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Making it New: Sappho, Mary Barnard and American Modernism

Sarah Barnsley

Abstract

Contrary to the pessimism of American editors in the 1950s who told Mary Barnard that “Sappho would never sell,” Barnard’s *Sappho: A New Translation* (1958) is now in its fifty-fifth year of continuous print by the University of California Press. Expressing the bare, lyrical intensity of Sappho’s poetry without recourse to excessive linguistic ornament or narrative padding, Barnard’s translation is widely regarded as the best in modern idiom, with leading translation studies scholar Yopie Prins asserting that “Barnard’s Sappho is often read as if it is Sappho.”

This essay will examine how Barnard managed this remarkable achievement, linking Sappho to the American modernist project to “make it new,” to quote Ezra Pound. New archival material is used to show how Barnard declared herself “A Would-Be Sappho” as early as 1930. The essay begins with the reasons why Sappho was appealing to those with modernist sensibilities, reading the development of Imagists Pound, H.D. and Richard Aldington against the backdrop of the public excitement that surrounded the major excavations of Sappho’s corpus at the turn of the century. The essay then zooms-in on the ways in which Sappho was a vital element in the formulation of Barnard’s identity as a late modernist writer, particularly examining her appropriation of the imagery from Sappho’s fragments as Barnard developed her “spare but musical” late Imagist style in her poems of the 1930s and 1940s. If Barnard’s deep absorption of Sappho in her emergent years enabled her to find a means of producing American free verse in the modernist tradition, then there was an intriguing reciprocation: it was this very “Sapphic modernism,” I contend, that enabled Barnard to find a means of translating Sappho to be read “as if it is Sappho.” The essay concludes with a new interpretation of the significance of Barnard’s appropriation of Sappho in her own poetry, noting how, peculiarly, Barnard drew out of her Sappho connection a thoroughly American idiom to pit against European literary autonomy, on a par with William Carlos Williams’s own attempts to produce a thoroughly American verse. In making Sappho new for modern Americans, Barnard was, I find, making a new language for modern American poetry.

Sappho and the Imagists

One October day in 1930, having been recently introduced to the poetry of the “real moderns”¹ at Reed College in Portland, Oregon, Mary Barnard (1909-2001) wrote to her mother that she now intended to “study for greater subtlety of rhythm...greater ‘intensification’...and, to some extent, clearer images,” before signing off with a rather curious moniker. As well as a convert to the modernist movement, Barnard was, she told her mother, “a Would-Be Sappho” (Letter, October 27, 1930). Time would tell that Barnard would one day write and ‘be’ Sappho in her 1958 translation, after initiating a correspondence with Ezra Pound in 1933, who encouraged her to take up translation and serious study of Greek metric, but not before her unique brand of late Imagism had extensively engaged with Sappho’s poetry both as part of her apprenticeship in prosody and as part of her American modernist project to ‘make it new’ for the nation, as my forthcoming book *Mary Barnard, American Imagist* explores.² Modernism, for Barnard, was not an expired aesthetic standing in the way of a new poetry; it was an ongoing project of which she felt a part. Works like *The Cantos* did not leave her feeling that a finite point had been reached from which she had to depart; instead Barnard treated modernist work as working material to be used towards the achievement of as yet unfulfilled goals. Her American measure, for example, refined over two decades, developed, in part, from her assessments of Pound’s use of classical metres from *Personae* to *The Cantos*. In her use of Sappho, Barnard was doing just as her Imagist forebears had done: finding a “spare but musical” voice through the appropriation of an exemplar in the mode.³ And yet, intriguingly, Barnard managed to draw out of her Sappho connection a thoroughly American poetic idiom, as well as a best-selling text that would trigger an outpouring of classical translations by Americans. With special emphasis on Barnard’s appropriation of the imagery from Sappho’s fragments, this essay explores how Barnard managed this remarkable feat and how, in making Sappho ‘new’ for modern Americans, Barnard was making a “new verse, in a new conscious form” (Williams, “America, Whitman, and the Art of Poetry” 2) suitable for the “yawping speakers of a new language,” as her other significant mentor, William Carlos Williams, had demanded (*Selected Essays* 286).

Sappho, of course, had been central to the “real moderns” that Barnard had come under the influence of, especially Pound and H.D. “It all began with Greek

