

An Apple Out of Reach:

The Unattainable Ideal Beloved and Sappho's Poetics  
in the Poetry of Marguerite Yourcenar and Anne Carson

by

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A thesis submitted to the Faculty of Graduate and Postdoctoral  
Affairs in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree

of

Master of Arts

in

English

Carleton University  
Ottawa, Ontario

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**Abstract**

The way the Archaic Greek poet Sappho and her poetry is represented and engaged with in the writing of Anne Carson and Marguerite Yourcenar appears on the surface to be decidedly disparate. However, when the thematic elements of Yourcenar and Carson's respective Sapphic texts are excavated, the two authors in fact demonstrate resemblance, specifically in how they both engage with Sappho and her poetry as a way to push eroticism beyond the profane and into the realm of the sacred. By drawing on criticism of Sappho, moral philosophy, and other writings from Yourcenar and Carson, I argue that both Yourcenar and Carson invoke Sappho as an incarnation of the ideal beloved inside the text and in their biographies. Attendant to this argument, I also present a reading of Yourcenar and Carson's Sapphic texts that highlights and then engages with misconceptions of their work and styles by drawing attention to previously-neglected elements in their writing to draw them closer to a Sapphic 'tradition.' My own poetry, which is appended to the thesis, demonstrates how the imagery and themes discussed in the main body can be applied to articulations of the ideal beloved, even when the poetry is not explicitly Sapphic in origin.

## **Acknowledgements**

For a project as sustained as this, there are, in addition to those who have helped me directly, countless others who have provided moral support and made smaller, though no less important, contributions as I endeavoured to finish this project. First and foremost, I would like to thank my supervisors Dr. Brenda Vellino and Dr. Nadia Bozak, who saw this project through from its more ramshackle beginnings to the final, more elegant, piece of writing it eventually became. Their advice and the care with which they handled my writing can scarcely be understated and I am thankful for all they have done. I would also like to thank the other members of my thesis committee — Dr. Travis DeCook, Dr. Andrew Wallace, and Dr. Kimberly B. Stratton — for their generosity of time and attention in reading my thesis and agreeing to proctor its examination. I would also like to thank my friends and parents for providing so much in the way of external help and emotional support for this very complex project. I am eternally in your debts and will never forget the kindness you have all shown me in the last. Thank you, everyone.

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## **Introduction: Sappho's Shattered Visage**

By virtue of the fact her poetry survives only in fragments, there will never be a 'true' analysis of Sappho. The disparate thematic elements of Sappho's fragments — erotic, sacred, natural — can never be brought together when there are almost no complete poems to examine in this way.

However, the great joy of writing poems as an inheritor of Sappho, or as one who catalogues her work, is the possibility of reconciling these elements in your own work. Marguerite Yourcenar and Anne Carson are both poets whose bodies of work maintain a substantial, if not essential, relationship to Sappho; I seek to explore the ways these poets engage Sappho as a carrier of erotic mysticism, especially in relationship to the lesbian elements of her work and their own representations of desire. Erotic because that is the register in which these poets have read her work, mystic because there is transcendence in its equivocation between the phenomenal world and metaphor. Rather, I am interested in how the metaphysical aspects of Sappho, after having been stressed during the 19th century, led to her apotheosis as an idealized poet in the works of Marguerite Yourcenar and Anne Carson, two writers who, on initial impression, seem like extremely disparate contributors to the Sapphic tradition in poetry. The not unearned reputation of Yourcenar as a difficult, unsentimental prose stylist seems to be the perfect opposite of Carson, whose experimentalism is laced with a deep emotivity. Despite the considerable difference in poetics and relationship to queerness, their interpretations of Sappho have a number of remarkable similarities and, even more so, their poetic work bears a number of fascinating resonances that can be drawn out through investigation of Carson and Yourcenar's translations of her work. Several decades of separation in time from each other cannot help bringing their contrasts into sharper relief.

The imagery of erotic desire in Sappho's poetry has become so ingrained in the language of love poetry as a whole that it has ceased to be recognized as such. In *A Sappho Companion*, a volume which gathers poetry influenced by Sappho from Archaic Greece to the 20th century, Margaret Reynolds is quick to point out how the popular songs "You Took Advantage of Me," "Where Did Our Love Go?" and "Like a Virgin" can be seen as glosses on a number of Sappho's fragments, albeit unintentionally (15). However, Reynolds is careful to point out that these should not be viewed as examples of writing in the manner of Sappho, rather: "[she] has no authentic voice in any language, even her own [...] for each Fragment [...] is also a reconstruction, but it reminds us that Sappho and her work should be thought of as something strange, foreign and remote; something that is ultimately unrecoverable, in spite of all the many layers of invention by later writers." A problem with Sappho's reception is that we know almost nothing of her biography, and the moment during which she lived meant that the Fragments themselves are likely transcriptions of performances rather than material that circulated as material texts (16). This points to a larger problem with analyzing the works of Sappho in general. With but one complete poem, the "Ode to Aphrodite," it is difficult to ascertain what kind of poetics, if any, might be ascribed to her work. Her appeal must be, as Reynolds puts it, the "unrecoverable" nature of her work. The fragments of Sappho are dried and pressed flowers from a Greek garden, dead yet richly suggestive in their preservation.

Anne Carson and Marguerite Yourcenar are both 'serious' poets insofar as that might mean that they deal with philosophical subjects: death, love, time, and language, among others. However, I am most interested in how this subject matter overlaps with their interpretations of Sappho. The body of work each writer has carefully created is almost entirely preoccupied with the notion of how eros might lead to a higher plane of understanding, such that love and passion

are valid pathways to enter into connection with the divine. Rather than placing them in a tradition with other poets, I would place the writings of Yourcenar and Carson alongside the Song of Songs, the *Gita Govinda* of Jayadeva, and the *Autobiography* of Saint Teresa of Ávila. This passage from *The Autobiography* is a most illustrative example of the particular interrelatedness between erotic sensation and agapic recognition in her writings:

It pleased the Lord that I should sometimes see the following vision. I would see beside me, on my left hand, an angel in bodily form — a type of vision which I am not in the habit of seeing, except very rarely. [...] It pleased the Lord that I should see this angel in the following way. He was not tall, but short, and very beautiful, his face so aflame that he appeared to be one of the highest types of angel who seem to be all afire. [...] In his hands I saw a long golden spear and at the end of the iron tip I seemed to see a point of fire. With this he seemed to pierce my heart several times so that it penetrated to my entrails. When he drew it out, I thought he was drawing them out with it and he left me completely afire with a great love for God. The pain was so sharp that it made me utter several moans; and so excessive was the sweetness caused me by this intense pain that no one can ever wish to lose it, nor will one's soul be content with anything less than God. It is not bodily pain, but spiritual though the body — indeed, a great share. So sweet are the colloquies of love [...] (Teresa 274 - 275)

The description Saint Teresa gives in this passage is one that invites an approach to the divine in an erotic as opposed to contemplative way. The description of the angel as "beautiful" and the emphasis on physical contact and its kindling of a "great love for God" should not be viewed as contradictory and radically new, but as the representation of a devotional model that emphasizes

love for the divine as being inseparable from eros. Similarly, the poetry written by Yourcenar and Carson evokes moments of erotic mysticism. In the poems they have translated from Sappho and the poems that are written in a style which adheres to her own, Sappho becomes the ideal beloved who remains just out of reach and animates the eroticism suffused in the body of the text. In the works I will examine by Carson and Yourcenar, their poetic beloved takes a tripartite shape that is simultaneously human, divine, and sapphic. In writing poems which follow this model, Sappho is raised from a poet known only in fragments to ideal, consecrated by the poets who write specifically in response to her work.

To be more clear, my analysis of Sappho as idealized beloved will take the following shape. After a brief preview of the works I will examine from both poets, I intend to look at the history of Sappho's transmission through the fragments and what affective and symbolic elements from these have become regarded as inseparable from her work. Afterwards, I will look at how Sappho's representations of the divine in her own poems has been taken up by scholars in conjunction with an analysis of the tendency to idealize Sappho, and how the eroticism of Sappho's own poems and, by extension, the love poems of Carson and Yourcenar, is inseparable from attempts to reach toward the divine. Finally, I will examine how one of Sappho's best-known fragments — Fragment 105 — undergoes radical transformations in translations by both Carson and Yourcenar. By familiarising the reader with Sappho's works as opposed to trading in suppositions and possibilities, I will demonstrate the sophistication of allusion in the works of both Carson and Yourcenar. While I hesitate to use biographical criticism as a method of approaching either of the three poets' work, it is necessary to demarcate how separate from each other they were in time, and yet a through line connects their works with Sappho.

Marguerite Yourcenar is the pen, and second legal, name of Marguerite de Crayencour, a Belgian writer from a petty aristocratic family. Her reputation in the Anglosphere is disappointing for someone of her stature in her native French. This is often reduced to her status as the first woman elected to the French Academy in 1980. Perhaps fittingly, the text of hers I have chosen to examine in detail is *Feux*,<sup>1</sup> a series of prose poems composed during the 1930s in the wake of a psychologically ruinous affair with the classicist André Fraigneau (Savigneau 98). While Yourcenar's popular reputation is that of a lesbian who wrote exclusively about homosexual men her (often abortive) relationships with men provide an interesting counterpoint to the tone of *Feux*. "Sappho, or Suicide," in addition to being the only poem about a non-mythological figure, is the final prose poem of the book. The finality of the Sappho chapter and its dreamlike structure, combining the poet Sappho with a similarly-named acrobat from Ancient Greece (Yourcenar *Couronne* 72), seems to point to a desire for Yourcenar to move beyond the physical eroticism of male sexuality towards the ideal brought upon by an embrace of lesbianism, with Sappho lighting the way. The collection was written prior to her eventual coupling with the American academic Grace Frick, who would be Yourcenar's romantic partner until her death. As such, the inclusion of Sappho, whom Yourcenar refers to as a "*hapax*" of female sexuality (Yourcenar *With Open Eyes* 143), seems to indicate a greater metaphysical possibility after her mortification from the failed relationship with the openly gay Fraigneau (Savigneau 102).

There is some difficulty in attempting to understand Anne Carson's biography in relation to her career. Carson favours a recondite approach to her own background in the paratexts of her work. Most notably, this manifests in the oft-referenced biography "Anne Carson was born in

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<sup>1</sup> Though I refer to the text by its original French name, the edition I am citing from is an English translation.

Canada and teaches Ancient Greek for a living." which perfectly obscures her relationship to anything but language. The more interesting question is understanding how Carson's work is constructed in the shadow of Sappho, who appears to be the prism through which all of her poems are filtered. Her first book, *Eros the Bittersweet*, first published in 1986, is an examination of, among other works of Classical literature, the eponymous metaphysical force in the Fragments of Sappho. This would be unremarkable enough if her translations of Sappho in *If Not, Winter* were not a continuation of her findings in *Eros*. If one reaches further back into her biography, the roots which entangle her with Sappho begin much earlier, at fifteen, when she became interested in learning Ancient Greek after finding a copy of Willis Barnstone's translation of Sappho's work (Carson "An Interview"). It becomes clear that Sappho is a recurring figure who was a prime mover of Anne Carson, poet. Therefore, it would not be exceptional to consider that what Carson writes is almost exclusively under the purview of this initial exposure to Sappho, which takes its fullest form in her long poem *The Albertine Workout*, which was published in book form in 2014. The poem is interesting insofar as it is not a lyric poem, but rather a poem which serves as literary criticism of a single figure — *Albertine* takes Proust for its subject — yet it utilizes Sapphic language and conceptions of eros. In particular, the structures of these poems are heavily indebted to Carson's interpretation of Sappho's Fragment 31, itself a subject of Carson's in *Eros*. It shows how she adapts Sappho as a kind of overriding ideal for representations of erotic desire outside of the original's Archaic *milieu*. In this sense, much as in Yourcenar, Sappho becomes the poet to whom all attention is returned.

As mentioned earlier, the problem Reynolds lays bare in her assessment of Sappho is that there is very little left with which to evaluate her. Some fragments are longer than others but this does not leave much when some consist of single stanzas, or lines, or even words. However, I

disagree with Reynolds insofar as this neglects the possibility of imagery and tones that are derived from the fragments; these bring into focus a Sapphic sensibility that can be understood through what remains and what has been transmitted by other poets. When one does think of Sappho, rather than complexities of form and preferred genre, what emerges from what remains of her work are the images and the almost elegiac tone of the fragments — Sappho is frequently mourning the passage of time, the ephemerality of love, while her cries to Aphrodite seem like the threnody of one longing to pass into the void at the edge of consciousness. The question of what imagery we associate with Sappho is, surprisingly, an easy one. The Sappho of the fragments is a poet in considerable debt to the natural world for she uses its elements as vehicles of sublimated erotic desire such as the apples and flower-beneath-the-foot of Fragment 105 or the honey of Fragment 146. This mode is not exclusive to Sappho, but the way she uses this kind of divine attention is lavished on the most minute aspects of the natural world in her poems.

Marilyn B. Skinner, in her survey text *Sexuality in Greek and Roman Culture*, indicates that the imagery we have come to associate with Sappho is oriented towards a language of "hidden sexual implications" (50). Sappho is careful to weave the implications into the text through subtle suggestion and careful diction and construction. Skinner is particularly interested in how imagery is used by Sappho in "Fragment 2," another ode to Aphrodite. In this poem, many of the subjects from the natural world which we have come to associate with Sappho are used to evoke the erotic:

Apple, incense, roses, horses, the flowering meadow — each bears some relation to the cult of Aphrodite. All occupy a place in a network of erotic metaphors alluding to or symbolizing parts of the female body (Wilson 1996: 38). Thus the fleshy fruit of the apple [...] and the folded petals of the rose can be used as

analogues for the female genitalia, which explains their frequent occurrence in wedding songs. (Skinner 50)

I am particularly interested in the reference to the "apple" in "Fragment 2" — "where is your graceful grove / of apple trees and altars smoking / [...] / apple branches and with roses (Carson *Winter* 7) — which appears, much more famously, in "Fragment 105." What this indicates is both a consistency in imagery between Sappho's sacred poems and her *epithalamia*, or "marriage songs" (Snyder 102), the genre to which Fragment 105 is often believed to belong (104). More pressingly, I am interested in how there is a seeming lack of difference between these poems. Sappho's poetry in praise of Aphrodite and women make use of the same images: apples, flowers, a transposition of the body onto earth. Skinner asserts that the imagery in "Fragment 2," as well as Carson's critical writing on the imagery of the fragments in her essay "Decreation," which puts Sappho's work in conversation with religious texts from Middle Ages and the 20th Century, show an interesting turn towards a hermetic language of divine revelation.

Sappho's "Fragment 31," in addition to forming the spine of Carson's engagement with Sappho, is also the poem which can be analyzed to understand the overall Sapphic sensibility of Carson's work and how that carries over into her other poems, even those which do not explicitly involve Sappho. Much like "Fragment 2," this poem combines the devotional and the erotic aspects of Sappho's work:

He seems to me equal to gods that man  
 whoever he is 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, even a moment, no speaking  
     is left in me

no: tongue breaks and thin  
 fire is racing under skin  
 and in eyes no fire 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.

But all is to be dared, because even a person of poverty (Carson *Winter* 63)

Purely emotive, this poem strikes at the essence of so much of what Carson and Yourcenar take from Sappho in terms of tone: a nauseating bodily reaction to love, an ecstatic reaction to a denial of affection, and a profound desire for that which is just out of arm's reach. Carson's fascination with this element of Sappho's work manifests in the triangular structure of both *Albertine*, which expands it to a number of levels to encompass characters from Proust, the reader, and herself and, more traditionally, in the unspoken dissatisfactions of a marriage in *Beauty*.

In Yourcenar, whose translation of Fragment 31 emphasizes the volition of the pain — "Je ne résiste pas au délire trop fort; / [...] / Et je connais la mort" (Yourcenar *Couronne* 75). — we see this manifest in the language with which she describes both her representation of Sappho — "she struggles with the angel of dizziness each night" (Yourcenar *Fires* 97) — and the brief verse interludes that separate the prose poems of the collection — "*When I see you again, everything becomes limpid again. I am willing to suffer*" (Yourcenar 63). This particular notion of suffering is not one that is unique to their own work. In fact, both Carson and Yourcenar's translations of Fragment 1 emphasize that Aphrodite is a punishing goddess just as much as she is the goddess of love. Just as love manifests as longing in Fragment 31, it is combined with the desire for divine retribution and longing in both poets' translations of the "Ode to Aphrodite." We begin with Carson's translation:

Deathless Aphrodite of the spangled mind,  
 child of Zeus, who twists lures, I beg you  
 do not break with hard pains,

O lady, my heart

but come here if ever before  
 you caught my voice far off  
 and listening left your father's

golden house and came,

yoking your car. And fine birds brought you,  
 quick sparrows over the black earth

whipping their wings down the sky  
through midair—

they arrived. But you, O blessed one,  
smiled in your deathless face  
and asked what (now again) I have suffered and why  
(now again) I am calling out

and what I want to happen most of all  
in my crazy heart. Whom should I persuade (now again)  
to lead you back into her love? Who, O  
Sappho, is wronging you?

For if she flees, soon she will pursue.  
If she refuses gifts, rather will she give them.  
If she does not love, soon she will love  
even unwilling.

Come to me now: loose me from hard  
care and all my heart longs  
to accomplish, accomplish. You  
be my ally. (Carson *Winter* 3)

In the poem, the speaker, who is also named Sappho, seeks direct consolation from Aphrodite in a moment of emotional turmoil. Indicative of the erotic, especially in relation to the divine in the poem, is when speaker asks Aphrodite to "loose me from hard / care and all my heart longs." While it is not quite as explicit as the "fire [...] racing under skin" (Carson 63) as "Fragment 31," it does model a similarly ecstatic desire — "loose me" (3) rather than a desire for a total extinguishing of emotions — and places it into direct association with the divine. Yourcenar's translation of the poem — with my transliteration from her French in square brackets afterwards — uses the same language of the erotic, but in a fascinatingly different way. Rather than asking for release from Aphrodite, Yourcenar's translation of Sappho looks to the goddess as a dispenser of grace and a way of moving beyond the physical and into a transcendent state beyond the body:

Aphrodite au char blanc tiré par des colombes  
 Ô terrible, ô rusée, ô tourment des humains,  
 Empêche que mon âme et mon corps ne succombent;  
 Je tends vers toi mes mains.

[Aphrodite of the white chariot pulled by doves  
 Oh terrible one, oh sly one, oh tormenter of humans,  
 Prevent my soul and body from succumbing;  
 I stretch my hands out to you.]

Fais halte en plein espace et dit: "Qui donc est-elle?  
 Je prendrai ton parti; son cœur sera brisé.  
 Elle courra vers toi, et tu la verras telle

Qu'un jouet méprisé.

