Contents

List of Illustrations vii
Acknowledgments xi
Introduction xvii
Chronology xxxiii

Chapter 1: Sapphic Performances 1
The Implications of Reading Sappho 2
“Old Things Are Becoming New” 6
“Charming Tableau” 11
“Going Back with Knowledge” 17
“If I Can Ever Sing to You” 28
“My Orchard in Mytellini” 31

Chapter 2: Weaving 41
“One Handwoven Dress” 42
“Beautiful, Statuesque Girl, Heroine of Two Social Continents” 46
The “Anadromic Method” and Experimental Replication 56
“My Happiness Hangs on a Thread” 63
“The Key to the Matter Is the Loom!” 72

Chapter 3: Patron of Byzantine Music 79
The “Musical Question” and the Oresteiaka 80
Penelope Sikelianos Duncan 87
After Penelope 91
Konstantinos Psachos and the Field of Greek Music 103
Eva Sikelianos in the Field of Greek Music 111
Patron of Greek Music 116
Lessons from India’s Decolonization Movement 121

Chapter 4: Drama 137
Isadora Duncan’s “Multiple Oneness,” 1903 140
Atalanta in Bar Harbor, 1905 144
Delphic Visions on Mount Parnassus, Early 1920s 148
Prometheus Bound in Delphi, 1927 154
The Persians at Jacob’s Pillow, 1939 164
Chapter 5: Writing  174
   Upward Panic  175
   The Loom Is the Key (Again)  184
   “Politics”  193
   Translating Angelos Sikelianos’s Act of Resistance  201
   Angelos’s *Akritika* Thrusts Eva into Politics  208
   “Greek Home-Coming Year”  218

Epilogue: Recollecting a Life  224

   Appendix: Cast of Characters  237
   Notes  247
   References  301
   Index  323
In the summer of 1900, Eva Palmer was reading the lines of Sappho in the company of her friends Renée Vivien and Natalie Clifford Barney, preparing for a series of Sapphic performances in Bar Harbor, a summer island resort on Mount Desert Island off the coast of Maine. Of the three women, Barney and Vivien (who was later christened, in a portrait, “Sapho 1900”) are well known as formative members of a Paris-based literary subculture of self-described women lovers, or “Sapphics.” In a period that scholars have identified as “pivotal” in delineating modern lesbian identity, they interwove the fragmented texts of Sappho in their life and work, making the archaic Greek poet Sappho of Lesbos the quintessential figure of female same-sex desire and Sapphism, or lesbianism. They appear in the history of gay and lesbian sexuality as the women who contributed substantially to the turn-of-the-century decadent rewriting of Baudelaire’s lexicon of the sexualized woman.

Eva Palmer is largely absent from this history. She has made cameo appearances as the “pre-Raphaelite” beauty with “the most miraculous long red hair” who performed in two of Barney’s garden theatricals in Paris. Yet Eva’s correspondence, along with such sources as photographs and newspaper coverage, indicate that she participated in many more performances. From 1900 to the summer of 1907, the years when she moved with Barney between the United States and Paris, she developed a performance style that complemented the poetic language of Vivien and Barney by implicating Sappho in the practice of modern life. Eva’s acts helped transform the fragmented Sapphic poetic corpus into a new way of thinking and creating, before her differences with Barney propelled her to move to Greece to live a different version of the Sapphic life.

“Implicate” is a good word to think with as I begin to track Eva’s involvement with Sappho’s poetry. The word is rich in associations of braiding, twisting, weaving, and folding in its Greek and Latin roots (πλέκω, to
Chapter 1

weave; πλόκος, lock or braid of hair; πλοκάμι, tentacle; plico, to fold; and plecto, to fold, wind, coil, wreath). It calls up the body of the reader together with her mind. To study how Eva’s reading of Sappho “implicated” or involved her in Sappho’s poetic corpus on both a physical and literary level, I pay attention to Eva’s hair, dress, and gestures; the photographs for which she posed; the letters she wrote; and the ways in which these different media delivered the pain and pleasure of Sappho’s effects. I look at how she folded Sappho’s extant words into her life, simultaneously living through her readings of Sappho and shaping Sappho’s meaning through her life to turn her life of art into an art of life.

THE IMPLICATIONS OF READING SAPPHO

Signs of Eva’s involvement with Sappho’s poetry are subtly coded in an early twentieth-century photograph (figure 1.1). Eva, viewed in profile, is seated in a leather, cushioned chair. She holds a book upright on her lap, and a wall of books appears in the background to her left. She is elegantly dressed, with a white fur stole falling over her white lace dress, and her hair loosely braided and collected in a low chignon. While the picture represents an upper-class white American woman reading in a Victorian home study, the Greek prototype is suggested by the hair. The hair’s styling combines with the whiteness of the dress to give a feeling of being Greek. This elusive Greekness then transfers to the reading pose. Eva is holding the book as if it were a scroll. She is posing as both a woman reading Greek and a Greek woman reading.

The pointedly Sapphic connections appear when the photo is set next to a line-drawn rendering of an ancient female reader painted on a fifth-century Attic red-figure vase (figure 1.2). At the turn of the century, Eva would not have seen the original vase, as it is displayed in the Greek National Archaeological Museum, and she did not travel to Greece before 1906. But she would have seen the line drawing reproduced in several books in the late nineteenth century. A likely source was Long Ago, a collection of Sappho-inspired poems with explicit references to erotic attachments between women, published under the pseudonym of “Michael Field” by Katharine Bradley and Edith Cooper, who were aunt and niece as well as lovers. Eva, Renée Vivien, or Natalie Barney would likely have owned a copy of the 1889 edition, which included the line drawing in its front matter. The three women sought out books with references to Sappho. Might Eva be holding this book (which, at 10 cm × 21 cm, is just about the right size) in the photograph?
FIGURE 1.1. Eva Palmer reading, ca. 1900. Acc. 96-153, Alice Pike Barney Papers, No. 6-156, SIA2018-072680. Smithsonian Institution Archives.

FIGURE 1.2. Eva Palmer reading, alongside line figure of Sappho, also seated and reading, on a vase in the museum of Athens, as rendered in Albert Dumont and Jules Chaplain’s Les Céramiques de la Grèce proper (1888), p. 358, and labeled, “Sapho et ses compagnes.—Hydres à figures rouges du Musée de la Société archéologique d’Athènes” (Sappho and her companions.—Red figures from Hydra in the Museum of the Archaeological Society of Athens; 360).
In the drawing, a seated woman, also in profile, directs her eyes downward to a scroll held upright on her lap, while a lyre is handed to her by a standing figure. Beneath the lyre, the first three letters of Sappho’s name, ΣΑΠ, form the arc of the reader’s line of vision. What does the name of Sappho identify: the woman reading, or the author of the scroll she is reading? Is this an image of Sappho or of a woman reading Sappho? It is impossible to decide. This is just one of the drawing’s many gaps, one of the troublesome lacunae of lost materials, context, and meaning. The photograph represents Eva’s performance of the image of the woman reading under the name of Sappho—a performance that revitalized the ancient image by playing with its ambiguities. Eva holds a book as if it were a scroll, like the ancient woman reading. The lines of her body, and even the table with the vase and flowers in the foreground, perfectly reflect the shape of the drawn figure. The table cuts the view of Eva’s lower limbs exactly where the ancient artifact is broken, where a piece of plain terracotta fills in the empty space. The photograph makes us see the negative space as a table. Thus it draws attention not only to the fragmented image but also to the many latent possibilities offered by the image. Eva might be playing the role of Sappho, or of a woman reading Sappho, or she might be making herself into a modern work of art in imitation of the vase painting, or she might be codifying her same-sex eroticism. These are all possible readings.

The play of the photograph with a classical image of Sappho was not an obscure allusion. The name of Sappho was known to people in the high society in which Eva traveled: wealthy vacationers such as the J. Pierpoint Morgans, Pulitzers, George Vanderbilts, and Barneys, who all had homes in Bar Harbor. They were ferried from the mainland to Mount Desert Island on a steamboat improbably called the S. S. Sappho. And when, in the previous spring, Barney had published Quelques Portraits-Sonnets de Femmes (Some portrait-sonnets of women), a book of traditional sonnets dedicated to her female lovers (whose identities she hid behind initials such as “P.M.T.” for Pauline Tarn, aka Renée Vivien, and “L.” for Liane de Pougy), a tabloid article in her hometown of Washington, DC, exposed the same-sex love interest of the book with an article entitled “Sappho Sings in Washington.”

What connotations did Sappho have for Eva and her friends and all those wealthy Americans? “Sappho” is the proper name attached to a collection of fragments of poetry dating from 630 to 570 BCE. In antiquity, Sappho was nearly as legendary as Homer. Her name identified an exceptional poet of verse in Aeolic Greek who happened to be a woman from the
island of Lesbos. So great was her poetry and so symbolic was her female gender that the ancients called her the tenth Muse. Yet little is known about her life. Contradictory stories circulated among ancient Greeks and Romans, who drew on her poetry to shape her biography and introduced new legends into her corpus. Some said she was a good lyre player, daughter, sister, wife of a rich man, mother, and homemaker. Others featured her unrequited love for a man named Phaon, which sent her hurling in a suicidal leap from the White Rocks, a high promontory on the island of Leukas. Still others, associating her with a community of women on Lesbos, wondered if she wasn’t “γυναικε[ράσ]τρια” (in love with women), hence “ἀτακτος . . . τὸν τρόπον” (irregular in her ways).14 She became “masculae autem Saffo [masculine Sappho] either because she is famous for her poetry, in which men more often excel, or because she is maligned as a tribas [a woman who has sex with another woman].”15

Everything having to do with the transmission of Sappho is elusive to the point of being powerfully suggestive. No book of her poetry survives. Indeed, hardly a whole poem is extant. Counted together, Sappho’s poetry totals just over two hundred remaining fragments, preserved as passages quoted by ancient authors and on scraps of papyrus recovered from trash heaps at Oxyrhynchus, Egypt. Paradoxically, the fragmentary nature of the work and critical attention to the eroticism of her poetry have kept Sappho’s name in circulation.16 In modern times, especially in the nineteenth century, the fragility of Sappho’s words and reputation encouraged new uses of Sappho’s name and the place name Lesbos.17 Baudelaire’s usage was especially transformative: he cast Sappho as the muse of his decadent worldview, and his poem “Lesbos” (1857) made Lesbos, Sappho’s supposed homeland, the “Mother of Greek delights” and generated “lesbians,” female companions of the “virile” Sappho, on the island of Lesbos, who looked at each other with non-procreative sexual longing. Meanwhile Sappho became the Victorian figure of the poetess, denoting femininity, sentimentality, and the inevitable fall into obscurity of the female poetic voice.18 It has been said that Baudelaire invented the “lesbian” Sappho in the 1850s; British poet Algernon Swinburne imported her to Victorian England in the 1860s; H. T. Wharton assembled her corpus and translated it in equivocating ways in the 1880s; and Pierre Louÿs, with his literary spoof Songs of Bilitis (1894), a collection of female same-sex erotic poetry supposedly written by a companion of Sappho, renewed the shock value of the name of Sappho in fin de siècle Paris.19

It is within this context that Eva, in the company of Barney and Vivien in Bar Harbor, was posing for a picture after an image identified with
Sappho. I found the photo more than one hundred years later amid boxes of Natalie Barney’s things deposited with the papers of Barney’s mother, Alice Pike Barney, in the Smithsonian Archives. It offered a first glimpse of how Eva was reading Sappho’s fragments in 1900: how she was animating those fragments with her body, costumes, and props to perform a new kind of art. The photograph she created after the line drawing of the ancient painting had several layers of meaning. People uninitiated in the secrets of Sappho’s modern reception probably missed the reference to Sappho entirely. They saw just a picture of Eva reading. For Eva’s female companions, however, who saw the photo from a standpoint of their growing intimacy and developing Greek literacy, Eva’s pose drew lines of affiliation with the absent Sappho, adopting her as a powerful Greek prototype for living and making twentieth-century art. Indeed, her pose was so deeply implicated in their reading of Sappho’s fragments that it is impossible to tell where the fragments ended and Eva’s body and art began.

“OLD THINGS ARE BECOMING NEW”

But what was Greece to Eva? By what journey of intellect and desire had she come to embrace this particular Greek prototype?

A notion that the new world found creative ground in old things was integral to Eva’s nineteenth-century upbringing. It aligned with the progressive ideas of her parents, both from prominent American families and advocates of well-reasoned social and political change to counter the effects of industrialization. Her mother, Catherine Amory Bennett, a member of the Amory family descended from Salem merchants and part of Boston’s traditional upper class, was a classically trained pianist who dedicated herself to the arts and progressive causes such as women’s suffrage. She gathered musicians in the family home to play in her small orchestra or to sing. Operatic divas Nellie Melba, Lillian Nordica, Emma Eames, Marcella Sembrich, and especially Emma Calvé were near the hearts of Eva and her siblings.20 Eva’s father, Courtlandt, claimed he was descended from a knighted crusader and an ancestor who came over on the Mayflower.21 Trained as a lawyer at Columbia Law School, he spent his days “investigat[ing] for himself the questions, the problems, the mysteries of life. . . . No error could be old enough, popular, plausible, or profitable enough, to bribe his judgment or to keep his conscience still.”22 When he purchased
a stake in Gramercy Park School and Tool-House (also known as the Von Taube School, after its originator and director, G. Von Taube), he supported its “new education” model of self-directed learning harmoniously combining theoretical and practical learning to prepare students for a business or scientific course. Yet he also directed pupils to study “Greek, French, German and English systems of philosophy, following his motto, “old things are passing away; behold, old things are becoming new.” This was his willful misreading of the passage in 2 Corinthians 5:17 that reads “all things are become new.”

Old Greek things were deeply ingrained in the look and feel of the world that these Mayflower descendants had inherited. Greece entered America (as it did Germany and Britain) as a country of the imagination, a special locus of aesthetic and intellectual origins, practically from the country’s founding moments. Initially the founders filtered Greece into American self-governance through the guise of Roman republicanism, considered a more congenial model than Athens’s direct democracy. Then, around the turn of the nineteenth century and coinciding with the receding of fears of the “perils of democracy,” American elites began drawing visible lines of affiliation that filled the gap between the new world and ancient Greece through a variety of Greek “revivals.” “Greek revival” architecture, for example, was seen first in the Bank of Philadelphia (Benjamin Harry Latrobe, 1798–1801) and quite creatively in the capitol building in Washington (Latrobe, 1803–17, and Charles Bulfinch, 1818–26), then in an increasing number of banks, universities, churches, town halls, plantation houses, and even small urban homes and farm-houses across the expanding nation, until it became known as the “national style” of architecture in the United States. The naming of more than one hundred American towns after cities in ancient Greek literature (Athens, Sparta, Corinth, Thebes, Delphi, Troy, Olympia) and even after a hero of the Greek rebellion against the Ottoman Empire (1821–28) (Ypsilanti) from the early 1820s through the 1850s expressed both attention to ancient Greek prototypes and sympathy for modern Greek independence, another spectacular materialization of the Greek idea in which American philhellenes participated.