fragments,” H.D. had said in *End to Torment* (41). She could have been speaking for her lovers as much as for herself, for Pound, Richard Aldington and H.D. discovered Sappho around the same time that they were discovering both themselves and each other, buoyed by the major recovery of Sappho’s corpus which ran, rather tantalisingly, alongside the personal and creative emergences of these three poets caught up together in a triangle by turns erotic and aesthetic. In 1885, the year of Pound’s birth and one year before H.D.’s, Henry Thornton Wharton published *Sappho: Memoir, Text, Selected Renderings and a Literal Translation*, the first comprehensive book of Sappho’s lyrics in English, including translations by the Greek scholar John Addington Symonds. In 1901, Pound and H.D. met at a Halloween party. Both would go on to read and draw upon Wharton’s text, as would Barnard after them, a text which enjoyed renewed popularity in 1902 when a manuscript of Sappho’s work was discovered amongst the sandy rubbish tips of Oxyrhynchus in Egypt. Taken to Berlin for preservation by scholars from a nation which had churned out over twenty new editions and translations between the 1770s and 1850s, the aptly-named “Berlin Parchment” was quickly seized by translators.⁴ A French edition appeared in 1903, while Pound was still in college.⁵ The English edition arrived in England the year after Pound did, having published his first collection *A Lume Spento* in 1908. In 1909, J.M. Edmonds began publishing his English versions of the Berlin parchment in the pages of the *Classical Review*,⁶ the same year that Pound met the woman who was to appreciate his further experiments in Sapphics, his future wife Dorothy Shakespear, as well as the men who were to inspire his Imagist movement, fellow poets T.E. Hulme, Ford Madox Ford and Wyndham Lewis. H.D. sailed to Europe in 1911, joining Pound in London, to whom she had been engaged sometime between 1905 and 1908. There she met the English poet Richard Aldington, who shared her classical interests. As well as the articles from the *Classical Review* that H.D. would copy out in the Reading Room at the British Museum for Aldington (who, born in 1892, was still too young to gain a reader’s ticket), H.D. copied out Edmond’s Sappho translations to which Aldington swiftly responded with a poem based upon Fragment 96: “To Atthis (From the rather recently discovered papyrus of Sappho now in the British Museum).”⁷ H.D. had her own creative responses to the Oxyrhynchus finds,

among them, “Hermes of the Ways,” which she showed Pound in the British Museum tea room.⁸

H.D.’s and Aldington’s poems after Sappho crystallised some of the ideas that Pound had been having about the nature of the new poetry. After all, he and Dorothy had been reading Sappho themselves during their courtship when a light had gone on. “Blessed be Sappho who has shown you a path towards Truth,” Dorothy wrote to Pound in 1911 (Letter, September 14, 1911). Upon reading H.D.’s “Hermes of the Ways” in 1912, Pound famously informed H.D. and Aldington that the three of them were founders of a new poetic school: Imagists. Pound’s own work approximating Sapphics appeared soon after in the June 1912 issue of *The English Review*;⁹ and in October 1912, Pound forwarded work by H.D. and Aldington to Harriet Monroe at *Poetry*, saying of H.D.’s contribution that “it is in the laconic speech of the Imagistes... It’s straight talk, straight as the Greek!” (Letter, October 1912). A draft of Aldington’s “To Atthis” was published in September 1913 in *The New Freewoman*,¹⁰ above H.D.’s “Sitalkas,” another poem in the Greek vein, paired on the same page as the poets themselves were paired in marriage the very next month. In 1914, Edmonds produced more volumes of Greek fragments and Pound published *Des Imagistes*. By the time that Edmonds finally published the comprehensive *Lyra Graeca* in the Loeb classical series in 1922, closely followed by other translations by Edgar Lobel and Edwin Marion Cox, Pound, H.D. and Aldington had each produced work directly after Sappho, as had Amy Lowell, who edited the Imagist anthologies that followed *Des Imagistes*, much to Pound’s chagrin; no matter, Sappho bound them all. Pound’s *Lustra* (1916) included several poems modelled on Sappho’s fragments, as did H.D.’s *Sea Garden* (1916), *Hymen* (1921) and *Heliodora* (1924). H.D. continued her classical scholarship, producing a prose meditation on Sappho probably in the early 1920s (“The Wise Sappho,” not published until 1988) and reviewing Cox’s new edition of *The Poems of Sappho* in 1925 (“The Poems of Sappho” 596). When he returned from his military duties in the First World War, Aldington resumed editorial responsibilities at *The Egoist*, where he was involved with reprinting the “Poet’s Translation Series” that he had begun before he went off to war. In 1919, Aldington brought together two titles in the series into one volume, *The Poems of Anyte of Tegea* and *Poems and Fragments of Sappho* (the Anyte translated by Aldington,

the Sappho by Edward Storer). He had already printed a small number of copies of erotic lyrics after Sappho in 1917, *The Love of Myrrhine and Konallis*, which was reprinted in 1926.¹¹

The recovery of Sappho's work, then, not only formed a backdrop to the early lives of these three poets, it also triggered their experiments with poetic form and content that they found necessary to articulate their respective situations, for classical texts, such as Sappho's fragments, were, as Aldington pointed out in his commentary to each translation that featured in the "Poet's Translation Series" printed by *The Egoist*, "more alive, more essential, more human than anything we can find."¹² Obsessed with the fragment and the whole, the need to simultaneously foreground the break-up and disintegration of culture as well as speculations of its idealised unities, the eroded form of Sappho's corpus was a tantalising prospect for European-based modernists. As Margaret Reynolds writes in *The Sappho Companion*, Sappho was seen by modernist writers as "parading modern anxieties," the dispersal of her fragmented texts a metaphor for the modern experience of urban isolation (Reynolds 314), a model who enabled the moderns, as Erika Rohrbach puts in it in her essay "H.D. and Sappho: A Precious Inch of Palimpsest," "to be what they were" (Rohrbach 187).