[She stops in midair and says: "Who is she?

I will take your side; her heart will break.

She will run towards you, and you will see her as

A despised toy.]

À son tour de souffrir, à son tour de connaître

Les pleurs, l'attente vaine, et les tristes aveux,

Et de t'aimer, Sappho, malgré soi, et peut-être

Plus que tu ne le veux." (Yourcenar *Couronne* 74)

[It is her turn to suffer, it is her turn to know

The tears, the futile wait, the sad confessions,

And to love you, Sappho, despite that, and because

You no longer want her."]

While there are a number of differences between each translation on the formal level — Carson translates all seven stanzas, Yourcenar reduces this group down to just three — both poets emphasize the connection between personal erotic desire and crying out to the goddess for mercy. In a reversal of the distant man in "Fragment 31" who is "equal to gods," the speaker of the poem is able to reach Aphrodite and speak with the goddess. While Yourcenar does not provide commentary on the poem itself, Carson indicates that the central tension in the poem lies in the interpretation of what, in the first line of the poem, is "spangled," noting that the two terms

that have been transmitted through the fragments, "*poikilothron*" and "*poikilophron*" refer to both a "throne" and a "mind" respectively (Carson *Winter* 357). Whereas Yourcenar opts for the former, conflating the throne of Aphrodite with the chariot described in the fourth stanza of the original, Carson seems to emphasize, by the inclusion of mind in her own stanza, the contemplative nature of the poem. Similarly, Yourcenar's choice to include the line "Je tends vers toi mes mains" also indicates in this position of prayer, a contemplative tone to the poem.

Though this poem predates the Abrahamic religious faiths and is unlikely to have been in conversation with Vedic practices of the same period, I was particularly interested in how Sappho anticipates erotic aspects of devotional verse in future religious practices. Stephen P. Hopkins, whose paper "Extravagant Beholding: Love, Ideal Bodies, and Particularity" I will draw upon, sums up the tendency. While the following passage refers to a variety of texts from Near-Eastern faiths written in the tradition of sacred verse, I found that it was equally applicable to the tendencies I focus on in Sappho:

[...] the lover's body remains, in varied degrees, simultaneously concrete and individualized, the beloved who stands before the lover, literally or in the elastic presence of memory, as his or her own. Through the *anubhava* [Hindu term for physical relish] and the *wasf* [Arabic term for descriptive text], respectively, we are able to glimpse a form of love language, what I am calling an extravagant beholding, that holds in tension together ideal visionary forms with the concrete, material reality of the individual object of love: we touch, all at once, particularity, presence, and transcendence, even the experience of absence and erotic deferral, in the charged horizontal space of the poem. (Hopkins "Extravagant Beholding" 9)

As readers, we know almost nothing of Sappho's beloved in the poem. No body or elements of the natural world stand in for it, no sentiment, no memory of touch. What we do see, in "Fragment 1," is Aphrodite in all her glory. Sappho sings the praises of her manner, her disposition, her smile, consecrating her as the ideal beloved. This "extravagant beholding" is part of what Sappho has passed on to Carson and Yourcenar. Through reading their works informed by the framework Hopkins has established along with relevant insight into how Sappho's language and sensibility is adapted by the two writers, it will become clear how this element of erotic devotional verse translates into the realm of Modernist and contemporary erotic poetry.

As a brief example, Carson and Yourcenar's translations of Fragment 1 seem to be, at least on the surface level, indebted to the work of Algernon Charles Swinburne. During the Victorian period, he made a concerted effort in his work to elevate Sappho out of her humanity (Zonana 39) — which intersects with the concept of extravagant beholding. Introducing him as the direct poetic forebear of Yourcenar and Carson with respect to Sappho might seem like a bit of a temporal gap, but the possibility of this transition is likely. The most obvious connection is between Yourcenar and Swinburne, given that the former lists him, in an interview, as one of the poets who "nourished" her when she was a young writer (Yourcenar *With Open Eyes* 31). Less obvious, however, is Carson, although Sappho's status as the *idée fixe* of her poems is similar to Swinburne's. Joyce Zonana's writing on Swinburne untangles this particular relationship with an eye towards poetry:

Swinburne develops his myth of the Muse in a group of poems [...] that revolve around the figure of Sappho, long honoured as a figurative "tenth Muse" by poets and critics since Plato, but never before literally perceived and used as such. In these poems, Swinburne incorporates Sappho's language, translating and

interweaving fragments of her work; her voice, like a Muse's "enters" his. Even more significantly, Swinburne addresses and invokes Sappho here in a manner previously reserved only for sources of inspiration imagined to be genuinely divine — (Zonana 40)

Just as Sappho consecrates Aphrodite in the original, she is, in turn, consecrated by Swinburne in his poem (Zonana 41). Given the novelty of this, and the extent to which Swinburne modelled his work after her own (Reynolds 232), this engagement resonates with the sacred qualities she takes on in the poems of his successors. While Yourcenar invokes Sappho by name directly in the body of her prose poem, turning her into a figure of the ideal beloved, Carson picks up on the language and sensibility which Sappho leaves behind in the fragments. In reaching towards the poet, they try to touch the divine as a figure of the ideal beloved.

### **Apples, Flowers, Loves**

Sappho's "Fragment 105" is, arguably, the most famous of her incomplete poems. In this, it has provided base material from which other poets can form their interpretations of Sappho. In this section of the introduction, I hope to show how Yourcenar and Carson have translated Sappho in a way that is inflected by their own idiom, rather than in a way that is meant to transliterate from the original. I have chosen this fragment because it is, as discussed earlier, the fragment which is most emblematic of her tendencies to situate the human body within the natural world, placing Sappho into direct conversation with Hopkins' writing on the divine-as-natural-world in sacred poetry (Hopkins 42). To begin, I have selected a translation of Fragment 105 by Mary Barnard to illustrate the basic structure of the fragment. Dudley Fitts, in the foreword to Barnard's translation, notes that hers is an "exact translation" and a recreation of Sappho's "pungent downright plain style" (Sappho ix). This is a poor description of the style that Sappho's work

strives towards, but more than enough confirmation of the appropriateness of Barnard's translation as a basic distillation of the imagery and structure of the fragments. If we use this translation to determine these essential aspects, the style which Carson and Yourcenar have inherited from Sappho become even more apparent. Their poetic interpretation, unlike the shared imagery on which they draw, demonstrate their unique responses to her poems, showing heterodox interpretations of Sappho. Barnard's translation of Fragment 105 is as follows:

Like a quince-apple

ripening on a top

branch in a tree top

not once noticed by

harvesters or if

not unnoticed, not reached

Like a hyacinth in

the mountains, trampled

by shepherds until

only a purple stain

remains on the ground (Sappho 34)

These three stanzas are all that remain of the poem. While its precise nature eludes definition, due in part to its incompleteness, there is still much that is characteristic of Sappho's poetry.

In order to analyse this fragment, it is important to note its proper division. While both can be categorized as parts of Fragment 105, the fragment comprises two *smaller* fragments in

and of itself. Fragment 105a — the first two stanzas in Barnard's translation — is taken from a commentary on the work of Hermogenes, a Greek literary critic; Fragment 105b — the remaining stanza — is taken from a similar treatise on poetics by the critic Demetrius (Sappho 108). These are not authors who will be important to understanding Sappho from the perspective of this project, but it should be noted that the process of translation for this poem lies in finding a way to bridge the lexical, and even contextual, gap between the two. In this particular rendition, Barnard opens both fragments with an almost-Homeric simile: the subject of the poem is "Like a" difficult-to-reach fruit or a flower that has been pulverized by shepherds. The two images work in tandem to convey simultaneous difficulty and fragility. Furthermore, there is a sense of ambiguity which Barnard chooses to emphasize as an element of 'difficulty' in 105a. The subject of the poem, like the apple, is invisible to those who don't look hard enough to find her; those that do find the subject, find that she is not worth the effort, or simply too difficult to attain. Lyn Hatherly Wilson considers the unreachability of the apple as emblematic of the "thwarted desire" of the harvesters (96). Skinner's interpretation of the apple in "Fragment 2" seems especially relevant here, given that Wilson also connects the apple of "105b" to the aforementioned poem, noting that the apple, which represents the emerging beauty of a woman, is also connected to the sacred grove of Aphrodite (97). Consequently, the metaphorical violence which the female subject of the poem undergoes in 105b is the "fearful consequences of [...] a vulnerable position." Wilson's reading of the poem is useful insofar as it identifies that this is not a poem about *loving*. It is, rather, a poem about *being desired by someone in love* (97), a quality which the translations Yourcenar and Carson reinterpret in their own versions of the fragments.

Yourcenar's translation of the poem is an interesting case. The collection from which it is taken, *La Couronne et la Lyre*, was published in 1979, just prior to the height of her fame in

1980, when she would be elected to the *Académie Française*. A series of not-quite translations — a friend of hers noted that she would frequently change the poems in translation so that they suited her (Savigneau 364) — *Couronne* represents her most direct engagement with Sappho outside of her prose poetry collection *Feux*. Presenting Yourcenar's translation of Fragment 105 requires a bit of reconstruction on my part in combining her translation of 105a and 105b, since she chose not to group them together in *Couronne*, and identifies them with the original texts from which they were quoted. Additionally, as she was translating from Ancient Greek into French, I have provided a translation of her work — in square brackets after each fragment — in order to highlight the unorthodox structure she has given the poem:

...La pomme, sur la branche haute,  
 Pend toujours... Mais à qui la faute?  
 Sur l'arbre, durant la cueillée,  
 Cueilleurs, l'avez-vous oubliée?  
 Fruit rose sous la verte feuille,  
 Elle est trop haut pour qu'on la cueille... (Yourcenar "Sappho" 77)

[...the apple, on the high branch,  
 Always hanging... But who is to blame?  
 In the tree, during the harvest,  
 Harvesters, did you forget it?  
 Pink fruit underneath the green leaf,

It is too high for us<sup>2</sup> to pick...]

...Le troupeau en passant a brisé la jacinthe;

Elle fleurit encore contre le sol couchée... (Sappho trans. Yourcenar 82)

[...The passing herd crushed the hyacinth;

It blooms again flat on the earth]

It is easier to note what remains the same, rather than consider what Yourcenar has altered in the poem. The speaker of 105a is an active part of the poem's text, rather than the passive observer in Sappho's original. In her translation, Yourcenar renders the speaker of the poem as a scolding overseer. Rather than not seeing, or seeing and being unable to reach, Yourcenar's harvesters are castigated for being unable to finish what should be a simple task, since there is no hiddenness to this apple. The final two lines of 105a in Yourcenar's translation lay bare the subtext of Sappho's original poem. The "pink fruit" and "green leaf" are more euphemistic than Sappho's original and are almost totally divorced from the original imagery of the apple and the tree. Yourcenar identifies the tendency of Greek poetry to use "metamorphosis" in terms of recognizing the body in love poetry (Yourcenar "On Some Erotic and Mystical Themes of the Gita Govinda" 117), such that rendering nature as a further abstraction continues what Skinner suggests about the apple-as-genitalia, transforming the greenery into the pubic hair around it.

This kind of directness is absent from her translation of 105b. Whereas the apple was given new life, the hyacinth is displaced from its original context. At first, Yourcenar's flower

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<sup>2</sup> "On" is a difficult word to transliterate into English, especially here where the conjugation of "cueiller" indicates that it is in third-person singular. Given the oft-magisterial tone of Yourcenar's other poems, I am assuming this is a kind of majestic plural.

that "[blooms again]" (Yourcenar 82) seems to be much more in line with, or even anticipating, the reading of the poem, as indicative of "resilience" Snyder bestows on "Fragment 105b" (Snyder 105). There is no direct mention of shepherds — "*troupeau*" can even refer to a pack of animals, muddying the connotations of why the flower is being trampled — and the stain the flower leaves behind is not mentioned. This could be the reason Yourcenar separated the fragments in the first place: her translation of "105b," in this case, could even be removed from its context as a marriage poem. A flower, trampled by animals, that blooms again and again could be metaphoric of any number of things outside of human sexuality and, given that it was published during the 1980s, seems to dovetail with her renewed interest in the esoteric elements of Asian religions, especially Daoism, close to the end of her life (Yourcenar "Art"). Her tendency to alter poems shows that Yourcenar took the language of other poets and moulded them to what she believed was a better purpose, leading to the poem taking on something of a mystical character.

Anne Carson's translation of 105 is based on her education in classical poetry, specifically her background in interpreting Sappho and teaching Ancient Greek. Her first book, *Eros the Bittersweet*, will form a major part of my analysis of her other poetic work. It is interesting that, despite her penchant to experiment with form, her translation of 105 is the most similar to the original / Barnard's translation. Carson's translation modifies some of the punctuation, albeit not to the degree of Yourcenar, but the essential meaning of the poem appears to be the same on a conceptual level. That being said, her change of diction in 105a is worth examining further in its entirety:

as the sweetapple reddens on a high branch

high on the highest branch and the applepickers forgot—

no, not forgot: were unable to reach

like the hyacinth in the mountains that shepherd men

with their feet trample down and on the ground the purple

flower (Carson *Winter* 215)

In returning to the original form of the verse, her long lines suggest an attempt to echo the dactylic hexameter of Sappho's original, Carson does not so much translate Sappho as much as she reconstructs the *epithalamion* in her personal idiom. The parallel structure of the homeric simile is mostly retained — "as the" parallels "like the" — and the metaphor of flora standing in for the bride becomes anticipatory rather than mournful. The apple of 105a is in the process of becoming ripe, the "reddening," which seems to be more suggestive of shyness or emotional outburst, in contrast to the "ripening," that seems more purposefully in line with the genre of the poem, of Barnard-Sappho. Given the sexual suggestiveness of colour in Yourcenar, it would be safe to assume that Carson is playing a similar game with her readers here. Furthermore, the construction of the harvesters' inability to attain the apple is strange. While there is some ambiguity in the Barnard, and a single, keen eye in Yourcenar, Carson's translation implies that the harvesters can all see the apple. The "forgot—" of the second line is cut off by the "no, not forgot" of the third. Carson views this aspect of the poem as essential to its erotic thrust, that the "self-correction emphasizes desire's infinite deferral" (*Winter* 374). While hinted at in her notes for this poem, and by myself in gesturing to it, Carson emphasizes that the poem is demonstrative of how eros is equivalent to lack in Sappho's verse (Carson *Eros* 10), which I will emphasize as a part of her overall engagement with Sappho in the third chapter.

Almost disappointingly, the second stanza of 105 is translated straightforwardly by Carson rather than shaped by her own poetics, insofar as it resembles the Barnard translation without the "stain" of the original. While Yourcenar did the same, and removed some of the sexual connotations, she did so while emphasizing the cyclical nature of the image: a crushed flower that will be reborn. Carson seems to think little of 105b, as her notes on the poem merely restate the possibility of its "deflowering" nature *vis-à-vis* Catullus (*Winter* 374). This is not entirely negative, as it provides a vital clue to understanding Carson as a poet. There is little to be understood in the sex act, metaphorical or otherwise: what matters is the act of longing and the act of observing that which is longed for. The single choice of "reddens" tells the reader as much in "105a." While little of the poem remains, Carson seems to concur with Snyder's argument that the two images both point to a shared "[celebration of] women's beauty" (Snyder 105). I would expand this further, using Hopkins' reading of Sappho. While this might seem like a superficial reading, I am struck by how the body is connected to the landscape. As the beauty of the bride in these wedding songs is compared indirectly to the landscape, Sappho suggests an interrelatedness between the two. When the speaker of the poem notes the rarity of the high apple, or the fragility of the flower, she reveals the shared qualities of all three (apple, flower, bride). By virtue of this similarity, we come to see why Yourcenar was overly cautious in separating the two fragments that comprise "105."

From these two translations, or more accurately, interpretations, we can come to understand how Sappho was reshaped by various poetic styles. While these are poems that are clearly translated from Sappho, I am much more interested in how Yourcenar and Carson chose to incorporate this sensibility into their own work, particularly how they wrote poems about transcendent eros. By examining the three previous translations of Sappho, we have come to

understand how she might be reshaped in various disparate ways. Yourcenar is the most exemplary figure with regards to what I am examining in this poem: one who uses Sappho as a source of inspiration, but who is unafraid to disturb the meaning of the original poems and find individual nuances of meaning. Carson, however, may prove to be a difficult case, and consequently is the most interesting of the three. After having spent so much of her academic career with Sappho, her own poetic register might seem indistinguishable from the subject of her research. By using these translations as a springboard for how Yourcenar and Carson view the original poetry of Sappho, it allows us to ascertain how their translations initiated the process of writing *back* to her. Carson understands that poetry is indicative of a kind of philosophical inquiry, which she explores fully in her essayistic poems and critical writings. Yourcenar emphasizes physical communion and the potential for transformation in the material, using her responses to Sappho as the first steps on a staircase out of the particular and into a more transcendent view of life. For both, Sappho is an emissary of transformation, but the median along which that transformation is conducted varies wildly.

My chapter on Yourcenar will read biographical and epistolary sources in conjunction with "Sappho, or the Suicide," the final prose-poem in her collection *Feux*. While the poem's emotional register is autobiographical, the subject matter shows Yourcenar's great desire to project herself into the classical literature she so admired, not unlike the Sapphic Modernists who were her contemporaries. However, Yourcenar's disdain for these writers, especially Gertrude Stein, led her to adopt a style that, while severe, allows her to make similar observations on gender and lesbian identity during the 1930s. This chapter will also draw upon a reading by Martha C. Nussbaum to demonstrate how Yourcenar adapts the structure of Diotima's ladder

from Plato's *Symposium*, thus demonstrating the shared agapic and erotic natures of Sappho and her work.

The chapter on Carson will examine the construction of a Sapphic through-line in Carson's body of work, starting in the 1980s and concluding with her 2014 long poem *The Albertine Workout*. I will point out similarities with Gillian Rose's writing on Anders Nygren in *The Broken Middle*, in order to demonstrate how Carson lays the eroto-agapic tension of her project bare in her wide-ranging essay "Decreation." The rest of this chapter will consist of reading Carson in a partially closed system — albeit in conversation with scholarship on her work so as to anchor it to a larger discussion of her poetics — so as to view the full relationship between her own poetry and Sappho's.

### **Continuing the Sapphic Tradition**

I would be remiss not to note that a large majority of my own work as a poet was inspired, to varying degrees, by the poets I will discuss in this thesis. As a part of my continued engagement with Sappho, Yourcenar, and Carson, I have written an appendix whose contents include my own poetry and a brief reflection on its composition, drawing links to other writers and philosophers who I believe, in parallel, inform both my view of Sappho and my approach to creative work. This section of the thesis should be viewed as an extension of my intellectual inquiry into the possibilities of the lyric form, a realm in which I have considerably more experience and ability to write with nuance. The poems, one of which is inspired directly by one of the fragments, should be viewed as the completion of this textual ouroboros and the primary method by which I join myself to Sappho, Carson, and, especially, Yourcenar.

