

H.D. AND
SAPPHIC MODERNISM
1910-1950

DIANA COLLECOTT



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Contents

<i>List of illustrations</i>	ix
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	x
Introduction: Sappho, Sapphic, Saph.	1
1 <i>She too is my poet: Sapphistry</i>	9
1 Sapphic fragments	9
2 Who wrongs you, Sappho?	16
3 Sapphics	24
4 Islands on the air	28
5 Beginning with O	33
2 <i>A life of being: negotiating gender</i>	40
1 An other modernism	40
2 Invisible ink	45
3 No monster	49
4 Lesbian exile	55
5 Love is writing	63
3 <i>The perfect bi-: negotiating sexuality</i>	70
1 Signs	70
2 Both and neither	75
3 All this trash of Sappho	82
4 Lawrence's woman	92
5 A sex of one's own	98
4 <i>Straight as the Greek: Hellenism and modernism</i>	103
1 Hellenic subjects	103
2 I call it Hellas	107
3 Anti-Hellenism	113
4 The caressability of the Greeks	120
5 An inner region of defence	127
6 Greek ecstasy	130

5	<i>The art of the future: her emergence from Imagism</i>	135
1	The perfect Imagist	135
2	I was hiding	139
3	A voice within me	145
4	The woman speaking	150
5	A state of the soul	156
6	Doing something else	161
7	Myself for a presence	167
6	<i>What is (not) said: lesbian poetics</i>	172
1	Beyond the ending	172
2	We two	176
3	Silences shape all speech	181
4	Where does the body come in?	186
5	To sing love	193
6	What do you need to say?	201
7	Greeks and flowers	211
7	<i>Re-membering Shakes-pear: negotiations with tradition</i>	221
1	Forenames of presence	221
2	The tribute	231
3	The only begetter	236
4	The girl-page	246
5	Shakespeare's daughter	247
	<i>Afterword: at the cross-roads</i>	258
	<i>Appendix: Fragments of Sappho in H.D.'s poetry and prose</i>	266
	<i>Notes</i>	273
	<i>Works cited</i>	309
	<i>Index</i>	335

Illustrations

1	'Soft cushions . . .': Hilda Aldington in the 1920s (Beinecke Library)	<i>page</i> 19
2	' . . . rich colour': Bryher in the 1930s (Beinecke Library)	23
3	'To Marianne Moore': H.D. c. 1921 (Rosenbach Museum and Library)	58
4	'Sylvan Silvio': Silvia Dobson in the 1930s (Courtesy of Betty Shoemaker)	87
5 & 6	'We all drank literally of the Kastalian spring . . .': postcard in H.D.'s hand from Delphi, 1932 (Beinecke Library)	108–9
7	'For Heliodora': portrait photograph of H.D. taken in Montreux c. 1924 (Beinecke Library)	139
8	'Two mothers': Bryher, Perdita and Hilda in California, 1920 (Beinecke Library)	156
9	'Two selves': photomontage from the H.D. Scrapbook (Beinecke Library)	180
10	Hilda Aldington, probably taken in Cornwall by Bryher, 1919 (Beinecke Library)	187
11	'She is only a boy': Bryher in Cornwall, probably taken by Hilda Aldington, 1919 (Beinecke Library)	188
12	'She too is my poet': passport photograph of Hilda Aldington in the 1940s (Beinecke Library)	227
13	H.D.'s quill letterhead, designed by George Plank (Beinecke Library)	256

CHAPTER I

'She too is my poet': Sapphistry

I SAPPHIC FRAGMENTS

Re-vision – the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction – is for women more than a chapter in cultural history: it is an act of survival.¹

Adrienne Rich's seminal essay of 1971, subtitled 'Writing as Re-Vision', created the conditions for a rereading of H.D. Seeing with fresh eyes, Susan Gubar designated as 'Sapphistry' that aspect of H.D.'s poetic practice that reflected her own rereading of Sappho. Only at its most obvious does this practice take the form of direct quotation with variation, as in the poems numbered from Wharton's *Sappho*.² Among these, 'Fragment 113' has hidden depths, both sexual and textual.³ As Gregory comments, the title announces a specific textuality which the text resists, just as the poem itself enacts 'voluptuous denials of voluptuousness' (*Classic* 152).

Beginning with one fragment, 'Fragment 113' ends with several; 'neglect the lyre-note', writes H.D.,

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.

(*Collected* 132)

These lines recall the moments when Sappho spoke of, or to, her lyre – that 'divine shell'. It comes as no surprise that H.D. was later drawn to the lyrists of the English Renaissance, especially Tudor lutanists, who performed their poems as songs and addressed their instruments as Sappho did; in her tribute to Shakespeare, she twice cites Sir Thomas Wyatt's 'To His Lute' (*Avon* 72, 78).⁴ We can also read through the

expression 'no trembling of the string/ but heat' Sappho's famous references to the way love sets one trembling and starts fires in the body.⁵ These references form a palimpsest with phrases found on a piece of papyrus from the third century A.D.: 'strike the strings . . . receiving the *olisbos*'. Of uncertain ascription and dubious transcription, this fragment has been interpreted as 'strings which welcome the plectrum' and as 'women who use the dildo'.⁶ Hence the Sapphic intertextuality of 'Fragment 113' extends well beyond its innocuous epigraph translating a single fragment; it engenders a conceit that takes us to the heart of Sappho's *eros* and to the nature of the relationship between her art as a maker of song and her life as a woman.