In Pound's case, Sappho's shredded fragments informed his Imagist theories, giving an example of how a poem may derive its impact through stripping down to the essentials, a model for intense compressions where language is seen to convey as much in the spaces *between* words as in the spaces they occupy. So whilst his "Papyrus" (1916) is an obvious parody of Sappho's recovered texts, it also signals the power of the collage effect which Pound was to craft in *The Cantos*:

Spring
Too long
Gongula (*Personae* 115)

H.D. was drawn, like Pound, to the energy that teeters between the textual substance and the gaps in Sappho's corpus. For her, Sappho's work was a site of strange intensity, by turns luminous and shadowy, like an island "with bays and fjords and little straits between which the sun lies clear" ("The Wise Sappho" 58). In "The Wise Sappho," Sappho's words are likened to "orange blossoms" (bright yet, like delicate blossom flakes, barely tangible), "red hearts," "red lilies," weaving

cloth of “purple wool” and “scarlet garments” (57). Added together, Sappho’s texts, to H.D., inscribe a brilliant blankness as much as they do a fabric of glorious colour, like “all colours in spectrum” (58). The results of H.D.’s fascination with such entwined opposites are “jagged narratives,” as Diana Collecott has called them: texts modelled after Sappho’s eroded corpus which relentlessly present the reader with the same kind of “dilemmas of interpretation” as the translator of Sappho (161). The result is an intense yet elusive poetry (or “accurate mystery”), as “clear” and as immediate as the sunlight H.D. imagines over a gauze-like island ruptured by “innumerable, tiny, irregular bays,” (“The Wise Sappho” 58), yet as riddling as the endlessly fragmentary pools of water that wet the island, like the crack of the wind that disappears almost as quickly as it whips the ankles of the speaker in “Hermes of the Ways.”

Sappho and Mary Barnard

Like Pound and H.D., Barnard found herself attracted to the startling directness of Sappho’s poetry in her youth. Impressed with Homer and the Greek dramatists at high school, Barnard was among a select group of four students who opted to take Greek as their language choice at Reed. Like the Imagists, Barnard was drawn to the musical rhythm of Sappho’s cadences, but she was equally intrigued by the possibilities of the fragment as exemplified by Sappho, by the intense compressions within the fragment as much as by the expressive power of the surrounding gaps, by the use of plain “straight as the Greek” speech in the poem’s presentation. Fuelled by a copy of Wharton’s *Sappho* that she received for her twenty-first birthday in December 1930, Barnard began to experiment, like Pound and H.D. before her, with classic adaptation, expanding and condensing Sappho’s fragments as in her “Love Poem,” a condensation of Sappho’s Fragment One:

Oh plaguing Aphrodite, hear my prayer!
Give back my sane mind which you stole from me,
Or make me madder, not be aware
How laughable is my insanity.¹³

One untitled poem stands out:

Fire, snow, and the night
Create a world
Where two may come together.
But violet, gold, and white

Are one gray
With the rain, the light
And the thawing snow.
In the common day
We walk again remote
With alien gray faces.¹⁴

Here, Barnard takes images from several Sapphic fragments and shrinks them into one line, into a single phrase. “Violet, gold, and white” alludes to the colours that Sappho associated with Aphrodite, mentioned in many fragments. “Violet” refers to the colour of gifts given to Aphrodite in ritual, such as “violet tiaras”¹⁵ or “the folds of a purple/kerchief;”¹⁶ “gold” denotes the colour of Aphrodite’s winged chariot which carries her to the aid of Sappho in Fragment One; and “white” is the colour of several images related to Aphrodite—the whiteness of the foam from which she was born of the sea; the whiteness of the flowers of her myrtle groves where she was said to perform rituals; and the whiteness of the rock of Leucas from which it was thought she leapt out of mad desire for her lover Phaon.¹⁷

“Fire, snow, and the night” has about it “the fresh, colloquial directness” that Barnard admired both in the Imagists and in Sappho (*Sappho* 102), recalling the feeling of “words [that] fit so naturally into the rhythm that they seem like spoken words raised to the highest degree of music and expressiveness” that Sir Maurice Bowra identified as Sappho’s chief virtue (193). In what is one of Barnard’s most overtly erotic poems, however subtle (and, perhaps, euphemistic), “Fire, snow, and the night” suggests the sadness of the separation of two lovers parting in the morning, having “come together” at night and then walking “again remote” in “the common day.” The focus is not on how Sappho’s experience is *comparable* to that of Barnard’s speaker, as in some of her early adaptations, but on the intensity of the speaker’s experience directly. Whether one immediately grasps the Sapphic allusions or not, “violet, gold, and white” presents vibrant visual images that stimulate the senses. They are colour metaphors for the “fire, snow, and the night” that is the setting for the lovers’ encounter. That the passion suddenly fades—that “violet, gold, and white/are one gray”—is the emotional turmoil of the poem, and Barnard chooses to tell this through adding a colour metaphor of her own, “gray,” adapting the Sapphic allusion in order to emotionally load the statement. Just as the quick presentation of vibrant colours excites the senses, so does the use of “gray” have a devastating immediacy. In locating sexual disappointment in the

colour grey, Barnard follows what Pound had done in his classic adaptations in *Lustra*, where an abandoned lover is left to mourn “Grey olive leaves beneath a rain-cold sky” (“Gentildonna”), or finds their despair illustrated in the dull olive branches stripped to the ground like “pale carnage beneath bright mist (“April”) (*Personae* 93).

