

Critical Stereotypes and the Poetry of Sappho

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CRITICISM OF CREATIVE ART seems curiously dependent on biography.¹ It appears difficult to separate an artist's life from his work, or to regard literature or music or paintings primarily as public statements. Since the act of creation is assumed fundamentally to be an emotional response, the artist is viewed as an active participant in the world he has created. In the case of male writers, the assumption seems always to be that the artist, whether Catullus, Brahms or Goya, uses the full range of his intellectual powers to come to terms with his problems. It is understood that the methods and the problems vary considerably from artist to artist. But in the case of female artists, the assumptions on which criticism is based tend to be more narrowly defined: (1) *Any creative woman is a 'deviant', that is, women who have a satisfactory emotional life (home, family and husband) do not need additional creative outlets.* The assumption behind this assumption is that 'deviance' in the case of women results from being deprived of men—in other words, women artists tend to be (a) old maids or (b) lesbians, either overt female homosexuals or somehow 'masculine'. (2) *Because women poets are emotionally disturbed, their poems are psychological outpourings, i.e. not intellectual but ingenuous, artless, concerned with their inner emotional lives.* As a result, criticism of two such different poets as Sappho and Emily Dickinson can sound remarkably alike.

Dr John Cody's recent analysis of Emily Dickinson's poem "I had been hungry all the Years" provides a vivid illustration of the special criticism applied to female artists. I prefer to begin with Emily Dickinson rather than with Sappho, because Dickinson wrote in English (which I understand better than I do Greek), and because the facts of her life are relatively well documented: she was a recluse, unmarried, wore white, wrote in the bedroom of her house in Amherst

¹ See esp. Harold F. Cherniss, "The Biographical Fashion in Literary Criticism," *CPCP* 12.15 (1943) 279-92.

poems on little pieces of paper, some of which were published in her lifetime.

*I had been hungry, all the Years—
My Noon had Come—to dine—
I trembling drew the Table near—
And touched the Curious Wine—*

*'Twas this on Tables I had seen—
When turning, hungry, Home
I looked in Windows, for the Wealth
I could not hope—for Mine—*

*I did not know the ample Bread—
'Twas so unlike the Crumb
The Birds and I, had often shared
In Nature's—Dining Room—*

*The Plenty hurt me—'twas so new—
Myself felt ill—and odd—
As Berry—of a Mountain Bush—
Transplanted—to the Road—*

*Nor was I hungry—so I found
That Hunger—was a way
Of Persons outside Windows—
The Entering—takes away—*

(579 JOHNSON, ca. 1862)

My own impression of this poem is that its primary concern is disappointment: something long-awaited comes; once you have it, it disappears; thus in retrospect the anticipation seems more rewarding than the thing itself. The central thought is expressed in the terminology of food: the narrator of the poem is 'hungry'; then 'noon' (the dinner hour) has come like a guest, to dinner; there is a table with 'Curious Wine' (the narrator doesn't know what it is). The narrator had been like the birds, eating what was left; now he/she leaves the wilds, and his/her exclusion . . . , and enters the house. The hunger then goes away and there is nothing. The bread and wine in the poem may take on additional significance if we think of them as elements in the Christian sacrament of the Eucharist: Dickinson was raised by devout

churchgoers, and drew much of her subject matter and metrical structure from the hymns she heard as a child.² Then the poem might also say: after receiving Communion, what does one have?

To our impressions we can compare what Dr Cody says in *After Great Pain: The Inner Life of Emily Dickinson*. He reads the poem as an analyst would interpret dreams, along canonical Freudian lines: hunger connotes sexual experience, and Emily Dickinson's³

imbibing of physical affection quickly becomes a glut and overwhelms her painfully. The experience is novel in an uncongenial way and causes her to sicken and feel strange. She feels that sexuality is too common a territory for her (a "Road") because she is acclimated to an unfrequented and lofty habitat. (She comes of a "Mountain Bush" and feels out of place, perhaps degraded, in the "Road"; one senses in this word unpleasant connotations of too easy accessibility, prosaic purposes, dustiness, and commercial transactions.)