Far from merely 'alluding to Sappho in epigraphs to a handful of poems' as Peter Jay and Caroline Lewis state (24), H.D. embodies actual fragments of Sappho in over thirty poems and embeds many more in her prose. Following on the traces found by other readers,⁷ my chart in the Appendix identifies the least-disputable instances, aligning H.D.'s *Collected Poems, 1912-1944* and 'The Wise Sappho' with Wharton's *Sappho* and the most recent Loeb edition of *Greek Lyric I*, by David Campbell. This list suggests that no fewer than fifty-eight of the distinct fragments numbered by Campbell feature in these texts of H.D.'s, giving the lie to Jane Snyder's remark about the 'dearth of direct Sapphic allusions' in H.D.'s work (143).⁸ It also clearly indicates that, despite her familiarity with Wharton, H.D. worked direct from the Greek, resisting previous translations and engaging with newly discovered material.⁹ H.D.'s repetition of Sapphic phrases and motifs thus performs one of the oldest purposes of poetry: commemoration. In contrast to the sometimes perfunctory preservation of Sappho's art in the prose of classical grammarians and rhetoricians, H.D.'s re-membering of Sappho is also a reincorporation of her writing in a lyric context, a lesbian poetics.

Beyond the specific fragment, H.D. often uses a lexis that is traceable to Sappho and may well revive her values. This functions in positive and negative ways; for example, in 'Halcyon' (addressed to the young Bryher) she alludes to the line which Campbell translates 'You seemed to me a small, graceless child'.¹⁰ When H.D. describes Bryher in these terms as 'small' with 'hardly any charm', 'a child' with 'no Grace' (*Collected* 271, 275, 273), she is applying the term *acharis* ('without grace') to mean, in Snyder's words, 'not yet subject – in Sappho's way of thinking – to the charms of Aphrodite and the Graces' (86); hence not merely awkward, but undesirable.¹¹ According to this interpretation, an entire aesthetic may be transmitted by a single word – fortunately, in view of

the almost complete destruction of Sappho's writings. H.D.'s English usage supports Snyder's interpretation; thus she uses 'fragrant' to connote the sensual delicacy of a Sapphic sensibility, even the physical immediacy of her own 'Greek world'. In a poetic so crystalline, a mere word or phrase can serve as what Pound called the 'luminous detail' (*Prose* 23); the part contains the whole, the fragment the poem. H.D. identified the power of this aesthetic as Sappho's wisdom, saying: 'She constructed perfect and flawless . . . the whole, the perfection . . . of goddess, muse or sacred being from the simple grace of some tall, half-developed girl' (*Vision* 65).

The African American practice of *signifyin'* offers both an analogy and a terminology for H.D.'s textual Sapphisty. Historically, *signifyin'* refers to forms of wordplay and indirect speech used by slaves.¹² Those excluded from the dominant community – women, lesbians, homosexuals and ethnic, religious and political minorities – have also used double-talk to elude punishment, censorship or ridicule. Such discourse can only be interpreted by one who is also *other*: the initiate, 'the other who knows'; it may conceal meaning from one listener and reveal it to another. Hence it is vital to what Gary Burnett has designated the 'mysteries' of H.D.'s poetics: a poetics that requires both obliquity and revelation. H. L. Gates spells the term 'Signifyin(g)', to distinguish it from de Saussure's notion of signification, and defines it as 'a mode of formal revision [that] depends on its effects on troping . . . is often characterized by pastiche, and . . . turns upon repetition of formal structures and their differences' (*Signifying* 52). We have seen how a similar revisionary mode serves H.D.'s purposes in 'Halcyon'; later I will show how 'Fragment Thirty-six' (*I know not what to do*) deploys the repetition of formal structures inherent in Wharton's version of the original Greek. In her best-known prose on Sappho, H.D. translates another fragment: 'I think no girl . . . ever will again . . . be as wise as you are';¹³ she then tropes it, inverting the verb, asking playfully of Sappho 'was she wise?' (*Vision* 63, 64) and calling her essay 'The Wise Sappho'. Rhetorical questions and name-calling are just two of the language games that H.D.'s Sapphisty shares with African American speech. Gates asks himself why black people in the USA. 'talk about talking', and replies: 'they do this . . . to pass these rituals along from one generation to the next. They do it to preserve the traditions of "the race"' (*Signifying* xi). In African American culture, therefore, Signifyin(g) is as self-conscious as the use of literary allusion, parody and pastiche by male modernists such as Eliot, Joyce and Pound. The two lines unite in

the complex art of Ralph Ellison and Toni Morrison, but whereas the white writers' rhetoric often undermines the very tradition on which it signifies, the black writers are *inter alia* intent on sustaining their cultural tradition. H.D.'s linguistic rituals also honour what she perceived as an occluded tradition.

Critical debate about Sappho, at the end of the twentieth century, manifests the tension between fusion and fission that has characterised Greek studies and, some would say, Greek culture itself. In nineteenth-century imperial England, Walter Pater saw the creation of that culture as a triumph of centre over periphery.¹⁴ In contemporary California, Page duBois reflects that the colonising Athenians seem to have been 'haunted by a dialectic between integrity and dissemination'; she wonders:

How did they think about democracy – the dispersed, heterogeneous votes, scattered bits of broken shells, ostraka, pebbles broken from rocks, shards once part of whole bodies of vases – transformed through the vote into a single unified voice of the majority, of the polis as a new whole? (57)

How fifth-century Athenians thought is part of the way we think about them. Today the dialectic about historical Greece is not just between fragmentation and restoration, but between a felt need for lost perfection and an acceptance of the flawed and scattered experience of lived culture. On this axis, from nostalgic Hellenism to fractured Post-modernism (and combining both), exist our projections of the past and our perceptions of its artefacts.