The poetry I have written is meant to initiate a kind of pursuit of the ideal beloved in a manner similar to Renaissance Poetry, especially the *Trionfi* of Petrarch, and other sacred verse

— namely the *Gita Govinda* of Jayadeva — who mix the contemplative and erotic modes in their work. Though my verse, in its current state, is not as refined as their own, I aspire towards Yourcenar's dignified expression and my allusions are inspired by Carson's omnivorous tastes. In their poetry, I find a way to sacralize my work as I maintain a carefully mannered ironic distance from its subject matter. My work is no less inspired by Sappho, but I have found Yourcenar and Carson to be helpful guides in my pursuit of emulating her.

*We must have lived inside that dreaming  
No more able to escape than words can flee the page  
Our old Gods who gave us a magic by which to love*

Jacob Siegel, "The Old Gods"

## Chapter One: Sappho and Autobiography in Yourcenar's *Feux*

I would be remiss to begin writing a chapter of this thesis about Marguerite Yourcenar without a discussion of why she, as opposed to a poet more obviously connected to the Sapphic literary tradition, provides a compelling example of a writer who has elevated Sappho to the status of ideal beloved. Yourcenar represents a certain type of queer — I use this term because no subtler alternative exists — writer whose frequently thorny politics and self-consciously elevated literary style has, in addition to her relative obscurity outside of Europe, led to an incomplete engagement with the author in evaluations of her work. This is not, of course, to say that her reputation in English is minor. Anecdotally, she is still highly valued by writers and academics who are familiar with her work, but the period of her work that is most familiar to people is one which coincides with the reason for her survival in the public memory of Anglophone readers: her election to the French Academy in 1980. This image — an aristocratic Belgian woman entering a largely-antiquated governing body — seems to adhere to what might cynically appear to be a manicured public image presented to the public since her metamorphosis into a liberal humanist after the Second World War (Carlston 87). Yourcenar presents a difficult case as a writer, since her career can be neatly bisected into two distinct phases. The latter half is the Yourcenar who wrote *Memoirs of Hadrian*, a fascinating act of literary ventriloquism in prose that comes closer to the neatly-gardened syntax of Imperial Rome than any of her other novels. This chapter is concerned with a figure who might justifiably be called *la jeune Yourcenar*.

While the phases of an artist's career are discernable by changes in subject matter, or variations in approaches to said subject matter, there is very little to suggest that, beyond some superficial matters of style to be discussed further on, there is any sort of discontinuity between the Yourcenar who wrote *Feux* and the Yourcenar who would, in the preface to a reissued version of the text, refer to it as "only a stage of awareness" on the journey to whom she would become later on in life (Yourcenar *Fires* 9). This may be a half-subtle reference to her eventual partnership with Grace Frick, an American academic, after the writing and publication of *Feux* in 1936. Rather than alienate Yourcenar from her poetic contemporaries, as some scholarship tends to do, I wish to illustrate how Yourcenar's longer, winding road to Sappho can be viewed as a mutation of Sapphic Modernist poetics.

### **Yourcenar's Sapphic Poetics**

This chapter is not intended to entirely counteract English views on Yourcenar's evolution as a writer or her somewhat fractious relationship to queerness as a larger cultural concept. Rather, I am interested in "Sappho, or suicide," which is the final of nine prose poems in *Feux* and which seems to provide a moment of personal and philosophical clarity, insofar as it fully recognizes the ephemerality of desire and the physical world in a book so clearly fixated upon the passions of love. My analysis will draw upon both psychoanalytic and biographical criticism of Yourcenar in addition to scholarship related to Sapphic Modernism, in order to compare and contrast Yourcenar's status as a bisexual poet more predisposed towards women with other Modernist poets positioned by scholarship as poets inextricable from their lesbianism. The process of Sappho's consecration as an ideal beloved in the works of Yourcenar will be explored through the Hopkins paper mentioned in the introductory chapter and Martha C. Nussbaum's sensitive reading of Plato's *Symposium*.

The particular characteristics of Yourcenar's poems are difficult to ascertain given how few there are and limited engagement by critics (Gallant "Limpid Pessimism"). While the most obvious method of analysis would bypass Yourcenar's verse, there is much to be gleaned from what images and thematic interests she chooses to indulge in these works. While ostensibly written as a comment on Yourcenar's novels, Mavis Gallant elegantly summarizes these attributes that indicate the particular strain of modernism she operated within:

Her mind, her manner, the quirks and prejudices that enliven her conclusive opinions, the sense of caste that lends her fiction its stern framework, her respect for usages and precedents, belong to a vanished France. [...] To read her books [...] is like moving along a marble corridor in the wake of an imperturbable guide. The temperature varies between cool and freezing. The lighting is dramatic and uneven. Only the calm and dispassionate approach never changes.

What are we told? *How the body betrays us*. Why we destroy faith and one another. That we can produce art and remain petty. *What we can and cannot have entirely*. Jealousy, but not envy, is allowed free entry. *Reciprocated love is never mentioned and probably does not exist*. The high plateau of existence, the relatively few years when our decisions are driven by belief in happiness or an overwhelming sense of purpose are observed, finally, to be "useless chaos."  
(Gallant "Limpid Pessimism;" emphasis added)

These aspects of her work — "dramatic and uneven," "cool and freezing," and the seeming conspiracy between our bodies and emotions to deny pleasure — are the elements of Yourcenar's work that recur freely between her younger self's more experimental and autobiographical texts

and the writer eulogized in the *New Yorker* as someone with a "mania for anti-sentimentality" (Acocella "Becoming the Emperor"). This is not an entirely accurate view of the Yourcenar who appears behind the masks of *Feux*. She maintains her aristocratic distance from the reader, but we are permitted free vision of her emotivity from a distance.

Through a reading of "Silhouettes," a poem composed by Yourcenar two years before the publication of *Feux*, the particulars of her treatment of the erotic during the 1930s will become apparent and demonstrate a continuity of thought from this shorter poem to the larger work that is *Feux*. "Silhouettes," written during the 1930s, originally appeared in the collection *The Alms of Alcippe*, first published in the 1950s and reissued during the 1980s after Yourcenar's election to the French Academy. The latter edition, which Yourcenar's official biographer suggests was published with some hesitation, is presented entirely without commentary and does not state the provenance of the poems themselves. Indeed, in Savigneau's biography, little attention is paid to those poems, including "Silhouettes," that do not contain personal significance beyond the observation that "some of them [...] appeared in various reviews" (246). Even Yourcenar's published personal correspondence, *Lettres à ses amis et quelques autres*, whose index of works mentioned ranges from book-length endeavours to individual pieces, makes no reference to "Silhouettes." Although providing a complete transcript of the poem is unnecessary, special consideration should be paid to the phrase "Tu te détaches sur," which appears at the beginning of each of the poem's four stanzas:

Tu te détaches sur la nuit en costume de dieu

[You stand out against the night in the clothing of god]

(C'est à dire nu)

[(Which is to say nude)]

[...]

Tu te détaches sur le jour

[You stand out against the day]

Comme le corps de l'Amour

[Like the body of Love]

[...]

Tu te détaches sur le soir,

[You stand out against the evening]

Meurtri comme un soleil couchant;

[Bruised like a setting sun]

[...]

Tu te détaches sur la mort

[You stand against death]

Comme un cygne sur un blason noir

[Like a swan on a black coat of arms]

(Yourcenar "Silhouettes" 48 - 49)

Each stanza's opening line can be translated to mean "You stand out against," and suspends the object of the speaker's affection in the heavens at various points in a lifecycle that is paralleled with the passing of a day. At night, the beloved is born; during the day, the beloved becomes the "body of Love;" at evening, the beloved is "bruised like a setting sun" and finally the beloved, entering death, is a "Swan on a black coat of arms." What might first catch the reader's attention is the somewhat underwhelming nature of the imagery with which Yourcenar has illustrated her affection. The other lines of the poem, which I have not reproduced in full, are similarly rife with sentiments that have been borrowed from, or at least inspired by, poets like Baudelaire, in whose poetic register she found some affinity (Yourcenar "Art"). What I would like to draw special attention to in the poem is the 'suspended' nature of the beloved. While Yourcenar pushes each of the metaphors started in the opening couplet of each stanza to a sort of baroque conclusion straining her conceits not unlike the Metaphysical poets, the position of the beloved's body and its status remain unclear. In being apart from the speaker of the poem, they float above the world and resist easy definition. The speaker's "baisers sont des crimes [kisses are crimes]" (Yourcenar "Silhouettes" 48) and the beloved is a "Roi déchu debout au seuil de la nuit [Deposed king standing before the threshold of the night]" (49). While this does identify a beloved, Yourcenar reveals very little of them for the reader to understand. What does become apparent is the seemingly endless transformation and flux which surround the beloved in the *ars erotica* of Yourcenar. The beloved, the one who is the subject of love's torments, cannot be clearly perceived except through the loosely-attached images which evoke them. "Silhouettes," shows that Yourcenar was always working consciously towards what might be termed a Negative Theology of the Beloved: all that the beloved might offer the lover is already present in the other

qualities of the phenomenal world. "Silhouettes" makes the model of erotic desire Yourcenar uses in the somewhat obscure *Feux* more perceptible to the reader.

When *Feux* is considered within Yourcenar's greater *oeuvre*, it does not show the same qualities — namely the aristocratic formalism — that define her other works of prose. Yourcenar herself identifies the book as being "The product of a love crisis, [...] a collection of love poems, or rather [...] a sequence of lyrical prose pieces connected by a notion of love" (*Fires* 1). The "lyrical prose pieces" to which she refers are a series of prose poems, each of which takes its name and subject matter, sometimes quite loosely, from figures related to ancient Greek literature and mythology — in addition to Sappho: Phaedra, Achilles, Patroclus, Antigone, Lena, Phaedo, and Clytemnestra — and in one exceptional case, Mary Magdalen — are all 'masks' Yourcenar's speaker-avatar wears. The "notion of love" to which Yourcenar refers in the preface is conveyed in a series of fragmentary notes in between each of the prose poems. Given that Yourcenar identifies *Feux* as the consistent delivery of a single speaker "with or without mask" (4), these fragmentary notes are equally important to understand the meaning of the prose poems they enclose. While I do not want to diminish the importance of the masks other than Sappho, the connective fragments can be substituted as a lead-up to "Sappho, or Suicide" in order to better understand the poem, which holds the distinction of being the final mask of *Feux* (Savigneau 104). On the surface, this decision to read the poem as an individual piece may seem perfunctory, but the "fragments" of *Feux* appeared in the periodical *La Revue de France* a year ahead of its publication (103), which leads me to believe that there is more than enough reason to interpret an individual poem from the sequence on its own merits.

In an interview with the French journalist Matthieu Galey, Yourcenar indicated that *Feux* was, other than the commentaries she included in her books, "by far the most autobiographical

part of my work” (Yourcenar *With Open Eyes* 156). Furthermore, unlike many of the books Yourcenar wrote in the 1930s, which would be edited and reissued later on in her life, she has made it clear that *Feux* is one of two books she had not revised: "I felt that I'd said what I had to say. I couldn't have gone any further with them" (47). In a letter to a friend, she elaborated that one of the reasons she never revised *Feux* was because she wanted to maintain the original emotional state she was in as she wrote the book (Yourcenar *With Open Eyes* 130). Further, Savigneau refers to the emotional and romantic significance of the year 1935 (Savigneau 98), a portent of the fact that, only a year later, Yourcenar would publish *Feux*.

### **Desire's Many Faces**

To understand what Howard calls the "troubling sensuality" of her works at this time (71), I will seek to discern what provoked the "love crisis" which Yourcenar suggests undergirds *Feux*. Before we can proceed to an analysis of "Sappho or Suicide," we must understand who the three people were who drove Yourcenar to Sappho. The first, and most favoured, of the three individuals with whom Yourcenar was involved prior to the publication of *Feux*, was the editor André Fraigneau. This relationship would leave a lasting impact on Yourcenar who was "in love as she had never been before" and believed him to be the "man of her life" despite his protests to the contrary (Savigneau 97). Thoroughly incompatible with each other, he was firmly gay while Yourcenar's more omnivorous tastes lead her to take a number of male and female lovers over the years. Ultimately, there were too many differences between them. Fraigneau found her physically attractive and believed himself to be "something of a special case" in relation to her other lovers, implying that her attraction to him as an individual, despite her later, well-documented relationship with the American photographer Jerry Wilson, may have been another momentary dalliance with opposite-sex attraction. Furthermore, he was supremely convinced

that her abortive romance with him was the basis for *Feux*. As proof of this, he suggests that the book's cryptic dedication, to the god Hermes, is a result of "[her] wishing to dedicate it to me. My being her editor made this impossible, so she dedicated the book to Hermes, so that he would deliver the message to me." (Savigneau 102). Between this intimate knowledge of the text and some superficial similarities between their political affiliations, it is more than likely that the complex relationship with Fraigneau would have informed the "love crisis" of its genesis.

Interestingly, the second possible catalyst for *Feux* was, contrary to the popular perception of Yourcenar as an aristocratic lesbian, also a man: the Greek surrealist and shipping heir Andreas Embirikos.<sup>3</sup> The precise nature of their relationship is ambiguous, with conflicting reports as to whether Yourcenar's relationship with Embirikos was a passionate friendship, or something more romantic. Joan E. Howard, a friend of Yourcenar's from late in life, and the biographer of her partner Grace Frick, believes that there was an intimate nature to their relationship (Howard 52). In the notes to her text *We Met in Paris*, the aforementioned biography of Frick, she provides a brief summary of their relationship:

Biographers have been reluctant to say whether Yourcenar's relationship with Embirikos, whom she always called a "friend," included sexual intimacy. The information that is available to us now about the Greek writer and psychoanalyst strongly suggests that he would not have spent three months sailing virtually alone with her if it had not. Yourcenar, for her part, was then and would remain throughout her life, as she preferred to say, "sensually adventurous." (Howard 372 n6)

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<sup>3</sup> The biographies of Yourcenar I have consulted refer to his given name as being André, but I have decided this francization of his name would be unnecessary for criticism written in English.

While this is not to say that their relationship was the primary impetus for *Feux*, careful attention should be paid to this intimacy, especially since one impetus for "Sappho, or Suicide" was a Greek cabaret performance Yourcenar attended on this voyage with Embirikos (Yourcenar *Fires* 5). While much of the inspiration for the text seems to lie with Fraigneau, there is a certain finality to their relationship *vis-à-vis* the eventual relationship Yourcenar would pursue with Grace Frick after the publication of the poems. Constantine Dimaras, who in an interview with Savigneau, quoted in the latter's biography, doubts that there was a sexual nature to the relationship Embirikos, positing that, in addition to being a "bad witness" of the relationship due to his own attraction to Embirikos, Dimaras "had the feeling that, for her, the 'male chapter' was closed. I had always thought that she had had a very violent shock, an impossible affair, something somewhere between love and sexuality, that had put her off from love with men" (Savigneau 101). While the correspondence between Yourcenar and Embirikos carried on after the publication of *Feux*, Yourcenar records their last meeting in Paris took place in 1937 (Howard 372 n6), while Embirikos' abrupt severing of this relationship occurred in 1939 (Savigneau 100). Dimaras' comments about the closing of a "'male chapter'" in Yourcenar's life is an odd one, but provides a clue to the placement of "Sappho, or Suicide" at the end of *Feux*. Why would Yourcenar, one whose sex was declared accidental by her supporters at the French Academy (Gaudin 35), give the honour of the closing act to the Sapphic masque at the end of the collection? This could have been an unconscious, or even resolute, admission of her deliberate turn away from men toward an embrace of the Sapphic, or an indication of her final, pre-Grace relationship.

Yourcenar's relationship with Lucy Kyriakos is perhaps the most prominent lacuna in her biography. A few details have emerged; while the two had known each other since 1934 and

would sometimes voyage together (Savigneau 110), the precise nature of their relationship, as with Embirikos, was interpreted ambiguously by family members who were aware of their relationship. However, Savigneau is resolute in her belief that the two had a romantic engagement that lasted until Yourcenar left Europe for America with Frick in 1939. In support of Dimaras view that a “male chapter” had closed, Yourcenar continued her correspondence with Lucy after she left Europe. Her final missive to Kyriakos, a somewhat cutting postcard Savigneau refers to with some irony as “walking papers,” was never sent due to her death in the sacking of Ioannina during the Second World War (140).<sup>4</sup> Yourcenar’s reaction to her death manifested in the composition of some poems memorializing Kyriakos’ passing in 1942; these suggested a special, if understated in comparison to Fraigneau and Embirikos, relationship with her. Given that, of the three relationships that may colour *Feux*, their liaison seems to have outlasted the tempestuous “love crisis” which the text presents, I am curious about what this relationship meant to Yourcenar and how abstract treatment of the ideal beloved in *Feux* may place additional significance on the invocation of Sappho.

This becomes especially apparent when one considers the significance of the text in Yourcenar's later *oeuvre* in light of her relationship with Frick, whom she met just after completing the book and leaving Paris (Howard 52). In Frick, Yourcenar found someone who assuaged some of the romantic turmoil which weighed her down during the composition of *Feux* (Savigneau 122). In fact, Savigneau suggests, the emotionally, although not representationally, autobiographical novel *Le Coup de Grace* — the story of a love triangle between an aristocratic fascist, a naïvely optimistic woman, and her younger brother — may be read as an elaborate allegory for Yourcenar's final abandonment of Fraigneau for Frick (125). As an

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<sup>4</sup> Savigneau uses Janina, its Albanian name, in *Inventing a Life*

acknowledgement of their relationship's stability on their twentieth anniversary in 1957, Yourcenar presented Grace with a copy of *Feux* she illustrated with birds and a suspended Pierrot. In Howard's biography of Frick, she notes how close their relationship became through birdwatching in Paris (Howard 220). Having explored Yourcenar's romantic relationships which seem to inform the "love crisis" elements of *Feux*, I will turn to discussion of "Sappho or Suicide" which I read as a mutation of Sapphic modernism.