Once we accept the premise that the poem primarily concerns sex, it is possible to interpret its imagery more specifically:

It is a commonplace that a woman's introduction to sexual intimacies may be frightening and disappointing. The bruising of delicate membranes may draw blood. Thus, the line "The Plenty hurt me—'twas so new" may refer not only to the overpowering emotion generated by her own and another's passion but also to the overwhelming and painful effects of physical force. The transplanted berry may be the hymeneal blood (the first color commonly associated with berries is red); the "Mountain Bush," the mons veneris; and the "Road," the vagina. We cannot imagine that Emily Dickinson was unaware of these anatomical facts.

Whether or not she was more than "dimly aware" of these "unconscious sexual preoccupations" is not the issue: Cody's analysis enables us to see that Emily Dickinson, who "has for so long been thought of as an ethereal other world creature" was in fact "a living flesh-and-blood woman who, Victorian Age notwithstanding, was well aware that whether she liked it or not she had no choice but to share in the physiological reactions of the rest of humanity."⁴

² On Dickinson's use of hymn meters and form see Thomas H. Johnson, *Emily Dickinson: An Interpretive Biography* (Cambridge [Mass.] 1955) 84-86.

³ John Cody, *After Great Pain: The Inner Life of Emily Dickinson* (Cambridge [Mass.] 1971) 141.

⁴ Cody, *op cit.* (*supra* n.3) 142.

If we in turn analyse Dr Cody's analysis, we find that it rests on several questionable assumptions: (1) That poems are like dreams, that is, are individual expressions of emotional problems, rather than public statements meant to be understood by and communicated to a large audience who had not read Freud on roads, berries, etc. But Emily Dickinson, as her correspondence shows, was most interested in getting into print and being recognized. (2) That Dickinson's problem is sexual deprivation, specifically, inability to accept or to enjoy men, an interpretation read in from her biography.

The same basic assumptions tend to be made about Sappho's famous poem, *φαίνεται μοι* (31 L.-P.), though in less vividly stated forms. Compared to Emily Dickinson's, we know virtually nothing about Sappho's life. We can glean from biographies and passing references written long after her death the names of her family, that she lived in Mytilene at the end of the seventh century, that she wrote nine books of lyric poetry, that she was a female homosexual, short, dark and ugly, and that she died by throwing herself off the White Rock in West Greece because of her unrequited love for a ferryman named Phaon ('shining'). Much of this information seems to have been derived from interpretations by ancient scholars (all male) of her poetry, some also from caricatures of her in comedy; the story of her death is obviously based on myth.⁵ Again a portrait emerges of an emotional deviant: deprived because of her ugliness of male attention (like the ferryman's) which she craves.

Thus biography, itself derived from interpretation of the poems, is in turn reapplied to the poems and affects our interpretation of them. In the case of *φαίνεται μοι*, especially, much influential criticism has tended to center on the 'facts' of Sappho's life:

*φαίνεται μοι κῆνος ἴκος θέοισιν
ἔμμεν' ὄνηρ, ὅττις ἐνάντιός τοι
ἰσθάνει καὶ πλάσιον ἄδυ φωνεί-
4 κας ὑπακούει*

*καὶ γελαίνας ἡμέροεν, τό μ' ἦ μὰν
καρδίαν ἐν στήθεσιν ἐπτόαισεν*

⁵ On the evidence for Sappho's life see especially Thomas McEvilley, "Imagination and Reality in Sappho" (diss. Univ. Cincinnati, 1968; University Microfilms #68-15, 166) 259-63. On the significance of the myth of Sappho's death, see Gregory Nagy, "Phaethon, Sappho's Phaon, and the White Rock of Leukas," forthcoming in *HSCP* (1973).