Among the scholars of Sappho named in this chapter, Snyder and Williamson tend towards reconstituting the lost body of the poet's work and locating its integrity in the half-forgotten rituals of goddess-worship and female development of ancient Lesbos. For them, her fragments refract the idealism of second-wave American feminism in intimations of a once matriarchal culture. By contrast, duBois sites herself with those European feminists who view with scepticism 'the emphasis on wholeness and integrity, on the full body, as a strategy of scholarship that has traditionally excluded the female, identified as different, heterogeneous, incomplete in herself, a disturbance in the scholarly body' (38). Xavière Gauthier, for instance, maintains that women's voices are heard through 'gaps, borders, spaces and silence,' the 'holes in discourse'.¹⁵ In duBois' view, 'our access to the past is always fragmented, our construction of our past interested, particular' (39); hence her readings of Sappho are predicated on the damaged state of the writings themselves, their

frustrating elusiveness, their intertextuality with other writings and ultimate inaccessibility. 'And what is writing itself', she asks, but 'scattered letters' – 'the inscription on the ostraka that led to ostracism?' (57). She therefore focuses her textual interpretation on the phoneme, the atom of the written.

As we shall see in chapter 4, H.D. was committed to the dream of wholeness that generations of Europeans have vested in ancient Greece. 'It is nostalgia for a lost land', she wrote; 'I call it Hellas' ('Poetry' 72). Yet her poetic reflects 'her fractured sense of being eternally on intellectual borders' (21), as Susan Howe has written of Emily Dickinson. A woman-identified woman, H.D. survived the ostracism of a culture dominated by men. She was drawn to marginal spaces; the beaches which are a constant site of her poetry scintillate like the shoreline of Balzac's *Séraphita*.

... spangled with mica, glinting fragments, pretty pebbles of porphyry and marbles of infinite gradations of colour ... sea detritus, shells, sea flowers driven ashore by tempests ...¹⁶

However, H.D. saw it as the poet's task to 'integrate' what is disparate, urging writers in wartime London to 'collect the fragments of the splintered glass/ ... / now scattered in the shards/ men tread upon' (*Collected* 547–8). Consequently, she responded both to Sappho's holistic aesthetic and to the scattered state of her texts. H. T. Wharton's *Sappho*, a close companion throughout H.D.'s poetic apprenticeship, represented extremes of both integration and disintegration. Subtitled *Memoir, Text, Selected Renderings*, it creates a corpus out of what is told of Sappho's life and what survives of her writings; also out of her posthumous existence, in translations and improvisations from the classical period to the current *fin de siècle*. This book is so organised that it begins with the most complete extant poems in Sapphic metre. As if in historical imitation of her work's deteriorating condition, it then presents progressively attenuated quotations, ending with the Fayum Fragments, brought to Berlin from Alexandria in 1879. As for the English translations of Sappho, Wharton's term *Renderings* puns unwittingly on the multiple meanings of the verb 'to render', including to reduce (as fat in heat), to cover up (as a wall with plaster), to perform, translate, depict. Among his 'renderings', we find the reduction of her specificity to the idiom of any given period, from Latin epigram to Victorian vignette; we also find full-blown artistic depictions of the 'Hymn to Venus' – with which all editions of Sappho start – by poets as diverse as Ambrose

Philips (1711) and F. T. Palgrave (1854).¹⁷ 'Render' may be reduced to 'rend' and thus signify the torn and 'tiny scrap[s] of parchment', the 'imperfect fragments' that he described as being salvaged from the rubbish heaps of Egypt (181, 183).¹⁸

Aware of hidden meanings that threaten Sappho's integrity, H.D. vows 'to tear . . . even the barest fragments of vibrant, electrical parchment from hands not always worthy to touch . . .' ('Poetry' 73). In her own hands, these fragments carry the full charge of Sappho's *eros*, inviting initiation into her mysteries. 'In fragment lay potency', says Kathleen Fraser, considering how Austin Dickinson took scissors to the paper of Emily's letters, to censor intercourse between his sister and his wife (195). Throughout her life, H.D. invoked Sappho to validate her own poetic power. In a late notebook, she described unpublished poems on Greek themes like 'Dodona' and 'Delphi', which she had salvaged from buried drafts, as 'fragments . . . torn from the old Alexandrine palimpsest' ('H.D.' 214). In her 'Note on Poetry',¹⁹ she referred to her own earlier poems as 'these fragments' (71, 74), presenting them as parts of a lost whole, remnants of a forgotten continent. She went on to describe the composition of these poems – among them 'The Islands' and the song 'You are as gold' from *Hymen* – as a process of *isolation* or fragmentation:

I let my pencil run riot, in those early days of my apprenticeship, in an old-fashioned school copy-book . . . Then I would select from many pages of automatic or pseudo-automatic writing, a few lines that satisfied me. ('Poetry' 73)²⁰

This account stresses the impersonal and even random nature of the writing process, in accordance with Wesling and Slawek's description of the Dadaists' and surrealists' collage-making and *écriture automatique* as practices in which 'the aleatory appears as an integral part of the subject's product' (5). Thus subjectivity is decentralised by chance, and modernist 'objectivity' is achieved by reciprocity with the text. Romantic nostalgia for what is lost is only one of the literary positions H.D. takes up in this versatile essay; delight in what has the strength to survive her hard-headed editing is another. Here we become aware that the covert interlocutors of 'A Note on Poetry' include Richard Aldington and Ezra Pound as editors and critics of her earliest work. A reference in the same paragraph to her own 'stylistic slashings, definitely self-conscious', anticipates her later description of the way Pound 'slashed with his creative pencil' at the poems she showed him in 1912 (*Torment* 40).