Despite Barnard’s announcement that she was a “Would-Be Sappho,” despite all her experiments, under Pound, with Sapphics, despite her early adaptations from Sappho’s fragments, what is perplexing about Barnard’s late Imagist poetry is that as she refined her technique, Sappho seemed to vanish from her poetry entirely. “Fire, snow, and the night” makes a flicker of a reference to her corpus; and though classical in feel, the connections between this kind of experiment and Sappho’s fragments are, at best, subtle. And yet the 1950s saw Barnard pull off a masterful translation of the recovered Sappho corpus, praised by both Pound and Williams for its fusion of modern American idiom and clean, precise musical rhythm, as well as by critics for its unprecedented accuracy in capturing Sappho’s exacting plainness of speech; “Barnard’s Sappho is read as if it is the voice of Sappho,” declared Yopie Prins emphatically (5). What happened? How did Barnard manage such a skilful transition from hit-and-miss adaptation in the early 1930s to acclaimed translation in the 1950s if she seemed to give up on Sappho during the interim? I would argue that she never did give Sappho up, despite appearances; that the more she explored Imagism and free verse, the more she explored what she called the “cool country”¹⁸ of her northwestern local, and, of course, the more she experienced for herself the “extremes of love’s history” that Longinus observed as specific to Sappho’s lyric, Sappho became a *covert* presence in Barnard’s late Imagist poems, rather than an absence; and in this she was following H.D., who, Eileen Gregory writes, “absorbed Sappho at a ‘pre-verbal level’” (154).¹⁹ Gregory implies that Sappho’s lyrics existed in H.D.’s consciousness in a flexible form, being “pre-verbal” because they were resources for verbalisation into new work: “[i]n some of the early lyrics of H.D....traces of [Sappho’s] images and tonalities unobtrusively [mark] individual lyrics,” Gregory comments. In Barnard’s case, Sappho’s ability to bind and compact extremes and opposites into direct, immediate imagery held particular appeal. Longinus had said:

Do you not wonder how she [Sappho] gives chase at once to soul and body, to words and tongue, to sight and colour, all as if scattered abroad, how, at variance within she is frozen and burns, she raves and is wise? For she is either panic-stricken or at point of death; she is haunted not only by one single emotion but their whole company. All things befall a lover, but she took the extremes of love's history and binding them in one achieved a masterpiece. (48)

For a late modernist poet so often concerned with poetry *and* place, such an aesthetic provided a perfect example for how Barnard might harness into poetry the unusual climatic conditions of the Columbia River Gorge which dominated her local and formed a backdrop to the emotional dramas that demanded to be crystallised into poetry. Snaking along the Washington/Oregon stateline that divided Barnard's Vancouver hometown from Reed in Portland, the gorge is a formidable setting for the creative imagination. On one side of the Columbia, the Oregon side facing north, the gorge is steep; as a result, rain makes it way quickly down to the river via waterfalls, and the land is dark and wet. But on the Washington side facing south, the gorge possesses a gentler slant; there the land is drier as rain eases its way down to the river with less ferocity, and sunnier and lighter than the land opposite. Such drastically different climates are normally divided by a mountain, not a river; the resultant open space between them generates amazing light displays such as that of "Fire, snow, and the night," as well as the world's foremost example of a natural hybridisation system forged by the cross-fertilisations of the plants and animals that inhabit the opposing climates in unusually close proximity.²⁰ The effect of all this is the blending of peculiarly companionable opposites; the northwestern climate produces physical extremes in a tiny fragment of land, parallel to the "extremes of love's history" that Longinus observed in a fragment of Sappho's poetry.

So in poems like "The River Under Different Lights," while there is no overt allusion to Sappho, what we might call Sappho's 'oppositional poetics' is detectable in the articulation of the conflicting currents of light and water that confuse the speaker's senses. Comprised of three fragmentary sections which Barnard began working on in the 1930s, the first fragment, "The Gorge," begins:

Light has the dull luster of pewter
and the clouds move sidewise clawing the tops of the crags,

resting their soft gray bellies
briefly in the high valleys.

Foam, plowing against the rapids
gathers all brightness. (*Collected Poems* 21)

Not only are there colour oppositions—the “dull luster” against the bright foam—but also oppositions of speed and movement, as the crab-like clouds gently pause for a brief rest while the ship-like foam spiritedly plows against the rapids. The foam’s intensity is hastened through the shortness of the sentence which articulates it, in sharp contrast to the dullness of the high-valley light that languishes like a cloud over four lines. These are oppositions that are continued through the other fragments, from the ship that appears “as though resting from the sea’s labor” contrasted against the quick-moving buses that just about allow passengers “snatches of river between madrona and fir,” to the “fog with a slow edge” set against the “flux of stream and ocean.” The central opposition is between clarity and fogginess, between the light to be had on one side of the Columbia River Gorge, and the inclement fog that floats down from the steep, high valleys of the other. The clouds come to ground in the second fragment of the poem, “The Ship,” creating “fogging buses;” in opposition, the bright, plowing foam lifts off the surface of the water to reveal a passing ship, “a white vessel/dividing reflected forests.” In the third fragment, “The Estuary,” the light contrasts are simply compressed into that of “daylight and fog.”

