laundresses tossing cotton,
brisking daylight with lavender and gossip.

"But these are women who went out like you
when dusk became a dark sweet with leaves,
recovering the day, stooping, picking up
teddy bears and rag dolls and tricycles and buckets—

"love's archaeology—and they too like you
stood boot deep in flowers once in summer
or saw winter come in with a single magpie
in a caul of haws, a solo harlequin."

I stood fixed. I could not reach or speak to them.
Between us was the melancholy river,
the dream water, the narcotic crossing.
They had passed over it, its cold persuasions.

I whispered, "let me be
let me at least be their witness," but she said
"what you have seen is beyond speech,
beyond song, only not beyond love;

"remember it, you will remember it"
and I heard her say but she was fading fast
as we emerged under the stars of heaven,
"there are not many of us; you are dear

"and stand beside me as my own daughter.
I have brought you here so you will know forever
the silences in which are our beginnings,
in which we have an origin like water,"

and the wind shifted and the window clasp
opened, banged and I woke up to find
my poetry books spread higgledy-piggledy,
my skirt spread out where I had laid it—

nothing was changed; nothing was more clear
but it was wet and the year was late.
the rain was grief in arrears; my children
slept the dark out safely and I wept.

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