Eva’s parents and then her stepfather, Dr. Robert Abbe, themselves enacted Greek ideas on a daily basis. A case in point is a story Eva told about her maternal grandfather at his deathbed. His attending physician was Dr. Abbe, the man who would marry Eva’s mother after her father’s sudden death from peritonitis in 1888. An accomplished surgeon with strong
training in Greek and Latin and a serious interest in archaeology, Abbe knew of his patient’s love of ancient Greek. When he saw that the old man was “sinking into the last lethargy,” Abbe “started reciting a Pindaric Ode” in order to gain time so that the patient’s daughter Catherine could arrive to say her last good-byes. The dying man “recovered consciousness and finished the passage.” Many years later, Eva’s mother, now married to Dr. Abbe, worked with a small group in Bar Harbor to construct a building of the arts that was “severely classic” in design. The building opened its doors on Saturday, July 13, 1907, two months before Eva would return from Greece to introduce her mother and stepfather to Angelos Sikelianos. According to one eyewitness to the building’s opening, “its red-tiled roof, its marshaled columns, and its fine proportions” offered not just “a glimpse of some forgotten Grecian temple” but also “echoes of a shepherd’s pipe” and “the flitting passage of a flowing robe.”

Such enactments confirmed the sense that America was rooted in Greek culture. Like Percy Bysshe Shelley’s Britons, Americans were “all Greeks” when they moved in and out of Greek revival buildings designed to inspire “the highest aesthetic and intellectual stimulation.” They were “all Greeks” when they decorated their homes using architectural pattern books with Greek-inspired designs. They were “all Greeks” when they played parlor games posing as Greek deities or joined Greek-lettered fraternities. They were “all Greeks” when they suffered diseases with Greek-inspired names and participated in democratic political processes.

A shift in the distribution of Greek learning across gender divisions impressed itself on Eva’s youth. She was born into a world in which elite American males studied Greek sources as a “prerequisite for entry into public life,” while their female counterparts, excluded from participation in governance, found ways to study Greek informally. Over time and coinciding with her coming of age in the late 1800s, changes in the value given to Greek learning broadened its social reach. Hellenism was proposed as an antidote to the crude anti-intellectualism of industrial society. It became a “platform for the perfection of the inner self.” Thus imitation of the Greeks moved from elite domains of scholarship and governance to popular spheres such as athletics—for example, when the American team competed successfully, dominating the gold medal tally in the first international revival of the Olympic Games, held in Athens in 1896. Imitation of Greek prototypes became a private occupation too when figures such as the tragic heroine Antigone were upheld as good models for women of the rising middle class.
During Eva’s adolescence, as women began gaining access to higher education, they also took on leading roles in reforming American culture. In the public sphere, they actively sought to translate classical models for new purposes, which were as pointedly sociopolitical as they were scholarly. A case in point was the solidly humanities-based curriculum of Miss Porter’s School in Farmington, Connecticut, which Eva completed in 1891. As a day and boarding school, Miss Porter’s adopted a Yale preparatory curriculum for girls in grades nine to twelve. Even more revolutionary was the classically grounded humanistic curriculum that Eva followed at Bryn Mawr College, a school promising academic rigor equal to that of Harvard and Yale. After passing stiff entrance exams in Latin to gain entry as a twenty-two-year-old adult in 1896, she took advanced Latin and beginning and intermediate Greek classes there.

At Bryn Mawr, Eva would have encountered Sappho on many fronts. From the mouth of the college’s president, M. Carey Thomas, who set the school’s high-minded direction, she would have heard Sappho named “the greatest lyric poet in the world,” an exception in history, a sign of women’s as yet untapped genius, and call for the necessity of their solidarity. Thomas was the same person who established the goal that work done in women’s colleges should be “the same in quality and quantity as the work done in colleges for men.” Eva’s courses in Latin and Greek put that principle into effect by requiring that female students acquire skills in the original languages. They had to know the sources and stay informed about archaeological discoveries, such as the unearthing of new papyrus scraps of Sappho’s poetic fragments. Perhaps it was for them that “M. Maspero, the Director of Explorations in Egypt,” included the detail that “he detected the perfume of Sappho’s art” in those scraps in the sands of Oxyrhynchus. In her Latin studies Eva would have encountered stories of Sappho’s life in Ovid’s *Heroides*, or lingered on Catullus’s line about the young woman who made herself “Sapphica . . . musa doctior” (“more learned . . . than the Sapphic muse”). In Mamie Gwinn’s course on the English essay concentrating on “Arnold, Pater and Swinburne,” she would have read Swinburne’s *Notes on Poems and Reviews* in defense of “the very words of Sappho.”

Thomas’s message to students at Bryn Mawr College was double: that women’s higher education should replicate the “quality and quantity” of men’s colleges, on the one hand, and provide women students with prototypes such as Sappho who could serve as transformative models for women of the future, on the other. Indeed the twofold nature of Thomas’s notions
was written into the project of women’s higher education. Specifically with regard to Greek learning, it was impossible for young women to embrace the discipline of philology in the neutral, unstressed ways of men, whose gendered lives as men were not changed by their access to Greek learning. At the very least, women made Greek learning a sign of their capacity for cultivation. This was no small matter, for by learning to read Greek at Bryn Mawr College as if they were men reading Greek at Harvard College, women showed their capacity both for doing what men were already doing and for assuming some of their roles. In this way, they were “invert[ing] the traditional privilege system that lends primacy to men.”

Eva embraced the contradictory directions given to her by Bryn Mawr College. Though no stellar student, she gained enough training in classical languages to understand the significance of gendered adjectival endings and pronouns (lost in English translation) and to recite Sappho’s poetry in ancient Greek. Then, following Thomas’s second line of argument, she made use of classical prototypes to invert social conventions. She was likely practicing some form of “inversion” in the sexual sense in her dormitory room in Radnor Hall in the spring of 1898—perhaps testing Sappho’s words of love on a fellow student. At least one female classmate, Virginia Greer Yardley, recalled having a devastating “crush on Eva Palmer” and remained emotionally attached to her for years. In any case, Eva was caught doing something strictly prohibited, and President Thomas wrote her a stern letter “[forbidding her] the right of residence in the halls of Bryn Mawr College for one year from the 28th of May, 1898, to the 28th of May, 1899.”

It was commonplace to believe that women might grow “unwomanly” or excessively free if they got too close to Greek learning. In Eva’s case, her accession to classical studies did bear something in excess of the anticipated outcomes of a college education. When she and her female friends exchanged Greek words in private moments, they were not just proving themselves to be “as fully classical as men.” These women were using the classical to renegotiate old gender and sex roles, circumvent the attendant taboos, and express new desires. They were pushing old Western cultural models onto unconventional ground as an unwelcome “heresy.” It was for some such unspecified heresy that Eva was suspended from Bryn Mawr.
in the spring of 1898 and traveled to Europe with her brother Courtlandt, who was studying piano in Rome.

“CHARMING TABLEAU”

Eva returned to the United States in 1900 to spend the summer in “Brook End,” the home recently purchased and remodeled by her stepfather, Dr. Abbe. She had started spending summers at Bar Harbor with her sister May and brother Courtlandt sometime after her mother married Dr. Abbe in 1891, with evidence pointing to 1894—when she was twenty—as her first summer there and that year or the next marking the beginning of her friendship with Barney. It is possible that she visited Bar Harbor in her adolescence, something she and Barney each recalled many years later, but I have not found evidence to support this. In any event, she and Barney had not seen each other in Bar Harbor for several years. Now Barney was under the careful watch of her parents in “Bany-Bryn,” the Barneys’ twenty-six-room summer cottage down the road from the Abbes. Apparently, her mother and father, Alice Pike and Albert Barney, members of Washington’s high society, were so shocked when they learned of the same-sex love content of Barney’s Quelques Portraits-Sonnets de Femmes (Some portraits-sonnets of women), published in Paris the previous spring, that they fetched her from Paris to keep an eye on her. But either the story is mistaken or the punishment was ineffective, for Barney sent a personalized copy of the book to Eva, and she invited her lover Renée Vivien to come stay in her parents’ cottage.

A crucial moment in the coalescence of Eva, Barney, and Vivien as a group of readers of Sappho was a variety show fund-raiser held on Wednesday, August 29, 1900, for the new Bar Harbor village hospital. In the show, Eva, in fancy sandals and a golden headband, like a figure in the Sapphic corpus, played a small but telling part. Basic information about the event is found in the “Bar Harbor” column published in the New York Times. “Bar Harbor” of August 26, 1900, anticipates the theatrical event; then “Bar Harbor” of August 30 reports on the previous day’s entertainment. From the reports, we learn that Natalie’s mother, Alice Pike Barney, hosted the theatrical, and Natalie and her sister Alice Clifford (called Laura) wrote most of the script. Renée Vivien (“Tarn”) played an opening “burlesque” role entitled “The Dream of Alice in Wonderland.” The evening’s entertainment closed with four “charming tableaux” with the
following roles: Eva’s sister May played Helen of Troy and Sarah Bernhardt; Natalie’s sister Alice Clifford (Laura) was Cleopatra; and Eva performed Sappho. It is Eva’s tableau of Sappho that concerns me here.

While it was likely the social weight of the “list of characters and workers” generated interest for the New York Times readership (for “the enterprise [included] the names of the most well-known people here”), Eva’s tableau of Sappho holds more than social interest. The evidence is thin; yet careful attention to the tableau’s context, some guesswork on how the performance went, and consideration of some unpublicized activities around the time of the performance give another set of clues, beyond the photograph, of how Eva was performing the role of Sappho onstage and beyond.

The fact that she chose to stage “Sappho” as a tableau indicates her knowledge of the connection between women’s study of Greek and tableaux more generally. It marks her performance as an instance of “ladies’ Greek” in this respect: through women’s entry into Greek learning in British and American women’s colleges such as Bryn Mawr, “women imagined Greece on their own terms and within a female homosocial context.” “Tableau” (plural tableaux or tableaus) names an individual or group performance of a picture. Short for tableau vivant (or living picture), a tableau is a picture brought to life through the performers’ poses, costumes, gestures, and props. Tableaux create drama through artistic imitation, turning the stage into a living performance of a painting, sculpture, or bas-relief, which may itself be an imitation of a literary or dramatic scene. Drawing on a tradition of women striking poses inspired by ancient art, they reach back to Emma Lyon Hamilton, who performed charade-like “attitudes” of mythical and biblical personae for the British embassy in Naples. These were based on artistic renditions and tested the knowledge of visiting artists, aristocrats, and collectors of antiquities. In Eva’s day, tableaux were used in performances of Greek drama or verse at women’s colleges. They illustrated still scenes accompanied by narration. The dramatic effect of the illustration of Greek letters that “looked like a picture” lay in the animation of the dead letter, which affirmed both antiquity’s passing and the possibility of its return.

Eva was familiar with a number of paintings bearing the name of Sappho from her yearlong stay in Europe following her suspension from Bryn Mawr. During that time, she forged what would become a lifetime practice of visiting art museums. She likely saw firsthand the Roman fresco at Pompeii depicting a woman with a writing tablet in her left hand, with a stylus in her right pressed thoughtfully against her lips. People identified
this vision of a presciently learned woman with Sappho from the time of its discovery in the late eighteenth century. It aligned with the image of the woman holding a scroll inscribed with Sappho’s name in Raphael’s *Mount Parnassus*, a fresco painted on an interior wall of the Stanza della Segnatura in the Vatican Palace. Eva would have encountered these and some of the many eighteenth- and nineteenth-century artistic works representing Sappho as the singing, teaching, listening, fantasizing, loving, leaping, and dying poetess. These visual sources combined with Eva’s basic knowledge of Greek literature and several years’ experience producing and performing drama to give her the resources to develop a Sappho tableau that would resonate with the audience in Bar Harbor.

Eva’s conflicted emotions in the months preceding the tableau added another dimension to her performance of Sappho. She had returned to Bar Harbor the previous summer after two years’ absence. She was reportedly present at a “canoe club parade” on August 15, 1899, when the multimillionaire George Vanderbilt II with his new wife, Edith, were given a dinner welcoming him back to Bar Harbor after his long absence. Vanderbilt was a bookish, learned aristocrat, like Eva. He knew many languages, even modern Greek. He and Eva were old family friends, or perhaps something more, as Eva had visited him at Biltmore Estate in Ashville in 1894, when she was twenty. Rumors went around then that she and Vanderbilt were engaged. When she encountered Barney in Bar Harbor in July 1900, after years of separation, she was, in Barney’s words, “unhappy because of an old love,” perhaps for George Vanderbilt. Then Barney sent her the hand-inscribed copy of *Quelques Portraits-Sonnets de Femmes* with a dedication comparing the state of Eva’s heart to the fading days of autumn. Eva distanced herself from “the lines” that Barney inscribed in the front of the book. “For look,” she wrote, “without knowing much about my life, you have chosen to say that my dead leaves outnumber my flowers, which is as true as it would be to write a sonnet to November in the full fresh woods of July.” In cool tones, she undressed Barney’s poems to scrutinize their bare contents: “Take off the pretty clothes and what have you left but a denial that Beauty exists.”

Already in this first extant letter of Eva’s and Barney’s voluminous correspondence, the tensions are simmering. Tension would become a feature of the two women’s relationship, pushing and pulling them in a drama-ridden dance of differing temperaments and badly synchronized emotions even as they traveled side by side for nearly another decade. Here she is distancing herself from Barney’s decadent worldview. “Now I believe that even as there is a faith and a youth in me which you are not looking for
and therefore do not see, so also in life there is a vitality, a freshness, an
eternal strength which you deny because you have never gone on a quest
to discover them. Isn’t it true that you haven’t hunted any longer for God’s
Magnificence than you have for my flowers, and have denied it quickly,
ruthlessly?83 Eva would never fully give into Barney’s decadence: her
emphasis on artifice over nature; her disinterest in public, political life; her
disdain for the lower classes; her persistent desire to publicize her private
life; her linking of eroticism to domination; and her predatory stance.
Barney’s persistent pursuit of pleasure in the transient moment—and her
effort to make it as theatrical and ornate as possible—contrasted with
Eva’s longing for an ideal order beyond her passions and desires.84

When Renée Vivien arrived as Barney’s guest in August, Eva learned
that Vivien and Barney were lovers. The discovery coincided roughly with
the Sappho tableau and with Eva’s sharing of her knowledge of Greek with
Vivien. Together she and Vivien dedicated time to studying Greek, while
Barney socialized and counted on them to communicate their Greek learn-
ing.85 Although I have found no record of the poem Eva recited or the
painting or sculpture she imitated in her Sappho tableau, a few extant
details help recreate the performance. Barney left a verbal sketch, mention-
ing “faux columns” and an accompanying harp. In addition, she states that
Eva’s feet were “encased in white sandals with straps crisscrossing her
legs,” and she had “a gold band circling her forehead.”86 The binding ele-
ments of fancy sandals and a headband regularly appear in modern paint-
ings of Sappho, evoking lines from Sappho’s verse. The crisscrossing straps
of those sandals also dress Eva’s ankles in a risqué photograph that paro-
dies Christian paintings of the Annunciation. Kneeling before a virgin-like
Barney, who is holding a white lily while seated on a Corinthian throne,
Eva, the angel bearing good news, hides Barney’s frontal nudity with her
crown of braids and a draped piece of lace covering her left arm but not
her own bare back or bottom (figure 1.3).

The effect of Eva’s classicizing tableau was probably convincing; it was
most certainly arresting, for Eva had striking features, none more impres-
sive than her hair. Whether she wore it coiled around her head or loosely
falling over her body, it signaled a “medieval virgin”87 beauty that bound
her lovers to her.88 Vivien fashioned the beauty of “Eva,” the female figure
she created after Eva in A Woman Appeared to Me, to be dazzling, while
hard and distant, like a statue or icon: “Looking at her, I felt that divine
and terrible trembling that a perfect statue inspires, a dazzle of radiant
marble, a long-loved picture of infinite harmony.”89
As in the photograph of her reading pose, in her Sappho tableau, too, Eva deployed her assets to produce a multicoded message. Once again, she tapped into Sappho as a popular figure of complex significance. To the broader audience of the Bar Harbor hospital fund-raiser, Sappho, alongside Helen of Troy, Sarah Bernhardt, and Cleopatra, signified an unconventional female figure of great prodigy and uncertain proclivities. Progressive women in the audience, including Eva’s mother, would have appreciated the “exhumation” of talented ancient women that Eva and her sister and friends performed. A few spectators probably caught the sequence’s antibourgeois undertones. But to Barney and Vivien—who attributed homoerotic feelings to Sappho’s broken voice—the performance was erotically charged. Eva’s tableau implicated her alongside Sappho in her circle’s “inverse” passion for one another.