These tensions are heightened by the poem’s conflicting narrative currents. On the one hand, the poem appears to move from land to sea, progressing from “The Gorge” to the “The Estuary.” Yet one element, the ship, is making the opposite journey as it ‘passes inland,’ a metaphor, perhaps, for the oppositional movement of the poem. As with “Fire, snow, and the night,” Sappho-inspired techniques of compression and fragmentation predominate, and intensify the oppositions. Though the poem takes place within a very tight linguistic space, sentences are still maintained; the poem makes sense while also allowing itself to be pared down. It appears to simulate the appearance of fragments, with irregular stanzas which grate against the coherence conferred by the numerical and lexical sequencing of the fragments which sets them into order. The result is that the poem is made to be as confounding as the landscape which accommodates such seemingly incomparable idiosyncrasies. In its oppositional texturing, Barnard’s poem is evocative of the bewildering oppositions that swiftly move through Sappho’s

fragments that she later activated in her translation, from the “tender/ feet of Cretan girls” capable of violently “crushing/a circle” in “the soft/smooth flowering grass” to the “soft hands” that “tear off/dill shoots” to please the Three Graces.²¹

With the lack of prominent narrator—there is no “I” or “we” common to many of Barnard’s early lyric poems—there is no obvious human story to “The River Under Different Lights;” the only people mentioned are the “riders in the fogging buses” who snatch glimpses of the river, and even then they are strangers, to each other as much as to the eye watching. And yet there’s an overwhelming sense of melancholy in this poem; all brightness is gathered by the foam; greyness descends upon the scene; the bus passengers can see increasingly little of the landscape. Perhaps the poem is an extension of the separation of “Fire, snow, and the night,” inflected with the same greyness that arises following a failed love encounter? Certainly there is erotic suggestion in the opening lines, in the clouds resting on crags with their bellies out as if in bed, in the foam brightening with orgasmic intensity, as well as in the movement of the ship “dividing reflected forests” on the river surface. In an early, unpublished, version of the poem, “September” (1932), the erotic is displaced onto the local vegetation, which is tinged with sexual energy that freezes and burns at the same time after Sappho: “By the climbing road vine maple is frosted to fire/And elderberries are ripe with woodsmoke’s blue,” wrote Barnard. Something of the “alien” relationship that develops between the two former lovers is articulated in “The Estuary,” the final fragment of “The River Under Different Lights.” Here in the borderline space of the estuary (the river/sea border recalling the night/day border that agonises in “Fire, snow, and the night”), “fresh water meets salt,” two are blended, and then:

Nothing is sure, neither
tide, season, nor hour
in this flux of stream and ocean,
daylight and fog,
where only the fish,
a secret presence, move
surely on spring’s errand. (*Collected Poems* 23)

That is, there is no “spring’s errand” for the unspecified lovers, “only the fish” have this surety; in this poem, as in “Fire, snow, and the night,” the unspecified lovers (themselves a “secret presence”) become “remote” from one another.

So the disappointments of love and sex of “Fire, snow, and the night” return again and again in Barnard’s *Cool Country* poems (indeed, poems that probe the “cool country” of relationships), surfacing in the Washington deserted shorelines, the chilled forest valleys, the mists and fog of the Columbia River Gorge, the river itself with its currents as changeable as affairs of the heart. “Some poems may seem like nature poems, but they’re not that. They are not just descriptive. I would use an image in nature to evoke an emotional situation,” Barnard would later remark.²² Thus the bitter end of the implied love affair that has run its course, like a river, in “The River Under Different Lights” (which did not make it into *Cool Country*) is re-staged in “The Rapids” (which did), a poem based on Celilo Falls, the huge area of dramatic falls and rapids along the Columbia River wiped out with the building of the Dalles dam in the 1950s, and with them one of the oldest, continuously occupied tribal settlements in the U.S. In the middle stanza of this three stanza poem, Barnard’s speaker laments:

The water we saw broken upon the rapids
Has dragged silt through marshland
And mingled with the embittered streams of the sea.
One might have kept sweet pailsful and kept nothing. (*Cool Country* 7)

Just as the implied lovers become once again “alien” and “remote” in “Fire, snow and the night” and “The River Under Different Lights,” so too is the outcome of “the rapids” of this particular affair less than pleasant. In the detail of the transformation of fresh water into a silt-laden “embittered streams” is the detail of the end of the love affair—the bitterness of something that once yielded “sweet pailsful” now amounts to nothing. As in the most memorable of Sappho’s lyrics, the experience is bittersweet, and it is the land’s experience as much as anyone else’s. The “one” who “might have kept sweet pailsful and kept nothing” is at best, distant, part of an axiomatic phrase, the human element placed just on the edge of the frame, just a little too remote for the reader to see, a “secret presence.” And yet through so many of these poems persists the “secret presence” of Sappho, instructing the aesthetic.