Paul Smith has read Pound's 'truncation' of Hilda Doolittle's name and her poems as a wounding of the female body by the male phallus, a ritual castration; he therefore interprets H.D.'s later appropriation of the editorial pencil as an expression of what Freud and his followers called 'penis envy' (111–15). However, in view of the insistently textual tropes of 'A Note on Poetry', I would suggest that her belated resistance to Pound's editing consisted in associating her own writings with Sappho's, which Swinburne had described as 'mutilated fragments'.²¹ Far from presenting a diminished female body, H.D.'s doubling of herself with the Lesbian poet covertly opposes men's power as writers, editors and critics with an empowered lesbian body.

Poetic modernism, conceived as a unitary movement, has been characterised as 'the apotheosis of the fragment'.²² Its classic site is the 'heap of broken images' in Eliot's *The Waste Land* (*Poems* 61). Derided in a contemporary review as 'so much waste paper',²³ Eliot's text is littered with the detritus of earlier literature: a corpse from Webster, perfume bottles from Pope. By means of intertextuality, therefore, *The Waste Land* (1922) shatters the cultural inheritance of Europe into fragments, while H.D.'s contemporary series 'Sapphic Fragments' in *Heliodora* (1924) attempts new syntheses from archaic materials. At the same time, she is reassembling what Luce Irigaray characterises as the 'scraps', the 'uncollected debris' of a female imaginary (*This Sex* 30). In place of Eliot's wasteland, H.D. figured an 'island': a polysemous image for the poet of the Aegean archipelago, which acknowledges the diasporic state of Sappho's poetry while striving to sustain its coherent vision. Her essay 'The Wise Sappho' was originally entitled 'The Island: Fragments of Sappho';²⁴ in it, Sappho's writing is depicted as 'an island with innumerable, tiny, irregular bays' (*Vision* 58). It shows her to be intent on reassembling what Luce Irigaray has characterised as the 'scraps', the 'uncollected debris' of a female imaginary (*This Sex* 30). Benstock has identified Virginia Woolf's ellipses as markers of Sapphic modernism, while Jane Marcus has described *A Room of One's Own* as a place where 'Echo ... collect[s] some of the scattered parts of the woman artist's body' (*Virginia* 164). Similarly, the five poems H.D. numbered from Wharton's *Sappho* tease the reader with multiple echoes, in the manner Howe describes as 'one writer playing with, listening to, and learning from' another (27). Nor are these poems univocal: like Sappho's 'Ode to Aphrodite', they thrive on dialogue. The role of the epigraph in such a text is that of one voice among others, essentially occasional – as, it appears, were Sappho's Epithalamia. Consequently, it is as naive to

read these poems in biographical terms as it is to assume that Sappho's poems were 'confessional' in the mode identified by Anglo-American critics in the 1960s.²⁵ To interpret Sappho or Emily Dickinson, H.D. or Sylvia Plath, as confessional poets drastically reduces their complexity.

In 'Fragment Forty-one', for instance, the Sapphic epigraph about Atthis and Andromeda may well resonate with the occasion for H.D.'s poem; it may even indicate a biographical context – though the nature of that context is, as we shall see, open to dispute. However, the text of the poem alludes to other fragments, which shift the paradigm to less obvious aspects of Sappho and set up specific resonances within the body of H.D.'s work. Similarly, the epigraph to 'Fragment Sixty-eight' indicates a narrative context by gesturing at a woman who is, in Snyder's words, 'outside the charmed circle of those blessed by the Graces' (87). By this form of signification, the poem establishes its speaker's sense of her own marginality and undesirability without recourse to the confessional. Subsequent intertextualities with Sappho enhance the poem's lament for lost love. Embedded within her long speech are five lines presented as the speech of her former lover:

you spoke:
 'your hair is not less black,
 nor less fragrant,
 nor in your eyes is less light,
 your hair is not less sweet
 with purple in the lift of lock;' (Collected 188)

These lines actually echo three or more discrete fragments of Sappho, including Campbell Fr. 58 ('hair [turned white] from black'), 98 ('locks bound in a purple [headband]') and 112 ('your eyes [are] tender'). Moreover here, as elsewhere, what is apparently monologic is found to be dialogic, and the items that provide a hook for biographical interpretations – here the violets that the lover gathered and the beloved wore in her hair – are Sapphic elements in the texture of the verse.²⁶ Over and above the lovers' words is a lyric dialogue between H.D. and Sappho.

2 HO RONGS YOU, SAPPHO?

Signifying on her archaic Greek sources, H.D. finds English equivalents for words which – by virtue of reiteration – have special valency in their original contexts, achieving cultural translation of Sappho. Thus the keynotes of the verses just quoted are 'fragrant' or 'sweet' (expressing

delicacy in terms of the senses of smell and taste), 'light' (alluding to the visual attribute of grace) and 'purple' (alluding to the values of colour or decoration). In 'Fragment Sixty-eight', therefore, H.D. picked up the threads of what Barbara Fowler calls an archaic aesthetic, found in the work of other poets besides Sappho. Identifying this as 'the basis for Sappho's construction of desire', Jane Snyder summarises its three elements as: *charis*, 'grace'; *habrosune*, 'delicacy'; *poikilia*, 'subtlety' (79–80).

Charis relates to pleasure as well as grace: we have seen the effect of its absence in 'Halcyon'. In Campbell Fr. 108, *o kala, o chariessa [kora]*, a woman is addressed as beautiful and full of grace. H.D. renders this by call and response in the musical refrain of the bride chorus in 'Hymen': 'she is fair?/ . . . she is fair' (*Collected* 105–6). *Habrosune* suggests softness, tenderness, even lushness, as aspects of delicacy. Campbell Fr. 140, which H.D. recalls in her poem 'Adonis', refers to *abros Adonis* ('tender Adonis'); Fr. 89, to which H.D. alludes in 'The Wise Sappho', uses the same adjective for a fine fabric. Campbell Fr. 58, described by Snyder as an apparently 'programmatically statement' (89), is translated by Wharton as 'I love delicacy' (No. 79). As we have seen, H.D. attached comparable significance to 'fragrance' – a keyword in her Sapphic vocabulary. H.D.'s 'Centaur Song', set in Aphrodite's orchard as evoked in Campbell Fr. 2, associates both *charis* and *habrosune* with the goddess of love: 'They fall,/ the apple-flowers;/ nor softer grace has Aphrodite' (*Collected* 158). Here H.D. is not merely alluding to Sappho, nor signifying on her songs, but absorbing the aesthetics of an archaic *eros* into her own poetic.