The first traces of Eva’s erotic correspondence with Barney are exactly from the time of this tableau. From that moment on, Eva’s performance of the woman-desiring female in sandals with crisscrossing straps becomes a running motif in her staged productions with Barney, as is apparent in the sexually suggestive photograph and in the more demure photographs from the 1906 staging of Barney’s revisionary play *Equivoque* (see ahead to figure 1.7), in which Eva played the bride-to-be Timas (figure 1.8). Either before or just after her Sappho tableau, Eva undressed Barney again, this time literally, and declared her “foolish love.” She invited Barney to Duck Brook (“you know the one I mean where the boys sometimes swim”) to read poetry (“You can bring my Swinburne that I forgot yesterday or any other book you please, so that it be poetry, I can’t bear to read prose”). A series of Kodak photographs taken in Duck Brook stand as a record that she, Barney, and Vivien went to Duck Brook and undressed together. Although their instrument was the brand new Brownie camera, rolled out just that year to facilitate the quick snapshot, their poses were carefully composed imitations of female nudes in high art and mischievously parodied historic representations of women. Through the substitution of the female photographer’s eye for the traditionally male desirous gaze, and through their poses’ playful distortions of a range of visual sources, they sought to free the female nude from the male gaze to make it available for female-female alignments.

As the days of summer began to fade, Eva invited Vivien and Barney to Bryn Mawr College to stay in her comfortable dormitory room in Radnor Hall, which she maintained despite having been forbidden entry from 1898 to 1899. She would not complete her studies there. In fact, while she gave Vivien and Barney access to the Bryn Mawr campus, she seems to
have removed herself. Thus, Vivien attended Bryn Mawr lectures to bolster her readings of Sappho with Greek learning, while Barney “played tennis” and generally gave her attention to socializing. Nevertheless, the sequence of events I have reconstructed here represented a moment of coalescence. The women’s meeting at Bar Harbor in July 1900; Eva’s performances of Sappho at the end of August; the three women’s nude photos in Duck Brook; Vivien’s Greek lessons and Barney’s contacts at Bryn Mawr facilitated by Eva that September: the confluence of all these events identify a critical moment when Eva’s “ladies’ Greek” follows an important turning point in the history of sexuality.

“GOING BACK WITH KNOWLEDGE”

Eva’s and Barney’s letters, their loves, and their dissection of their loves in their letters during the first decade of the 1900s suggest that they came together and eventually separated by “going back with knowledge” to fill in where Greek words broke off. In Barney’s words, “We learn to love things in the past—the past is infinite for it contains the future—and what is it all après tout but a going back with knowledge?” In their best moments, they found inspiration in the lacunae in the textual record of Sappho’s corpus, as if the gaps in literary history represented deep, lost time from which the as-yet unlived future of alternative affective communities might unfold. This “queer time,” as critics call it today, moves not progressively forward in sequence but “wrinkles and folds as some minor feature of our sexually impoverished present suddenly meets up with a richer past, or as the materials of a failed and forgotten project of the past find their new uses, in a future unimaginable in their time.” Yet the theme of “going back with knowledge” to extract life from ruins recurred so often in their interaction that Eva balked at the feeling that forces of death and decay were guiding their relationship: “It seems you live for me as if you were looking at a pile of ruins and creating a beautiful poem.” Moreover Eva worried there was something in their blend of natures that was itself “broken”: “The sun throws millions of jewels on the water, and the flowers make the air seem like your breath. But my hands cannot gather the jewels for you and my lips cannot touch the flowers. And I can only speak to you in broken sentences.” If “broken sentences” were building blocks, how could they inspire new work? What sort of muse was a “pile of ruins”? That was a question to which Eva would keep returning all her adult years, especially after she left Barney.
Traces of Eva’s and Barney’s “broken sentences” of love are far from scarce. During the years when they were together, they constantly corresponded. They exchanged thousands of pages of handwritten letters from the time they became intimately involved that summer of 1900 until they mutually excommunicated each other in 1909. Stacks and stacks of letters, calling cards, telegrams, notes, cards, pneumatiques, photographs, and a lock of Eva’s red hair were all stored away for decades with old ribbons tied around them. Whether carefully preserved in their envelopes or tear- and mud-stained, these are the material by-products of their Sapphic love. The materiality of the letters is crucial, for they interweave writing and reading with physical effects of love. Consider Eva’s words to Barney: “Your letter folds me as closely as your arms and touches me as marvelously as your lips, I am bound by it as though all your body were over me, held by it as by your eyes when they glitter like jewels in the sun. My poet, my mistress, my lover! I love you all ways tonight, but most of all for the grace of your lines.” Here we see Eva creating written lines to express bodily lines she viewed through Barney’s recreation of Sappho’s lines.

However, if we compare the large body of remaining artifacts of Eva’s Sapphic love life with the few surviving lines of Sappho, we face an enormous incongruity. The Sappho whom Eva and the rest of us have been reading exists as a corpus of some two hundred tattered fragments of barely scrutable words or phrases, whereas the Eva over whom the traces of Sappho always “presided” exists in many complete, highly legible love lines. Thus, while Sappho, with a highly attenuated record of writings that tends to fall apart, has been assuredly identified as the original “lesbian,” Eva, with a substantial, legible, and rather complete body of writings implicating her in the circle of turn-of-the-century Sapphics, has been largely missing from lesbian historiography.

Her absence, together with the continuing existence of the large surviving body of her correspondence with Natalie Clifford Barney, is attributable to the fact that Eva, at a turning point in August of 1907, when she abruptly determined to marry Angelos Sikelianos, delivered to Barney all the letters she had saved, including correspondence with other female lovers. Eva explained, “If you care for me let our misery be between ourselves. Keep me now if you love me as I have kept you, keep my letters that I love above other things, keep yourself and believe this that the love I wrote to you about was you.” Barney responded with cruel sarcasm directed at Eva’s replacement of her with Sikelianos, another poet. Alluding to Eva’s fall in literary tastes, she gave her spiteful curse: “may this new love . . . learn to be nevertheless a simple, big sure thing, with less literature and
more heart beats in it.” Barney did keep Eva’s letters to the end of her life, even though she cut herself off emotionally from her—she even omitted Eva from her famous 1929 sketch of her guests in “Temple à l’Amitié,” where she admitted practically all her past and present lovers and friends, whether significant or a trifling intrigue. Much of the correspondence is now in the Bibliothèque littéraire Jacques Doucet, a library of the Sorbonne University where the papers of Natalie Clifford Barney were deposited after her death. I note the irony that Eva’s letters landed in the library of Jacques Doucet, who made a fortune selling dresses. Eva’s Parisian closets were once “full of dresses from Doucet.” When she left Paris in August 1907, she abandoned all those dresses together with her love letters.

While more than three hundred letters, notes, and telegrams stayed in Paris, an even larger stack comprising more than six hundred letters disappeared in Athens when in 1969, near the end of Barney’s life, Barney and her housekeeper Berthe Cleyrergue received a visit from Professor Octave Merlier. A French acquaintance of Eva’s who lived in Greece, Merlier asked Barney if she had anything of Eva’s to show him. He was hoping to microfilm all her papers. Barney, who was beginning to lose some of her mental acuity, produced several stacks of Eva’s letters for him to read. He read a few and said he was deeply moved. He asked to take them with him to Greece. Cleyrergue heeded his request but stopped short of giving him the remaining letters, for reasons that are not clear. Today the letters that Merlier took with him remain in Greece, separated from the letters in the Jacques Doucet Library. They are cared for in the unrelated Center for Asia Minor Studies, an institute for research begun by Octave Merlier and Melpo Logothetici-Merlier in 1930 and operated since 1962 by the Greek Ministry of Culture in Athens in the old Plaka district. Access to the collection was officially forbidden until 2016, in order to satisfy the wishes of Angelos Sikelianos’s widow, Anna, who feared that the exposure of Eva’s Parisian affairs might reflect badly on the Sikelianos family.

The effect of Eva’s returning the love letters to Barney might be exactly what Eva wanted. Barney distanced herself from Eva, while she both preserved the letters and kept them hidden. For many years, only Barney and Eva knew of their existence, and hence the “misery” the two intimately shared remained their well-kept secret. Even after scenes implicating “Eva Palmer” in Barney’s circle of lovers were mentioned in Barney’s and Vivien’s biographies, they were hidden in plain view under Eva’s maiden name and so remained invisible to scholars of modern Greek studies who attended to the afterlife of “Madame Sikelianou.”
The specific question raised in Eva’s dialogue with Barney about Sappho’s surviving words was how women of the present era might insert themselves where Sappho’s tongue “broke off.” It is admittedly ironic to return to their dialogue at this point, more than one hundred years after their words of love broke off and nearly fifty years since their correspondence all but disappeared. Fragment 31, Sappho’s most famous poem of female desire, in which the desiring subject breaks off while declaring her jealous love, was for them an implicit point of return. In the fragment, the first-person female speaker reacts to a scene in which her beloved, another woman, reciprocates the affections of a man. Sappho’s almost clinical description of the body’s reaction to the “god-like” interloper—Sappho’s ancient reader Longinus, who preserved the poem by commenting on it, medicalized the reaction as “παθήματα” (symptoms), associated with “ερωτικαῖς μανίαις” (lovers’ madness)—lists symptoms of the senses gone awry in a counterproductive overdrive. Her flesh burns subtly, her eyes are blinded, her ears hum, her pores sweat. Finally, the tongue is both described as “breaking” (“γλῶσσα ἔαγε”) and literally breaks off nonsensically: “ἀλλὰ πὰν τόλματον ἐπεὶ καὶ πένητα” (but all can be endured, since even a pauper). The Sapphic poem actualizes through syntactical breakdown the heart-pounding, sweat-inducing, tongue-tying, sense-depriving vulnerability of the jealous lover who cannot bear to see her lover give affection to a man. Through the centuries, the genders of the pronouns and adjectives have lent to this fragment an intriguingly problematic status, as the Greek clearly shows it is a female lover describing her jealous reaction to a female beloved in the company of a male lover. More than the genders, it is the poem’s ellipses, the “snapped off tongue,” that have extended its life in verse not just by “articulating... the Sapphic corpus” as an integrally broken one in need of collection but also by inviting supplementary creations. The poem’s “broken tongue” invited Barney and Eva to think of not just the anatomy of women’s same-sex love but its geometry and artistic media.

From the time Barney shifted her locus of operation from America to her pavilion in the Parisian suburb of Neuilly from the first years of the twentieth century until 1909 (when she moved to 20 rue Jacob on the Left Bank), she sought to occupy the place of the missing Sappho. Deploying her social dynamism, wit, and immense sexual appeal, she conquered ever more beautiful, talented, wealthy women, contributing to the expansion of an international circle of interinvolved female writers and performers. The geometry of the group was decidedly the love triangle. Triangle upon triangle formed a multisided pyramid, with Barney posing as Sappho.
at its apex and Vivien, for a short period, then Eva as the longer-term “confidante” occupying several planes of Barney’s affection with other women and even a man or two. Eva was with Barney on both sides of the Atlantic from July 1900 through August 1906, many more years than Renée Vivien, who shared Barney with other women from 1899 until she broke away in 1902, then briefly traveled with Barney to Lesbos in 1904 before finally breaking off ties. When in Paris, Eva and Barney stayed at first in hotels or rented beds in the apartment of one of Barney’s male suitors at 4 rue Chalgrin. Then, in 1904, they moved into neighboring houses in Neuilly-sur-Seine, with Barney at 25 rue de Bois de Boulogne and Eva at 56 rue de Longchamp.

Barney’s pavilion, with its expansive garden, became a gathering place. Women came and went, sometimes crossing paths and sharing in acts of love. Eva watched as Barney made love to others; or she made love while Barney or another woman watched her; or she read what Barney wrote about her other lovers; or she pursued lovers and wrote about them to Barney. Barney, Eva, and the following women were connected sexually in ways that cannot be easily disentangled: Minnie, Marchioness of Anglesey; Sarah (“Sarita”) Bernhardt; Emma Calvé; Colette; Olive Custance; Baronne Ilse Deslandes; Lucie (“Amande”) Delarue-Mardrus; Isadora Duncan; Princess Marie (“Bébé”) de Hatzfeld Hohenlohe; Wanda Landowska; Georgette Leblanc; Lilian (“Lily,” “Lil”); Constant Lounsbery; Marguerite Moreno; Liane de Pougy; Amélie Rives; Henriette Rogers; Nina Russel; Renée Vivien; Virginia Yardley; and Margaretha Zelle (“Mata Hari”). Men with a strong interest in the literary and dramatic Sappho played decisive roles from the sidelines: Pierre Louÿs, for example, who visited Barney’s pavilion on occasion, received a dedication from Barney for his inspiration of her “society of the future.”

Just what it meant to live under the sign of Sappho was a contested matter. Barney spelled out the order for a female erotic pedagogy in “Cinq petits dialogues grecs” (Five short Greek dialogues, 1902). Women were to relinquish ties with family, husband, children, and country for their desire for each other. Moreover, women were to write. What really interested Barney was the revolutionary precedent of Sappho, the woman who made writing her art shortly after the Greeks introduced writing. As Barney saw it, by writing, women could invert power relations. She elaborated on this rule in a letter in which she simultaneously praised her own work and criticized Eva for her performing art. Paradoxically, to make her argument, Barney relied on conventional gender dichotomies that...
privileged the work of great men while leaving no room for women to define themselves except after the example of these men or of the rare woman such as Sappho, “who was . . . essentially a man.” For Barney, Sappho was the exception who proved a historical rule. Barney divided the arts into “virile” and “effeminate forms.” According to her definition, artistic work of “the greatest virility, originality, genius—whatever you call it—is the most unadulterated,” that is to say, “engendered by and through itself only,” while “effeminate forms of art [are] . . . impregnated with the very élan of someone else.” In the historical scheme of things, “real men” did the “virile” work of writing and composing. Women, if they did any creative work at all, took on “effeminate,” reproductive roles. This happened in the past, and it was continuing in their day, Barney observed, when women such as Eva kept falling “instinctively into adaptation, criticism, copy of metres, or ingenious rendering of the works of others.” For Barney, Sappho showed the path for women to gain control over their circulation in the arts and in human society by becoming “absolutely and originally productive” and “hold[ing] the highest place in art.” Women had to follow Sappho, and to do so they had to “mentally change sex and become Lesbian or unlovely”; they had to compose or write.