ὡς γὰρ ἔς σ' ἴδω βρόχε', ὡς με φώναι-
8 σ' οὐδ' ἐν ἔτ' εἴκει,

ἀλλ' ἄκαν μὲν γλώσσα ἔαγετ', λέπτου
δ' αὐτικά χρώι πῦρ ὑπαδεδρόμηκεν,
ὀππάτεσσι δ' οὐδ' ἐν ὄρημ', ἐπιρρόμ-
12 βεισι δ' ἄκουαι,

ἔκαδε μ' ἴδρωσ ψῦχος κακχέεταιτ', τρόμος δὲ
παῖσαν ἄγρει, χλωροτέρα δὲ ποίας
ἔμμι, τεθνάκην δ' ὀλίγω 'πιδεύης
16 φαίνομ' ἔμ' αὐται.

ἀλλὰ πᾶν τόλματον ἐπεὶ τκαὶ πένητατ

(ed. PAGE, OCT 1968)

Wilamowitz saw 'that man' in the poem's first stanza as the husband of the girl. The girl is one of Sappho's students, and the poem concerns the man and schoolmistress Sappho's jealousy of him.⁶ This interpretation transposes the poem to the realm of sexual normality: there is no evidence at all in the text that 'that man' is a husband, or the girl Sappho's pupil, or that Sappho ran a girl's school.⁷ Page, in what is recognized as the authoritative English commentary on Sappho, is aware of the limitations of Wilamowitz' criticism, but still retains the same basic assumptions about the poem. In his analysis, he realizes that the man only appears in the first stanza, but at the same time he is reluctant to take his attention off of him:⁸

But we must not forget that the *man* was the principal subject of the whole first stanza; and we shall not be content with any explanation of the poem which gives no satisfactory account of his presence and

⁶ Ulrich von Wilamowitz-Moellendorff, *Sappho und Simonides* (Berlin 1913) 58. Wilamowitz, in his interpretation, was attempting to restore objectivity to the criticism of Sappho's poetry: "when the name Sappho is mentioned today, more people will think of sexual perversion than of a great poetess" (p.17).

⁷ The authority of Wilamowitz continues to make scholars uneasy about abandoning the girls' school hypothesis; see, e.g. R. Merkelbach, "Sappho und ihr Kreis," *Philologus* 101 (1957) 1-29. Two recent school texts treat it as a live possibility: David A. Campbell, *Greek Lyric Poetry* (New York 1967) 261, and Douglas E. Gerber, *Euterpe* (Amsterdam 1970) 161; see my review of Campbell, *AJP* 91 (1970) 467-68.

⁸ D. L. Page, *Sappho and Alcaeus* (Oxford 1955) 28.

his prominence in it. If Sappho wishes to describe nothing more than the symptoms of her passion for the girl, what motive could she have for connecting that description thus closely with an occasion when the girl is engaged in merry conversation with a man? Surely that occasion is not devoid of all significance: and then it appears impossible to exclude the element of jealousy from Sappho's emotional response to the scene. Sappho loves the girl: and it is clearly suggested that the girl is not, at least at this moment, particularly interested in Sappho. Sappho is present in the company: but it is the man, not Sappho, who is sitting close by the girl, rejoicing in her laughter and converse. To maintain that Sappho feels no jealousy of the man would be to ignore the certain response of human nature to a situation of the type described, and to deprive the introduction of the man, and his relation to the girl, of all significance. On this point, at least, there is little room for doubt.