The third element, *poikilia*, connotes the play of light and texture, what is shimmering, artful, variegated.²⁷ The adjective *poikilos*, sometimes translated 'many-coloured' or 'rainbow-hued' or 'gay leather strap . . . of Lydian work', to which H.D. alludes in 'Thetis' and 'The Wise Sappho'.²⁸ Campbell Fr. 1, the one complete poem that survives, addresses Aphrodite in Sapphic metre with an emphatic initial epithet: *poikilothron*. The last element has been read as an abbreviation for *thronos* (throne), or a reference to the mind: in his version of this ode, Swinburne has it both ways; addressing Aphrodite as of 'divers-coloured mind' and 'diverse-coloured seat', he also calls her 'subtle-souled'.²⁹ H.D. was certainly conscious of the archaic concept of *poikilia*. In her short story 'Ear-Ring', she pictures the mind as a kaleidoscope, saying, 'all the colours are there' (106). In *Paint It Today*, a similar expression hints at a lesbian subtext: 'there are many colours to our lives . . . The blue of the rainbow

must not dazzle out the rose and yellow . . . and violet and dark purple' (22–3).³⁰ Shakespeare may have signified on Sappho in a homoerotic context when he used the expressions 'different . . . in hue' and 'all hues' in Sonnets 98 and 20, both of which are cited by H.D. in *By Avon River*.³¹ In 'The Wise Sappho', she coined the noun 'all colour' (*Vision* 58); in 'Tribute to the Angels' she repeated it in hyphenated form: 'all-colour;/ where the flames mingle' (*Collected* 153); this catches in a prismatic image several interpretations of Campbell Fr. 152, which he translates 'mixed with all kinds of colours'. H.D. surely gestured at actual texts when she started her pen portrait of Sappho with these words: 'there is a tint of rich colour . . . violets, purple woof of cloth, scarlet garments, dyed fastening of a sandal . . .' (*Vision* 57). Within the palimpsest of this list is a glimpse of the *Iliad*, where Helen is discovered weaving a 'double-violet' robe reminiscent of Aphrodite's, and Andromache is shown working flowers into the texture of a purple robe. In Homer, as in Sappho, *poikilia* often refers to women's art: not only the surface decoration of embroidery, but the deep structure of weaving. That distinction plays its part in the allusions to Meleager's Proem to his *Garland* with which H.D. frames her portrait of 'The Wise Sappho'. 'Little, but all roses': she quotes his praise with a disdain worthy of Sappho herself (*Vision* 57). She then disposes of his roses by sheer wordplay: 'not all roses – not roses at all' but 'all colour' (58), illustrating her concept with the richly dyed and woven fabrics we have noticed. What stronger response to the man's implication that this woman's work was merely decorative?

Historically, Sappho's era (c. 600 B.C.) predated that of the Greek city-states, when men's rights and relationships predominated and women were physically and legally relegated to the domestic sphere, the reproductive role. Only in that early period, it seems, could female communities exist in which women were educated, initiated into female rites and trained as artists. Whereas Williamson argues for Sappho's centrality to her culture, and possible subversiveness within it, Cantarella describes the Sapphic *thiasoi* as situated in border zones, at the edges of cities, prefiguring the marginalisation of female homosociality in later periods. In them, she says, women enjoyed freedoms that were subsequently lost, including the temporary freedom to love members of their own sex in reciprocal relationships which did not resemble the dominant–submissive patterns of either heterosexual marriage or male *pederastia*.³² Most writers agree that Sappho and her fellow-poets Archilochus and Alcaeus flourished before patriarchal power was fully institutionalised and in a partially preliterate culture. Glimpsed through



'Soft cushions ...': Hilda Aldington in the 1920s

traces as limited – yet as telling – as Sappho's own fragments, the 'Sapphic' can therefore be sited in the prehistory of our own era: a place literally 'forgotten' and 'remembered', as in Benstock's formulation. Whether seen through the lens of cultural radicalism, feminist nostalgia, lesbian desire, romantic yearning for an erotic *au delà* or even masculine voyeurism, the Sapphic is a place of myth and imagination.

In H.D.'s first volume, poems such as 'Pursuit' and 'Huntress' re-enact the rituals of *thiasoi* dedicated to Artemis, whom the so-called *alibos* fragment is thought to invoke.³³ The process of recall or remembering involves signification on Sapphic texts. For example, the second stanza of 'Pursuit' derives, as Robert Babcock has shown, from Campbell Fr. 105c. This was preserved in a manual of style to illustrate the way a phrase can add beauty to the one before it: 'Like the hyacinth which shepherds tread underfoot in the mountains, and on the ground the purple flower ...' (D. Campbell 133). H.D. was familiar with D. G. Rossetti's version:³⁴

Like the wild hyacinth flower which in the hills is found,
Which the passing feet of the shepherds for ever tear and wound
Until the purple blossom is trodden into the ground.