Sappho and American modernism: some conclusions

Sappho had had something to teach the Imagist poets, and there were good reasons for them to try to emulate her plainness of speech, her verbal economy, her musicality. Sappho had also had something to teach the American modernists—particularly those concerned with a specifically homespun modernism—so there were good reasons, too, for poets like Barnard to emulate her oppositional poetics as a means of harnessing the range of human emotions *and* the extremes and ranges of the American landscape comprised of many different locals, her “collective notion of poetry”²³ as a way in which Americans could incorporate the many accents, dialects, viewpoints and concerns of members of the new nation, the “yawping speakers of a new language” as Williams put it. Indeed, out of all poets, Sappho was among the few who could be considered as an exemplar for American poets shaping a new lyric, for like Homer, Shakespeare and Dante, Sappho was a poet who heralded the new times for her nation; she had about her what Emerson described as “the timely.” Emerson had called for the American poet to go about the “singing” of America with the same sense of prescient purpose as Homer and Dante who were European models of “the timely man.” Addressing Americans, Emerson complained in “The Poet”:

Time and nature yield us many gifts, but not yet the timely man, the new religion, the reconciler, whom all things await. Dante’s praise is, that he dared to write his autobiography in colossal cipher, or into universality. We have yet had no genius in America, with tyrannous eye, who knew the value of our incomparable materials, and saw, in the barbarism and the materialism of the times, another carnival of the same gods whose picture he so much admires in Homer. (281)

If Sappho’s wider corpus had been available, perhaps Emerson would have cited her too as an exemplar in his passionate appeal for American poets to dare to come into the moment and “chaunt” their “own times and social circumstances” (281), for, as Barnard so eloquently argued in her essay-length footnote to her Sappho translation, Sappho had something of this timeliness. “Sappho was not, as has sometimes been assumed by those unacquainted with the tradition, a lonely poet adrift on a provincial island,” Barnard wrote, but lived “among the richest and liveliest Greek settlements of [her] period” where “both art and science were flourishing. This was the age that produced the Hera of Samos and the Pythagorean philosophers” (*Sappho* 95). This age had some parallel with Barnard’s; both Sappho and Barnard were witness to the early stages of their nations’ rise to power,

their emergent modernity, and their increasing dominance in the arts and sciences. “[Sappho] was riding the crest of her own wave; her world seemed modern to her as ours does to us, and just about as troubled,” Barnard continued.

However for all the parallels that Barnard saw between modern America and Sappho’s time “among the richest and liveliest Greek settlements of...the age that produced the Hera of Samos and the Pythagorean philosophers,” it was simply not enough for this new poetry, this new literature, this new nation to depend in any way on another culture to hold it up; simply not enough for Barnard’s poetry to assert itself through classical allusion, for Barnard to settle as a “Would-Be Sappho;” American poetry *had* to be American, first and foremost, as culturally autonomous as the English, as the Greeks, as the poets of the Italian Renaissance, and in no way deferring. This is what Williams was getting at shortly before he began corresponding with Barnard, when he reminded any would-be American writer of certain aesthetic imperatives. “We must invent, we must create out of the blankness about us, and we must do this by the use of new constructions” (*Selected Essays* 103), Williams had implored. Like Barnard, Williams saw America as “a new world naked,” as Paul Mariani effused in his Williams biography that took the phrase from *Spring and All* for its title. *Classic adaptation*, of the kind that Pound and H.D. had done in their early Imagist phases, as Barnard had in hers, got in the way of *American form-making*, which was the priority task. Whitman had set the pace in *Leaves of Grass* and his free verse innovations, and the following generations of American poets were obliged to be just as bold, to have the same “tyrannous eye” for “incomparable materials,” to make forms as new as spatial and material conditions of the times, indeed to catch “the truth of [American] civilization in its own forms” (Williams in Mariani 365).

So this is why Sappho became a “secret presence” in Barnard’s late Imagist poetry; her example had to be, in the end, just that—an example, and not a template from which to take a direct cut, for America had its own templates. Coming under Williams’s influence when she moved to New York, and having dug through his attic of manuscripts, reviews, and other writings when she was Poetry Curator at the University of Buffalo as she established Williams’s archive, there is little doubt that Barnard was aware of all that Williams had written about the new American art, and how the American poet should work. As a young poet she had

wanted to write like Sappho; but as her American project gathered pace, Barnard realized that her relationship to Sappho had to change. To echo Williams, in order to be like Sappho, to make a new art as worthy and as prescient as Sappho's, Barnard had to write *unlike* Sappho. "When each poem has achieved its particular form unlike any other, when it shall stand alone – then we have achieved our language. We have said what it is in our minds to say," dictated Williams in 1919 ("Notes from a Talk on Poetry" 216).

Of course, in the end Barnard *did* become Sappho in her critically-acclaimed translation of 1958; but this was no act of deference, for even in this remarkable translation which recovered Sappho for audiences of the modern, industrial age, there is the pulse of her and Williams's American project. It was certainly not what anyone had expected, not even Barnard. Despite having secured an introduction from the leading classical scholar and translator Dudley Fitts, Barnard's agent Diarmuid Russell had great difficulties trying to place the manuscript with a publisher. Florence Codman's Anchor Books told her that "Sappho would never sell" (*Assault on Mount Helicon* 289). When the manuscript was eventually snapped up by the University of California Press, not only did the book sell and sell (by the time Barnard wrote her memoir in the early 1980s the book was ninth on California's list of best-selling paperbacks), other translations within America swiftly followed it.²⁴ The feeling by critics was that Barnard had brought Sappho to a modern American audience, expressing the bare, lyrical intensity of her verse without recourse to the excessive linguistic ornament or narrative padding that had smothered so many previous attempts to translate Sappho into English—English English, that is, not American English. Just as Imagism perhaps belonged to the spare, austere American 1930s, perhaps Sappho's idiom coincided more comfortably with what Pound described to Barnard as the "amurikan langwidge" (Letter, January 22, 1934). Yet while Fitts's introduction paid tribute to Barnard's capture of Sappho's "pungent downright plain style," there was also recognition of the kind of "new conscious form" that Williams called for:

Like the Greek, it is stripped and hard, awkward with the fine awkwardness of truth. Here is no trace of the "sweet sliding, fit for a verse" that one expects to find in renderings of Sappho. It is exact translation; but in its composition, the spacing, the arrangement of stresses, it is also high art. This, one thinks, is what Sappho must have been like; and Longinus [...] was no fool when he pointed to her marshalling of sharp details, rather than to the melody of her verse, as the secret of her eloquence. (Fitts in *Sappho* ix-x)

And so in Barnard's *Sappho: A New Translation* we also find Barnard's late Imagism. In skilfully pared-down lines there's the same kind of conversational ease and cutting clarity detectable in poems such as "Fire, snow, and the night," managed into ribbon-like visual frames that simultaneously suggest fragments and wholes as in this example

Tonight I've watched

The moon and then
the Pleiades
go down

The night is now
half-gone; youth
goes; I am

In bed alone²⁵

Like Barnard's "Fire, snow, and the night," Sappho finds the move from night to dawn a fitting metaphor for the awareness of a lover's loneliness; the physical local coincides with the speaker's emotional local. As in "Shoreline," the fragment enacts several tonal shifts while maintaining a central, unifying "I" as the speaker moves from a mood of quiet observation ("I've watched/The moon and then/the Pleiades/go down"), to one of introspective regret ("youth/goes," a reference to the departure of youthfulness, but also a play on the departure of the "youth" who once shared the speaker's nights), to a final mood of muted despair ("I am/in bed alone"). Setting the first line off from the rest of the fragment is a device Barnard sustains throughout her translation; in this way Barnard seems to give the fragment a semblance of completion as the first line doubles-up as a title. Like an Imagist poem, the connective tissue of this fragment, as with others in Barnard's translation, comes not so much from the verbal content, but from the verbal rhythm which works towards the totality of the utterance— everything is part of "a simple but emotionally loaded statement," each part flowing rhythmically to the next in a "spare but musical" way (*Assault on Mount Helicon* 282), oiled by the easy familiarity of phrases following natural word order and the plain, common word, "stripped and hard" as Fitts observed, "straight as the Greek" as Pound had demanded, over anything ostentatious or florid. The fragment is exactly what Williams was after for the American poem—a machine of visual and auditory

movement, each part “moving rapidly from one thing to the next...a passage through...a swiftness impaling beauty” (*Selected Essays* 123). In a way, Barnard was simply being faithful to the Greek; “one thing is bound to strike the reader” of Sappho and Homer, Barnard said in 1994, “and that is the way their poems *move*... In both poets there is visual movement and there is auditory movement” (“Further Notes on Metric” 153). But this was also what she had wanted for her own “spare but musical” poetry; she wanted the sound of the voice “*making* a simple but emotionally loaded statement” (emphasis added), a line in the act of movement as in speech.

“Sappho’s poems are not the work of a young woman, but of a mature, older woman. I could not have translated her poems 20 years earlier,” Barnard later told David Gordon.²⁶ In a way, she was right, for the “Would-Be Sappho” needed to discover her own way of managing ‘simplicity’ after Poundian Imagism, and her own way of making her poetry genuine, sincere to its context, both unquestionably hers and unquestionably American. In her late Imagist poems focussed on her American local that drew her work close to the early Imagist poetry of H.D. and the wider American poetry of William Carlos Williams, Barnard achieved this simplicity with aplomb. In the same year that she completed her drafts of the translation, Barnard brought out her second volume entitled *A Few Poems*. She sent copies of both the fragments and her collection to Williams, of which he said in 1952: “It is all there; the new is all there... it is...what we have been about for all these years” (Letter, December 31, 1952). It was a ‘new,’ of course, that vitally depended on Barnard’s careful and strategic synthesis of Hellenism with modernism, yielding both a ‘new Sappho’ and a ‘new poetry.’

¹ Barnard said that “the poets I think of as the real moderns: [were] not Masters, Sandburg, the Benets, but Eliot, Pound, H.D., Edith Sitwell, Hart Crane, and...Cummings” and, latterly, William Carlos Williams. See her *Assault on Mount Helicon* 36.

² For further discussion of my critical notion of “late Imagism,” see Chapter 1 of *Mary Barnard, American Imagist*.

³ “Spare but musical” is a term that perhaps best defines Barnard’s poetic style, and came from her study of Sappho. She recalls in her literary memoir: “I found here, in Sappho’s Greek...the style I had been groping toward, or perhaps merely hungering for, when I ceased to write poetry [for a time in the mid 1940s]. It was spare but musical, and had, besides, the sound of the speaking voice making a simple but emotionally loaded statement. It is never ‘tinkling’ as Bill Williams...characterized it. Neither is it ‘strident’ as Rexroth described it. It is resonant although unmistakably in the female register” (*Assault on Mount Helicon* 282).