The girl is talking to him, and not to Sappho; the physical symptoms that Sappho describes in such detail result specifically from jealousy. In addition, Page tends to see the poem as a direct outpouring of emotion, in much the same way that Dr Cody read Dickinson. Sappho's language⁹

is realistic, severely plain and candid, unadorned by literary artifice. First, very quietly, 'I have no longer any power to speak'. Then she says something—we do not know exactly what—about her tongue. Then in simple words, 'a subtle fire has stolen beneath my flesh', and still more simply 'with my eyes I see nothing'. Then a homely metaphor, 'my ears are humming': and the next phrase could not be more bleak and unadorned, whether the words meant 'sweat pours down me' or 'a cold sweat covers me'. Then, without artifice, 'a trembling seizes me all over'; thereafter an image which owes nothing to literary tradition, and surely reflects her own manner of thought and speech, 'paler than grass am I'; and finally the homeliest phrase of all, 'I seem to fall a little short of being dead'. Rarely, if anywhere, in archaic or classical poetry shall we find language so far independent of

⁹ Page, *op.cit.* (*supra* n.8) 30. It is interesting to note that early critics of *Wuthering Heights*, which was first published under the pseudonym Ellis Bell, found the novel "forceful." When it was revealed that the author was in fact Miss Emily Brontë, critics were quick to discover that both characterization and description in the novel had been adversely affected by the necessary experiential limitations of a woman's life: see Carol Ohmann, "Emily Brontë in the Hands of Male Critics," paper read at MLA Women's Forum, December 1970. On the tendency to read contemporary values into ancient texts, see my article, "Cultural Conventions and the Persistence of Mistranslation," *CJ* 68 (1972) 31–38.

literary tradition, apparently so close to the speech of every day. Style is in harmony with dialect; both products of nature, not artifice.

His translation supports his interpretation. Sappho's verbs are attenuated into nouns, 'terrifies' (*ἐπτόαισεν*)¹⁰ becomes the conventional love-song term 'a-flutter', 'runs under' (*ὑπαδεδρόμηκεν*) has become 'has stolen' (as in "has stolen my heart away?"), 'whirrs', like a spinning *rhombos* (*ἐπιρρόμβεισι*) has become 'is humming', pours down (*κακχέεται*), 'covers'; 'hunts' (*ἄγρει*) merely 'seizes'; the violent 'greener' than grass (*χλωροτέρα ποίας*) merely 'paler'. Missing also is a sense of the military terminology in the opening stanza: the Homeric 'equal to the gods' has become somehow 'fortunate'. 'Sits opposite' only represents part of the meaning of *ἐνάντιος*, 'in opposition', as in battle. In the last stanza, the reassurance 'all can be endured' (*τόλματον*) has become a frustrated 'all *must* be endured'.

George Devereux, the anthropologist, sees the poem rather as an emotional outpouring of 'envy' of 'that man', as opposed to simple 'jealousy':¹¹

The core of the problem can best be stated in somewhat colloquial terms: "What does this man—and indeed any man—have that Sappho does *not* have?" What can a man offer to a girl that Sappho cannot offer?" The answer, I think, is obvious (*Od.* 11.249ff). [This is the passage where Poseidon says to Tyro: "rejoice lady, in my love, and as the year goes by you shall bear glorious children, etc.,"] and leads to a clinically highly documentable and crucial finding: few women are as obsessed with a (neurotic) feeling of incompleteness—with the clinically commonplace "female castration complex"—as the masculine lesbian. Moreover, the latter experiences her "defect" with violent and crushing intensity particularly when her girl-friend is taken away from her not by another lesbian, but by a *man*, who has what she does not have and which she would give her life to have.

According to Devereux, Sappho in the poem is describing the sort of

¹⁰ On the meaning of *προέω* see H. Frisk, *Griechisches etymologisches Wörterbuch* (Heidelberg 1960) II.615. The secondary definition 'flutter' given in *LSJ* does not represent the root meaning of the verb, which is cognate to *πήσσω* and *πτώσσω* 'crouch in fear' (not to *πέτομαι* 'fly'). In *Od.* 22.298–99 *προέω* is used to describe the suitors' reaction to Athene holding her aegis above them from the rafters: "Their hearts were terrified (*φρένες ἐπτοίηθεν*); they fled in panic (*ἐφέβοντο*) along the hall like a herd of cattle."