Rossetti's 'One Girl: A Combination from Sappho' joins these lines, based on Fr. 105c, to the famous image of the highest apple in Fr. 105a. Mary Barnard would assign the same pair of images to two voices and call them 'Lament for a Maidenhead' (no. 34). Both translators arbitrarily composed parts into a whole by reference to the female body. H.D. would have known that the Lesbian text emphasises the masculinity of the shepherds (*poimenes andres*) and suggests a threatening analogy between *possi* ('feet') and *pos(s)is* ('husband').³⁵ Yet she discards Rossetti's version, which favoured an analogy between the trodden flower and the ruptured hymen by gratuitously adding 'for ever tear and wound'. Instead, she renews the image by placing it in a homosocial context of female activity. Replacing the simile with a metonymy that dramatises the chase, she also achieves an urgent immediacy:

But here
a wild-hyacinth stalk is snapped:
the purple buds – half ripe –
show deep purple
where your heel pressed. (Collected 111)

In 'Pursuit', Sappho's image appears to have been reinscribed in a narrative of lesbian desire: 'H.D. leaves no doubt', says Babcock, 'that "purple" and "hyacinth" have specifically Sapphic connotations, and that Fragment 105 [*sic*] lies behind "Pursuit"' (45).³⁶

She recycled the same image in 'Fragment Forty-one', which also signifies on the dialogue with the goddess beginning 'Who wrongs you, Sappho?' in the so-called 'Ode to Aphrodite'. The speaker of H.D.'s poem, betrayed in love, reproaches herself for turning aside from the path that leads to Aphrodite's shrine. Within this hieroglyphic landscape, familiar to readers of early H.D., we stumble on another version of Fr. 105c:

though my heels press my own wet life
black, dark to purple,
on the smooth, rose-streaked
threshold of her pavement. (Collected 182)

The scene has shifted from pasture to temple, and the source of oozing 'purple' is now not flower juice but blood. Another significant change is the substitution of 'my heels' for 'your heel'; the speaker's guilt and self-disgust is embodied in this abject image, where the same person is both subject and object of the physical action: 'my heels press my own wet life'. In place of Rossetti's fantasy of male violation, there is a hint of

self-wounding here – reminding us of Swinburne's early role in the transmission of Sappho to H.D. Nevertheless Swinburne's sadism, in such poems as 'Dolores', inflicted on a female body that is slavishly 'branded with kisses that bruise' and draws blood (*Works*1: 286, 292), and recorded by a specular male, becomes a milder masochism in H.D.

In 'Fragment Forty-one', both the suffering of pain and the articulation of that suffering are located in the same body. The poem's epigraph ('... *thou flittest to Andromeda*') implies that the speaker is a woman caught in an erotic triangle with two other women. However, its final stanza, in which this speaker finally dedicates to Aphrodite 'the love of my lover/ for his mistress', implies an erotic triangle of two women and one man. Louis Martz identified the uncollected poem 'Amaranth' as an earlier version of 'Fragment Forty-one'³⁷ and read it biographically as 'the anguish of a deserted woman' (Hilda Doolittle) in response to 'the infidelities of Richard Aldington'; he went on to argue that this narrative of betrayal in a trio of poems from 1916–17 was 'masked as expansions of fragments of Sappho' when they appeared in *Heliadora* (Martz xiv). A still earlier draft (which Martz calls 'original version') gives '*her* mistress' instead of '*his* mistress' in what are now the poem's final lines (*Collected* 618; my emphases). If this textual history is correct, then the original version of the poem was homosexual rather than heterosexual, and the revisions made before publication masked not the biographical context but the lesbian content. Joan DeJean recounts similar moments in the reception of Sappho's work; just as Latin versions of the classical period 'translated' certain pronouns from the feminine to the masculine gender, recent scholars have rearranged lines and rendered disputed word endings so as to transpose her material into a heterosexual context (307).

Eileen Gregory has described the typical poem by H.D. as 'a liminal state' ('Rose' 537). Yet another allusion to Sappho, in the lines just cited, confirms the textual liminality of 'Fragment Forty-one' – its ability to respond to both same-sex and other-sex interpretations. The words 'smooth ... threshold' actually translate Campbell Fr. 117a; David Campbell's note on this scrap of poetry reads: 'Attributed to Sappho's Epithalamia since Catullus' *rasilem* ... *forem*, "polished doorway", occurs in a wedding-hymn' (141). To the fragment itself, H.D. adds the hymeneal description 'rose-streaked', turning the marble flesh-coloured or even bloodstained; compare the active verb in 'violets streaked black ridges/ through the grass' (*Collected* 17). Similar images in 'I Said' intensify the sexual resonance of such expressions, placing them in a homoerotic context.³⁸

'Eurydice' alludes, like 'Fragment Forty-one' and 'Fragment Sixty-eight', to Sappho's bridal songs. It explores the possibility of a new marriage between Orpheus and Eurydice when he and his ravished bride have escaped from Hades to the 'upper earth'. D. H. Lawrence, using a similar mytheme in his later poem 'Bavarian Gentians', would celebrate Persephone's return to the underworld and her forced marriage with its ruler Pluto: he envisages Persephone as 'darkness invisible enfolded in . . . / . . . the arms Plutonic, and pierced with the passion of intense gloom' (*Complete* 697).³⁹ Where Lawrence, erasing Persephone as the 'lost bride' of Pluto in a context both phallic and patriarchal, would signify on Milton ('darkness visible'), H.D. signifies on Sappho. She does so when Eurydice reflects on her lost chance of being restored to the world of colour and light:

What had my face to offer
but reflex of the earth,
hyacinth colour
caught from the raw fissure in the rock
where the light struck,
and the colour of azure crocuses
and the bright surface of gold crocuses . . .