While Barney and Eva proliferated love triangles in their lives, in writing, they boldly revised them. We see a revision of Sappho fragment 31 in this letter by Barney to Eva in February 1902:

My sweet—How envious I am of both of you! You will be with me soon . . . and tell me all about it. I wish I could have seen you . . . and her face close to your hair, like a pale white flower with the sun for auriole— and I what have I rested my eyes upon and found joy in? In nothing but the imagining of it—yet how much more real than the touch of real hands and the look from real eyes that I do love.128

As in Sappho fragment 31, here Barney, the female lover, addresses the female beloved, Eva, who is giving her attention to another lover. But Barney makes some crucial substitutions. She identifies a woman rather than a man as the interloper. This alters the sight lines of the poem, making both Eva and her lover potential objects of Barney’s desirous approach. And while Barney states her “envy” of Eva, she does not display any symptoms of a lover’s jealousy. She does not make the scene vanish by shutting down her senses, as happens to the speaker in Sappho fragment 31. Instead she covets what the two women have shared. Through the store she places in the “man-force” of original writing, Barney confirms her power to call up her eyes’ unfulfilled wish of seeing Eva with her female lover (“I wish
I could have seen you . . . and her face close to your hair”). This inversion of the power dynamics of Sappho fragment 31 that places Barney in control to insert herself in a triangle of lovers as its seeing, feeling, imagining, desiring, and desired subject makes the scene even “more real” than if it were present.

Barney’s terms in this passage deserved comment, and comment Eva did. Eva produced a competitive revision in a letter she sent to Barney a few months later in the spring of 1902. Here and elsewhere the contest in their correspondence is ongoing. Eva’s letter returns to the exact configuration of Sappho fragment 31, with Barney the beloved approached by a man and Eva the lover standing in Sappho’s place—precisely where Barney liked to stand. The sight lines are Sappho’s, the potential for jealousy and misery the same. But Eva anticipates this version of events through a performative idiom: she uses writing to demand the scene’s change.

Je veux te voir danser!

(I want to see you dance!)

A key feature of this passage is its dramaturgical approach. Eva writes as a director, not a poet or narrator, with an aim to dramatize in the present rather than to describe a past scene of dancing and lovemaking. The opening lines give the beat of the dance through the repeated words of desire (Je veux . . . je veux, oh comme je veux). Eva commands Barney to speak (Reconte-moi . . . dis-moi . . . ), then orders the scene to stop (Non!) so that she, Eva, may replace the interloper. The scene’s change brings Eva “from afar” closer and closer to her dancing lover. She introduces erotic words
to help Barney experience sexual arousal with each rereading of the letter. The effect is to make music and dance a metaphor for the way she occupies Barney’s brain in something approaching the ecstasy of Dionysian “madness,” as suggested by these lines from Barney:

you are like a dance in my brain trampling all thoughts and filling me utterly with wild music of utter madness. It takes possession of my whole body and every nerve beats to the rhythm every motion falls into the harmony of it until all of me is like a lyre rent under the feet of a dancer—Desire sweeps up and down like a throb of drums and the ecstasy of it breaks me—stretches each chord into the inarticulate invercity of a perfect (terrible so human is the founded and varied and blended joy of it) silence.131

Barney liked to dress up her lovers in an “erotic embellishment of lesbian play.”132 She had experience assisting her mother, another social dynamo, with theatricals in Bar Harbor and Washington, DC. In Eva now she found a splendid stage manager, producer, designer, actor, and artistic director, who played an instrumental role in shaping her culture of “theatrical display.”133 Eva brought to Barney’s burgeoning movement several years’ theatrical experience and a lifelong attention to stage management. Barney relied on Eva for all her theatrical skill, especially her brilliant resourcefulness in hairstyling, costuming, and props (figure 1.4). Barney would give Eva an assignment, for example, to stage a photograph depicting the mirroring sameness of a loving same-sex couple in the style of a conventional portrait, and Eva would produce the costumes or props and hair styling to materialize Barney’s ideas, as seen in a photograph (figure 1.5) from a series of pictures pairing Barney with Lucie Delarue-Mardrus as look-a-like lovers.134

As much as Barney relied on Eva to dress up her crowd, she did not tire of dressing her down for her submission to “effeminate” performing arts. Barney conceded that these “have their place in art and are indispensable just as women are to the making articulate of that which is engendered in them.”135 Nevertheless, she argued, they “are by nature subjective, less purely creative, secondary.”136 She was especially harsh in her criticism of musical performance, something that mattered a great deal to Eva. She compared “the rendering of music” to “a woman who lends her pretty grace and patience to the thought of [others].”137

Eva disagreed. She granted Barney the superiority of her verbal brilliance, and she acknowledged that her musical and theatrical interests were of lesser creative power than Barney’s writing. Moreover, she ac-
knowledged her weaker character compared to Barney’s dominant personality: “I am fluid, without initiative, because I shrink so from the winter wind of a difference with you that I catch at any agreement that seems to offer a chance shelter, only in the end to have you pin me in the teeth of the blast by saying that I am only an echo of the last strongest force I have come in contact with.” Yet on the more significant matter of her life’s direction, that is, the value given to the media of artistic expression, Eva held her ground. She challenged Barney for returning to the single paradigm of Sappho, the poetic mentor and muse of women’s same-sex desire. On one particular occasion, she pinned Barney into a corner. In a letter to Eva, Barney defended her tendency to endlessly impersonate the Sappho model: “You humble me by seeming to suppose that just because you have seen me do more or less adequately the role of—who shall we say? a Sappho? I am an impersonation of her, capable and admirable be it ever so little in this one. Instead, I would have you believe that I am open to any of the reality.” Barney’s defense of her constant return to her Sapphic model of the virile female writer was that her “surroundings were so lacking in suggestion.” They offered her no strong alternative. But Eva saw another way. She reminded Barney of an article of her faith, the “belief in inclusiveness” against the tendency of the world to exclude minorities. This was the principle she wished to follow. That is to say, she tried to find a point beyond Barney’s binaries of masculine creative versus feminine procreative arts to justify women’s work as singers, actors, dancers, and performers.

To do this she broadened the Greek canon. Her greater learning made many more Greek sources available to her than Barney could even imagine. No one else in Barney’s circle of Sapphics could append the pre-Socratic Parmenides, for example, to the list of a young woman’s required readings. Of special interest to her was the Parmenidean plenum—the “impossible ‘One’”—a container rather than a divider of opposing things:

the impossible “One that is in all things and also in nothing . . . that is a whole . . . that has neither beginning, middle, nor end . . . that cannot be in anything . . . that cannot be in time at all . . . that cannot be many . . . cannot have parts,” and yet which “has parts and therefore is many includes differences has limits and extremes . . . therefore a beginning, a middle and an end . . . is both at rest and in motion . . . whose parts become older and younger, therefore the One which is both older and younger than itself, which is in all things and also in nothing, which is everything, and yet can never be anything that is.”
Eva proposed this all-inclusive, indivisible One as a supplement to Barney’s order of women writers after the model of the virile Sappho. Into the indivisible One she folded all the Muses’ arts—and it is no accident that the words “music” and “drama” would become her Parmenidean containers later in life. Thus, while the Sappho whom Eva discovered in the interpretive community of Sapphics is tightly interwoven in the course of her ar-

FIGURE 1.4. Eva Palmer in a lace dress, ca. 1904. Seated in a cushioned chair in a posture reminiscent of a woman in a klismos chair, Eva has accessorized her dress with an ancient Greek hairstyle and large, beaded necklace. Acc. 96-153, Alice Pike Barney Papers, No. 6-190, SIA2018-072682. Smithsonian Institution Archives.
Sapphic Performances

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Statistic and personal life from Bar Harbor to Delphi, she is not Barney’s “virile” writer but Eva’s “effeminate” One: a Sappho “who lends her pretty grace and patience to the thought of [others],” in the service of the performing arts. One by one, Eva would work to master the arts of costuming and stage design, vocal performance, musical composition, and choreography, with a powerful feeling that what once existed had passed away,

FIGURE 1.5. Natalie Barney and Lucie Delarue-Mardrus in lace dresses in a photo by Pierre Sanitas, Paris, ca. 1904. The two women have nearly matching hairstyles and lace dresses, which also nearly match Eva’s hairstyle in figure 2.4. Acc. 96-153, Alice Pike Barney Papers, No. 6-145, SIA2018-072679. Smithsonian Institution Archives.
yet still inert ancient poetry could be made into a living dramatic art that would engage and transform modern life.

“IF I CAN EVER SING TO YOU”

The performance of ancient Greek poetry in song was an element of Eva’s Sappho tableau. Song was a piece of ancient Greek poetry, whether epic, dramatic, or lyric: the most irretrievably lost element of Sappho’s art. For Eva, song was part of a complex tangle of relations. There were musical tangles, for the question of how to excavate the music in Greek poetry was and remains unanswerable. In Eva’s time, it was not just scholars of Greek antiquity but composers of new music and even philosophers who were drawn to the puzzle of Greek poetry’s missing sounds. What did the music of poetry sound like when it came from such archaic psychic depths? By what technical means might one push the poetry of tragedy, for example, into the realm of music so as to shake the complacency out of modern audiences? What were the qualities of a specifically “Greek” music, and how did they intersect with Western musical theory? These were questions that would occupy Eva for decades to come.

There were personal tangles too: a mix of family complications arising from her intimacy with Barney, some quite traceable, others suspended in archival vagaries. Eva’s comings and goings with Barney caused Eva’s mother and brother deep distress. Her mother disapproved of her intimate relationships with women; she especially disliked Barney, who reportedly told Eva’s mother that “the only way to treat [Eva] was like a dog.” Eva’s brother Courtlandt, whose music making she described as part of her core being (“I am what Cory’s music has made me,” she once told Virginia Yardley at Bryn Mawr), became hostile when he discovered that Barney was Eva’s lover. He dished out verbal abuse, then stopped speaking to her. This was a pattern he would repeat throughout their adult years: Eva’s correspondence from 1900 to the end of her life bears witness to a pattern of harsh recriminations followed by long periods of aggressive silence—especially for her choice of partners, regardless if they were female or male (he despised Angelos too), and other choices as well. He never spared her feelings, contrary to his claims, but served her large doses of pain.

On one occasion Eva worked especially hard to win back Courtlandt’s love. She was studying classical vocal performance in New York City from 1901 to 1902 as a step in her goal to achieve the Parmenidean plenum.
As a slightly less ambitious aim, she determined to sing “Liebestod” from Richard Wagner’s *Tristan and Isolde* for Courtlandt. The Palmers were a musical family with many musician acquaintances. Catherine, Eva’s mother, was a gifted pianist and conductor of a small chamber orchestra. She entertained world-class musicians in their home, as mentioned above. Courtlandt, also a pianist and a student of Ludwig (Louis) Breitner and Ignacy Jan Paderewski, was “suspected of being a genius,” a child prodigy, though he retreated from live solo performance after receiving mediocre reviews for his lack of musicianship. Eva studied violin with Madame Ludwig Breitner in her youth, but she was much too interested in performing poetry and drama to ignore vocal performance. From the age of fifteen, when she attended Miss Porter’s School, she began to experiment with ways of reciting poetry to push language in the direction of music. Classical opera, choral music, and art song were forms she knew well from her earliest years; so it makes sense that she turned to studying them when she first tried to cultivate her voice’s dramatic potential as a young adult. The music of Richard Wagner, the most influential composer of her era, had a special resonance. Eva, May, Courtlandt, and their mother were all Wagner enthusiasts. When Eva planned a pilgrimage to the Bayreuth Festival in August 1904, her mother and sister May both wrote letters anticipating her journey, and Courtlandt wrote after the fact to inquire about the festival. Eva later recalled the powerful effect of Wagner’s “strange” harmonies on Courtlandt in his early childhood.

It was near the end of the first of Courtlandt’s long cooling periods, in March 1902, after two years’ separation, that Eva determined to sing for him: “Music is the only thing that could bring us back together.” An aria by Wagner was just the thing, Eva figured. She imagined progressing far enough in her voice studies to perform “Liebestod” (German, “Love death”), the very difficult final aria from the sepulchral last scene of *Tristan and Isolde*. By singing this particular piece of music—with its trochaic feet recalling Greek lyric poetry—she thought she would bring herself closer to Courtlandt. To Barney, she described her goal in a way that she thought Barney was “surely imaginative enough to see.” The provisional plan she laid out in her letters suggests both how far she had gone in her voice studies and how closely she attended to musical drama’s emotional effects. Thematically “Liebestod” is a strange choice of music for winning back an estranged brother, for the nearly seven-minute song is one of the most sustained musical expressions of erotic love. Kneeling before her dead lover Tristan, Isolde sings phrase after phrase without harmonic resolution until she reaches “höchste Lust” with the corpse of Tristan in her
embrace. At the moment of musical climax, Isolde has herself reached an ecstatic climax. She is almost out of this world. Imagining Tristan risen from the dead, she points to him: “Do you see, friends?” she cries, as if calling on an ancient chorus to confirm her vision. 154 Tristan remains lifeless, however, and as the orchestra plays the aria’s only resolving notes, Isolde dies of grief. Neither the song’s erotic content nor the scene’s failed resurrection was lost on Eva. In her odd suggestion that Barney was “surely imaginative enough to see” the effect the song might have on Courtlandt, Eva recognized the seductive power of musical drama. Sung well, a song of love in death might not resurrect its heroes, but it could reignite “Lust.”

Eva’s lust for singing “Liebestod” was complex, perhaps as rich as the German word “Lust,” the semantic field of which extends from delight and joy to an inclination, wish, or desire to sexual pleasure and lust. It was equally a means to reignite Courtlandt’s love, who, in his angry dismissal of Natalie, performed as a competitor for something more than sibling love, and to pursue her new lustful longing for Barney. Eva used song to give Barney pleasure too, balancing with music the pleasure Barney gave to her with verse. Both saw their erotic union as one combining song and verse, the two elements of Sappho’s poetry. “I will write, you will sing, and better than all we will live,” 155 Barney wrote to Eva. For Barney in her moments of amorous rapture, Eva was not just a singer. Her life was itself a song: “I am so glad that I have never carved a statue or painted a picture or produced anything as beautiful as yourself. Life has been your art—you have set yourself to music, your days are your sonnets.” 156 Eva kept raising her musical expectations to try to please Barney. At first it was enough for her to recite or sing choral passages from literature. 157 The next step was “to be an artist” by mastering the art of song: “Ah dearest I shall be happy if I can ever sing to you if I can ever give you the kind of spontaneous yet lasting delight that your lines give me, I would be an artist for you as well as a lover, a beloved, a friend I would lift that side of me up to the line of my capacity for loving you.” 158

Over time Eva’s wish to reconcile with Courtlandt was overcome by her desire to lift Barney to new heights of lust through and for song. She wanted Barney to experience music’s seductive power on the grander scale offered by choral music. In vocal ensembles, Eva sensed an “invisible force” capable of lifting “the masses.” She described this feeling late in 1901 after a Christmas Oratorio Society concert she attended at Carnegie Hall, where her father’s friend Andrew Carnegie had invited all the city’s popular choruses to join in song.

(continued...)