### **Suicide and Sapphic Modernism**

Sappho, in Yourcenar's prose poem, is uprooted from her origins in Ancient Greece and transplanted to "the international world of pleasure-seekers between the wars" (*Fires* 3), indicating that, although the other 'masks' the speaker wears throughout the book may be evocative of Yourcenar's inner turmoil, the Sapphic mask is especially so. In fact, the commentary Yourcenar provides on "Sappho, or Suicide" in the introduction to the 1968 edition of *Feux* is, with the exception of her interviews with Galey, the only commentary she has ever provided on the poem (*Lettres* 536). What can be discerned from this introduction? There is no whiff of the Sappho whose poetry "discourages" Yourcenar (Howard 184), but there is much reference to Shakespeare, whose comedies, Yourcenar suggests, supplant the "Greek themes" a reader may expect from a piece named after her, perhaps indicative of a desire to leave behind and transcend the world that she viewed as an essential quality of Shakespeare's later comedies. This view of Shakespeare, one which emphasizes an equivocation of life, death, and almost all sensual experiences (Yourcenar "Humanism and Occultism in Thomas Mann" 212), is one which seemingly informs the climax of "Sappho, or Suicide." Similarly, Yourcenar located the narrative arc of the poem in the "contested legend of the poetess's [sic] suicide over a handsome,

unresponsive youth" (*Fires* 3). Yourcenar, whose translation of Sappho in *La Couronne et la Lyre* includes a brief discussion of the supposed affair between Sappho and Phaon, indicates her awareness of how this misperception arose from confusion about an identically named musician who was known to be a different person from the lyric poet ("Sappho" 72). Yourcenar seems to draw influences for the prose poem as much from these contradictory sources as from her trip with Embirikos during the time she wrote the book. Yourcenar writes of her inspirations for "Sappho, or Suicide" in the introduction to *Feux*:

'Sappho, or the Suicide' came from seeing a variety show in Pera, and that phrase was written on the deck of a cargo ship moored on the Bosphorus, while the gramophone of a friend played for hours on end a popular American refrain, 'He flies through the air with the greatest of ease / This daring young man on the flying trapeze.' Perhaps it doesn't matter much that these ingredients are, in the legend of the classical poetess, mingled with memories of impersonations during the Renaissance, and are mingled also with echoes of lines of poetry, the only good ones I know by that whimsical virtuoso [Théodore de] Banville, when he speaks of a clown thrown in mid-sky; mingled also with the recollection of an admirable Degas drawing. (Yourcenar *Fires* 5)

In addition to Shakespeare, as well as other influences mentioned in letters like Paul Morand and Colette (Yourcenar *Lettres* 538), or those whom she named explicitly in the introduction like Paul Valéry (Yourcenar *Fires* 3) and Jean Cocteau (4), Yourcenar cast a wide net across the whole of literature to write this poem; this entices the reader towards a reading of the text self-consciously drawing attention to its literary and philosophical allusions.

Reading Yourcenar into the canon of Sapphic Modernism, alongside Woolf — whose work she translated into French — and others for whom she held considerably less esteem, is a difficult task. From this, we can see subtle attempts at distinguishing herself, similar to Yourcenar's own perception of Sappho, as a way of standing apart from peers whose work resembles her more closely than she may have wanted it to. Yourcenar's reluctance to acknowledge even her own bisexuality seems at odds with her choice in subject matter. Colette Gaudin views the preface to Yourcenar's poems as being redolent of a certain "desire for self-effacement" in the specific case of Yourcenar's work immediately pre and post Grace Frick (Gaudin 38). It is in this somewhat ambivalence towards her sexual tastes that Yourcenar finds a kind of energizing subject matter, stressing her separateness from what Shari Benstock refers to as the expatriate branch of Sapphic Modernism.

Benstock centres Gertrude Stein as someone whose work can be viewed as the spine of Sapphic Modernism (115). However, when asked by Shusha Guppy in an interview for her feelings on writers who "have tried to illuminate female homosexuality," Yourcenar replies curtly that Stein is "completely foreign to me" (Yourcenar "Art"). Yet Benstock's study provides a potential argument for Yourcenar's inclusion in the overall critical framework surrounding Sapphic Modernism. While she is not mentioned directly by name, Benstock's analysis of *Nightwood*, Djuna Barnes' baroque novel of lesbian desire, yields some comparison to Yourcenar's work. This passage, describing Barnes' novel, in particular, seems especially relevant: "without the unconscious, there could be no conscious; the unconscious is the culturally excluded Other necessary to the existence of culture. This description, indeed, retraces a major theme of *Nightwood* — the relation of culture to cultural repression" (Benstock 103). Yourcenar deals with the problem of the excluded "Other" and "culture" by positioning herself as both the

speaker-avatar of *Feux* and as its writer, as the curator of classical literature specific to her historical moment, asserting that she, as an aristocrat of taste and infinite subtlety, is just as worthy of reading herself into the classical and Biblical masks she has assembled. Given that she links her prose poems with *A Coin in Nine Hands*, a novel about an attempted assassination attempt on Mussolini written before the Second World War, she clearly meant to position the work as something that was meant to speak to a specific moment in time (Yourcenar *Eyes* 39). In fact, the lack of participation from Yourcenar in the more specific Sapphic Modernist discourses Benstock outlines draw her even closer to Barnes' aesthetic example; her free movement between the more conservative elements of Modernist discourse while having one foot planted in the "Sapphism" it opposed suggests Yourcenar's dance with the "relation of culture to cultural repression" (Benstock 101). Most illuminatingly, Benstock draws out the central theme of *Nightwood*, and by implication implies the sort of project Yourcenar undertook in writing *Feux*, as follows:

Again, the Other is revealed in writing practices that appear to belong to *écriture féminine*, a writing that stays as close to the unconscious as possible and that produces jokes, puns, slippages of grammar, and rhetorical and lexical extravagances. It risks falling *inside* oppositions, where the difference between laughter and tears, anger and love can no longer be differentiated. This writing constantly (but not consistently) retraces sexual desire as linguistic excess [...]

*Nightwood* shines a cold light on the fear of alternative sexualities and the force of their repression. (Benstock 104 )

Similarly, I argue that Yourcenar's prose poems are far outside of the usual, measured writing found in her novels and short stories, even in this period which she identifies as one of her more

experimental (Yourcenar *Eyes* 69). Yourcenar's preface suggests that she writes close to the parameters of "*écriture féminine*" identified by Benstock (104) — and Helene Cixous before her — tacitly acknowledging the "abstract expression of passion" and "excessive expressionism" which "tries to create an entirely poetic language" through word games and puns rooted in psychoanalytic language (*Fires* 6). What initially seems to be a typical Yourcenarian treatment of Classical literature may be read as a potent bridge between this period and the experimental Sapphic literature that emerged as a counternarrative to the dominant strains of Modernism.

Other efforts to place Yourcenar in conversation with Sapphic modernism have yielded little success. One of the more prominent examples of Yourcenar's visibility in anglophone literary criticism was her inclusion in Susan Gubar's seminal essay "Sapphistries," a taxonomical piece that investigates the writers who in her view constitute the canon of Sapphic Modernism. What Gubar makes apparent in this essay, before addressing Yourcenar, is the evidence of a major bisection in Sapphic Modernism itself. Since the figure of Sappho is almost entirely unreproducible due to her transmission in Fragments and competing reception histories, how Sappho is reinvented can often come down to *who* is perceiving Sappho (Gubar 44). Interestingly, the most prominent lesbian opponent to Sappho is Virginia Woolf, who argued in one of her short stories that Sappho was frequently invoked as an impossible standard for women to reach and therefore unsuitable as a model of reference for women (45). In contrast, Sappho was embraced by poets like H.D. as a model of inspiration who served as a life-giving source of spiritual survival, as a rejuvenating influence, and as a somewhat metaphysical partner (57). Where Yourcenar fits into this dynamic is tricky. Her discussion of Sappho in interviews has, as previously mentioned, been somewhat of a shell game. She translated her fragments and wrote a poem named after Sappho, but preferred Theocritus, who is much less present in her other poems

(Howard 184). Yourcenar refuses to acknowledge Sappho as a lesbian, yet pushes back against her reputation as a lovelorn woman driven to suicide over a man's rejection of her in her biographical entry in *Couronne*. In this paper, Gubar acknowledges a similarity between Yourcenar and Barnes' approach before concluding, of the former:

Sappho's second name may be suicide, for the writer who invokes Sappho's fame may be collaborating with the enemy: she may be destined to associate the grace and daring of her art with the anguish of a *fated, if not fatal, eroticism*. In either case, by the 1930s, the dream of recovering Mytilene had degenerated for Yourcenar into a circus act. She sees lesbianism as an artful and courageous but doomed effort to defy the laws of gravity (Gubar 61; emphasis added)

Gubar astutely picks up on what other critics have, after her, noted about Yourcenar's relationship to lesbianism. It may be, in fact, for this reason that so much of Yourcenar's writing concerns gay men, who lack the kind of mythic figurehead which Sappho provided to the Sapphic Modernists. That Yourcenar included a reference to Phaon, whose relationship to Sappho seems to act as a cudgel against lesbian readings of Sappho, seems to be indicative to Gubar, of Yourcenar smashing a window on her way out of the house. That being said, Yourcenar settled down with Grace Frick just after the completion of *Feux*. In fact, a sensitive reading of the prose poem might suggest that it leads Yourcenar back to her desire for queer women in real life. This text, may serve as a bridge between Yourcenar's more classical tendencies as a writer and Yourcenar's difficulty reconciling her romantic feelings for other women with the larger culture of "lesbianism"; This parallels her difficulty in separating her weakening arch-conservative and developing liberalism during the years before the Second

World War (Carlston 116). Yourcenar abandons the overtly sophisticated presentation of her work, yet is somewhat repulsed by the alternative she has made available to herself.

Erin G. Carlston's *Thinking Fascism: Sapphic Modernism and Fascist Modernity* is more rigorous in its discussion of Yourcenar, dedicating an entire chapter to her novel *A Coin in Nine Hands*, which is strongly associated by Yourcenar herself with the poems of *Feux*. While there is little insight that can be gleaned for "Sappho, or Suicide" specifically, Carlston interestingly identifies Yourcenar's "indifference" to gender. In contrast to critics like Linda K. Stillman and Meryl Altman, who identify Yourcenar as a female misogynist *par excellence*, Carlston suggests that what Yourcenar does when she takes up a male voice or character is enact realignment to a neutered gender or a state of genderlessness to escape from the identity of an "upper-class Catholic woman" and become something entirely free (126). Instead of finding new power in her gender, as the Sapphic Modernists did, Yourcenar arrives at the same conclusion through ambivalence towards the same. While Yourcenar clearly has a complex connection to this idiom, her exploration of queer "genderlessness" through the gay male characters of her prose or the male masks in her other poems of *Feux*, as well as the poetic experimental language akin to Djuna Barnes, along with the culminating poem of *Feux*, place her in a mutated relationship to the Sapphic affiliated constellation of women writers.

While "Sappho, or Suicide" possesses considerably more narrative than the other prose poems in *Feux*, the details will be familiar to those aware of even the most basic elements of Sappho's biography, featuring here details from the often mistakenly conflated life of her double. An acrobat, named after Sappho, falls for Attys, a young incompetent who joins the performance circuit only because of Sappho's willingness to fight on her behalf. They enjoy a brief but passionate courtship before Attys abandons Sappho for a wealthy member of the audience.

Heartbroken, Sappho falls for Phaon, an English sailor who eventually leaves her as well. During a performance, Sappho attempts suicide, but is ultimately thwarted, leaving the speaker of the poem to ruminate on her sorry condition (Yourcenar *Fires* 89-98). A deceptively simple narrative, but one told with extraordinary lyrical density, Yourcenar deliberately plays upon the confusion of the two Sapphos for her poetic engagement with Sappho.

Yourcenar's major connection to Sappho's poetic sensibility is the nature imagery she uses to evoke the titular figure and the objects of her affection. The most striking example of this is in the opening lines of the prose poem. Before her performance, the acrobatic Sappho applies makeup in her dressing room. In language similar to Sappho's "Fragment 105," Yourcenar describes the acrobat: "To shun daylight, her eyes recede from the arid lids, which no longer shade them. Her long curls come out in tufts like forest leaves falling under precocious storms; each day she tears out new grey hairs, and soon there will be enough of these white silken threads to weave her shroud" (Yourcenar *Feux* 89). While it does not draw upon any explicitly Sapphic images, Yourcenar combines the trees in the first half of "105" — "ripening on a top / branch in a tree top" (Sappho 34) — with a description of hair that falls out with age, turning the reddening apple of beauty and youth into the sign that unreachability was ultimately not the boon the original poem seemed to suggest. In contrast to the strong verdancy of Sappho's fragment, the tree to which Yourcenar's Sappho is compared is a dead one. "Arid lids" that "no longer shade" reduces Sappho's image of the natural world as a source of vital energy and, in Yourcenar's translation of "Fragment 105b", spiritual regeneration ("Sappho" 82). Furthermore, the joining of this barren natural world with the hair and the joining of the hair with funeral garments is a tidy reversal of the imagery unique to Sappho. The tree becomes, by association, a place associated with death and perhaps the ultimate extinguishment of the soul. The other

images of the poem are similarly overripe and develop a language transposing the natural world for the flesh and organs of others. This often occurs in less developed, more momentary details. The eyes of Attys are a pair of "sick turquoises" (Yourcenar *Fires* 91) and Phaon's body becomes that of a "bronze and golden god" (95). There is also a possible allusion to the triangular formation of "Fragment 31" in the configuration of Sappho as the greying, close-to-death observer of a happy relationship between Attys, her much younger beloved, and Philip, the man for whom she abandons Sappho. Though the love triangle is not unique to Sappho, the conflation Yourcenar makes between the natural world and erotic attention is another way she yokes her own work closer to that of Sappho. In conjunction, the two point to a shared literary ancestor.

Yourcenar evokes a similar linguistic register to Sappho's through the use of language related to the natural world. Hopkins reminds us of how the register of Sappho's fragments resonates with similar metaphoric language to the biblical Song of Songs:

Sappho's fragments, extol the power of a mad love that sends shudders, "strange sweating," fever, and a tingling warmth inspired by the "stream of beauty" that enters "in through the eyes" of the lover at the sight of a "godlike" face of a beloved beautiful boy (251A–B). The speech is memorable for its vivid image-rich evocation of sexual joy and the pains of separation, love's intense mad emotions, an exterior and interior *jouissance* and extravagant beholding that responds to the physical beauty of a beloved (and so godlike) body. (Hopkins 6)

Similarly, Yourcenar's metaphors and images echo the register Hopkins presents through the simultaneous presence of both pain and life in the images Yourcenar invokes in her work. While "Fragment 31" does not seem to inform the passages from Yourcenar other than their outward affect, it helps to establish a Sapphic sense of equivocation. The speaker's act of "extravagant

beholding" manifests in several ways, in particular, in the speaker's appreciation of the beloved's body. The respective abandonments of Sappho by Attys and Phaeon increases a tendency Hopkins identifies as a "radical presence evoked in the charged language of loving description . . . combined . . . with a sense of suspension, of a love (for the time being) lost and (perhaps) just about to be regained. Presence is linked to deferral, what is (always) yet to be" (Hopkins 14). What Yourcenar bolsters in her poem is the notion that Sappho is always just at the periphery of suffering and pleasure: "too winged for the ground, too corporeal for the sky" (*Fires* 89), Yourcenar's Sappho not only witnesses these states of spiritual abnegation in others, but exists permanently in one herself.

The representation of Phaon and Attys is also interesting. While Attys is often referred to in feminine terms, Phaon is also feminized close to the end of the poem. Yourcenar presents Phaon, who "wrapped himself in a robe Attys left behind: the thin silk gauze worn on naked flesh accentuates the quasi-feminine gracefulness of the dancer's long legs; relieved of its confining men's clothing, this flexible body is almost a woman's body. This Phaon, comfortable in his impersonation, is nothing more than a stand-in for the beautiful absent nymph" (Yourcenar *Fires* 96). I would draw particular attention to how Phaon, despite remaining a man and not undergoing any kind of metamorphosis outside of his drag impression of Sappho's former beloved, comes so close to being Attys that he becomes a "stand-in," a term implying his masculine beauty is almost indistinguishable from the feminine beauty of her lost love. These moments are ones that highlight the "essence of androgyny" (Ladj 89) of the text and suggest the higher ideal towards which Yourcenar's Sappho yearns. Interestingly enough, there seems to be some parallels here to what Yourcenar also yearns for. Carlston, most perceptively, links this ambiguity of sexuality — the image seems to suggest that Phaon and Attys are one-in-the-same,

keeping with the overall theme of equivocation in the poem — to Yourcenar's own ambivalence around sexuality and gender. Despite what might seem like steadfast conservatism, Carlston insists on Yourcenar's dispassionate relationship towards strict gender and sexual categories as an essential aspect of her novels (Carlston 91). Her adventurous sexual preferences and apparent wide-reading of Classical, Renaissance, and Enlightenment texts on sexuality lead to a kind of shared radicalism, though not presented as such, with Foucault (92). The figure of Phaon-Attys is also not without precedents in her own works. Viewing "Sappho, or Suicide" as the culmination of a centuries-long speculation about the poet, Joan Dejean views Sappho's decision to commit suicide in Yourcenar's poem as being in retribution for allowing herself to fall in love with a 'false' Attys (295). This does not necessarily carry the connotations of a fixation on Attys, or recognition of a misplaced lesbian desire in her pursuit of effeminate, gay men parallel to her biography. The equivocation between Attys and Phaon is the central point. Beauty, in its fleshy form, is a hollow pursuit before one turns to the ideal. This conclusion, which prefigures the more sagelike Yourcenar of *Hadrian*, indicates that there is a source other than Sappho buried within the poem.

Central to understanding all of Yourcenar's work is her fondness for Plato's philosophy since her youth (Yourcenar *Eyes* 202). Over the course of "Sappho," a number of things become clear. The first is that Sappho finds solace from the world in her relationship with Attys, who provides emotional as well as physical comforts. The second, is that this relationship is, like most phenomenal things, ultimately unstable and the pleasure of attachment to the world through desire will ultimately be met with an equal pain. Eventually, Sappho happens upon Phaon, a feminine man whose physical beauty is so close to Attys' that he studies images of her in Sappho's room in order to avoid "breaking fragile illusions" (*Fires* 95 - 96). When Sappho

attempts to commit suicide, looking over the audience from atop the trapeze platform, she finds that the entire world she knew is indistinguishable and that, in death, she might be able to transcend it. Speaking of this tendency in his paper, Hopkins illustrates parallels to the absence of an ideal beloved in the text of the poem: "Its metaphors and similes throw verbal bridges across empty space that serve both to connect and to separate lover from beloved; to touch and to preserve difference, at one and the same time: to defer finality and to prolong a certain insatiable desire" (9). The beloved is not the Sappho who Yourcenar writes of in the poem, nor is it Attys or Phaon; rather, the beloved is Sappho's very absence, a kind of transcendent lesbian bliss. Yourcenar's Sappho-in-transcendence, or ideal Beloved, who escapes the crude world into which she has been dragged, parallels the structure of Diotima's Ladder from the *Symposium* of Plato. Sappho is beyond the material, Yourcenar seems to say, she has ascended out of reach and is almost impossible to attain.

