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CHAPTER 1

Sapphic Performances

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 Sapphic¹ 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”)² 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,³ they interwove the fragmented texts of Sappho in their life and work, making the archaic Greek poet Sappho of Lesbos⁴ 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.⁵

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”⁶ 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.⁷ The word is rich in associations of braiding, twisting, weaving, and folding in its Greek and Latin roots (*πλέκω*, to

weave; *πλόκος*, lock or braid of hair; *πλοκάμι*, tentacle; *plico*, to fold; and *plecto*, to fold, wind, coil, wreath⁸). 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.⁹ 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.¹⁰ 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 propre* (1888), p. 358, and labeled, "Sapho et ses compagnes.—Hydres a figures rouges du Musée de la Societé 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. Pierpont 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*.¹¹ 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.”¹²

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.¹³ 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 "ἄτακτος . . . τὸν τρόπον" (irregular in her ways).¹⁴ She became "*mascula 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.²³ 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.”²⁴ This was his willful misreading of the passage in 2 Corinthians 5:17 that reads “*all* things are become new.”²⁵

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.²⁶ 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.²⁷ Then, around the turn of the nineteenth century and coinciding with the receding of fears of the “perils of democracy,”²⁸ 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 farmhouses across the expanding nation, until it became known as the “national style” of architecture in the United States.²⁹ 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,³⁰ 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 Latin³¹ and a serious interest in archaeology,³² 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."³³ Many years later, Eva's mother, now married to Dr. Abbe, worked with a small group in Bar Harbor³⁴ to construct a building of the arts that was "severely classic" in design.³⁵ The building opened its doors on Saturday, July 13, 1907,³⁶ 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."³⁷

Such enactments confirmed the sense that America was rooted in Greek culture. Like Percy Bysshe Shelley's Britons, Americans were "all Greeks"³⁸ when they moved in and out of Greek revival buildings designed to inspire "the highest aesthetic and intellectual stimulation."³⁹ 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,"⁴⁰ 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."⁴¹ 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 1891.⁴² 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.⁴³

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,"⁴⁴ an exception in history, a sign of women's as yet untapped genius, and call for the necessity of their solidarity.⁴⁵ 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."⁴⁶ 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.⁴⁷ 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").⁴⁸ In Mamie Gwinn's course on the English essay concentrating on "Arnold, Pater and Swinburne,"⁴⁹ she would have read Swinburne's *Notes on Poems and Reviews* in defense of "the very words of Sappho."⁵⁰

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."⁵¹ They and their Greek books were implicated in a social transformation. "What didn't the Greeks have?" Eva would later ask Natalie Barney, making the point that the Greeks gave her everything she needed to live a transformative life.⁵²

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 sense⁵³ 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"⁵⁴ 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."⁵⁵

It was commonplace to believe that women might grow "unwomanly" or excessively free if they got too close to Greek learning.⁵⁶ 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."⁵⁷ 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."⁵⁸ 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.⁵⁹ 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.⁶⁰ It is possible that she visited Bar Harbor in her adolescence, something she and Barney each recalled many years later,⁶¹ 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 “Ban-y-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.⁶² But either the story is mistaken or the punishment was ineffective, for Barney sent a personalized copy of the book to Eva,⁶³ 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.⁶⁴ 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*.⁶⁵ “Bar Harbor” of August 26, 1900, anticipates the theatrical event; then “Bar Harbor” of August 30 reports on the previous day’s entertainment.⁶⁶ 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”⁶⁷) played an opening “burlesque” role entitled “The Dream of Alice in Wonderland.”⁶⁸ 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.⁶⁹ 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"⁷⁰), 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."⁷¹ "Tableau" (plural tableaux or tableaux) 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.⁷² In Eva's day, tableaux were used in performances of Greek drama or verse at women's colleges.⁷³ They illustrated still scenes accompanied by narration. The dramatic effect of the illustration of Greek letters that "looked like a picture"⁷⁴ 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.⁷⁵ These visual sources combined with Eva's basic knowledge of Greek literature and several years' experience producing and performing drama⁷⁶ 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.⁷⁷ 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.⁷⁸ 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,"⁷⁹ 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.⁸⁰ "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."⁸¹ 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."⁸²

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 learning.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, mentioning "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 elements of fancy sandals and a headband regularly appear in modern paintings of Sappho, evoking lines from Sappho's verse. The crisscrossing straps of those sandals also dress Eva's ankles in a risqué photograph that parodies 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 impressive 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



FIGURE 1.3. Eva Palmer kneeling before Natalie Barney, ca. 1900. Unknown source, printed in Jean L. King, *Alice Pike Barney: Her Life and Art* (Washington, DC: National Museum of American Art in association with Smithsonian Institution Press, 1994), p. 137, with other photographs from the Smithsonian Institution, gift of Laura Dreyfus-Barney and Natalie Clifford Barney in the memory of their mother, Alice Pike Barney. The archivist in the Smithsonian Institution Archives was unable to locate the photograph.