¹¹ George Devereux, "The Nature of Sappho's Seizure in Fr.31 LP as evidence of her Inversion," *CQ* n.s. 20 (1970) 22.

anxiety attack that Devereux has frequently witnessed in homosexual patients.

If Sappho's poem had just been dug out of the sand and if we had never heard of Wilamowitz or looked in Page or read Devereux's article, our interpretation of the poem might be very different. Perhaps it is impossible for any of us to approach Sappho with the same objectivity that we can maintain in reading Emily Dickinson, because we always seem to come to ancient texts with dictionary in hand. But to look at the text itself, without any preconceptions about the identity of the narrator, the poem says: "That man seems to me like the gods (*ἴκος θέοικιν*, a designation that in Homer connotes unusual strength) who sits opposite (or in opposition), who hears you (female) speaking sweetly and laughing passionately.¹² This (*i.e.* hearing you) terrifies my heart in my breast (*i.e.* the effect of you on me, the narrator, is very different from your effect on 'that man'). For whenever I look at you then I can speak nothing still, but in silence my tongue is broken (*ἔαγε*, a verb used to describe broken bones), and immediately a light fire runs under my skin, and with my eyes I see nothing, and my ears whirr, and a cold sweat holds me down, and a shuddering hunts all of me, and I am greener than grass, and from dying little lacking I seem to myself to be (repetition 'to myself' signifies a conclusion, and reference to the narrator, a transition to a new subject).¹³ But all is endurable, since even a poor man . . ."—does the poem go on to say that god makes even a poor man rich (as in the introduction to the *Works and Days*), *i.e.* that there is some hope for change, or eventual triumph?¹⁴

Looking at the text, it seems fair to say that quantitatively at least the main emphasis in the poem falls on the narrator's feelings. It is important to remember that what she is describing is an illusion, 'he seems to me' (*φαίνεται μοι*), 'I seem to myself' (*φαίνομ' ἐμ' αὐται*). The time is indefinite, the illusion happens over and over: 'whenever I look at you' (*ὡς* with subjunctive *ἴδω*). The man has no specific identity; he is 'whoever (*ὅστις*) sits opposite'. The exaggerated terms in

¹² On the meaning of *ἴκος θέοικιν*, see Garry Wills, "Sappho 31 and Catullus 51," *GRBS* 8 (1967) 174–83, and M. Marcovich, "Sappho Fr.31: Anxiety Attack or Love Declaration," *CQ* n.s. 32 (1972) 26.

¹³ On *ἔαγε* as 'is crippled', see M. L. West, "Burning Sappho," *Maia* 22 (1970) 311, and Marcovich, *op.cit.* (*supra* n.12) 27–29. On the structure of the poem, see Helmut Saake, *Sappho-Studien* (Munich 1972) 53–54.

¹⁴ On the contents and translation of the fifth stanza, see West, *op.cit.* (*supra* n.13) 312–13.

which the narrator's reactions are described add to the sense of illusion: the broken tongue, the sweat that grasps, the shuddering that hunts, and being greener than grass do not portray the condition of the narrator in real life. The phrase 'greener than grass' at the end of the list of symptoms has particular impact. It translates the Homeric 'green fear' for one's life in battle into the context of daily existence. In the same way, the man like the gods in the first stanza is not a Homeric hero but someone sitting opposite a girl. It is as if Sappho were saying that what happens in a woman's life also partakes of the significance of the man's world of war. When she writes a long narrative poem about Hector and Andromache it is to describe their wedding.¹⁵ When she speaks in her poem to 'Aphrodite on intricate throne, immortal' of pursuing and fleeing, it is describing not the grim chase of Hector by Achilles, "as in a dream one cannot pursue someone who flees" (*Il.* 22.200), but the conquest of an unwilling lover, "if she flees now, soon she'll pursue you."¹⁶ Her victory is achieved by the intervention of Aphrodite, not through her own powers. In *φαίνεται μοι* also, any change that is to come about must take place through endurance. As a woman, she must rely on the special weapons of the oppressed, miracles and patience.