I turn to the American philosopher Martha C. Nussbaum, whose reading of *The Symposium* is imbued equally with a sense of mysticism and eroticism that, I believe, is paralleled in Yourcenar's writing. I want to consider how Yourcenar understands that individual occurrences of *kalon*, or "beauty" become indistinguishable from each other once one transcends the phenomenal and moves into the transcendent. What I believe Yourcenar understands, as Nussbaum so eloquently puts it, is that "all beauty, *qua* beauty, is uniform," (Nussbaum 179). The ultimate disappointment of Sappho with lesbianism and affairs with men she experiences in Yourcenar's poem is the acknowledgement that all romantic entanglements are equally disappointing. I turn to Nussbaum's reading as it allows for the full consideration of how sensuality might itself unfold towards a state beyond fleshliness and total knowledge. While the ladder makes an appearance as an element of romantic and erotic desire in as old a text as *The*

*Divine Comedy* (Hopkins 48-49), the way Yourcenar joins it to Sappho is, in her own way, a manner of consecrating Sappho as an ideal beloved.

At the conclusion of the poem, in preparation for her suicide, Sappho mounts the stairs to her trapeze and stands above the crowd below:

She climbs at last higher than the spotlights: spectators can no longer applaud her, since now they can't see her. Hanging on to the ropes that pull the canopy painted with stars, she can only continue to surpass herself by bursting through her sky. Under her, the ropes, the pulleys, the winches of her fate now mastered, squeak in the wind of dizziness; space leans and pitches as on a stormy sea; the star-filled firmament rocks between mast yards. From here, music is only a smooth swell washing over all memory. Her eyes no longer distinguish between red and green lights; blue spotlights, sweeping over the dark crowd, bring out, here and there, naked feminine shoulders that look like tender rocks. Hanging on to her death as an overhanging ledge, Sappho looks for a place to fall[...] (Yourcenar *Fires* 98)

In addition to replicating the figure of the suspended lover from "Silhouettes,"— the image of the beloved who "[stands out on]" the skyline (Yourcenar "Silhouettes" 48) — what this passage does is collapse the entire world into a series of indistinguishable phenomena outside of herself. She is still, as Yourcenar might expect from her beloved, exquisitely beautiful but ultimately above the morass that has congealed together in the circus' benches. While, on one level, it approximates the sort of poetic language that Yourcenar took such pains to create for *Feux*, it also replicates the view from the top of Diotima's ladder, "a revelation [...] a beauty marvelous in its nature, for the sake of which he made all his previous efforts" (Nussbaum 184). What Sappho learns, from the top of the trapeze-ladder is that the beauty of the world, of the audience,

loses all sense of identity, becoming the indistinguishable *kalon* of which Diotima and Nussbaum speak, when perched over the inevitable — whether thwarted or not in the case of Sappho's failed death — and eager maw of eternity. Sappho becomes an ideal beloved to Yourcenar insofar as she is able to surpass the limits of humanity placed upon her and, in her despair, escape even briefly from the limitations of flesh. In this sense, the placement of her mask at the end of *Feux* could be seen as a defeat for Yourcenar. Conceding that Sappho, her ideal beloved, could not be reached through any means, whether classical or through the poetics of Sapphic Modernism at the time of her writing. The failure of Sappho to die and transcend the *kalon* so clearly, in the mind of Yourcenar, beneath her means that she could no longer be attained. Sappho would remain, then, a *hapax*, something that would always stand alone and outside of what Yourcenar herself might have been. Of course, the tone of Sappho's poems never truly left her work — DeJean identifies Yourcenar's novel about Hadrian as the repository for these stylistic interests, while discarding Sappho as a figure entirely (DeJean 296) — and Yourcenar herself was content to leave *Feux* as it were in her back catalogue, whereas she rewrote and edited many of her other early books years after the fact.

Yourcenar's eventual partnership with Grace Frick, and her relationship with Lucy Kyriakos, shows that she herself was amenable to erotic relationships with women, even if she would not place any value on identifying herself with lesbianism or other Sapphic modernists. However, this does not prevent a kind of parallel exploration of the same concerns — the body and homoeroticism — in Yourcenar's work which lies closest to poetics of the Sapphic Modernists. The mystic edification of the final image of "Sappho, or Suicide," and the elevation of the self to a kind of divine vessel, finds a radical rebirth in Yourcenar's seemingly conservative treatment of Sappho. Though her Sappho does not quite reach transcendence, this

seems to be what Yourcenar strives for. As her ideal beloved, Sappho is kept close to the ground when she could, or should, be far beyond the reaches of the Earth.

*Jack gave me a book of haiku  
and told me to look for the kigo.  
I tried crossing them out,  
  
making my own Sapphos...*

Elisa Gabbert, from *L'Heure Bleu, or The Judy Poems*

## **Chapter Two: Sappho, Anne Carson, and the Erotics of Readership**

Carson is a poet whose name has been inextricable from Sappho since, at least, the publication of *If Not, Winter*, a 2002 collection of her Sapphic translations. Of course, Sappho has appeared at other times in Carson's *oeuvre*, too. She is lurking as a speaker in Carson's *Men in the Off Hours*, as the subject of an essay about agapic love and annihilation in her 2005 compendium *Decreation*, as the subject of Carson's 1986 debut book, *Eros the Bittersweet*, and, most recently, appearing in a 2019 poem entitled "Waves." It would not be an overreach to suggest that Carson is as vitally important to the preservation of Sappho in the twenty-first century as H.D. was in the twentieth, and Algernon Charles Swinburne was in the nineteenth. What separates Carson from these forebears, and, more importantly, from Marguerite Yourcenar, is her virtuosic usage of form and seeming disinterest in revising the territory mapped out for her by her predecessors. While the construction of Sappho as an ideal beloved, as persona, is much more explicit in Yourcenar, Carson opts for a subtler approach, re-consecrating Sappho as an ideal beloved separated from her by historical distance and a poverty of available texts beyond what few fragments of thousands of lines of verse and songs remain. When Carson translates Sappho's poems and incorporates her fragments into other poems, she does so out of no erotic devotion to Sappho as a mortal woman, but in the tradition of the Tenth Muse.

The purpose of this chapter is threefold. In the first section, I will examine *Eros the Bittersweet*, the first and longest of Anne Carson's two works of nonfiction. In it, the reader is

guided by Carson through the works of Sappho to elucidate a triangular notion of desire which operates under a condition of 'lack.' I will apply a reading of the triangular structure of Carson's erotics to her translations of Sappho found in *If Not, Winter* with an eye towards Carson's poetics as a sustained project. The second section of the chapter will look at how Sappho figures in Carson's work as a discursive tool and as an ideal beloved toward which she strives. I plan to do so by examining her essay "Decreation," informed, in part, by the English philosopher Gillian Rose's discussion of erotic and agapic love in "Love and the State: *Varnhagen, Luxemburg, Arendt*" from *The Broken Middle*. The third and final section of the chapter will use these findings to read Carson's Sapphic project against *The Albertine Workout*, a 2014 poem by Carson which fuses the Sapphic elements of her earlier work to an analysis of Proust. Rather than the latest in a series of poems which reflect on Sappho, who is not mentioned in the book, Carson transposes Sapphic erotics onto the fifth volume of *À la recherche du temps perdu* and haunts the proceedings of Proust's modernist novel, showing the almost inescapable nature of the Greek poet in all her works.

A central tension within the body of Carson's poetry is the surface inscrutability of her poetic form and the willingness with which she points to her forbearers as a method of disarming perceived difficulty. On one level, this is an admirable part of Carson's poetics. Rejecting the so-called "Anxiety of Influence" proposed by Harold Bloom and the "Tradition" of T.S. Eliot, Carson's relationship to her influences is less that of a marionettist, who skillfully manipulates a number of puppets, than it is the configuration of herself as a *bunraku* puppet, giving herself freely to the desires and movements of others. Dan Chiasson, in a review of Carson's novel-in-verse *Red Doc*, emphasizes the central tension of this model:

Because Carson is so pushy about naming her ancestors (in [*Autobiography of Red*] it was Emily Dickinson, along with Heidegger and Whitman, among others; here Proust shares the spotlight with Daniil Kharmis, the Soviet Surrealist who died in a Leningrad prison), her actual influences sometimes blur. It is hard, reading Carson, to get out from under Carson, who is far from the gnomic riddle some of her readers, enamored with their own taste for hard literary productions, make her out to be. Eliot's preposterous footnotes to "The Waste Land" were added as a pacifier for those who bridled at its obscurity, and struck an obnoxious tone of mock edification. Carson flips it around and often gives the pantomimed instruction primary position, telling us what to think and feel about texts that are only barely present. It makes for a very passive reading experience, with Carson so busy reading herself. Her great predecessors were all scramblers: Carson is a born unscrambler — "a teacher of Greek" — which accounts for her poems' equal investment in riddles and solutions, but also for her occasional inability to make riddles that are hard enough to want to solve. (Chiasson "The Muse Makes Mischief")

While viewing the tension in her work more negatively than myself, Chiasson points out that Carson's work is obfuscating — his description of her work as "riddles and solutions" could be applied to almost any of her poetic sequences or essays, as we will find with "Decreation" — but administered through such overbearing speakers and directed with "pantomimed instruction" that it creates a kind of semi-ironic distance. In his analysis of Carson's intertextuality, Chiasson makes the mistake of assuming that her writing, as with the poetry of John Donne, finds meaning in the shocking metaphors and combinations of intertexts. There is truth, however, to this

understanding of Carson and the central tension of allusiveness in her work that she resolves in "Decreation." I also take exception to a number of Chiasson's other assertions, especially the idea that reading Carson's poetry amounts to a "passive" experience and that Carson is an "unscrambler." The joy of Carson, as with Yourcenar, is that the relative opacity of the poems' surfaces — constructed with densely-arranged-but-easily-understood language — often hides a deeper resonance or meaning. The gestures which Carson makes to other writers are often signposts that point to their particular philosophical and thematic involvement with the text in question. Her severity of language, of style, resembles Yourcenar in function: nothing is accidental and all moves the reader to a hidden maelstrom beneath a surface reading of the text. The fatal error in Chiasson's assessment is that he does not engage with Carson as a writer with a coherent set of philosophical interests — he incorrectly assumes that the various influences she invokes are affectations that weaken the structure of her poems rather than necessary, scholarly rabbit holes into which she retreats. Carson herself has contributed to difficulties of categorization and analysis due, in no small part, to her reticence to offer insights into her work. What holds these works together is a metanarrative that unites her eternal return to Mytilene and Sappho with a devouring appetite for all subjects.

### **The Possibility of Sappho in the Mind of a Living Poet**

In the introductory chapter to this project, I discussed the relative openness with which Carson has discussed her early relationship with Sappho, namely that she was intrigued by the presentation of Greek text alongside the English translation and that she was instructed in Ancient Greek at lunchtime by her teacher in high school (Carson "An Interview with Anne Carson"). The latter story, of female instruction in the language of Sappho, could be interpreted as a sort of textual echo with Sappho's own work. After all, Sappho is, in some traditions,

portrayed as a schoolteacher to young girls (Yourcenar *Couronne* 70). That Sappho has been a constant presence in her biography from such a young age suggests a foundational relationship to her work. Carson is not so much someone who happened upon Sappho and poetry from Ancient Greece but rather who found her own work in a process of eternal return to Sappho.

*Eros, the Bittersweet*, the book which germinates Carson's careful mapping out of Sappho's poetic territory, is extremely direct in its treatment of the subject matter: eros is read as an experience tinged with *glukupikron*, which can be understood, according to Carson as "sweetness, then bitterness in sequence: [...] sorting the possibilities chronologically" (Carson *Eros* 3). Carson, of course, adheres to this definition of erotic experience, though it appears in countless other poems by Sappho, which suggests that there is something else to be grasped there. My interest in how Carson engages Sappho in this reading of the term is not in its relation to erotics, but rather the larger metaphysical dimensions of said reading. Erotic experience is something that is "in sequence," a movement from "sweetness" and vitality to "bitterness" and death — as indicated by a moving out of consciousness and into the ecstatic a process of inevitable decay. The process of Sapphic love, for Carson, is one of renewed grace and beauty, especially shown in the prominence she gives "Fragment 31." To fall outside of this love, to fall out of love, to fall into despair, is synonymous with death. Though Carson does not name him in this model, nor does Sappho in any of her surviving poems, it becomes clear that Thanatos, winged brother to Eros, is his equal in this model. The "lack" (*Eros* 12) of which Carson speaks could then be interpreted as the slow movement of loss into the mind of the lover, eating away at the once-full presence of the beloved.

Sappho's "Fragment 31" occupies most of Carson's discussion in *Eros*, and provides insight into the Sapphic sensibility of her later poems. Before discussing this fragment, I would

like to provide Carson's translation from *If Not, Winter*. Though the dates of publication for these two books are separated by some twenty-six years, I was struck by the felicity of Carson's translation with her original notes on the poem in *Eros the Bittersweet*. While there is, obviously, a move towards the lyric poem as Carson's primary method of writing, as opposed to the lyrical-yet-exegetical tone of her first book, the consistency of her wonderment towards Sappho as both translator and interlocutor is striking: evidence that she has not forgotten her first love. The poem, in its entirety, reads as follows:

He seems to me equal to gods that man

whoever he is 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, even a moment, no speaking

is left in me

no: tongue breaks and thin

fire is racing under skin

and in eyes no sight and drumming

fills ear

and cold sweat holds me and shaking

grips me all, greener than grass

I am and dead — or almost

I seem to me.

But all is to be dared, because even a person of poverty (Carson *Winter* 63)

This poem, whose triangular structure of desire (speaker, godlike male, female subject of erotic desire) fascinates Carson, is the entry point into her more philosophical wrestling with the core of Sappho, eventually becoming the bridge which links Sappho to elements of mystical writing. Her notes on the poem from *Winter* reveal that her reading evokes a kind of ecstatic experience on the part of the speaker: the "tongue breaks" is indicative of a "breakdown" (*Winter* 363 - 364). Furthermore, she cites Longinus' use of the poem in his text *On the Sublime* with approval: "Sappho's body falls apart, Longinus' body comes together: drastic contract of the sublime" (364). Carson's citation of Longinus indicates that entering into the sacred relationship of lover and beloved, as an observer, leads to a bisection of the self. The reader, becoming the observer, is initiated by Carson into the proceedings of the poem. Translating sews tight the ironic distance between Carson and Sappho's fragments, placing herself into the gaps in her ideal beloved.

Carson's commentary on the poem in *Eros* carefully emphasizes the primacy of the triangular entanglement of the poem's figures. In the chapter titled "Ruse," Carson goes over the metaphysical dimensions of the triangle in order to illustrate this point, suggesting the first lines of the poem emphasize the constructed nature of its setting: "The poem floats towards us on a stage set [...] actors go in and out of focus anonymously" (*Eros* 13). This ambiguity of description, however, is not a failure of detail on the part of Sappho. Rather, it is a vital part of

the poem's nature. To Carson, the poem is not solely about emotional states, but also the mental dimensions thereof:

It is not a poem about the three of them as individuals, but about the geometrical figure formed by their perception of one another, and the gaps in that perception. [...] Thin lines of force coordinate the three of them. Along one line travels the girls' voice and laughter to a man who listens closely. A second tangent connects the girl to the poet. Between the eye of the poet and the listening man crackles a third current. The figure is a triangle. (*Eros* 13)

This triangular figuration is one which perpetuates the notion of "lack" discussed earlier. The speaker of the poem, who I read as an avatar for Sappho, clearly delineates the state of each relationship in the fragment and does so with a decreasing familiarity of the mental state, and attributes, of each subject. The man, who is the interloper between the speaker and her beloved, stands at the furthest reach of the triangle. He is "equal to gods," not in the sense that he is a divine figure, or of comparative physical stature, but that he is at the greatest distance from the speaker. The male figure, like the gods, is a vessel approached with praise, in this case the "lovely laughing" of the female lover of the poem (*Winter* 63). Finally, when the reader is granted access to the interior of the speaker's mind, we understand the physical aspects of her desire for the girl who is just out of her reach: a winged heart, "drumming [filled] ears [...] cold sweat" (63). Each corner of the triangle signifies a different aspect of the "jealousy" that provides the poem's thematic engine: while the beloved lavishes attention on the man, the speaker "does not covet the man's place nor fear usurpation of her own." What Carson suggests is that the act of being separated and jealous is necessary to express the emotion of the poem (Carson *Eros* 14). The man is barely detailed, with Carson suggesting that he is a vacuum-figure of erotic desire in

the triangle — contrasting Sappho as "impossible to believe [...] as an ordinary lover," showing that she is more worthy than him (15). What remains are the ways in which sensation is delineated: the speaker-lover is the physical sensation in the mind — the natural world as an extension of the body — the beloved is the emotive sensation in the mind — stirring physical sensations and longing — and the man is the stretches of the mind where reason and knowledge end — an impossibly distant, annihilating force that is essential to the erotics of lack.

Carson does not explain Longinus' reading of "Fragment 31" in any great depth in "Ruse," but she does provide a parallel one that addresses his reading of the text as an ecstatic moment for the speaker:

Were she to change places with the man who listens closely, it seems likely she would be entirely destroyed. She does not covet the man's place nor fear usurpation of her own. She directs no resentment at him. She is simply amazed at his intrepidity. This man's role in the poetic structure reflects that of jealousy within Sappho's feelings. Neither is named. It is the [female] beloved's beauty that affects Sappho; the man's presence is somehow necessary to delineation of that emotional event — it remains to be seen how. (Carson *Eros* 14)

What Carson suggests in this passage is that the man, rather than an interloper, is essential to its erotic charge and a node of further desire for the speaker. This act of being "entirely destroyed," or the possibility of annihilation — "shaking / [...] greener than grass" denotes the speaker moving outside of herself and dissolving into the natural world — in this poem, is central to Carson's understanding of ecstatic eros. In line with my earlier observation about Carson's poetics, this is where the coexistence of Eros and Thanatos is made tangible. Just as Carson implies that the man in the poem creates lack, and is essential to its metaphysical structure, he is

the final conduit of all erotic desire, an "irradiating [...] absence" which throws the three figures of the poem into action and anchors the three figures together (*Eros* 16). The aforementioned "third current" (13) which connects the speaker to her adversary implies that there is a relationship between erotic desire and thanatonic annihilation in Carson's interpretation of Sappho. The physical sensations that afflict the speaker dissolve into the nothingness which surrounds the man. Despite feeling these sensations the speaker is still "dead — or almost" (Carson *Winter* 63), suggesting that, in Carson's translation, there is a sense of possible renewal, or rebirth, in death. The love the girl bestows upon the man, granting him divine vitality, is transferred to the speaker equally through the triangular formation of desire. The speaker, being touched by both, becomes a psychopomp who moves freely between the realms of death and life. The "lack" of which Carson speaks then becomes, rather than unreciprocated erotic affection, the realm of equivocation in which the ideal beloved becomes unreachable. The nameless girl on whom Sappho lavishes her affections is so far out of reach that she moves from the realm of the physical and romantic into the realm of the divine with the man who is described as godlike.