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Index

A. A. Vantine and Company, 45, 264n30
Abbe, Catherine, xxxv–xxxvi, xxxviii, 6–8, 11, 16, 29, 33, 43, 47–48, 55, 93, 98, 112, 116, 130, 237, 255n78; 286n54; as Catherine Amory Bennett or Catherine Palmer, xxiv, xxxiii, xxxiv, 6–7; opinion of Natalie Barney, 28, 93
Abbe, Robert, xxxiv, xl, 7–8, 11, 237, 252n32, 254n59, 254fn64, 286n54
Aeschylus: Oresteia, xlii, 80, 83, 84, 85, 86, 87, 89, 90, 202, 241, 274n29 (see also Oresteiaκα); Persians, xviii, xlii, xliii, 164–70, 242, 245; Prometheus Bound, xviii, xxxi, xxxix, xl, 131, 134–5, 137–139, 148, 154–166, 169, 170, 172, 174, 219, 221, 222, 227, 240, 241, 243, 283n23, 284n15, 289n134, 290n158; Psachos's compositions for performances of tragedies of, 80, 135, 162, 241, 243; Suppliants, xli, 90, 143–144, 148, 241, 243. See also Delphic Festivals; Duncan, Isadora; Duncan, Perenope Sikelianos; Naoroji, Khorshed; Shawn, Ted; Sikelianos, Eva Palmer
Akritika (Akritan Songs), xlii, 174, 208–218, 244, 245; Cairo edition of, 210–211; 296n118; Eva's divergence from Seferis's instructions in publication of, 212–213; haste in translation of, 213–214; manuscript production of, 210; medieval predecessor of, 210; multiple hands transmitting, 210–211; photostat reproduction of, 210–211; Seferis's self-erasure in publication of, 211–212. See also Nikolaidis, Nikos; Seferis, George; Sikelianos, Angelos; Sikelianos, Eva Palmer; World War II
Albright, Ann Cooper, 229, 285n28 alligator, of Natalie Clifford Barney, 42, 45, 263n6
amateurism: in historical study, 61–2; in modern classicism, xxvi, xxix, 42, 153, 231, 234–23; in performance and theater, 140, 146, 147–8, 163, 175. See also
archaeology: “alternative”; queer time; reception of Greco-Roman antiquity
American Hellenic Union, xlvi
American Institute of Archaeology, xl anachronism, xxvi, 59, 62, 80, 128, 156, 162, 229, 257n105 anadromic method (ἀναδρομή): in music, 58, 112, 162, 183; in somatic practice and self exercise, 69, 183; in weaving, 56–63, 78, 152. See also anachronism; archaeology, as experimental replication; queer time; Sikelianos, Eva Palmer
Anastasopoulou, Maria, 283n2
Anglesey, Marchioness of (Minnie or Lily), 21, 259n120, 259n123
Antigone, 8, 87–88, 252–253n43, 274n29, 274n35. See also Sophocles
Apollonian mode, 142, 146, 169–170, 177, 194, 195; Angelos Sikelianos in, 48; movement of, 169–170
archaic period. See Greece; Graham, Martha; Shawn, Ted
archive: abundant, xxvi–xxvii, 249n37, 289n119; divisions of labor in, xxvi, 60–61, 269n122, 269n129, 272n182; as experimental replication, 56–63, 112, 249n33, 269n120; “no such thing as correctness” of, 62, 141, 155, 173; as restoration, 60, 141
Archbold, Ann Mills, xxxv, 146, 239
archive: abundant, xxvi–xxvii, 249n37, 257n102; Anna Sikelianos overseer of Angelos's, 221; Anna's interference with Eva's, xi, 226, 244; Artemis Leontis's work on Eva's, xlii, 229–232; as counter-memory, 228–229; Eva's selective curation of her, 18–19, 221–222;

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archive (cont.)
of Hellenism, xxvi–xxvii, 234–235;
initial monetary interest of Greek offi-
cials in Eva’s, 224–225; Octave Mer-
lier and Eva’s epistolary, xlvi, 19, 226;
as performance, xxiii; US embassy in
Greece as initial handler of Eva’s, 224–
225, 237. See also Barney, Natalie Clif-
ford; Benaki Museum Historical Ar-
chives; Center for Asia Minor Studies;
fragments; Hellenism; materiality;
photography; reception of Greco-
Roman antiquity; Sikelianos, Eva
Palmer
Aristophanes, Birds, 228
art of life (also art of living, art of self, ex-
ercise of self), xxv, xxvi, 2, 42, 174, 175,
176, 177, 182, 183, 184, 190, 191, 193,
200, 201, 206, 232–234. See also per-
formance: Eva’s life as; self-
fashioning; Sikelianos, Eva: art of life;
Upward Panic: as an art of life or ethical-
political exercise
arts and crafts movement, 74. See also
labor; weaving
Asia Minor Catastrophe, xxxviii,122–124
Athens: Acropolis of, xxxix, 44, 46, 141–
142, 184; Conservatory of, xxxvi,
xxxvii, 82, 83, 91, 96, 103, 104, 107,
108, 117, 135, 228, 242, 243, 278n127,
283n234; Eva’s house on Serifou Street,
xxxvi, 64, 230; Municipal Theatre in,
xxxv, 90, 274n26; Philopappos Hill,
xxxix, xli, Rizareios Ecclesiastical
School in, 90, 144; Royal Theatre in, 83,
84, 86, 87, 90, 274n26; Theater of Dio-
nysus in, 142, 285n36
autobiography. See life writing; Upward
Panic
authenticity, 36, 62, 69, 84, 89, 136, 182,
193, 235, 251n16
Balkan Wars, xxxvii, 76, 114
Bar Harbor, xviii, xxxiv, xxxv, xxxvi, xl, 1,
4, 6, 8, 11–17, 24, 27, 47, 49, 48, 53,
55, 93, 144–8, 237, 251n11, 254n61,
254–5n66, 256n85, 260n145; Abbe
Museum in, 252n32; Archbold Cottage
in, 146, 286n55; Brookend, 254n59,
254n60, 286n54; Building of the Arts
in, 8, 252n37; Duck Brook, 16–17,
256n93; Barker, Elsa, 181,190, 207–208, 212, 221–
222, 237
Barnes Bliss, Mildred, 147
Barney, Albert, 11, 33, 237
Barney, Alice (Laura), see Dreyfus-Barney,
Laura
Barney, Alice Pike, xxx, xxxiii, xxxv, xxxvi,
6, 11, 15, 24, 237
Barney, Natalie Clifford: “Cinq petits dia-
logues grecs,” 21, 261n168; disdain of
for Raymond and Penelope Duncan,
38, 49, 266n; epistolary archive of and
fate of Eva’s letters, 18–19, 226 (see
also archive); Equivoque, xxii,
xxviii, xxxv, xxxv, 16, 31–37, 39–40, 41, 42,
43, 56, 71, 91; eroticism of linked to
domination, 14, 20–22; in fascist Eu-
rope, 193, 219; financial wealth of,
116, 237; first meeting of with Eva in
Bar Harbor, 11, 254n60, 254n61; inter-
actions of with Angelos, 49, 51–52, 55;
Quelques Portraits-Sonnets de Femmes,
4, 11, 13; relationship of with Eva , 20,
24, 28, 32–33, 38, 42, 49, 56, 66, 93,
147–148, 182, 209, 281n196; relation-
ship of with Renée Vivien, xxi, xxiv,
xxxv, 4, 11, 14, 21, 38, 245, 256n85;
valuation of writing over performance,
21–22, 24–28, 233. See also archive;
Bryn Mawr College; class; Cleyrergue,
Berthe; dance; Duncan, Isadora; elitism;
Equivoque; Greek dress; performance;
politics; Sappho; Sikelianos, Angelos;
Sikelianos, Eva Palmer; Vivien, Renée;
writing
Baudelaire, Charles, 1, 5, 286n53
Bayreuth Festival, xxxv, 29, 38, 139, 144,
263n14. See also Wagner, Richard
Beard, Mary, 248n28, 249n31
Beaux, Cecilia, xxxiv
Ben-Zvi, Linda, 288n104
Benakis, Antonis, xl, xli, 237; Emmanuel,
295n85
Benaki Museum Historical Archives, xxvii,
xlv, 132, 177–178, 201, 225, 230, 237
Berenson, Mary, 270n144, 271n153,
271n161
Berlin, Netta, 270n132
Bernhardt, Sarah, xxxiv, xxxv, 12, 16, 21,
238
Bibliothèque littéraire Jacques Doucet, xi,
xli, 19. See also Doucet, Jacques
biography. See life writing
body, embodiment, x, xxx, 2, 4, 6, 18, 36,
37, 42, 43, 46, 68–69, 84, 99–100, 141–
142, 146, 156, 161–162, 165–166, 216–
217, 227, 229–230, 289n123. See also
materiality; multimedia; photography;
reception of Greco-Roman antiquity: body as a mode of
Boissy, Gabriel, xl, 290n144
Boone, Laurel, 284n20
Bourgault-Ducoudray, Louis-Albert, 92,
275n57
Bournazakis, Kostas, 265n46, 270n146
Boyd Hawes, Harriet, 269n122, 269n129
Britain: and Allies in World War I, 101,
121; blockade of Greece enforced by,
199; decolonization movement against
76–77; role of in World War II and post-
war Greek civil conflict, 201, 207, 209,
214, 216, 217, 218; support of for
Cairo Government, 213
Brooks, Romaine, 116, 219, 279n155,
297n141
Bryn Mawr College: Barney and Renée
Vivien’s access to, xxi, xxxiv, 16–17,
256n85; curriculum and mission of,
9–10, 12, 150, 227, 253n45; Eva’s class-
mates from, 10, 28, 180, 239, 241, 245,
253n54; Eva’s dismissal from, 10–11,
12, 245; Eva’s staging of As You Like It
at, 255n76; Eva’s staging of Euripides’
Bacchae at, xviii, xlii, xlv, 173, 181,
292n4, 292n5, 293n21. See also classical
studies and gender; Thomas, M.
Carey
Buschor, Ernst, 138, 141, 155, 157, 172,
173, 238, 285n32
Butler, Judith, 233
Byzantine music. See music

Cairo Government of Greece. See World
War II
Calotychos, Vangelis, 299n23
Calvé, Emma, 6, 21, 238, 257n103,
259n121
camera, xix, xx, xxiii, xxix–xxx, 16, 72,
128, 170, 227. See also photography
Campbell, Mrs. Patrick, xxxv, 238
Carman, Bliss, 284n20
Casatt, Marchesa Luisa, 44
Case, Janet, xxiv
Center for Asia Minor Studies: Eva Sike-
lianou Papers in, xlv, 19, 226, 230–232,
244
Chater, Ellen Dundas, 180–181
Chicago or World’s Columbian Exposition,
44, 114
choreography. See dance
Christianity, Orthodox (also Greek Ortho-
doxx Church, Church of Greece), xxxvii,
58, 79–80, 81–82, 90, 100–101, 103,
107, 108, 112, 113–115, 122–123, 126,
162, 223, 234, 272n1, 274n26, 276n83,
278n132
Chrysanthos of Madytos, 103, 107, 273n6
City History Club of New York, xxxiv, 237
class, xxvi, 2, 6, 7, 8, 42, 72, 75, 77, 92,
100, 112, 123, 127, 130, 132, 165, 190,
227, 234, 259n124. See also Barney,
Natalie Clifford; Duncan, Penelope
Sikelianos; Glaspell, Susan; Naoroji,
Khorshed; Sikelianos, Eva Palmer; Yard-
ley, Virginia Greer
classical period. See Greece
classical reception. See reception of Greco-
Roman antiquity;
classical studies: critical perspective on,
248n26; and gender asymmetries, xxiv,
xxvi, xxix, 8–11, 20, 22–28, 62, 140–
141, 184, 229, 231–233, 234–235,
249n34, 254n58, 269n122, 269–
270n129, 286n60; and modern Greece,
235, 248–249n28. See also amateurism;
archaeology; ladies’ Greek; reception of
Greco-Roman antiquity
classicism, 40, 43, 79, 114, 134, 146, 234,
235, 248n26, 250n4, 283n5, 285n29;
Eva as an icon of, 235; and neoclassi-
cism, xix, xxvi, 44, 45; and same-sex de-
sire, 1, 4, 5, 20, 25, 247n11, 250n4,
254n58, 255n75. See also Germany;
Hellenism; reception of Greco-Roman
antiquity
Cleyrergue, Berthe, 19, 238
Code, Grant, xliii
Cohen, Getzel M., 269n122
Cold War: and blacklisting of Eva, xlv,
218; and Marshall Plan in Greece, 218–
223; and reappropriation of Eva’s life
story 226–229, 235
Colette, xvii, xxxv, 21, 146, 148, 238,
250n2, 257n103
colonialism: anti-, xxv; British, 76, 77, 88,
132, 135; crypto-, 77; and intersections
colonialism (cont.)
with Hellenism, 235, 299n23; struggle against, 76, 77, 130, 135, 160, 161; studies of, 272n2
Colum, Padraic, 212
Communism, xxv; and Communist Party of Greece (KKE), 123, 202. See also EAM
Conservatory of National Music, xxxvii, xxxviii, 117–118, 151
Constantine, King of Greece I, xxxviii, 101, 104–106, 122–123, 202, 279n142
Constantine, King of Greece II, 226
Constantinople, 82–83, 92, 107, 122–123, 272n1, 273n5, 278n130, 278n131
Cook, George Cram “Jig,” 150–154, 173, 223, 238; attempts of to reanimate Ancient Greek dance and song, 152–154; decision of to abandon Western dress, 151–152; and the Delphic Players, 154, 287n77; influence of on the Delphic Idea, 154, 155; month-long stay of in Sykia, xxxviii; and Provincetown Players, xviii, xxxviii, 117, 151, 154, 238, 243, 288n113
Coudert, Clarisse, 44
Crowfoot, Grace Mary, 61
Curtis Burlin, Natalie, 92–93, 98, 100, 238, 275n66
Custance, Olive, 21
daily life, as performance. See art of life; performance; Sikelianos, Eva Palmer: art of life; Upward Panic
Damaskinos, Archbishop of Athens, 202
dance: ancient, 140–142, 144, 145–164, 166–166, 171; ballet, 141; correspondence between Eva and Natalie Barney on, 23–24; inspired by ancient Greek molpe (song); 164–165; inspired by Greek sculpted and painted source materials, 141–144, 152–154, 156–157, 158–159, 164–165, 243, 285n28; as literary trope in Greek folk, xli, 136, 137, 146, 166–170, 187–188, 228, 242; modern, xxviii, 141, 164–173 193, 240, 284n20, 285n36; Nietzsche, the first philosopher of, 142; of tragic chorus, xxx, xli, 80, 137–173, 181, 194, 227–228, 284n15, 291n171
Daniels, Frank, The Idol’s Eye, xxxiv, 255n76
Davis, Homer W., 199, 295n87
Debussy, Claude, 92
Dekemvriana (December events), 218
decadence, xxix, 14, 156–160, 288n118, 289n122
Decorative Arts at International Exposition, xxxix, 78
DeJean, Joan, xxi, 250n2
Delandes, Ilse, 21, 148, 257n103
Delacroix, Eugène, La Liberté guidant le peuple, 44–45
Delaure-Mardrus, Lucie, 21, 24, 27, 239, 250n2
Delphi: Angelos’s construction of roads and paths, xl; European Cultural Center of, 226, 299n5; Eva as “High Priestess of,” xviii; excavations of, 137; Sikelianos house in, xxxiv, 117, 175, 222, 224, 225, 227, 244, 290n143. See also Cook, George Cram; Delphic Festivals
Delphic Festivals, xvii, xviii, xxiii, xxiv, xxxiv, xxxv, xxxix, xli, 80, 117, 148, 150, 155, 174, 225, 227, 228, 229, 240, 243, 244, 283n7; 1927 festival, xviii, xxxix, xl, 57–58, 117, 137–141, 154–164, 172, 224, 238, 241, 243; 1930 festival, xviii, xl, 172, 228, 237, 245; 1930s plan for resumption of under Metaxas dictatorship, xlii, 167; 1952 revival of under Marshall Plan, xlv, 218–223; archiving and collecting materials from, xlvi, 60, 225, 237, 241, 280n158; archiving and exhibition of materials from, 60, 226, 228, 241; Delphic Idea supporting, xviii, xxxvii, xxxix, xli, 79, 134, 148, 150–151, 160, 163, 177, 194, 195, 218, 287n77, 287n89; Eva’s overspending on, 117, 175, 224, 280n158; Indian connection to, xxxix, 160–161; protofascist and decolonizing aspects of, 134–135, 156–161, 284n18; reviews and critical discussions of, 137–138, 139, 283n6, 284n16, 284n18, 284n26, 289n123. See also Cook, George Cram “Jig,” influence of on the Delphic Idea; Delphi; Sikelianos, Angelos, “Delphic Word” (Δελφικός λόγος); Upward Panic
Delsarte, François, 68–72, 140–41. See also mythic pose
demoticism: and anti-Western nationalism, 111, 239; and language debates, 84, 86–87, 88, 90, 137, 163, 274n38; relation-
Index

ship of to music, 88, 109, 110; as Western-based theory of non-Western purity, 89–90, 134, 136, 278n126. See also authenticity; music