(Collected 52)

'Hyacinth colour' translates a phrase from Campbell Fr. 166 describing Leda's egg; 'gold crocuses' may allude to Sappho's praise of Cleis in Fr. 132. Other references to colour and light in 'Eurydice' indicate an elaborate signification on tropes from Sappho's Epithalamia: Campbell Fr. 112 celebrates a bride honoured by Aphrodite: 'your eyes [are] gentle, and love streams over your beautiful face'; in Fr. 138, a similar expression is used (perhaps mockingly) of a bridegroom: 'spread abroad the grace in your eyes'.⁴⁰ By contrast, Eurydice asks:

what was it that crossed my face
with the light from yours
and your glance?
what was it you saw in my face?
the light of your own face,
the fire of your own presence?

(Collected 52)

This poem is far from a celebration of marriage; it gives voice to a woman whose abandonment by her husband has enabled her to see through a situation subsequently described by Woolf: 'Women have served all these centuries as looking-glasses possessing the magic and



'... rich colour': Bryher in the 1930s

delicious power of reflecting the figure of man at twice its natural size' (*Room* 37). H.D.'s poem counterpoints Orpheus' disastrous backward glance at his wife by Eurydice's hindsight on the sexual politics of their relationship. Its intertextuality with Sappho represents not only a recovery of the female voice, but also a recuperation of presence and energy for the female self. Whereas Eurydice is traditionally represented as a woman who can only live by virtue of her husband's art – Orpheus is, significantly, a masculine figure for poetry itself – H.D.'s poem wrests her into a resistant autonomy:⁴¹

At least I have the flowers of myself,
and my thoughts, no god
can take that;
I have the fervour of myself for a presence
and my own spirit for light . . . (*Collected* 55)

H.D.'s 'expansions from Sappho' (to borrow a phrase from Landor) are more complex than those of her male predecessors, not least because of her irregular relationship with the line of transmission that they represent. Hence her response to Wharton's *Sappho* is as much deconstructive as reconstructive, and her intertextuality with Sappho resembles Emily Dickinson's practice as described by Susan Howe: 'Forcing, abbreviating, pushing, padding, subtracting, riddling, interrogating, re-writing, she pulled text from text' (29).

3 SAPPHICS

Early and late, H.D.'s poetic signature is found in sense impressions such as scents, and lexical items such as flower names, that represent the risky interface between her work and Sappho's. They also mark what duBois has identified in Sappho's text, despite shifting and indeterminate pronouns, as 'a female space' (136): the resonances between Campbell Fr. 94, a dialogue on parting in which Sappho (named in the text) reminds her lover of their mutual delights, and H.D.'s 'Songs from Cyprus', bear this out.⁴² Thus both poets can be located within what Adrienne Rich has termed a 'lesbian continuum'. Rich has been challenged about the breadth of this term, which she uses 'to include the range – through each woman's life and throughout history – of woman-identified experience' (*Blood* 51).⁴³ Nevertheless, it makes sense of the living link between women poets in different times and places. Writing to May Sarton, H.D. described her transatlantic connection with her

motherland as an 'umbilical chord'.⁴⁴ This Freudian slip (alluding to musical harmony, deep-submerged communications cables and the life-giving maternal body) also deftly describes H.D.'s relationship across the centuries with Sappho, whom one writer called 'the nursing mother of intellectually free women'.⁴⁵ Although the unequivocal adjective *lesbian* can be found in her writing, she was chary with the modern usage *lesbian* – no doubt because, to quote Silvia Dobson, 'we had to be very, very careful'.⁴⁶ The sign *woman*, much used in feminist criticism of the 1980s, simultaneously marked feminist projects and masked lesbian presence. Friedman and DuPlessis unmasked that presence in their pioneering essay subtitled 'The Sexualities of H.D.'s *Her*'; Friedman went on to trace, in 'I go where I love', a 'lesbian continuum' between H.D. and Adrienne Rich, while DuPlessis gave her attention to the 'lesbian/matrixsexual erotics of Hermione's identity' (*Pink* 95). Meanwhile, as we have seen, a rich body of criticism has established Sappho as the crucial precursor for H.D., not merely as a lyricist who transcended her sex but, as she put it, as 'terribly . . . a woman' (*Vision* 59).

H.D.'s preoccupation with ambivalent spaces also connects her with a male precursor. Even though Swinburne's assertion that 'great poets are bisexual' allowed him to celebrate Sappho as the originator of a classical tradition long since appropriated by men,⁴⁷ he mediates, a fiery-headed Hermes, between Sappho and Sapphic measure in ancient Greek and their revival in nineteenth-century English verse. Other Victorians were involved in this revival, but Swinburne led the shade of the Poetess into the light of day for H.D. His 'Sapphics' set to music a waking vision of Aphrodite, whose only words are 'Turn to me, O my Sappho'; the entire poem turns, as strophe succeeds strophe, and this turning is enacted by the goddess' doves 'looking with necks reverted, / Back to Lesbos' (I: 333). The enjambements of Ezra Pound's 'The Return' may well have been inspired by 'the reluctant / Feet' of Swinburne's 'Sapphics', while his 'Apparuit' is a rare instance of Sapphic metre in modern English verse.⁴⁸ Crediting Swinburne's position as a prosodist, Pound nevertheless suppressed specific debts to him. By contrast, H.D. referred to the young Ezra as a 'tawny Swinburne' (*Torment* 4) and glanced back to this Victorian Englishman throughout her poetry and prose. Late in life, she apparently took the Latin title 'Vale Ave' from his elegy for Baudelaire, while her first volume, *Sea Garden*, recalls his invocations of Sappho in 'On the Cliffs' and 'A Forsaken Garden', which begins: 'At the sea-down's edge between windward and lea' (III: 18). *Between* is a keyword for Swinburne, whose

work is, in Jerome McGann's words, 'remarkably rich in boundaries – in images, poetic forms, and prosodic devices which can suggest a point of limits' (171). The transsexual seer Tiresias epitomises this 'double vision' (172), and is aptly placed 'Athwart the lintel of death's house' (II: 239).⁴⁹ Thus Swinburne signified on Campbell Fr. 55, from which H.D. borrowed 'even in the house of Hades' ('Fragment Sixty-eight'), the scrap of text functioning as what Gregory has called a 'psychic threshold of intensity and power' ('Falling' 114).