As in the photograph of her reading pose, in her Sappho tableau, too, Eva deployed her assets to produce a multicode 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.⁹⁰ 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.⁹¹

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."⁹² 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").⁹³ 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.⁹⁴ 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,⁹⁵ 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”⁹⁶ 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?”⁹⁷ 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 un-lived future of alternative affective communities might unfold.⁹⁸ 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.”⁹⁹ 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.”¹⁰⁰ 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.”¹⁰¹ 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.¹⁰² 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 1909.¹⁰³ 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."¹⁰⁴ 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"¹⁰⁵ 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."¹⁰⁶ 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.”¹⁰⁷ 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.¹⁰⁸ 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.”¹⁰⁹ 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.¹¹⁰ 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 Logotheti-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 2016,¹¹¹ 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,¹¹² 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 "ερωτικάϊς μανίαις" (lovers' madness)¹¹³—lists symptoms of the senses gone awry in a counterproductive overdrive. Her flesh burns subtly, her eyes are blinded, the ears hum, her pores sweat. Finally, the tongue is both described as "breaking" ("γλωσσα ἔαγε") and literally breaks off nonsensically: "ἀλλὰ πᾶν 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"¹¹⁴ as an integrally broken one in need of collection but also by inviting supplementary creations.¹¹⁵ 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.¹¹⁶ 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”¹¹⁷ occupying several planes of Barney’s affection with other women and even a man or two.¹¹⁸ 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;¹¹⁹ 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;¹²⁰ Sarah (“Sarita”) Bernhardt; Emma Calvé;¹²¹ Colette; Olive Custance; Baroness Ilse Deslandes; Lucie (“Amande”) Delarue-Mardrus; Isadora Duncan;¹²² Princess Marie (“Bébé”) de Hatzfeld Hohenlohe; Wanda Landowska; Georgette Leblanc; Lilian (“Lily,” “Lil”);¹²³ Constant Lounsbery; Marguerite Moreno; Liane de Pougy; Amélie Rives; Henriette Rogers; Nina Russel; Renée Vivien; Virginia Yardley;¹²⁴ 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.”¹²⁵

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.¹²⁶ 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.¹²⁷ 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 1902.¹²⁹ 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!

Je veux, oh comme je veux. Je t’adore quand tu danse. Raconte-moi tes mouvements, tes poses. Dis-moi ceux qui t’aiment le mieux et ce qu’ils te disent. Y en-a-t-il qui l’apprécient? Non! pas autant que moi qui de loin te vois danser et suis excitée, et qui de près te sens danser sur les pointes de tes jolis seins, sur ton ventre et le long de tes jambes avec mon corps pour ton parquet.

(I want to see you dance!

I want it, how I want it. I adore you when you dance. Tell me about your movements, your poses. Tell me who loves you best and what it is they say. Is there a man who finds you attractive? No! not as much as I when I see you dancing from afar, and I am aroused, and I feel I am almost dancing on the tips of your lovely breasts on your belly and your legs with my body as your floor.)¹³⁰

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 inversivity 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."¹³⁸ 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."¹³⁹ 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"¹⁴⁰ 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."¹⁴¹



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.

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 1.5. 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.

tistic 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,

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.¹⁴² 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.”¹⁴³ 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),¹⁴⁴ became hostile when he discovered that Barney was Eva’s lover. He dished out verbal abuse, then stopped speaking to her.¹⁴⁵ 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,¹⁴⁶ 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.¹⁴⁷

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,¹⁴⁸ 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.¹⁴⁹ Eva later recalled the powerful effect of Wagner’s “strange” harmonies on Courtlandt in his early childhood.¹⁵⁰

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.”¹⁵¹ 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.”¹⁵² The provisional plan she laid out in her letters suggests both how far she had gone in her voice studies¹⁵³ 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.

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