Dionysian mode, 24, 142, 144, 146, 154, 161–162, 194, 197, 285n35. See also Dionysus; madness

“Dionysia” theater in Syntagma Square, xl

Dionysus, 154, 196–197, 203; theater of, 142, 285n36

Dodd, E. R., 289n119

Donnelly, Lucy, xliii, 180, 239

Dorf, Samuel, 259n122, 262n173, 286n58

Doolittle, Hilda (H. D.), 139, 150, 155, 239, 240, 256n85

Doucet, Jacques: Bibliothèque littéraire, xi, xlvi, 19; fashion designs of, 19, 75

Dragoumis, Markos, 273n12, 277n107, 279n144

Dragoumis, Ion, 109, 111, 239, 279n144

Draper, Ann Mary Palmer, xxxvii, 239

Dreier, Katherine, xlii, 166, 239

Dreyfus-Barney, Laura, xxx, 11–12, 15, 237, 239, 253n69

Du Bois, W.E.B., 134, 215

Dumbarton Oaks, 147

Duncan, Isadora: Athens visit of in 1903 and performance of third stasimon of Aeschylus's Suppliants, xxxv, 38, 46, 87, 89–91, 140–144, 284n15; Athens visit of in 1915, xxxvii, 101, 130, 241; in Barney's circle, 21, 148, 259n122; disappointment with Byzantine music, 90; and Greek prototypes, 43, 44, 46, 69, 87, 140, 141–142, 170, 239, 264n22, 285n36; 46, 87; reception of Nietzsche, 142–143; relationship to Eva, xvii, 36, 48, 49, 130, 139, 144–145, 265n45; travels to Albania in 1913, 101. See also Sikelianos, Eva Palmer; and Isadora Duncan's Greek movement

Duncan, Menalkas, 43, 96, 101, 102, 239, 265n39, 293n37

Duncan, Penelope Sikelianos: death of and Eva’s reaction, xxxvii, 101–103, 149, 239; as Elektra, xxxvi–xxxvii, 96, 98–100, 266n55; foreignness in Greece, 46; and Isadora's 1903 Suppliants, 87, 90–91, 144; motives of as matchmaker, 38, 49–50, 266n35, 266n56, 266n57; position of vis-à-vis the language and music questions, 87–89, 90–91; singing of and Eva, 36, 94–96, 100, 102–103, 139, 144, 147

Duncan, Raymond: and the Akadémia, xxxvi, 98, 239, 276n86; campaign for Venizelos, 104; marriage to Penelope Sikelianos, xxxv, 46, 87, 265n37, 265n39, 266n35; North American lectures of, xxxvi, 96, 97; Elektra performance by, xxxvi–xxxvii, 98, 244; and Equivoque, 36–37, 91; refugee work, xxxvii, 100–101, 123; travels to Greece, xviii, 38, 39, 41, 46, 102, 142, 155; and weaving, xxxv, 36–37, 43–44, 45, 98, 100–101, 184, 239, 264n22

Dunmore, Lake in Vermont, xxxiii, 254n61

EAM (National Liberation Front): Angelos, recruit of, 202, 295n95; delegation of to Cairo in 1943, 207–208; formation of with its military arm, ELAS, 201–202, 208; marginalization of in end of war negotiations, 217–218; provisional government (PEEA) of, 208, 213, 215; relations of with other resistance groups, 202, 208, 213. See also Dekemvriana; fascism: antifascist movements

Eames, Emma, 6–7

Earle, Ethel, xli, 253n43

Earle, Mortimer Lamson, 253n43

economic crisis, and writing Eva Palmer Sikelianos: A Life in Ruins, 230

Edison cylinder recorder: use of by Natalie Curtis 92, 238; use of by Psachos, 96–97, 109, 276n84

elitism, 125–126; Barney’s, 38. See also Barney, Natalie Clifford; Eva Palmer Sikelianos, political commitments of

Emmanuel, Maurice, 92, 140–143, 155, 284n26, 285n27, 285n36, 288n22

Emerson, Ralph Waldo, 178, 299n16

Epidaurus, xxxix, 50, 133–134, 149, 221, 228, 299n15

Equivoque, xxii, xxviii, xxxv, 16, 32, 33–37, 38, 39–40, 41, 42, 43, 56, 71, 91

eroticism. See Barney, Natalie Clifford; gaze, gendered nature of; lesbianism; Lesbos; Sapphism

ethnomusicology, 92–93, 238, 241, 273n3

Euripides: Bacchae, xviii, xlii, 175, 181, 184–185, 245, 292n4, 293n37

evzone, 186–188, 293n40

fascism, xxv, 134, 157–161, 185, 208, 216, 220, 226, 283n233, 289n123, 289n127; and antifascist movements or organizations, xlv, 201, 202, 203; Eva’s denunciation of, xlv, 226, 289n130. See also Delphic Festivals; modernity; Sikelianos, Angelos

fashion: and alienated labor, 63–64, 74–76, 77, 78; as “erotic embellishment,” 24; Eva’s disregard for prevailing, xix, xxx–xxxi, 41–42, 47–48, 52–54, 55, 56–57, 63–64, 77–78, 216, 233, 265n42, (see also Greek dress; self-fashioning); Eva’s lectures on (see Sikelianos, Eva Palmer, 1919 and 1921 lectures on Greek fashion); and Hellenization (see going native); inspired by ancient Greek prototypes (see anadromic method; Greek dress: and Greek source materials); and structures of relations, 62–63, 69, 77–78, 130, 250n3

Federal Theatre Project, xlii, 166–167, 169, 175, 181, 185, 242

Fiske, Shanon, 254n58, 288–289n119

Fortuny, Mariano, 41–44, 264n16, 264n19, 264n20

Foucault, Michel, 176, 233, 292n9

Fournaraki, Eleni, 283n2

fragments: of Anacreon, 251n16; of Eva’s archive, 221, 226–227; of Greek tradition, see syntrimmata; representing deep time of as yet unlived future, xxi, xxvi, 17, 173, 214, 234; of Sappho, xxi–xxii, 1, 4, 5, 6, 9, 17–18, 20, 22–23, 32, 50, 112, 234, 250–251n7, 258n115; terracotta fragments, 38–39, 71. See also archive; Equivoque; lacunae; ruins; Sappho; syntrimmata

Fuller, Loie, 141, 239, 284n15, 285n28

gaze, gendered nature of, 16, 45, 125

Gaziadi filmmakers, xl
gender. See classical studies; reception of Greco-Roman antiquity; gender asymmetries in Germany: influence on modern Greek culture, 82–88, 109; interest in ancient Greek culture, xxxix, 7, 59, 83–84, 85, 92, 138, 238, 242, 284n26, 250n4; World War I occupation of Fort Roupel, 105; World War II occupation of Greece, 192, 194, 197, 202, 203, 207, 208, 214, 216, 217–218, 219, 294n63, 296n99. See also Buschor, Ernst; Evion Panaharmonium; Nietzsche, Friedrich Wilhelm; Strauss, Richard; Wagner, Richard; World War II

Gish, Lillian, 41, 44, 263n2

Glaspell, Susan: non-elite education and relation of to Greek, 139, 153; “Dwellers on Parnassos,” xxxviii; The Road to the Temple and her silence regarding Eva, 151–152, 287n95; travels to Greece, xxxviii, 123, 151–154, 238, 240

Glyks, John, 273n6

Glytzouris, Antonis, 275n45, 275n52, 283n3, 284n15, 284n18, 288n116

Golden Dawn, 279n144

Goldman, Hetty, 249n30, 269n122

going native, 39, 46, 55, 56–57, 78, 134, 152, 222, 268n101. See also authenticity; Sikelianos, Eva Palmer

Goldhill, Simon, xxv, 248n24, 250–251n7, 252n26, 253n75, 267n80, 268n102, 276n83

Gourgouris, Stathis, 299n23

Goldman, Hetty, 249n30, 269n122

Graham, Martha: as “brilliant archaeologist,” 172, 291n173; Clytemnestra, “prehistoric” rather than archaic choreography of, 291n171; student of Denishawn, 164, 240

Gramercy Park, New York, xxxiii, 7, 242

Gramercy Park School and Tool-House, 7

Great Famine (in Greece, 1941–1944), 199–201, 219

Greece: archaic, 1, 28, 42, 46, 62, 100, 130, 141, 156–160, 161–162, 169–172, 193, 265n40, 274n29, 291n171; classical, xxiv, xxvi, xxvii, 43, 44, 45, 46, 56, 57, 58, 62, 66, 74–76, 114, 140, 148, 152, 156–157, 184, 204–205, 228, 234; as a decolonizing project, 160–161; Eva’s “way into,” xxvii–xxviii, 9–11, 36,

Greek: in American education, 7, 8, 150, 152, 154, 155; ecumenical versus national, 272n1, 278n132; Eva’s experience with ancient, xxi, 9–10, 111–112, 227, 252–253n43; 256n85; Eva’s fluency in Modern, xxiv, 96, 120, 162, 201

Greek dress: ancient versus modern, 41, 48–49, 51, 69; Barney’s distaste for Eva’s, 49, 51, 266n54; and cross-dressing, xxx–xxxi, 77, 128; in Eva’s personal effects, 224–225; and Greek sculpted or painted source materials, xxvii, 41–42, 43, 44, 45, 52, 55, 59, 63, 64, 65, 69, 76, 140–141, 147, 155, 229–230, 263n14, 264n25; looseness of representing women’s liberation, 43–45, 46, 51, 52–55, 264n25; and nationalism, 75–76, 161; as a tourist industry, 228; unaffected simplicity and eccentric affectation of, 47–48, 56–57, 66–67; use of modern horizontal looms to produce ancient, 59, 60, 74, 78, 152. See also fashion; vase painting; weaving

Greek Government in Exile, or Cairo Government, xliv, 192–193, 207, 208, 211, 213, 217. See also World War II “Greek Home-Coming Year,” xxxi, 218–223

Greek War Relief Committee, xlv, 199–201

Greenwood, Emily, 299n24

Griffin, Roger, 157

Gryparis, Ioannis, 163, 240, 283n1

Gwinn Hodder, Mary, 9, 253n49, 253n54, 259n124;

Hadjidakas, Manos, 228

Hains, Daniel Dickey, 152, 255n73, 288n101

Halperin, David, 233, 251n16, 292n9

Hambidge, Jay, xxxviii, 155, 184, 190, 240, 272n182

Hambidge, Mary Crovatt, xxxix, xlii, xxvi, 155, 185, 190, 191, 193, 222, 240, 272n182, 272n183, 272n184, 289n130, 293n37; founder of Hambidge Center for the Creative Arts and Science, 190, 240; tensions of with Eva, 185, 293n37

Hamilakis, Yiannis, 173, 248n28

Hamilton, Edith, xxv, 259n124

Hamilton, Emma Lyon, 12

Hanink, Johanna, 248n27, 295n81, 299n24

Harrison, Jane Ellen, xvi, 62, 240, 254n56, 254n58, 263n4, 291n178

Hart, Mary, 229, 264n29
de Hatzfeld, Marie, princess of Hohenlohe (“Bébé” or “Baby”), xxxi, 21, 240, 257n103

Hatzimihali, Angeliki, xlv, 77–78, 219, 240

Hawes, Harriet Boyd, 249n30, 269n122

Hellenism: American revivals of, 7–9, 149–150, 151; as antidote to industrialism, 8, 77–78; expanded archive of, 234 (see also archive); and gender, 42; power/knowledge clashes over, 77–78, 81, 111, 114, 134, 151, 160, 193, 194, 225, 226, 227, 234–236, 254n58, 278n126, 288n119, 299n23, 299n24; strains of in Eva’s work, 77–78, 114–115, 134, 160, 193–194

heritage, xxvi, 79, 80, 111, 116, 134, 227–228

Herriot, Édouard, xli, 296n115

Hindustan Association, 131, 282n222

Holst-Warhaft, Gail, 285n29

House Un-American Activities Committee, xlv, 218. See also Cold War

identity. See classicism; demoticism; lesbianism; Hellenism; national culture; Sapphism; reception of Greco-Roman antiquity

implication, xxiii, 1–6, 10, 16, 18, 19, 37, 39, 40, 62–63, 250–251n7, 252n26. See also body or embodiment; reception of Greco-Roman antiquity

improvisation, 79, 109, 144, 147, 162, 172
India: attachment to by Americans, xl, 293n41; colonialism in, 76, 128, 133, 134, 216; decolonization of, 76–77, 126–127, 135–136, 160–161; national movement of, 131, 132, 161, 242, 282n222. See also Cook, Nilla; Delphic Festivals; Gandhi, Mahatma; MacLeod, Josephine or Tantine; Naoroji, Khorshed; Tagore, Rabindranath

Ioannidou, Eleftheria, 287n89


Jacob's Pillow, xliii, 231, 244, 290n145, 290n164; Eva's work at, 164–173, 181, 185, 188

Joachim III, Patriarch of Constantinople, 82

Jeffreys, Peter, 289n122

Jews and anti-Semitism, xxv

Joukowsky, Martha Sharp, 269n122

Jowitt, Deborah, 291n173

Judanis, Gregory, 289n127

Kalomiris, Manolis, 109, 117, 135, 240, 278n127, 279n134

Kambanis, Aristos, 103–104, 108–111, 277n113

Kanellos, Vassos and Tanagra, 241, 284n15

Karas, Simon, xl

Karzis, Linos, xli, 174, 221

Katsimbali, Kalypso, xxvii, 50–51, 149, 202, 241

Katsimbali, Kalypso, George: brother of Kalypso, xxvii; as Henry Miller's "colossus of Maroussi," 51; present at funeral of Kostis Palamas, 202, 203, 241

Kazantzakis, Nikos, xxvii, xxviii, 111, 117, 149, 241, 294n63

Kober, Alice, 249n32

Kolocotroni, Vassiliki, 234

Kotopouli, Marika, 84, 202, 203

Koukouzeles, John, 273n6

Koun, Karolos, 228

Kourelis, Kostis, 249n33, 279n152, 283n236

Krastel, Friedrich (Fritz), 84

labor, 36, 60, 61, 74, 76, 77, 130, 175, 184–185, 190–191, 269n129. See also amateurism; archaeology: divisions of labor in; arts and crafts movement; loom; weaving

lacunae, xxi, 4, 17, 113, 172. See also anachronism; fragments; queer time; ruins

ladies' Greek, xxiv, 12, 17, 147. See also Prins, Yopie

Lalaki, Despina, 226–227

Lambelet, Georgios, 88

Lambropoulos, Vassilis, 299n24

Landowska, Wanda, 21, 257n103

Langer, Cassandra, 279n155, 297n141

language question (γλωσσικό ζήτημα). See demoticism: language debates

Latour, Bruno, 273n4

Lausanne, Treaty of, 122–123, 124,

Leblanc, Georgette, 21, 257n103

Lekakis, Mihalis, 298n156

Leontis, Artemis, Topographies of Hellenism, 269n104

Lesbos, xxi, xxv, 5, 21, 33, 38, 247n11, 250n2, 250n4, 251n13, 251n17, 259n121, 286n53

lesbianism, xxi, xxv, 5, 21, 33, 38, 247–248n11, 250n2, 250n4, 250n5, 251n17, 261n168, 286n53. See also Sapphism