Swinburne hectically celebrated Sappho as

Love's priestess, mad with pain and joy of song,
Song's priestess, mad with joy and pain of love . . .

(III: 310)

In this way, he distinguished the embodied 'poetess' from the sublime (male) poet who, in the words of 'Thalassius', was 'no more a singer, but a song' (II: 302). In the 1890s, Arthur Symons described the Decadent ideal in literature as 'a disembodied voice, and yet the voice of a human soul' (867); W. B. Yeats echoed Symons when he defined the highest kind of poetry as 'an almost disembodied ecstasy' (*Essays* 194). H.D. displayed her inheritance from these writers when she wrote of Sappho as 'not a woman, not a goddess even, but a song or the spirit of a song'; immediately she retracts this decadent fantasy: 'Yet she is embodied – terribly a human being, a woman' (*Vision* 59). We are reminded of Woolf's *cri de coeur*: 'who shall measure the heat and violence of the poet's heart when caught and tangled in a woman's body?' (*Room* 50). Both women wrested their modernism out of the prevalent misogyny. Hence H.D.'s poetics oscillate, vitally, between the whole and the part: between embodiment and disembodiment, the immediate and the inaccessible, the image and the narrative, the unreadable text and the remembered melody. She is always aware that beyond the written record, in all its imperfection, is the perfection of song – we know not how improvisatory. In jazz music, the dynamic is always between the note and the chord, the phrase and the melody, the soloist and the ensemble, the individual singer and the body of tradition. It is this creative dynamic which distinguishes one performance from another.

When H.D. improvised on Wharton's 'Fragment Thirty-six' (*I know not what to do: / my mind is divided*),⁵⁰ she performed a debate between two embodied arts: the art of love and the art of song. In these words for a single voice, the desire to make love vies with the desire to make music:

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

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?

(Collected 165-6)

In H.D.'s Sapphic mode, 'rapture' is ever threatened by 'rupture'. But, as in 'Hymen', '[r]apture of speech unsaid' (*Collected* 110) can be transformed into song. In neither song nor love is there a question of gender: both *I* and *you* are indeterminate, in the purest tradition of the love lyric. In accordance with that tradition, readers will engender the speech according to their understanding of the speaker's sexuality. Here, as in so much else, H.D.'s text resembles Sappho's, of whom Joan DeJean states: 'Fictions of Sappho are, at least in part, a projection of the critic's/writer's desires onto the corpus, the fictive body, of the original woman writer' (3). 'Fragment Thirty-six' actually fractures Wharton's ten-word version of Sappho's verses in order to reincorporate them in its own rhetorical patterns. Thus H.D.'s repetition with variation of words, phrases and rhythms creates a semiotic vehicle on which all the poem's signification is borne. The first Sapphic phrase, *I know not what to do*, becomes an inverted refrain, initiating five of the poem's nine stanzas; the second Sapphic phrase, *my mind is divided*, is the theme of her variations ('my mind is reft:/ . . . My mind is quite divided,'); from within this phrase, the word *mind* impels the poem's symmetries ('my mind hesitates/ above my mind'). Meanwhile the succession of impulses, and the oscillation between two desires, builds into a musical simile of wind and waves:

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,
.

so my mind hesitates
 above the passion
 quivering yet to break,
 so my mind hesitates
 above my mind,
 listening to song's delight. (167)

H.D.'s immediate precursor in this mode was Amy Lowell. Alluding to 'Longinus' in 'The Sisters', Lowell pictured Sappho in the act of love as a 'frozen blade before it broke and fell' (*Complete* 459). For Snyder, many of Lowell's short poems 'read almost like translations of some of the fragments of Sappho's poetry preserved for us by later ancient writers' (131). *Pictures of the Floating World* (1919), which preceded H.D.'s 'Fragments' in *Heliadora*, included a love poem entitled 'The Artist', which reads:

You would quiver like a shot-up spray of water,
 You would waver, and relapse, and tremble.
 And I too should tremble,
 Watching. (*Complete* 211)

Lowell was the key poet for Bryher before she met H.D. Her own *Amy Lowell: A Critical Appreciation* followed on the heels of Lowell's *Tendencies in Modern American Poetry*, from which Bryher discovered that 'H.D. was a woman and an American' (*Heart* 187). If Amy was an intermediary for Bryher and Hilda, she was also a significant presence between Swinburne's Englishing of Sappho and H.D.'s. Hence, in simple terms, H.D. belongs with Lowell's 'singing sisters', who inherit the gift of their Lesbian foremother and are themselves 'mother-creatures, double-bearing' (Lowell, *Complete* 459).⁵¹

4 ISLANDS ON THE AIR

'I write in self-defense', says Nicole Brossard in *The Aerial Letter*, which she addresses to 'the risk taken in writing' by one who possesses a female, a lesbian, body; 'I do it in struggle and for my survival' (39-40, 46, 43). That struggle is registered in fragmentary texts from which a 'non-fragmented' sense of being is assembled (134). In her words, '[t]he lesbian knows the fire and the ashes of desire, of being, and of fragment', since she is 'a threatening *reality* for reality' (121; original emphasis). For H.D. also, writing shared this risk and this intimacy. In her 'Note on Poetry,' she wrote of contradictory desires: '... desire to escape, desire to