⁴ For a detailed overview of the emergence of modern Sappho translations in Europe, see DeJean.

⁵ See Renée Vivien, *Sappho: Traduction nouvelle avec le texte grec*.

⁶ See Edmonds, “Three Fragments of Sappho” and “More Fragments of Sappho.”

⁷ This is the title that Aldington gave the poem for its first publication in *The New Freewoman* in September 1913. However, in *Des Imagistes*, Aldington changed the title to reflect its preliminary acquisition by Germany: “To Atthis (After the Manuscript of Sappho now in Berlin).” See Pound, ed., *Des Imagistes* 19.

⁸ See H.D.’s account in *End to Torment* 40. Richard Aldington recounts this incident slightly differently; he thought it possible that H.D. might have in fact mailed it to Pound. See Aldington 122.

⁹ See Pound, “The Return” and “Apparuit” (343-44).

¹⁰ This version was entitled “To Atthis (From the rather recently discovered papyrus of Sappho now in the British Museum)” (114).

¹¹ *The Love of Myrrhine and Konallis and Other Prose Poems* was first published in Cleveland by Clerk’s Press in 1917, of which very few copies remain. A limited edition of one hundred and fifty signed copies were published in 1926 in Chicago by Pascal Covici.

¹² See, for example, the first of this series *The Poems of Anyte of Tegea* (7). There were six editions in this series, including *Poems and Fragments of Sappho*, translated by Edward Storer, Poet’s Translation Series, 2 (London: The Egoist, 1915). Aldington’s and Storer’s translations were later reprinted in one volume, entitled *The Poems of Anyte of Tegea and Poems and Fragments of Sappho*.

¹³ Mary Barnard, “Love Poem,” Mary Barnard Papers provided by Elizabeth J. Bell, literary executor to the estate of Mary Barnard, Vancouver, Washington.

¹⁴ Mary Barnard, untitled poem that begins “Fire, snow, and the night,” Mary Barnard Papers provided by Elizabeth J. Bell, literary executor to the estate of Mary Barnard, Vancouver, Washington.

¹⁵ See Barnard’s fragment number 42 in *Sappho: A New Translation* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1958).

¹⁶ See Barnard’s fragment number 21 in *Sappho: A New Translation*.

¹⁷ “Leucas” derives from “leukos” which means “white.” Leucas is an island in the Ionian Sea, named after the whiteness of its rocks.

¹⁸ See Barnard, *Cool Country*.

¹⁹ The “pre-verbal level” that Gregory cites is a quotation from D.S. Carne Ross’ essay “Translation and Transposition.” Carne-Ross uses the term “pre-verbal level” to describe the point to which H.D. broke down Euripides’ *Ion* before reconstituting it on her own terms (8). Gregory is somewhat misquoting Carne-Ross here, but creatively so, using the term to describe the extent to which H.D. had *absorbed* Sappho into her mind. Margaret Reynolds concurs with Gregory’s usage and quotes it in *The Sappho History*: “Sappho’s vocabulary, and her imagery, are everywhere in H.D. absorbed, as Gregory says...‘at the pre-verbal level’” (219).

²⁰ For this observation I am indebted to Bert G. Brehm, Professor of Biology Emeritus at Reed College. On 3 June 2005 I attended one of Brehm’s field trips to the Columbia River Gorge, where Brehm emphasised the unique biology of the region.

²¹ See, respectively, fragments number 23 and 19 in *Sappho: A New Translation*.

²² Mary Barnard quoted by Jane Van Cleve, “Hearing Sappho.”

²³ The phrase is from Margaret Reynolds who writes that “[Sappho’s] collective notion of poetry—where many sing, and many consciousnesses are realised—means that Sappho can assert her own identity within the poem. She makes a persona other than herself who can then look at her, recognise her, name her. Even in the few fragments that we have, one of the peculiarities of Sappho’s poetry is that she often names herself, brings herself into existence by signing her own name in her compositions.” See Reynolds, *The Sappho History* 4.

²⁴ See Lattimore; Groden; Barnstone; O’Connell; Davenport.

²⁵ Barnard, fragment number 64 in *Sappho: A New Translation*.

²⁶ See Gordon (171).

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Note: The Mary Barnard Papers were transferred from the archives of Elizabeth J. Bell, literary executor to Mary Barnard’s literary estate, in Vancouver, Washington, to the Yale Collection of American Literature at the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library in January 2005. I consulted some of these papers (some originals, some copies) in Vancouver during visits to Elizabeth J. Bell in 2003, 2006, 2009 and 2011. I also consulted some of these papers at the Beinecke during my tenure as H.D. Fellow over 2007-2008. For reasons of transparency, I have thus referenced materials according to the source I personally consulted during the preparation of this essay—either “Mary Barnard Papers provided by Elizabeth J. Bell, literary executor to the estate of Mary Barnard, Vancouver, Washington,” or “Mary Barnard Papers, Yale Collection of American Literature, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University.” These materials appear by kind permission of Elizabeth J. Bell.

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