As we have previously seen with Hopkins' essay, this is where equivocation becomes a register in which sacred and profane love collapse into a single source. Writing of fellow scholar Michael Sells' work on sacred Arabic poetry, Hopkins states:

The balance, however precarious, between the "who" and the "what" does not seem to be present at all. In the Arabic and later the Islamic mystical context, the *awsaf* and their semantic extravagances serve to evoke not only an elusive erotic/divine presence but also, and perhaps most important, absence. The rich dissembling similes, imagery, and metaphors serve to evoke increasing distance and a continuous metamorphosis, finally, memory of what is lost: the beloved as a

concrete individual presence evaporates in the dissembling semantic over- flows  
 [...] (Hopkins 21)

While this refers to an idiom which is outside of Sappho's Archaic *milieu*, there is ample evidence here to suggest that she is operating within a similar poetic tendency. I would especially like to draw attention to the "increasing distance" and "continuous metamorphosis." While the speaker of Sappho's fragment is frozen to contemporary readers in the fragment which survives, we are to understand that her ecstasy at seeing her beloved with the man is a kind of revelatory experience. Her eroticism is bound to jealousy and distance. Rather than an apple or a flower, we can tell that the sweet-speaking girl is one with Sappho in the grass just as the speaker becomes a kind of metaphysical entity.

This free equivocation, which in turn leads to insurmountable distance, provides the spine for Carson's more erotically-tinged works written post-*Eros*. These poetics are described by Jessica Fisher as being inherently "dialectical" (Fisher 10), a position with which I am inclined to agree. The poetics of equivocal Eros and Thanatos serve to distance Sappho's erotic programme from the reader, and turn the reader's attention back onto Carson's relationship with the text and the act of transposing Sappho over another. As we will see later, especially with her exploration of Proust's novel, Carson is uninterested in resolving the tensions that her model presents, because the purpose of equivocation in her poems lies precisely in the rupture they cause in the text. It is necessary that ambiguity and strangeness run free in the body of the text. Just as in Carson's view, the Sappho of "Fragment 31" feels no worse off for having the man present because he is an essential aspect of the erotic exchange of desires. The speaker desires the girl but the presence of the man and their connection through the triangle figure allows her to vicariously experience the ecstasies of eros despite its denial, which originates in the man's

presence between them. Fisher expands on this aspect of Carson's model of eroticism and 'lack' by drawing attention to the necessity of denial:

Carson's understanding of desire is fundamentally Lacanian — she describes it as "organized around a radiant absence" and as having lack as "its animating, fundamental constituent." Crucially, the blindness desire inscribes is not only at the point of the occluded object, but also within the subject, since the act of "reaching for an object that proves to be outside and beyond himself" shows the lover *or thinker* [emphasis mine] at the limits of the self (Fisher 11)

At this point, I would like to return to my earlier metaphor of Carson as a puppet whose joints are moved by her many influences as opposed to the other way around. While Carson is an active participant, insofar as she has returned to the same poets and philosophers between poems, suggesting intellectual and aesthetic kinships, there is a kind of agapic devotion to the writers she has chosen to emulate. It becomes difficult to discern, in this case, whether or not Carson's use of Sappho's triangular erotics are a result of her own, unique interest in them, or if they are the logical end result of Carson's investment in allowing Sappho to speak through her as a kind of muse. Fisher's repeated emphasis on the "blindness" of desire and the hiddenness of its target renders the use of Sappho in Carson's work ambiguous, essentially putting a similar gap between Carson and Sappho to that between the subjects of "Decreation" and the divine. Carson seems to want Sappho, who is beyond comprehension and distant due to circumstances of her reception history and the fragmented access to her work, to be the primary recipient of her focus, but her imagined reader, much as the man of "Fragment 31," exists as a distraction from this relationship with Sappho as an ideal beloved. The imposition of Sappho as a sort of colonizing aesthetic sensibility in other poems is Carson's method of expressing devotion to her: it is literary style as

*agapic* annihilation. Carson "depicts the poet as someone desperate for outside contact, [...] and the [...] echo of this idealized relationship between writer and reader: writer as host, reader as guest" (Stanton 2). We see, then, that Carson echoes Sapphic yearning in this model of the writer – reader exchange. Carson's own body of work becomes a vessel for Sappho to act as host simultaneously with Carson. In essence, she is constantly writing back to Sappho by always including her in poems and essays. The reader becomes acutely aware that Carson is not writing to any one human, but to Sappho who is an ideal beloved. Dovetailing with this sentiment is the recurring use of Sappho as a way for Carson to continue her usage of the heterodox in her poetry, which helps her in "creating the conditions whereby we might account for the 'strange similar things [that] go on all at one time' within the material world" (Fisher 12). Carson, who has given herself over fully to the aesthetic whims of her Muse, allows Sappho to create a fissure between what is and what could be, expanding the *Mysterium Magnum* of the relationship between life-love and death-bitterness in her translation of Fragment 31, to suggest a kind of interrelatedness between all things. Similarly, in Sappho's "Fragment 105," the woman is an apple and a purple flower at the same time; she sits at the centre of a line between the two. However, in Carson, who fully expands the triangle to create a relationship between its figures who do not interact, the apple becomes like the purple flower, since they both share the quality of the woman to which they are compared. It is through this that Carson, in the words of Fisher, "[draws] our attention to the holes in being" and illustrates that these "lacunae" (Fisher 13), are a kind of *kalon*, if you will permit a brief return to the language of Plato's *Symposium*, for which one must suppress desire in order to ascend beyond the phenomenal and into the golden field of desire for the ideal beloved. It makes sense that Carson would discard the merely human in her work, when it allows her to more accurately grasp at the divine. In always being distant, Sappho's absence

becomes all the more of a tension. To return to Hopkins: the “who” and the “what” of eros is in creative tension together, at one point dividing and at another healing the heart, but never absorbed into some “higher” abstract ascendant unity either" (50). As a material interest, Sappho is entirely understandable, but as an ideal beloved, her presence is spectral and a distraction to the reader. In essence, she intrudes where she might not nominally belong.

Having now established the primacy of Sappho to Carson's aesthetic project, I would like to examine one of the more interesting uses of the poet in her essay and opera titled "Decreation." I will specifically engage how Carson reveals that the erotics of "Fragment 31" have mystical themes allowing Carson to draw a line from her poetry to the similarly erotic-theological project of the 20th century Neoplatonist philosopher Simone Weil.

### **The Beloved and the Un-Self**

Sappho, Marguerite Porete, and Simone Weil are not three thinkers whose work is likely to be discussed as having any commonalities. For almost every link between two, the third will, much like the female speaker of "Fragment 31," be at an irreproachable distance. However, Carson believes the three to be united in the ecstatic methods they used to "Tell God." The purpose of "Decreation," though Carson does not state it so obliquely, is to unite the three writers through a shared tendency to conflate erotic, mortal love with agapic, divine love. In doing so, Carson reframes Sappho as a writer, whose poems are to be read as being just as much about the permeable boundaries of materiality and divinity as they are about eros. As previously stated, this is not meant to contradict any aspect of Sappho previously written about in Carson's work; I read this development as a 'both/and' aspect of her poetry rather than an 'either/or.' As noted, Carson explores the same tension as Gillian Rose's similarly dialectical approach to the two varieties of love in her book *The Broken Middle*.

The most interesting development in the three years between the publication of *Winter* in 2002 and "Decreation" in 2005 is the reframing of "Fragment 31" as a lyric poem with inescapably devotional elements (Carson "Decreation" 159). Her examination of the fragment in "Decreation" seems to mirror much of her previous commentary made in the endnotes to *Winter* and in the "Ruse" chapter of *Eros*. She remarks on the central theme of "jealousy" in the poem and its essential "geometrical" nature, referring to the triangle at its centre (160). However, she begins to place new emphasis on the "breakdown" elements that the second-through-fourth stanzas convey. Here Carson pulls at the thread left so tantalizingly free by Longinus and fully commits to a devotional reading: "This is not just a moment of revealed existence: it is a spiritual event. Sappho enters into ecstasy. 'Greener than grass I am...',' predicating of her own Being an attribute observable only from outside her own body" (161). Interestingly, Carson is unwilling to pursue the poem beyond its final surviving line, given that she believes the "ecstasy is just the means to an end" (161). Though Carson does make reference to Sappho's worship of Aphrodite in the introduction to "Decreation" (157), she does not read the goddess explicitly into the action of the surviving stanzas of the poem. While she does not make this reading explicit, given that Aphrodite is invoked as a kind of divine devotional figure for Sappho (157), there is a possibility that Carson means to invoke her as a similar deity in the framing of Sappho's work and that the "sweat speaking" girl of "Fragment 31" is meant to be read as Aphrodite herself. She does, however, use Sappho's devotional sensibility to entertain a further meaning of the poem, that has to do with the "metaphysics or theology of love [...] a deeper spiritual question." It is at this point that Carson fully takes control of Sappho's voice (162). Sappho asks "*What is it that love dares the self to do?*" to which the Sapphic-Carson continues "*Love dares itself to leave the self behind, to enter into poverty*" (162). To enter into the sweetness and life of love that the erotic model in

"Fragment 31" provides, one must understand that it is necessary to "*leave the self behind*," and accept that passing outside of the self and experiencing a kind of ego death is part of the same continuum. Rather than understand the poem as a binary, Carson, and her ventriloquism of Sappho at the end of this section of the essay, shows that the triangle is a closed system. None of the three figures is capable of stopping the relationship between love and separation, life and death. Each is a conduit through which the force of unrealized eros passes.

While Marguerite Porete — a 14th century mystic, whose *Mirror of Simple Souls* eroticized the relationship of the individual to God, resulting in her trial and execution for heresy — does not figure into my final analysis of Carson and Sappho as much as Simone Weil will, Carson points out a number of interesting parallels between her own work and that of both Porete and Weil. Much as the speaker of "Fragment 31" finds herself outside of her body, in *The Mirror of Simple Souls*, the book on which Carson's analysis of Porete is built, there is a shared concern for a desire to be "split in two," so that her "soul is carried outside of her own being." While this process is progressive, as opposed to the momentary ecstasy of "Fragment 31," Carson sees clear intersections between Porete's erotically charged agapic return to God and Sappho's poem (163). Even more strikingly, Sappho's triangle reappears under interesting circumstances. In it, Porete tries to balance the "contradictory realities" between herself, her soul, and God (164 - 165). Interestingly, Carson makes the psychological ambiguity of Sappho's poem clear in her analysis of Porete. The conflict between lover and ideal beloved is a tripartite conflict between the self-as-flesh, the self-as-metaphysical-being, and the object of affection.<sup>5</sup> The eventual method of resolution, in Porete and therefore Sappho, Carson, and Weil, is the eventual collapse of "Being from three to two to one" (166).

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<sup>5</sup> These terms are my own, Carson refers to a "three-person situation" (Carson "Decreation" 164)

This process becomes explicit in Carson's analysis of Weil. Carson shows how decreation, as a concept, originated in Weil's thought as a method for "[rendering] back to God what God had given" (167). What Weil does that piques Carson's interest with regards to both Sappho and Porete is reintroduce the triangular geometry of desire in a way that is entirely related to theology, consisting of "God, herself and the whole of creation" (168). The unavoidable crease in Weil's work, according to Carson, is the impossibility of solitary communion with God — "Witness is the problem" — Weil is always present, making the task of "[disappearing] from herself in order to look" one that cannot be completed (169). Carson describes the process of decreation as a kind of "joyless joy," meaning that in order to replicate a similar relationship, such as Simone Weil and Marguerite Porete maintain with their respective conceptions of God, she must eventually allow her identity to be extinguished by giving her creative faculties, if not her entire self, up to Sappho.

The final section of "Decreation," emphasizes the connections that Carson has made with the authors *vis-à-vis* ecstasy, God, triangular erotics, and the eventual death the ego must undergo if one is to be truly loved. There are, of course, new details that deepen some of the connections between Sappho, Porete, and Weil. We can see that the "chiastic immersion" of Porete's writings — "iron [...] which placed in the furnace [...] becomes fire [...] a river that loses its name when it flows into the sea" — resemble the odd metaphors that Fisher describes as central to Carson's work. Carson's emphasis on Porete's ability to write metaphors and images outside of "reasoning" in favour of her desire "to *tell*" is a function of the intuitive ("Decreation" 172). All three writers have a "dream of distance" in their writings (173), a desire to move beyond the human-bound and a love for what lies in the transcendent. Weil was "resurrected" by a farmer who organized her notebooks — when in fact she wanted him to "transmute her ideas

into his own" — just as Carson rearranges and translates Sappho.<sup>6</sup> In essence, "Decreation" is a work which examines the relationship of its author to her greatest inspiration. The final mentions of Sappho in the essay confirm it as such. When Sappho's "Fragment 2" is mentioned as an hymn in the manner of decreation (178), Carson's analysis has come full circle to her original Beloved. Aphrodite lurks at the margins of these fragments, but is never quite present for Carson, by virtue of their transmission, as they are for Sappho. We understand that the grove of "Fragment 2" is meant to be her sacred grounds (Carson *Winter* 359). Most evocatively, the apple from "Fragment 105a" appears here as a signifier of Aphrodite's beauty: "here to me from Krete to this holy temple / where is your graceful grove / of apple trees and altars smoking" (Carson *Winter* 7). Just as "Fragment 31" might be read as a model for her erotics, "Fragment 2" could be viewed, by virtue of its inclusion in "Decreation," as Carson's way of suggesting Sappho's omnipresence in her own poetry. The girl in "Fragment 31" might be read as Sappho's way of expressing erotic devotion to the goddess. It is necessary, then, that in emulation of the poet's love for her ideal beloved Sappho must hover close to the work of Carson: "a set of conditions that at the beginning depend on Aphrodite's absence but by the end include her presence. Sappho imitates the distance of God in a sort of suspended solution — and there we see Divine Being as a dazzling drop that suddenly, impossibly, saturates the world" (Carson "Decreation" 179). The three women of this poem all mirror Carson's process. Sappho who, in her poem about observing her beloved, seems to want to melt into the natural world before her. Porete, in *Mirror*, has a desire to join herself outside of creation in God. Weil, most achingly, seems to want to cease to

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<sup>6</sup> During the Second World War, after having moved to England, Weil strictly limited her diet in solidarity with the population of her native France. Due to this, and a lifetime of poor health, she died of heart failure at the age of 34.

exist entirely: to pass without hesitation into the ideal and annihilate the self. In holding up a mirror to these other writers, Carson deliberately catches her own reflection as well.

### **The Broken Middle**

Philosophical definitions of love are, quite often, difficult to parse outside of each philosopher's individual projects. While Carson has never explicitly mentioned Gillian Rose, I was struck, upon my first reading of *The Broken Middle*, by the similar purposes love serves in their respective bodies of work, placing emphasis on it as a metaphysical force. The resonance between the two helps to extract what is unspoken and latent in the former's essay. The exact nature of love in "Decreation" is somewhat puzzling given its instantiations in Carson's other poems, especially the naked presentation of gay desire in *Autobiography of Red*, which retells part of the myth of Hercules as a gay love story. However, I was particularly drawn to how Carson combines both erotic and agapic love in a manner similar to Rose's exegesis of the theologian Anders Nygren:

Expressed as the content of an idea taken from Plato, Eros is acquisitive love, man's way to perfection, egocentric. In short, it is motivated by desire for an object, however lofty. Agape, as content taken from the Gospels, but also Johannine and Pauline — 'God is Agape' — is spontaneous and unmotivated, not limited by any desire, or the value or lack of it in any object. Hence it is creative, in a sense derived from the idea of creation *ex nihilo*. Finally, but perhaps most important of all, 'Agape is the initiator of fellowship with God'. This means that the command to love the [*sic*] neighbour is derived from God's love for man. It does not indicate man's way to God by loving the neighbour, nor even man's love

for God, but fellowship within God's love, within God's love to man. (Rose "Love and the State" 169)

Carson is operating outside of Rose's critique of 20th century political philosophy — the subject of the chapter from which this preceding definition is taken — but the combination of erotic and agapic love also seems to provide the impetus for Carson's relationship with Sappho. On one hand, Carson's writing is clearly "erotic" in the sense that her work is frequently centred on the "acquisitive" process. However, Sappho enters into Carson's work as the source of her devotion, much as, according to Rose, agape is initiated by "fellowship" with the divine. Her interest in Sapphic striving toward the erotic divine starts with her devotion to the poet's work and her need to move beyond it. Carson, in essence, replicates the theological model Rose proposes and elevates Sappho to the position of ideal beloved. Her erotic fixation on Sappho, manifested as love of her poetry and its constant refrain in her scholarship eventually becomes a submissive position, guiding her readers towards her own Muse after having merged her creative identity with her source of generative energy. The process of "Decreation" becomes one of consecration of the erotic with the agapic. Sappho resembles the interlocutors Carson engages with in "Decreation" in the sense that she originates the patterns of divine love in which Porete and Weil participate, but also unreachable, beyond full comprehension. She is an ideal beloved pulling at Carson, bifurcated between Sappho and her reader, towards something outside of herself.

Critics responding to "Decreation" have largely ignored the move towards self-effacement in the text, but are usually helpful in pointing out its mystic tenor. Johanna Skibsrud, intriguingly, views the essay as something that "flounders" immediately (Skibsrud 132). Getting bogged down in the syntax of the essay, and the opera of the same name which follows it, Skibsrud emphasizes the impossibility of "Decreation" and reframes its subject matter as being

about the act of writing (133). While I agree with some of her points — she comes to the same conclusion that I do, relating Carson to the greater body of "decreative" art (136 - 137) — I feel that much of the reception of Carson's work ignores the essentially mystical, in form if not exactly in function, character of her work. Jennings' reading of Carson's process of translation emphasizes the erotic process of writing in the voice of another and the way it can lead to a bond between the translator as lover (Carson) who takes on the project in hopes of restoring a connection to her ideal beloved (the translated, Sappho):

Translation's dual perspective (temporal, linguistic) recalls the erotic origin of Carson's triangle figure. Carson describes the way the lover's 'desiring mind' shifts between 'two poles of response,' between 'the ideal' (union with the beloved) and 'the actual' (the beloved's absence). 'Triangulation makes both present at once by a shift of distance... the people do not move. Desire moves. Eros is a verb' (*Eros*, 17). Temporal distance shifts when Carson translates, but distance remains as an integral part of a translation defined in terms of an essential lack. A perfect (i.e. complete and accurate) translation remains unattainable owing to the (current) fragmentary state of her source material, but while the distance between the two languages prohibits their conflation, it can be bridged. Carson, like desire, bridges the gap between fragment and restoration, between Greek and English. She projects the possibility of fulfilment on its lack. (Jennings "The Erotic Poetics of Anne Carson" 3)<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Due to the nature of the exported document and the layout of the database from which this article was obtained. The pagination refers to the PDF export rather than its page in the original journal.