Leukas (also Lefkas, Lefkada, Santa Maura), xxxiii, xxxv–xxxvi, xxxix, 46, 49, 50, 88, 89, 231, 244, 262–263n192, 265–266n49, 299n7; town of, 46, 50, 88, 244; white rocks of, 5, 33, 36–37, 39–40, 49–50

Liberty and Co., 45; 264n30

life writing, xxv–xxvii, 178; and autobiographical status of Upward Panic (see Upward Panic); and autobiography, xxv, 177–183, 254n61, 292n12, 292n14; as biography, xxv, 248n27; as cultural biography, xxv–xxvii; as mode for study of reception of Greco-Roman antiquity, xxvi–xxvii, 248n27; and Sappho, 5. See also Upward Panic

loom: constructed by Eva and the Duncans, xxxv, 45, 239; Eva's made of walnut in Leukas, 49; Eva's in US, 184–185, 188; instrument for Greece's emancipation, 63, 72, 74–78, 152; Mary Hambidge's made in Athens, 272n183; in Rabun Gap, 190; weights, 78, 272n183. See also arts and crafts movement; labor; weaving
Lounsbery, Grace Constant, xxxv, 21, 241, 257n103
Lyceum of Greek Women, xxxvii, xxxviii, xxxix, 73, 78, 137, 272n177, 283n2, 284n15
Macintosh, Fiona, 273n16
MacLeod, Josephine, or Tantine, 293n41
Macmillan Company Publishers, xliii, xlv, 179, 183, 198, 199
MacMonnies, William Frederick, xxxv
madness or frenzy, 20, 24, 122, 146, 149, 165, 176, 216–217, 258n113. See also Dionysian mode; *Upward Panic*
Maeterlinck, Maurice: *Pelléas and Mélisande*, xxxv, 238
makam, 83, 109–110, 124, 273n6
Magnus, Maurice, xxxvii, 101, 241
Mahn, Churnjeet, 291n177
Malnig, Julie, 291n171
Marchand, Suzanne, 285n32
Marianne, figure of revolutionary France, 44–45, 264n22
Marshall Plan: and “Greek Home-Coming Year,” xxxi, xlv, 45, 218–223, 238. See also *Cold War*
Martindale, Charles, 250n7
masks: of Eva, 52, 139, 161, 182, 206, 211–212, 216–217, 228, 235; in the Delphic Festivals, 137, 161
materiality: of archive, xxxii, xxxvii, xxviii xxix, 17, 18, 224–225, 229–231; of Greek traditions and Eva’s work in them, xxvi, xxviii, 38, 42, 57, 58, 59, 63, 113, 173, 185; of writing 18, 210–211, 212–214; Melba, Nellie, 6
Mercouris, Spyros, 82
Merlier, Octave, xli, 19, 226, 238, 241. See also Center for Asia Minor Studies
Mistriotis, Georgios, 85–86, 87, 89, 241, 274n26, 274n29
Mitropoulos, Dimitris, xxxvii, xxxix, 135, 228, 241–242, 282n12, 283n234, 283n235
modernism, xxii, xxv, 87–88, 209, 243, 245, 248n18, 249n33, 250n5, 285n28, 285n36, 288–289n119. See also dance modernity, xxii, xxx, 124, 128, 194, 209, 210, 226, 227; and fascism, 157; and mechanization, 126
Moreno, Marguerite, 21, 35, 257n103
Morgan, J. Pierpont, 4
Mumaw, Barton, 185, 242; *koryphaios*, 167, 168; “Greek solo” of, xlii, 187–188
Murray, Gilbert, 165, 263n4, 290n152
Murray, Peggy, 292n17, 297n124
music (cont.)
Manolis; multimedia; Mitropoulos, Dimitris; musical question; Nairoji, Khorsked; Nazos, Georgios; Ottoman Empire; Palmer, Courtlandt, Jr.; Psachos, Konstantinos; Sikelianos, Eva Palmer; Swinburne, Algernon; tragedy
musical question (μουσικό ζήτημα), 80–83, 86–87, 92, 103, 107, 120, 273n4
Mycenae, xxxix, 2, 3, 129, 131, 133
mythic pose, 68–71, 140
Naoroji, Dadabhai, 126, 127, 242, 282n30
Nazis, invasion of Greece. See Germany; World War II
Nazos, Georgios, 82, 83, 108–109, 110 Nehamas, Alexander, 233 Nelly’s (Nelly Sougioutzoglou-Seraidare), 186, 289n136 Nea Skini (Νέα Σκινή, New Stage), 87, 88, 243, 244, 274n34 Nietzsche, Friedrich Wilhelm: Angelos’s reading of, 111, 124, 149; the “dancing philosopher,” 142, 285n37; Evangelia’s reading of, xxi, 59, 77, 120, 137, 204, 232, 233, 299n16; ideas of Greece and classicism, 137, 139, 142, 157, 248n26, 268n102, 284n16; “rainbow bridge,” 120; and idea of untimeliness, xxv. See also Germany; Isadora Duncan; reception of Greco-Roman antiquity; Sikelianos, Eva Palmer, untimeliness of; Wagner, Richard Nike: Greek word for victory, 73–74, 77; of Samothrace, 44, 73, 77, 264n22; winged images of, 150
Nikolaidis, Nikos (Nord, Paul), 212, 213, 242
Nikoloudi, Zouzou, 228
Nineteenth-Century Club, xxxiii, 242
Nirvanas, Pavlos, 78, 130
Noel, Muriel, 78, 272n182, 272n183, 272n184
Nordica, Lillian, 6
Oeconomos, Thomas, 84, 86, 88
oktoechos, 81, 82, 273n6. See also Chrysanthos of Madytos; Evion Panharmonium Olympia, xxxix, 7, 50, 230, 243, 283n7
Olympic Games, 8, 230
Onassis, Jackie, 41
O’Neill, Eugene, xlii, 151, 166, 242
Oresteia, 80–87, 89
Orientalism, 107, 111, 235, 299n23
Orzech, José Clemente, xl, 242
Orthodox Church. See Christianity, Orthodox
otherness. See Sikelianos, Eva Palmer: art of life
Ottoman Empire, xxxvii, 7, 73, 74, 77, 92, 100, 101, 106, 107, 111, 114, 122, 123, 278–279n134; music of, 106, 108–111, 115, 124, 193, 278n126, 278n130, 279n137. See also Turkey
Owen, Norton, 290n164
palace of Agamemnon: house of the Duncans on Mount Hymettos, xxxv, 38, 46, 47, 155
Palama, Nausika, xxxvii, 50, 202, 242
Palamas, Kostis: and Angelos, xxxiv, 148–149, 150; commemoration of Aristotle Valaoritis, xxxiv; as demoticist poet, xxxiv, 84, 88, 109; father of Nausika, xxxvii, 50, 202, 242; funeral of, xliv, 202–203, 206, 207, 209, 242, 296n110
Palmer, Courtlandt, Sr., xvii, xxxiii, 6, 242, 247n2
Palmer, Courtlandt, Jr., xxxiii, xxxiv, 29, 112, 198, 222, 242, 254n59, 254n60; acquisition of “Edison” wax cylinder by, 96; Eva’s relations with, xiv, xiv, 28–31, 38, 48–49, 191, 260n145, 267n71; death and bequest to Eva, xiv, 221; “his illness,” 260n145; music studies and career, 11, 242, 260n144; opinion of Angelos, 221, 260n146; reconciliation with Eva, 221
Palmer, Catherine. See Abbe, Catherine
Palmer, Robert, xxxiii, xxxvi, xxxviii, 243
Pan: aesthetic and political import of for Eva, 176
Panathenaic Stadium, xlii, 174, 240, 284n15
Pangalo, Léna, 271n158
Panourgiá, Neni, 296n112, 296n113
Papandreou, Georgios, 67, 69, 265n46, 270n146
Papadaki, Lia and Efthalia, xxi, xlvi, 228, 259n23, 266n56, 275n43, 283n233, 287n89
Papadaki, Lia and Efthalia, xxi, xlvi, 228, 259n23, 266n56, 275n43, 283n233, 287n89
Parmenides: concept of the plenum, 25, 28
Parnassus, Mount, xvii, xxxviii, 13, 122, 114, 121, 123, 135, 137, 149, 151, 154, 164, 203, 222; and Montparnasse, neighborhood in Paris, 121
Parren, Calirrhoe, 283n2
Parsis, 80, 127, 130
Pasagiannis, Kostas, 41, 50, 51, 243
Pasagiannis, Spelios, 41, 50, 51, 87, 243, 244
Patel, Dinyar, 281n198, 282n230
Pennanen, Risto Pekka, 278n134
Peren, Calirrhoe, 283n2
Perikersis, Dimitrios, 279n137
performance: amateurism in, 140, 146, 147–8, 163, 175; as another term for technique of “upward panic,” 177; as archaeology, 172, 291n173; Barney’s definition of as “effeminate,” 22–27, 31, 233; Eva’s life as, xxii, xxiii, xxiv, xxv, xxx–xxx, 41–42, 49, 182–183, 216–218, 255 227–228, 233, 234, 235–236; Greek history as, 196, 197–198, 200, 203; Greek politics as (see politics, as theater); and identity, 68–69, 232–234; and the “lost” arts, 38, 85; of music, 28–31, 79, 81, 83, 92, 107, 109, 125, 128; and photography (see photography); as reception of classics (see reception of Greco-Roman antiquity); Sapphic, xxii, 2–6, 11–17, 20–28, 31–40, 41, 62–63, 193 (see also Equivoque); theatrical, xvii, xxxv, xxxvi, xxxix–xliii, 84–88, 89–91, 96, 98–99, 137–140, 141–142, 143–148, 151–164, 221–222, 286n60, 288n101, 288n103 (see also Aeschylus: Cook, George Cram: and the Delphic Players; Euripides: Sikelianos, Angelos: Dithyramb of the Rose; Sophocles; Swinburne, Alge- non: Atalanta). See also archive; fashion; Greek dress; masks; multimedia; photography; reception of Greco-Roman antiquity; tableau vivant
Perkins, Ed, 292n5
photography (cont.)
philhellenism, xix, 7, 207, 215–216, 219, 222, 228, 235
philology. See classical studies
piano keyboard: irreconcilability of with Byzantine oktoechos and non-Western music, 81–82, 92, 109, 117–119, 120, 126–127, 280n167. See also Evion Panharmonium
Pindar, 8
Plantzos, Dimitris, 289n123
Plato, 91, 94, 95, 98, 147, 232, 253n43; academy of, 98, 239; neoplatonism, 204; platonic love as a code word for male same-sex desire, 250n4
Plemmenos, Ioannis, 278n131
Pluggé, Domis Edward, 286n60
Porter, James, 248n26, 251n9, 283n5
Potts, Alex, 250n4, 264n21
Pougy, Liane de, 4, 21, 257n103
Pratsika, Koula, 138, 227, 228, 243, 283n7, 298n159
Preston, Carrie, 264n22
Prins, Yopie, xxiv, 249n31, 251n7, 258n115, 291n178, 292n4, 293n21
privilege. See elitism
Proestopoulo, Nikos, 224, 243
Proestopoulo, Katina, xxxvii, 243
Psachos, Konstantinos: background and training of, 83, 92, 273n12; composer for Prometheus Bound, xli, 79–80, 134–136, 137, 162, 240–241, 243; and demoticism, 109, 110, 278n130; relationship with Eva; xxxvi, xxxvii, xli, 80, 83, 91, 96–98, 103, 111, 113, 115, 116–120, 174, 276n84, 277n106, 277n107; Greek music collected by, 96–98, 276n84, 277n107; influence on of Western collections of Greek music, 92; organ for Byzantine music constructed by, xxxviii, 117–120, 128–129, 280n170; Ottoman popular music collected by, 109–110, 278–279n134; Penelope's lessons with, 91, 95–96; professor at Athens Conservatory, 80, 83, 91, 95–96, 103, 104; struggle of against colleagues, 107–109, 110; struggle of against Western music's encroachment, 92, 106–108 234, 277n106; theory of regarding Greek music as Asian and vice versa, 108–111; and Venizelos, 103–104, 110–111, 279n142. See also Aeschylus, Konstantinos Psachos compositions for; Conservatory of National Music; “Edison”; Evion Panharmonium; music; musical question
public: and matters of concern, xxiv, 81–87, 104, 135–136; versus private or in-group, xxiii; 9–11, 12, 14, 46–50, 52, 100. See also politics
Quatremere de Quincy, Antoine Chrysostôme, 113, 114
queer time, 17, 62, 183, 214, 234, 257n98. See also anadromic method; fashion; fragment; reception of Greco-Roman antiquity; ruins
racism, 76, 127, 133, 193
Raftopoulou, Bellla, 156, 158, 159, 161, 169, 243, 288n116
Rallis, Ioannis, 208
Rasula, Jed, 285n36
reception of Greco-Roman antiquity:
American, xxvii, 6–12, 43–44, 48, 52, 68–69, 111–112, 144, 150–154, 164–173, 176, 199–200, 204, 207, 218–219, 226, 228–229, 252n29, 252n37, 288n101, 288n103; archives of, xxvi–xxvii, 18–19, 234; body as a mode of, x, xxx, 2, 4, 6, 36, 37, 42, 43, 46, 68–69, 84, 99–100, 141–142, 146, 156, 161–162, 165–166, 216–217, 227, 229–230, 289n123; Eva’s intentionally anachronistic periodization in, 58–59, 62; gay and lesbian reappraisal of, xxviii (see also lesbianism; Sapphism); and gender asymmetries, xxiv, xxvi, xxix, 8–11, 20, 22–28, 140–141, 184, 231–233, 234–235; life writing as a mode for studying, xxvi–xxvii; liquid, vs monumental, xxvi, 249n29; and gender, 234–235 (see also classical studies); modern Greek, 137–138, 154, 161, 198, 210, 227–228, 234–235, 252n26, 299n24; and Nietzsche’s reconstruction by participation, 268n102; and performance, 41–42, 284n15 (see also Aeschylus; Equivoque; Euripides; performance, Sapphism; Sikelianos, Angelos: Sibyl; Sophocles; tragedy); and photography, xxiii, xxx, xxviii–xxviii, xxix–xxxii, 2–4, 65–66, 69–72, 98–100, 141–142, 170–172; and reader response criticism, 250n7; and self-fashioning, 6, 56–57; 250–251n7, 268n102; study of, xxv–xxvii, xxix–xxx, 250n7, 299n24. See also Akritika; Apollonian mode; amateurism; anadromic method; archaeology; classical studies; classicism; dance; Delphic Festivals; Dionysian mode; Duncan, Isadora; Duncan, Raymond; Duncan, Penelope Sikelianos; fragment; Germany; Greece; Greek dress; Hellenism; ladies’ Greek; lesbianism; masks; materiality; music; mythic pose; national culture; Nashville Parthenon; Nietzsche, Friedrich Wilhelm; Olympic Games; Parmenides; performance; philhellenism; photography; Plato; politics; “queer time”; ruins; Sappho; Sapphism; Shawn, Ted; Sikelianos, Angelos; Sikelianos, Eva Palmer; Strauss, Richard; syntrimmata; tableau vivant
Reed, Alma, xl, 242, 243
revivalism. See classicism; Delphic Festival; Hellenism; Olympic Games
Reynolds, Margaret, 257n105, 261n168
Rigopoulos, Rigas, 296n99
Rives, Amelie, 21
Robeson, Paul, xliv, 215, 219, 243, Rodriguez, Suzanne, 254n65
Rogers, Henriette, 21, 257n103
Romanou, Katy, 273n8, 273n9, 274n40, 275n58
Rome: Angelos’s travels to, xxxvi, 49, 266n49; Courtlandt Palmer’s studies in, 11; and decadence, 289n122; Eva’s travels to, 11; occupation of Greece, 198–199; Roman Hellenism: 63, 251n9; Roman republic versus Greek democracy, 7. See also reception of Greco-Roman antiquity; Sikelianos, Angelos: Sibyl
Roosevelt, Eleanor, xvii, xlii, xlv, 247n1, 247n4, 297n143
Royal Theatre (Greece), 83, 84, 86, 87, 90, 274n29
Rubin, Gayle, 258n112, ruins: as creative inspiration for new life, xxvi, 17, 59, 73, 172–173, 248–249n28, 291n177; as effects of time and destructive forces, 74, 100, 176, 223, 224–225, 251–252n19; metaphor for loss in Eva’s life, xxvi, 17, 39, 140, 174, 227; as remains of antiquity, xxvi, 39, 58, 65, 95, 120, 137, 138, 139, 146, 155–156, 164, 173, 194, 223, 227. See also anachronism; anadromic method; archaeology; fragments; lacunae; queer time: syntrimmata
Russel, Nina, 21, 148, 257n103
Russell Hovey, Henrietta, 284n20
Russian Socialist Federative Soviet Republic, or USSR, 124, 202, 218, 226
St. Denis, Ruth, 44, 69, 153, 155, 164, 244
Sakellaridis, Ioannis, 273n7, 274n26
Samson, Jim, 273n10, 273n11, 275n58
Sapphism, xxi, xxii, 1, 18, 25, 26, 32, 39, 40, 42, 177, 209, 228, 235, 247n11, 248n19, 257n98, 277n11. See also lesbianism
Sappho: epigram from Palantine Anthology 158D, 262n170; Eva’s tableau of in 1900, 11–17, 39; fragment 1, 251n14;
Sappho (cont.)
fragment 31, 20–24, 258n113; 258n115; fragment 34, 262n189; love triangles inspired by, xxi, 20, 22–23, 32–33, 42; paintings of, 12–13, 14, 34, 255n7; papyrus scraps of at Oxyrhynchus, 5, 9, 251n14; reception of, 4–5, 9–10, 39, 251n13, 251n15, 251n16, 251n17, 251–252n19, 253n145, 255n75, 256n90, 257n98, 259n121, 286n53; red figure vase painting of, 2–4; S. S. Sappho, 4, 251n11; suicidal leap from White Rocks, 5, 33, 35–36, 39–40, 262–263n192, 265n37. See also Equivoque, fragments; lacunae; lesbianism; Lesbos; Sapphism