This interpretation may not tell us everything we want to know about the poem, but I think at least it reveals what the poem is *not* about. There is nothing specifically stated in the poem about jealousy of a rival. What the man has that she (the narrator) doesn't have (*malgré* Devereux) is not male generative capacity but physical strength: he seems 'like the gods' while she is faint and powerless.¹⁷ What she (the narrator) feels is not jealousy but the response of lovers to beauty in their beloved: when the suitors see Penelope in *Odyssey* 18 "their knees were loosened, and their hearts were beguiled with passion" (212). As for Sappho's style, if being untraditional is artless, then we can agree (in Page's words) that she is "without artifice." But it might be fairer to comment on the dramatic personification 'trem-

¹⁵ This point was suggested to me by Dr Marilyn Skinner.

¹⁶ John Marry made these observations about the use of Homeric vocabulary in fr.1 L.-P. in a panel discussion on Sappho in November 1972 at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst.

¹⁷ On the contrast implied between mortal and immortal, see McEvelley, *op.cit.* (*supra* n.5) 171, and G. Aurelio Privitera, "Ambiguità antitesi analogia nel fr.31 L.P. di Saffo," *QUCC* 8 (1969) 37-80.

bling hunts me down' or her conversion of Homeric formulae, e.g. taking 'like the gods' from the context of war to the struggles of emotion, and turning the conventional 'green fear' into the startling, entertaining 'greener than grass am I'.¹⁸ The sense of illusion that she creates in the opening 'he seems' and its echo 'I seem to myself' in the fourth stanza is one of the first expressions of what will later become one of the primary concerns of poetry and philosophy: the effects of the imagination.¹⁹ The deliberate generality of the poem, the absence of proper names and specific references to time and place, indicate that this poem is meant to bring to mind no particular place or occasion. It tells of 'that man—whoever' and of the narrator's reactions 'whenever I look at you'.²⁰ It is no more directly representative of the historical Sappho's feeling at any given moment in history than the sonnet "Th' Expense of Spirit" is a transcript of a day in the life of William Shakespeare.²¹

To recapitulate: biographical criticism, in the case of the women poets Dickinson and Sappho, may keep us from seeing what the poets say. Dickinson's dignified, remote poem about disappointment becomes an outcry of sexual frustration; Sappho's song about the weakness of a woman in love a jealous admission of penis envy. Applying assumptions our society makes about 'normal' female psychology to the work of women poets can do little to advance our understanding of their poems. This is not to say that their poems are not different because they are by women; I think perhaps they are. Dickinson writes about her 'inner life' and Sappho about her love for her female friends and the pleasures of singing and being together because these activities, not war or games or government, were the experiences that her society and times permitted to women. Those who are secluded in some way from the concerns of the larger society are by necessity thrown onto themselves and thus have time and scope to express what others, in more diffracted contexts, do not have time to articulate or

¹⁸ On Sappho's use of Homeric vocabulary and unusual metaphor, see Marcovich, *op.cit.* (*supra* n.12) 26–32.

¹⁹ On imagination and reality in this poem, see also McEvilley, *op.cit.* (*supra* n.5) 171, and on the connotations of *φαίνεσθαι*, Helmut Saake, *Zur Kunst Sapphos* (Munich 1971) 20.

²⁰ But *cf.* for example C. M. Bowra's appealing re-creation of the circumstances from his own imagination; *Greek Lyric Poetry*² (Oxford 1961) 184–87. Wilamowitz, of course, read "Ἄγαλλι, which helped to particularize the occasion.

²¹ Douglas L. Peterson, "A Probable Source for Shakespeare's Sonnet cxxxix," *Shakespeare Quarterly* 5 (1954) 381–84, shows that "Th' Expense of Spirit" is based on a handbook description of the consequences of lust.

to understand. Such enforced withdrawal has made women's poetry distinctive and influential.²²

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