What this demonstrates, in essence, is that triangular desire in "Fragment 31," upon which Carson has placed so much emphasis, is not exclusive to erotic desire, but can also expand beyond the realm of the text and into the sort of relationship Carson might have creatively with Sappho herself. The "possibility of [projecting] fulfilment on its lack" is especially relevant since "lack" is the central drive of erotic focus in Carson's interpretation of Sappho. However, the word 'erotic' is key to understanding why Carson frequently returns to Sappho. The erotic suggests the love between humans, whereas agape, as Rose's interpretation of Nygren argues, is characteristic of love for the divine. However as Rose also notes, in this view of "eros and agape as [non-contrary]" (Rose 168), there is more than enough evidence to interpret the two as existing as part of an indistinguishable energy which characterizes Sappho in Carson's work. The relationship between Carson and Sappho, then, is clearly rooted in the same sort of triangular function as Sappho's relationship to Aphrodite and Porete and Weil's respective relationships to God. This notion of deferred desire, lack, or "distance" is something that Skibsrud picks up on in her readings as well, tying it to deferral-by-distance present in all three works (Skibsrud 133). In her notes to her own translation of the poem, Carson observes that the central tendency of "Fragment 2" is much like her own sense of erotics, "a set of conditions that at the beginning depend on Aphrodite's absence but by the end include her presence" and notes the tendency also appears in the work of Weil (*Winter* 358). This gives insight into her method of translation as evincing the same kind of erotic-agapic love as practised by Sappho *et al* (Robinson "An Antipoem that Condenses Everything" 182). However, what does become clear through these disparate readings of Carson's work, is that her writing is performed with extreme disinterest in herself. In "Decreation," Carson has carefully molded her entire aesthetic project into a single

essay. Through the reverse-ventriloquism of this essay, she asks the reader to take on the role of hierophant and interpret the abstractions of her writing.

Carson fully returns to the model of Sapphic musedom Swinburne perfected in his cycle of poems about the Greek poet (Zonana "The Muse as Sister Goddess" 41). Elizabeth Coles, in her own analysis of "Decreation" offers a reading of the essay in deference to Weil's original definition of decreation. Much like myself, Coles is adamant that critics of Carson's work are hesitant to see parallels in the religious commentaries that are more in-step with Weil's work (Coles "The Sacred Object" 132). Furthermore, the implication that Carson's writing in "Decreation" is "Carson's most forceful theorization to date of "withness" and the relationships of writing, inherits its strictures and arguments from writers whose object of desire and interpretation is a divine one" (Coles 134), another characterization of Carson as a much more mystically inclined writer than one might first assume. While I disagree with Coles' assertion that there is "no case [...] made for [Sappho, Porete, and Weil's] relatedness" (Coles 136), her general characterization of Carson as a mystical thinker in postmodern drag is where I find so much to agree with her on. Most strikingly, this reaches a sort of premature climax in Coles' definition of love in Carson:

Love of the divine object is obstructed by the natural self-love of subjectivity; "withness" is a problem because it means two and not one, a subject "with" an object. The scenario, Carson tells us, is also one of jealousy, though not in any straightforward sense: each writer is jealous of that presence that obstructs contact with the beloved object; in the cases of Sappho, Porete and Weil, that presence is herself. (Coles 135)

We can now come to the conclusion that love in Carson, especially the love for the ideal beloved, is fundamentally constructed from jealousy, distance, and dissolution. What remains to be seen, however, is the precise method by which Carson transposes this model of decreation onto poems unrelated, on the surface, to Sappho. That such a work does, in fact, exist is testament to her devotion both to Sappho and her adaption of her forebears' project.

### **Carson After Sappho**

"Decreation" is, in my opinion, the last major work of Carson. While there has been no shortage of publications under her name since 2005, the majority of these have been translations of Euripedes, large book-length experiments in text formatting — *Nox* and *Float* — and a sequel to *Autobiography*. While these texts are worthy of consideration in their own right, I am less interested in them as they represent a significant break from her prior body of work. However, there is one major exception to this.

*The Albertine Workout*, published nearly a decade after "Decreation" in 2014, as I have previously stated, is a long poem which acts doubly as a commentary on Marcel Proust's novel *A Remembrance of Things Past* and, I believe, Carson's return to working in a mode more explicitly connected to work of erotic desire as 'lack' that she undertook in her earlier books. While it is not a poem explicitly about Sappho, there are a number of concordances with a Sapphic sensibility as elaborated by Carson that make this text an exciting vision of what is to come.

There is little academic writing about *Albertine*, but Adam Watt's essay provides some interesting commentary on what Carson attempts:

For a reader unfamiliar with Proust's novel, *The Albertine Workout* would provide an (albeit quirky) introduction to the protagonist's relationship with Albertine, the

roots of this relation in the biographical facts of Proust's life, the tensions at the heart of *La Prisonnière*. For a reader familiar with the novel and familiar with the critical literature, however, *The Albertine Workout* is something much more: it is a contribution to critical commentary on Proust's work, it interacts with the existing literature, suggests connections and paths one might pursue, whilst also being a creative work, a carefully crafted meta-literary construct. (Watt 649)

Although he does not mention it as a direct comparison, it becomes clear through Watt's description that *Albertine* is consonant with the kind of work Carson does in "Decreation." He offers the usual commentary on the type of work Carson does — "quirky," "carefully crafted" — which I find to be shorthand for critics who are relatively uninterested in looking at the thematic elements of Carson's work, concentrating instead on the admittedly fascinating craft of her poetry. The work "critical" here is interesting, as it shows that there *is* something lurking beneath the surface of this poem. After all, Albertine is a bisexual woman and the mask which Sappho wears in this particular work.

Very little suggests direct engagement with Sappho in this poem. She is, surprisingly, not one of the authors cited in the appendices of *Albertine*, which leads to a number of frustrating cross-references and Sappho-spottings. The most direct allusions to Sappho emerge in the Carson's characterization of Albertine, comparing her, using the imagery of Proust's novel, to a series of flowers across the span of three pages:

24. The state of Albertine that most pleases Marcel is Albertine Asleep

25. By falling asleep she becomes a plant, he says.

26. Plants do not actually sleep. Nor do they lie or even bluff. They do however, expose their genitalia

[...]

29. [...] several observations could be made about the similarity between Albertine and Ophelia — Hamlet's Ophelia — starting from the sexual life of plants, which Proust and Shakespeare equally enjoy using as a language of female desire. Albertine, like Ophelia, embodies for her lover blooming girlhood, but also castration, casualty, threat and pure obstacle. [...]

[...]

30. Albertine's laugh has the colour and smell of a geranium.

[...]

32. Albertine's eyes are blue and saucy. Her hair is like crinkly black violets.

(Carson *Albertine* 10 - 12)

While the flower is not unique to Sappho, the joining of the flower in the poem to womanhood, especially to "sexual life" and "female desire," seems to be indicative of the reception history of Sappho's "Fragment 105b," especially through Catullus, whose version of the poem seems to be the origin of its relationship to "de-flowering" and marriage (Carson *Winter* 374). The purpose of this is not to link Carson directly to Catullus' legacy, but to the possessiveness that the narrator of *Remembrance* has to women. According to Watt, "*La Prisonnière* is, amongst other things, an essay on lying, dissimulation, and deception," an air which Carson attempts to replicate, I believe successfully, in her framing of the poem (651). Carson informs us that the narrator is jealous of Albertine because she has lesbian friends and spends time away from him (*Albertine* 6). He is, in the worst ways, possessive of her and reduces her when he confines her to his house and "[she] becomes, as he says, 'a heavy slave'" (8). There is, between these two loose allusions, something of Sappho's work in the poem and, beyond it, an exploration of how the ideal beloved can

manifest outside of works which might not explicitly seem to relate to them. This is where Carson's work to portray Sappho as a mystical poet aids her in the project of consecrating an ideal beloved. The love between Marcel, Albertine, and her lesbian friends initiates the erotic triangle of Sappho once again. Just as in Yourcenar, *Albertine* places supreme emphasis on the "[the] radical presence evoked in the charged language of loving description [...] a love (for the time being) lost and (perhaps) just about to be regained. Presence is linked to deferral, what is (always) yet to be" (Hopkins 14). Though Hopkins is referring to the Biblical *Song of Songs*, there is something curious in the way that Carson similarly draws upon the language of "lost" love in a poem that is about longing for figures that inspired jealousy in life and wistful longing in death. Always at the margins of this is Sappho. Carson's jealousy, that someone will use Sappho for similar purposes and allow her to move outside of her purview, will result in her loss of Sappho. We find her again, in this poem, yoked to a 20th century novel, her fragments fertilizing the new earth.

At the beginning of the poem, Carson informs the reader of something in Proust scholarship known as the "transposition theory," which argues that Albertine is a female version of Alfred Agostinelli, who was Proust's driver and male lover outside of the text (*Albertine* 6). While she does not go into this much further beyond an example I will mention later, she allows this tension to hang over the poem. Are we meant to believe this interpretation, or is this another rabbit hole? The answer is that Carson believes Albertine is Alfred-as-ideal-beloved. We learn that, before the publication of *Prisoniere*, Alfred died in an aviation accident, which Proust echoes by having Albertine die during a horseback riding session. The parallels between the two, including a stanza from Mallarmé engraved on Alfred's plane (17) and Albertine's yacht (20), seem to connote that Proust wishes to push what was once in reach far out of hand. As if to

remind the reader of her devotion to Sappho, Carson herself includes her own translation of the poem close to the end of *Albertine* (21).

The main sentiment the poem seems to explore is expressed in quotes Carson pulls from the novel in stanza 52 of the poem: "One only loves that which they do not entirely possess,' says Marcel." The word 'lack' does not appear in this stanza, but it does not need to. Carson has, in a sense, turned the gaze of the Sapphic onto a novel which belongs to a kind of mirror-Lesbos. What this does show is her continued devotion to the tradition of Sappho who is 'dead' by virtue of not appearing in the poem, but lurks at its edges like the Aphrodite of "Fragment 2." The stanza from Mallarmé is not meant for the reader, but for Sappho, who is absent.

Sappho provides the strongest origin for Carson's project as a poet; where other critics see a multitude of voices, there is always Sappho's clarion call above all else. After culminating the first phase of her Sapphic project in "Decreation" and translating her work for herself, Carson is no longer obliged to follow behind Sappho. She is free to reach upwards for her and beyond the phenomenal. That, according to Carson's canny usage of her work in *Albertine*, Sappho can be transposed into any circumstance shows that the beyond is far beyond the capabilities of any mere reference. She is the divine light whose loving emanations provide the source for Carson's continued writing.

## **Conclusion**

In the end, what are we to expect from a poet whose remaining poems are harder to locate than fractured mirrors at the bottom of a lake on a moonlit night? To return to Reynolds' notion from the beginning of my thesis, it is impossible to avoid Sappho when writing new love poems and love songs because so much of the well-trod territory of these genres has been made unconsciously under her auspices (15). What becomes notable, by contrast, is when poets do in

fact make the grand claim to be one of Sappho's inheritors. Swinburne's language is overblown, but his devotions to Sappho, whom he elevated to godhood in his verse, are proof that invoking her directly is an energizing pursuit. The vein has been mined deeply, but there is still nobility in returning to it if one digs deeply enough.

In comparing Yourcenar, whose invocation of Sappho seems tinged with embarrassment for others like her, and Carson, who is the authoritative inheritor of her tradition, we understand how such an evasive figure can metamorphose under different circumstances and poetic idioms. What makes Sappho interesting in Carson and Yourcenar is not the novelty with which they allude to her, but in their shared vision of her as an ideal beloved.

Yourcenar, who translated Sappho's poems, and incorporated the poet into her own work, did so out of a desire to escape sexual taxonomies. Her disparagement of other lesbian writers who used Sappho, and her alienation from the Sapphic Modernists by means of her poetics, was futile effort, as she replicated their poetics indirectly. In alienating herself from the material concerns of the Sapphic Modernists, Yourcenar finds, in Sappho, a language which is eminently suitable for transcendence. In her view of the trapeze as a kind of ladder to the divine, Yourcenar walks with the poet towards a higher ideal. This indicates that there is much beyond the recovery of Sappho as a kind of stylistic icon. What is suggested in "Sappho, or Suicide" is that there is a path to eternity in her fragments and story. The failed death of Sappho, Yourcenar implies, is reflective of how too few are willing to read Sappho for religious purposes and choose to cling to myths that would keep her bound to the earth.

Carson is deeply attached to Sappho. Her translations are stylish, but she is careful to emphasize her fidelity to the Greek text. This is enough for her, for there is much to love about Sappho in her poetry. Carson's essays return to Sappho as a treasured source and a constantly

rejuvenating way to see the world. Her decision to read Sappho outside of lyric poetry, pulling her into mystic and logocentric directions, shows that Sappho's work is a kind of religious text unto itself. In holding so closely to Sappho's project, she becomes a hierophant, revealing the hidden, mystical applications of the poet's work. Carson, unlike Yourcenar, does not discriminate between the erotic and the agapic, choosing to view them as coloured rays passing through a prism from a united origin.

There is always a compelling reason to return to the fragments of Sappho. Given that so much of poetry can be drawn back to her work, there is something noble in the attempts, over the centuries, to reconstruct or build from her fragments. That this artistic fervour has subsequently taken on a mystic, even religious, character should not be ignored. What Carson and Yourcenar, just as Swinburne before them, have demonstrated is that Sappho is no longer Sappho. Rather, the Tenth Muse sits in her place as a kind of implacable ideal beloved. We are compelled to write to her, to borrow her fragments and expand on them, because there is something just out of reach about her. In order to fully engage with Yourcenar and Carson, as well as others who work in this tradition, it is necessary to look at what metaphysical dimensions their work takes on and from where in Sappho it was taken. When the ideal beloved is a poet's muse, all works dedicated to them should be viewed as an act of absolute devotion. To Yourcenar and Carson, there is no difference between the hand Sappho has guided towards affection and the hand to which she has guided towards the pen.

*The mune ha gien her loicht an' gan  
The stardies eek are flee  
Upon ma bett in durchet nich'  
Ah lane ah lee.*

Stevie Smith, "Sapphic (*in mixed speech*)"

### **Chapter Three: Some Reflections on Writing Poetry as the Pursuit of the Ideal Beloved**

As previously discussed in the introductory chapter, the purpose of this section of my thesis is to demonstrate the interrelatedness of my own poetic work to the poetry of Carson, Yourcenar, and, by extension, Sappho. While I am, by circumstance, an academic, I am first and foremost a poet and my interest in the authors whose works are the subject of my thesis long predates any intentions of scholarly analysis. Rather, I believe that the critical work which precedes this chapter is a dilution of the poetic work which has been inculcated by an irascible desire to remove myself from my current circumstances and dissolve, as it were, into *poésie* beyond the reaches of the material.

Of course, not all poetry is created equally. What I have edited for presentation in this chapter can be neatly sorted into one of two sections, the first of which — *Plectrum and Scapula: Sonata in Twelve Poems* — is a lyric cycle I have been in the process of composing since high school for reasons I will detail in the next section of this chapter. The second grouping of poems — *Études* — is a series of poems which were edited concurrently with my writing and researching of the thesis under the supervision of Professor David Stymeist in his creative writing workshop class in the Winter 2020 semester. While some of these poems were started prior to my writing of the thesis, under the influence of Sappho *et al.* they began to take on new meanings and found new life when grafted to my current project, a sort of unexpected richness that allowed me to glimpse their initially abandoned potential in a new light. While these poems

are not as purely Sapphic as those which comprise *Scapula*, I believe that they are necessary to demonstrate an engagement with Sappho's poetics which, like Carson's work in *Albertine*, move beyond the allusive and into an engagement sensibility with the poet's work. There are no flowers beneath the foot or rosy-fingered dawns in a poem like "Sfumato," but the sort of equivocation which I seek is characteristic of prior engagement with Sappho that transposes some of her genius for conveying metaphysical sensations into a somewhat more autobiographical setting.

As such, the purpose of this chapter is not to merely offer poems which bear some of the same formal tendencies as their immediate inspirations, but to show that the calibre of my devotion stretches deep into the foundation of what I have endeavoured to write even before taking on this project. This, of course, meant displacing other poets who might have been incorporated into my thesis if not for constraints of subject matter or time period. Rather, I urge you to view these poems as the product of someone who has prostrated themselves — as Baudelaire, Swinburne, and Doolittle must once have — before the shattered visage of Mytilene's greatest soul.

### **Floating Through the Void on a Bed of Roses: Notes on Composition**

I started writing poetry because, as if there were any reason otherwise, someone would not love me back. There is very little I can say about this relationship because it, like so many other primal experiences of first love, has been written of authoritatively and shamelessly by others with the fortune of hindsight, sobriety, and a kind of sagesness that tends to develop with age. The choice I made, and something I understood to be a maturity far beyond my sixteen years at the time, was simply never to externalize my emotions, retreating further and further inward until

any physical symptoms of my affection, or even the slightest chance of emotional outburst, would be mistaken for something else. It was, of course, at this time, I began to retreat into art.

My parents were encouraging of artistic expression when I was younger in a way that I consider to be fortuitous when compared to the circumstances in which I find myself now: piano lessons until teachers became unavailable, frequent trips to art museums, a steady supply of literature and an encouragement to read whatever I could get my hands on — the last of which culminated in my introduction to the Marquis de Sade at thirteen, an experience which, while well outside of the purview of this essay, was deeply informative to what I considered good literature could be. These activities were edifying in a way that would produce a *frisson* whenever I encountered art that spoke to me directly. Even the briefest catalogue of art which pushed me towards being a poet could stretch on for pages. In the days which followed the dissolution of my abortive relationship, I found myself returning to some of the earliest, and to this day, best loved works of poetry that continue to cast a shadow over the works of poetry in *Scapula*.

The first poems I read for my own sake were notable to me because of their outsized emotion of presentation in comparison to what, on the surface, appeared to be ruminative subject matter. The first poet I ever truly loved was William Blake, whose work I came to after hearing "The Fly" set to music by the bassist and singer Esperanza Spalding for *Chamber Music Society*, her third album. Even though Blake has always seemed an especially musical poet, Spalding's gentle enunciation of the lines lifted me outside of myself. From my local library, I borrowed a copy of *Song of Innocence and Experience*, committing the poems of the latter half to memory. Even today, I can still recite large swaths of it from memory and poems like "The Sick Rose" and "Ah! Sun-flower" drift in and out of my own work like phantoms. At this point in time, I

also came across the band Florence + the Machine and became entranced by its frontwoman, Florence Welch. In the lyrics she wrote for the band's songs, especially on *Lungs*, their first album, I found so much of what I admired in Blake transposed in a more immediately accessible language and accompanied with lush instrumentations which balanced the introspective lyricism and, much like my experience reading Blake, felt as though I was drifting outside of consciousness. These songs, like Blake's poetry, made me want to write outside of myself, to put the various elements of my psyche and my thoughts into the landscapes I observed and from half-remembered reinterpretations of Biblical stories. Very little of my poetry from this period has survived as it is, and there is little way around this, inexcusably poor. The gestures I made towards myth were amateurish, even for my age, and there was very little ironic distance in what I wrote. Nothing was ever objective: every haiku I wrote about flowers was about *my* act of *observing* the flowers, which I suppose is more about my current desire for decreation, to return to Carson, in my current poems than it is anything else. A sign, perhaps, that I have moved on past mere imitation and my interests in creating a unique set of poetics above all else.