Sanatorium: of Schatzalp, xxxvii, 101; of Saratoga, xliii, 185, 292n4,

Schlenther, Paul, 84, 273n17

Schuré, Edouard, xl

Schwab, Katherine, 269n126

Seferis, George (George Seferiadis): correspondence with Eva, 209–211, 212, 213, 214; Nobel speech, 296n100; role in publication of the Akritika, 209–214, 243–244; visit to Delphi, 296n115

self-fashioning, 56–57, 62–63; 250–251n7, 268n102. See also art of life; fashion; Greek dress; reception of Greco-Roman tradition

Sembrich, Marcella, 6

Shawn, Ted: “Death of Adonis,” 165; and Denishawn, 164, 244; Eva’s termination of collaboration with, xliii, 138, 188–190; Eva’s weaving costumes for, 166, 167, 185, 188, 290n158; as Hermes in the Nashville Parthenon, 170–172, 291n168; influence of Eva’s archaic angularity on, 169–171; influence of Eva’s “Persian Postures” on, 169–170; “Kinetic Molpai,” 165–166, 185, 290n152; 290n154, 290n158; Men Dancers of, xliii, 164, 165, 244, 290n145; “perfect match” with Eva, 166, 167, 244; Prometheus Bound, 165, 284n15; in Upward Panic, 178, 180, 188; use of proscenium versus amphitheater, 167–168; use of vaudeville to access non-elite audiences, 164, 290n147. See also Aeschylus, Persians

Shakespeare, William: As You like It, xxxiv, 255n76, Romeo and Juliet, xxxv; Hamlet, 183, 293n29

Shelley, Percy Bysshe, 8, 48, 252n38

Sikelianos, Angelos: Akritan Songs (Ακριτικά), xliiv, 174, 208–218, 244, 245; and Anna Karamani, xliii, 192, 244; attempt of to erase Eva’s creative labor, xlii, 174, 291n1; brotherhood of elite, xxviii, 124, 149, 152; death of, 220, 221; “Delphic Word” (Διθύραμβος του Ρόδου), xli, 149, 287n77; Dithyramb of the Rose (Διθύραμβος του Ρόδου), xli, xliii, 204, 243; Eva’s devotion to, 66–68, 117, 192, 204, 206, 207, 219, 227; Eva’s initial assessment of, 48–49, 52; eulogy of for Kostis Palamas’s funeral, 202–203; and fascism, xliii, 276n142, 283n233; interactions of with Barney, 51–52; nationalist-populist drift of, 111, 123–124, 134–135, 202; “Open letter to His Majesty,” 1922, xxxviii, 123; “Penelope Sikelianou” (Πηνελόπη Σικελιανού), 88–89; as a philanderer, xxvii, 50–51; “Plan général du mouvement delpique” in 1930, 287n89; Prologue to life (Πρόλογος στη ζωή), xxvii; religious syncretism of, 149–150; resistance to German occupation and membership of in EAM, 202, 207, 208, 213, 295n95; The seer (Αλαφροϊσκιωτος), xxxvi, 68, 276n84; Sibyl, xliii, 198–199. See also Akritika; Delphic Festivals; Naoroji, Khorshed; Sikelianou, Anna Karamani; Sikelianos, Eva Palmer

Sikelianos, Eleni, 244, 253n43, 289n138


Sikelianos, Frances Lefevre, Frances Waldman: xli, xlii, xliii, xliv, xlv, 191, 244, 245
Sikelianos, Glafkos, xxxvi, xxxvii, xxxviii, xxxix, xli, xlii, xliii, xliv, 68; 70, 71–72, 102, 128, 151, 191, 224, 225, 237, 244, 245; named after Eva, 68
Sikelianos, Ioannis, xxxiii, xxxvi, xxxvii, 88, 244
Sikelianou, Anna Karamani, xliii, 19, 128, 135, 151, 163–164, 175, 224, 242, 253n43, 277n91, 282n212, 283n236
Sikelianou, Eleni Pasagianni, xxxiii, xxxvi, 46, 51, 87, 88, 243, 244
Sikelianou, Harikleia (Stafanitsa), xxxiii, xxxix, xliv, 88, 223, 244; Stefanitsa family, 88
Sikelianou, Penelope. See Duncan, Penelope Sikelianos
Sikya, Eva’s purchase of property in, 100; Sikelanos house in, xxxvii, 100, 102, 112, 117, 128, 135, 151, 163–164, 175, 224, 242, 253n43, 277n91, 282n212, 283n236
silk: use of in dresses and costumes, 41, 43, 45, 57, 62, 128, 129, 130, 184, 185, 188–189, 225, 264n30
Siopsi, Anastasia, 86
Skalkottas, Nikos, 228
Smith, Bonnie, 62–63, 173, 291n178
Smith College, xviii, xlii, 175, 181, 183, 286n60, 293n21
Solomos, Dionysios, 89, 203
Solon, 216–217
Sophocles: Antigone, 8, 87–88, 252–253n43, 274n29, 274n35; Elektra (or Electra, Electre) xxxvi, 96, 98, 286n60; Oedipus Rex, 221, 253n52
Soteriades, Georgios, 84
Stanford, Charles Villiers, 84
St. Denis, Ruth, 44, 69, 153, 155, 164, 244, 290n146, 290n147
Steichen, Edward, 141–142, 170, 285n33
Stein, Gertrude, 265n39
Stettinus Jr., Edward R. (secretary of state), xlv
Strauss, Richard:  
Elektra, xxxvi, 96, 98–99, 244, 274n76, 276n83; in Greece with  
Eva, xxxix, 244–5
swadeshi, 161,  
Swinburne, Algernon: aesthetic proximity of to Sappho, 5, 9, 145, 286n53; A  
Tantalus in Calydon: Eva’s planned performance of, xxxv, 144–48; choreographing  
of, 146; musical arrangements for, 147: recitation of, 16, 145
syntrimmata (συντρίμματα), 59, 63, 95, 276n76. See also fragment
tableau vivant, xxxiv, 11–17, 28, 31, 39, 98, 99, 100, 146, 147, 150–151, 164, 255n66
Tagore, Rabindranath, xxxix, 131, 245
Tanagra figures, 43, 229, 263–264n15
Tarn, Pauline. See Renée Vivien
technologies of self. See art of life; Foucault, Michel; Sikelianos, Eva Palmer:  
art of life; self-fashioning
theatricality, 193, 217, 229. See also madness; performance; politics; Upward Panic
Thermopylai, epitaph by Simonides for the Spartan dead at, 295n78
Thomas, M. Carey, xxxiv, 9–10, 245, 253n45,
Thucydides, 270n132
Tiffany, Louis Comfort Tiffany Chapel of  
1893 World’s Columbian Exposition, 114, 279n152
Tillyard, H.J.W., 118, 280n167
Titian, 125
tourism, xxxi, xlv, 219–220, 228, 236, 262–263n192; Greek Ministry of, xlii
tragedy, Greek: and the chorus, 80, 138, 139, 142, 144, 166, 284n26; Greek politics as, 197–198, 200, 216; and Greek tragoudi (τραγούδι), 84–87; modern performances of, 136, 137; and music, 28, 89–91, 92, 135, 147, 274n26; Nietzsche’s ideas of, 139, 142–144, 284n16. See also Aeschylus; Euripides; perfor-
mance; receptions of Greco-Roman antiquity; Sikelianos, Angelos; Sophocles
Trigger, Bruce, 173
Tsrouchis, Yannis, 228
Tsountoura, Marta, 284n26

tunic. See Greek dress
Turkey, 73, 77, 114, 122, 199, 264n30. See also Ottoman Empire

University of Michigan 2005 workshop  
“Eva Palmer Sikelianos: Past, Present, Future Directions,” xi, xiii, 229
untimeliness. See Nietzsche, Friedrich Wilhelm; queer time; fragments: represent-
ing deep time of as yet unlived future; Sikelianos, Eva: untimeliness of
Upward Panic: and autobiography, 177–183, 188, 292n13, 292n15; as an art of life or ethical-political exercise, 174, 175–178, 182–183, 184, 206, 213, 217; Eva’s resistance of the subject-position within, 178–182; Greek politics as mythic dramaturgy within, 197–8, 200; manuscript and publishing history of, xxviii, xlii, xlii, 178–183, 188, 219, 226, 228, 292n12; Pan and, 176–177; shifting sense of “politics” within, 194–198, 206; as source text with retrospective viewpoint, 39, 40, 49, 57, 80, 94, 135, 138–139, 144, 145, 147, 151, 155, 161–162, 167, 287n77; writing and re-
vision of, xlii, 175–183, 190, 239, 292n13. See also Anton, John; art of life; life writing; Sikelianou, Eva Palmer; writing

Valaoritis, Aristotelis, xxxix, 88, 89
Vanderbilt, George W., xxxiv, 4, 13, 252n34, 255n77, 255n78
Vanderpool, Joan Jeffery, xlii, xlii, 57, 168, 245
Van Steen, Gonda, 84, 157, 273n14, 283n6, 284n16, 284n18, 291n166, 299n23
vase painting, reception of, 2–4, 6, 12, 14, 41, 43, 57, 59, 63, 69, 137, 144, 147, 155, 156–159, 164–165, 172, 251n10, 269n122, 285n28, 290n147. See also dance; Greek dress; reception of Greco-Roman antiquity; Sappho
Vassiliou, Spyros, 210, 217, 296n117

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Venizelos, Eleftherios, xxxvii, xli, 101, 104, 105, 109, 111, 122, 123, 130, 245, 279n42

Vivien, Renée (also Pauline Tarn), xvii, xxi, xxxiv, xxxv, 1, 2, 4, 6, 11, 14, 16, 17, 19, 21, 38, 39, 245, 250n2, 255n67, 256n85, 256n90, 256n94, 257n103

Vlachos, Georgios: open letter to Hitler, 196, 295n77

Vlagopoulos, Panos, 275n57

Von Taube School. See Gramercy Park School and Tool-House

Wagner, Richard, 29, 59, 90, 92, 145, 147, 286n52. See also Bayreuth Festival

Waldman, Anne, xlv, 245

Waldman, Frances. See Sikelianos, Frances Lefevere

Wallace, Henry A. (vice president), xlv

weaving: ancient versus modern, 59; of Anna Karamani Sikelianou, 272n181; of costumes for Greek revivals, xxii, xxxiii, xxxvix, xliii, xlvi, 42, 43, 57–58, 137, 161, 166, 167, 184–185, 186, 188, 290n158, 291n171, 293n37; of Eva with Mary Crovatt Hambidge, xlii–xliv, 78, 184–185, 190–193, 222, 240; Eva’s teaching of to Muriel Noel, 78, 272n182, 272n183, 272n184; of Eva for Ted Shawn, 167, 185–190, 290n158; as financial necessity for Eva, 184–193, 207; as metaphor for the entanglement of women’s labor and life, 1–2, 42, 62, 230, 232; as metaphor for entrapment, 49, 51, 55, 62, 63; Nilla Cook’s admiration for Eva’s, 151; as organized resistance to industrialization, xxxviii, 74–75, 78, 176–177, 247n4; as a social and generational space of connection, 59, 78; and spinning, 61, 63, 76–77, 78, 101, 152, 153, 160, 161. See also arts and crafts movement; Duncan, Raymond; Greek dress; labor; loom; Sikelianos, Eva Palmer

Wharton, Henry Thornton, 5, 256n85

Wigman, Mary, 243, 283n7

Wilde, Oscar, xxxiii, 148, 299n16

Wilamowitz-Moellendorff, Ulrich von, 84

Winterer, Carolyn, 43, 253n45

Woolf, Virginia, xxiv, 269n104

World War I (Great War), 73, 101, 105, 114, 116, 122, 269n122

World War II, xvi, 174, 183, 185–186, 192–193, 194, 197, 207–208, 209, 210–214, 217–218, 226; and Germany’s occupation of Greece, 192, 198, 199, 200, 202, 207–214, 217, 219; and Greek Government in Exile, or Cairo Government, xli, 192–193, 207, 208, 211, 213, 217. See also Akritika; Britain; Cold War

writing: Barney’s definition of as “virile,” 22, 25–28, 233, 247n11; as part of Eva’s art of life, 18, 175–183

Xenopoulos, Grigoria, 274

Yannopoulos, Pericles, 114

Yardley, Virginia Green, 10, 21, 28, 52, 65, 68, 245, 253n54, 253n103, 259n124, 260n144

Zaimis, Alexandros, 82

Zelle, Margaretha (“Mata Hari”), 21

Zon, Bennett, 273n3

Zonana, Joyce, 286n53