My work is driven principally by a tendency Anne Carson illustrates in her book *Eros the Bittersweet*: "Imagination is the core of desire. It acts at the core of metaphor [...] Writing about desire, the archaic poets made triangles with their words." (Carson *Eros* 77). In order to collapse the distance between the physical "thing" and its written counterpart, I abandon a sense of self in my writing. The subjects I write of in my poems are extensions of how I see them in my mind. I am not interested in metaphor or simile as a suggestion that images *might* share a metaphysical link for there must be a porous border between all things.

This tendency is best represented in my poem "Sfumato," though it exists as a kind of sketch at the moment. The Zwilich concerto of which I have written is dramatic, but I lack the

sophistication or musical knowledge to draw, out of myself, the correct way to describe it.

Rather, I have allowed the image of a caressing thumb over the cheekbone to simulate the swell of violins. The rush of strings and the *basso*, for loving someone is like being seduced by art, is one and the same.

In working with Professor Stymeist, I tried to purge my work of all sentimentality. The tendency I have admired in Yourcenar and Carson is their ability to abnegate catharsis by simulating a sheet of marble between their texts and the reader in their tone. This is how I explore the ideal beloved. I have fully alienated myself from the material things which once stirred longing in me and I want poems to reflect this as well. To move dispassionately, without "like" or "as" unless extremely necessary, is to move into the realm of the divine and the ideal beloved. When I am grasped by ecstasy in writing — watching a deer in "Sapphic," or envisioning the speaker's legs as the compass' in "Valentine" — it is necessary to abandon sentimentality and recognize that the self is yearning for a kind of beyond.

Comparing one form of art to another is futile. However, I feel that my work has always resembled the painting *Christina's World* by Andrew Wyeth. There is, at the core of my own work, a kind of melancholy acknowledgement of separation from other things. However, as I read more poetry and began to realize that this was not an entirely negative thing, I began to view the painting as a perfect representation of transient beauty. There is, in the lack of face in the painting's central figure, a kind of deep ambiguity I have learned to admire. In the poems I have written, desire is often deferred, if not outright denied, and this is meant to crystallize a kind of contemplative and erotic tone.

Poems I have written like "In Umbria" and "Les fleurs dédaignées" make loose usage of forms like the aubade and the sonnet. Rather than close the distance between the affective object

and the speaker, I choose to keep it open as the desire for the ideal is often, in my opinion, preferable to the real thing. "The Rose" series of poems I have written are meant to walk this kind of fine line between representing the eponymous sculptures they have been named after and the metaphysical qualities of the person they reminded me of when I think back to their formal nature — coyly artificial, elegant — and the kind of loose cultural assumptions around them: rose-as-love, rose-as-eye, rose-as-liturgical-symbol — all into one poem. That these things have no surface resemblances is the point, these differences obfuscate what is clearly a shared, in my mind, divine Form.

This is not to say that I am making any kind of endeavour to change poetry forever, quite the contrary. I suspect that, deep within me, there has always been a kind of aesthetic conservatism which is more prominent in the unconscious, rather than the text, of my poems. For every attempt I have made at *vers libre* or something resembling the experimental, there is a part of the text which clings to past forms. For this reason, I have continued to return to poets like the Baudelaire of *Les fleurs du mal* — the importance of my first reading of his work in French, especially "Le Cygne" can scarcely be understated — and Stevie Smith, whose formal inventiveness and, at times, alienating subject matter often conceal willful participation in a much more traditional vein than some of their readers might wish to believe.

It is from this tendency that I wrote the earliest poems for *Scapula*, turning my righteous indignation to extremely stilted poems about heartbreak. In an overripe poem, which would eventually become "Short Talk on Ryan Gosling," my tormentor was Doubting Thomas and Longinus at once, plunging his fingers into the gashes he had left before worming them around inside me. Other poems, like "Valentine" — a graffito over Donne's "A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning" — and "Quatrain Written in the Margins of My Composition Book," have remained

more or less unchanged in their mood and form, save for drastic evolutions in language and refinement since having first written them. In writing these, I turned to poets like Sappho, whose name has always been a sort of balm, and Anne Carson, whose translation of the former and *Autobiography of Red* appeared to me at this most opportune time, to provide a model of what I aspired to do. It was ignoble, I told myself, to pursue things any further. He would never know that I had loved him and I would be content with the knowledge of myself which I had gained.

Besides, at this point in time, I began to approach poetry with an increasing seriousness. Where Blake and Baudelaire had pulled back the curtains on what I learned poetry could be, I pursued this fitful idea even further. Before high school had ended, I had moved further and further into a baroque method of self-expression. Geoffrey Hill and Ezra Pound's propensities towards abstraction along with the sage-like Emily Dickinson of her later poems guided me towards a vision of poetry I could write that, while retaining a taste for the metaphysical, contained simultaneous meanings. In an act of embarrassing self-pity, I discarded most of what I had written up until that point. Childish, yes, but not without a certain degree of self-awareness. By the time high school had ended and cordial contact with my poetry's inspiration had all but ceased, I turned more towards Pound and his branch of Modernism.

I found, in Hilda Doolittle, the sort of intense interest which I had not felt in the longest of times. Her poetry, especially the majesty of her later collections like *Heliadora* and the deeply Freudian *Red Roses for Bronze* captured my interest immediately. However, I find myself continually redrawn to *Sea Garden* after all of these years. Having found most other treatises on poetry, especially Hill's critical writing, impenetrable, Doolittle's essay "Notes on Thought and Vision" became the next clear step in my poetic development. Here was a writer whose work I deeply admired and offered clear indications of where I could pursue further development. I

became fascinated in her discussion of the triadic structure of the "body, mind, overmind" (Doolittle "Notes on Thought and Vision" 17). I realized that, in all of my concentration on heartbreak, I was too self-centred. Afraid, as it would seem, to move out of myself and into the state of higher consciousness she describes as an "abnormal consciousness" (19). It was also in this essay, long before I first read Plato in my sophomore year of university, that I came into contact with what, I can only assume, was an aestheticized description of a hierarchy similar to Diotima's description of the ladder in *Symposium*:

One must understand a lower wisdom before one understands a higher. One must understand Euripedes before one understands Aristophanes. Yet to understand dung chemically and spiritually and with the earth sense, one must first understand the texture, spiritual and chemical and earthy, of the rose that grows from it.

Euripedes is the white rose, lyric, feminine, a spirit. Aristophanes is a satyr.

Is the satyr greater or lesser than the white rose it embraces? Is the earth greater or less than the white rose it brings forth? Is the dung greater or less than the rose? (Doolittle 32)

I began to understand, after having read the essay, that I could not become a full poet until I had a complete understanding of all things. I wrote workmanlike poems on all subjects and in all forms and found what did and what did not interest me. I returned to the sonnet after a few attempts at a sequence in high school, one of which started as an assignment for a creative writing course I took in my senior year, and took a deeper interest in animal life, space, and myth beyond its capacity to serve as a vessel for my own emotions. In a sense, Doolittle's abstraction

is not what I had initially perceived as a kind of virtuostic experimentalism, but a warm-hearted tethering of the Self to what is outside of it. My final task was to begin to seek out and take note of what Doolittle referred to as "clear entrances, [...] to over-world consciousness" (Doolittle 24). I looked back to my childhood and my high school years, now in the midst of university education, and tried to find my own gateways to this sense of knowing and conduit to a higher art.

Of course, I will avoid discussing in detail those about whom I have already written. Yourcenar, Carson, and Sappho serve as some of my most potent "sign-posts" (Doolittle 24), but there are others whose names I have already mentioned. Blake, Donne, Hill, Baudelaire, and Smith, whose bodies of work sent me into a frenzy upon first exposure, and were soon joined by others whose work, even outside of poetry, spurred a desire to write in this contemplative mode. I think specifically of how this tendency manifests in the music of Sufjan Stevens — deeply spiritual but spritely and formally inventive — and Yukio Mishima — violent, erotic, elegant. What connected me to these artists, like those to whom I have had a longer relationship, was an ability to root visions of the ecstatic in the phenomenal world.

Having read these authors, as well as researching the minutiae of their practices, I began to fully understand how to join the work I wrote in high school to a more mature understanding of what I wanted to do and how I could make that poetry function. I began to write double-poems. Using my personal experiences as seeds from which to grow larger concepts, just as one might take aspects of philosophy or art, which I have done as well, for the central subject of a poem or a novel, I began to write, constantly aware of the following declaration by Mallarmé: "I say: a flower! and outside the oblivion to which my voice relegates any shape, insofar as it is something other than the calyx, there arises musically, as the very idea and delicate, the one

absent from every bouquet" (Mallarmé "Crisis in Poetry" 75-76). In essence, I had developed, over the course of some ten years writing poetry, a method which would allow me to delve into the inner recesses of my psyche and project it into the world while remaining completely separate. "Sapphic in E-Flat Major," the earliest poem I have kept from my initial flurry of work in high school has morphed into a work, that I believe, is supremely demonstrative of what Yourcenar refers to as the "discretion and intensity" of Racine (Yourcenar "Selma Lagerlöf, Epic Storyteller" 129n). I did not want to renounce being an heir to the Baroque or Symbolist styles, but someone who could stand alongside both and create works drawn equally from both tendencies, standing at the centre of a quincunx between my four initial gateways — Blake, Donne, Baudelaire, Smith — to poetry.

I return now to my initial proposition: that these poems be viewed as an integral part of my thesis's creative inquiry rather than a staid gallery appended to it. Yourcenar, Carson, and Sappho have always been linked to my work's exploration of the devotional and the erotic. These poems are as much the culmination of aesthetic development as they are the groundwork on which my observations rest. How they have developed — shedding the material for the metaphysical, eschewing observation for transposition — demonstrates a kind of movement towards the quietly passionate and meditative. In emulating these three poets in my own work, I hope to demonstrate how my work engages with themes of erotic and agapic love and that the striving for the ideal beloved can be a path for both forms of love.

## Plectrum and Scapula: Sonata in Twelve Poems

*Ars Poetica*

A splatter of ink  
As I wrote poems in bed  
Wet spider lily —  
Sheets stained with afterbirth  
In the furnace of my chest.

*Berm*

Surfacing at dawn  
He crawled out of the river  
Spreading himself across the berm.

The leopard smothered  
An iris with its paw.

Wind in the forest  
Blows dew from the branches  
He arches his back.

Sighs — like unwound ivory —  
Wake the starling in its nest.

Sinuous arms  
Soft as marble, twice as bright  
Unblemished by the sun.

Disinterred from his tomb  
At the bottom of the lake.

The morning frost  
Grows upwards like a vine  
Rows of mirrors along my sleeves.

*Transference*

A tiger-skin rug  
Prowls in the office of the  
Psychoanalyst.  
Opposite the fireplace  
Its ivory teeth —

*Just now, in the smoke, his face!*

*Villa*

In the night,  
Molting-winged Pothos  
Unsettles the soft rhythm  
Of the bougainvillea  
By the window, opposite mine.

*Short Talk on Ryan Gosling*

The blood, self-same scent of sperm,  
softly streaming from a wound  
opened by the stiletto he so gingerly  
held. Silhouette of silver in the cool,  
light of his larimar eyes,  
scorpion-like in his patience.

*Valentine*

In class, I watched as you  
Pulled the compass from your bookbag,  
Separating its legs  
Gently with your index knuckle.  
No one, save for me, watched  
As you wrote, with its diamond point,  
Your name, in harried script  
Along the heavy window pane  
Wishing you'd written mine as well.

*Rose I (after the sculpture of the same name by Isa Genzken)*

Too sharp  
to step  
upon,  
or too  
tall  
to be worth  
the effort.  
It grew in  
the desert  
between  
cold rocks  
when  
at an opportune  
moment  
a gardener  
understood  
the eminence  
of its beauty  
and the inevitability  
that it  
would  
collect  
as the  
mote  
of dust  
in the eye  
of a  
man  
unfortunate  
enough  
to have  
noticed  
something  
other  
than  
himself.

*Rose II (after the sculpture of the same name by Isa Genzken)*

A seam  
running  
along  
the ground  
between  
    us above  
the concrete  
    of the building  
in the noontide  
    Sun  
    as the scepter  
    of Helios  
might have  
    at one time  
    or another  
    bisected  
the flower-dreams  
    of  
    one who  
    gave him  
    credence  
    or sought  
    relief below  
    the red  
Paradise  
    of his  
    empyrean  
    head.

*Rose III (after the sculpture of the same name by Isa Genzken)*

In each  
thorn  
a malediction  
spoken  
in the  
reverent  
tones of  
a choir  
so certain  
that in  
the lace  
of their  
collars  
an angel  
passed  
through with  
ease, ascending  
this steel  
ladder  
and would,  
one day,  
unfurl  
the petals  
and reveal  
a visage  
of utmost  
devotion.

*In Umbria*

In the morning light, the void of thy lips  
Parted as the ropes of the bee skep  
In which the queen and her congregants  
Move in slow, steady circles around the blazing tetragrammaton  
Around the centre that was thy tongue  
And all the honeyed qualities thereof  
which I longed to mediate as scripture  
And whisper with delight in time with  
The slow organ music of thy drowsy, sighing breath.

*Quatrain Written in the Margins of My Composition Book*

My soul, in secret ministry,  
With hornèd owls in tree,  
Evaporated with a thought —  
One day you won't remember me

*Sapphic in E-Flat Major*

As a child, in a meadow, I saw a fawn  
So white I could not tell it from asphodel;  
I dared not move too close, lest it run away.

To watch was enough.

You could not have been any more cruel to me  
From the other end of the room, a rose wheel,  
The light you gave was constant and terrible.

Breaking me on wheels

That, like Catherine, helped prove my devotion.  
You smiled like a cherub with a flaming  
Iron arrow not an arm's length from my chest.

Please. O God. Relent

So that I may have air in my lungs again  
And the light which you cast passes over me.  
I am unworthy of the attention you

Have burdened me with.

At one time, I might have called out to you in  
Anguish, but it is sweeter to be without  
Your hairy arms around my neck and the touch

Of your lips on mine.

## Études

*Suffan Notenbuch (composed after each track on Side D of All Delighted People)*

I

In the glasshouse, a pale orchid  
Withered away in mourning.

In repentance, the sun outstretched  
His arms but was rejected.

II

At dusk, an owl stopped its flight  
In the boughs of a pine.

Needles, softer than the lawn below,  
Arranged themselves into a mandorla

III

At midnight, the light of a candle  
Softened beneath a portrait in the foyer.

The warmth in the eyes of the painting  
Diminished with the remaining beeswax.

IV

When the snow melts, a calcified  
Poppy emerges from the earth.

A faint, red scar  
Along its broken stem.

## V

A deer, scarcely visible,  
Through the iron railing, butted

The fallen apple  
Forgotten by the orchardist.

## VI

The sculpture of dread Proserpina  
Overgrown with lichens

Wept, with uncertain emotion,  
Once the last frost melted.

## VII

Upon his couch, he was the perfect  
Image of a leopard.

The fur knotted at his throat,  
The red stains beneath his nails.

## VIII

The shattered honeycomb  
Dropped by Eros at his mother's feet.

Crawling, scarcely visible beneath the resin,  
Was a bee with tattered wings.

## IX

On that hill, just at the edge of Provence,  
The lavender drifted upwards

In the manner of Ezekiel's chariot  
Towards the heavens in the night.

## X

Above the lacquered hexagon  
On his nightstand was a moth.

When it landed on his hand, he thought  
He recognized the touch.

## XI

In the forest, a dark orchid  
Grew resplendently between trees

Before he was taken, by his own accord,  
Into the soft hands of the moon.

*Discourses on the Void*

I) On Christian architecture of the last century

During *compline*, my eyelids would follow the smoke,  
As it would drift above the plaster seraphim,  
To that vacuum of darkness in the highest vault.

II) On the surface of a cowry that brought to mind an image of the Black Forest

Through petrified moonlit firs, an amber fissure,  
Porous and rich, cracks like a whip through the treeline.  
Its mouth — such eager, gleaming teeth — emits no sound.

III) On the impossible bouquets of the Dutch Golden Age

It does not have to be dark out. At times, the stars  
Can be folded inwards and sewn along a veil.  
In this light, bees know to sleep.

*Alma Doll*

Beside a swanskin  
Hand; vodka,  
Flowers,  
And crystalline  
Crown of thorns.

*Sfumato*

The placement of your thumb along  
My cheekbone and the violins  
    Of the Zwilich concerto  
In the other room.

*Les fleurs dédaignées*

With my stone face,  
How like a Breton sculpture,  
Or one of Gradlon's submerged courtesans  
I must seem. As I wait, coiled as  
She Who Loves Silence with funereal  
Poise — betrayed, perhaps by the kiss of  
Chrysanthemum in my eyes  
And the fragments of mirrors before my feet.

*Do not touch  
At thorns  
Lest blood stain the petals  
Or you cease  
To recognize that they were never  
Yours to begin with.*

*Stepped lines on Yanagihara's novels*

The Anatomist stood above

His subject. Taking, from an alligator bag,  
Two velvet gloves, cut and dyed from night itself.

Very gently, with a pair

Of scissors — brass handled, antiquarian —  
He cut to its heart

With a shrike's grace and precision.

Taking a second to admire it before laying  
The organ in a carefully decorated terrarium.

*Sistrum*

Sealed but not entombed  
In the sterile hollows of the earth,  
Dripping mirth and growing feathers,  
Waiting for her death to birth.  
Garnet beads beneath her tongue and oxblood  
Stains upon his face.

*On a Sacred Heart from Tulum*

Rounds of pink roses  
Whose petals metamorphose  
Into a halo  
Around the midwinter sun  
At the edge of the ruins.

*Forest Scene for the Panels of a Rococo Drawing Room*

The hunter in a heart's forest  
Chased by maenads in the blood  
Climbed the length of a cypress tree  
To avoid the flood.  
So well hidden was that young man —  
For no Prince of Thebes was he  
That he began to gather dust  
Between the boughs and leaves.  
He lingered there for many years  
Until the beats in leopards' furs were gone.  
He wandered out — with leisurely gait —  
Pulsing through every vein and bone.

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