



SWINBURNE'S SAPPHIC SUBLIME

Loose Limbs, Mutilated Fragments

WHY is Algernon Charles Swinburne remembered as the most Sapphic of Victorian poets, if not indeed the very reincarnation of Sappho? "No bard of the present age has a genius more akin to hers, more passionate and fiery, than Mr. Swinburne," proclaims an anonymous reviewer in the *Athenaeum*: a conventional opinion, but curious because it appears in the context of a review of Michael Field (*Athenaeum* 1889: 56). While offering praise for the Sapphic lyrics in *Long Ago*, the reviewer believes that Michael Field "has not, indeed, the impulsive spring of uncontrollable passion which is characteristic of the true lyric poet," nor "the infinite command of musical metres" of a poet like Swinburne (57). What is "impulsive," "uncontrollable," and infinitely "musical" in Swinburne is his unsurpassed metrical virtuosity, the passionate rhythms that rule his verse, and especially his imitations of Sappho. In "Anactoria," his most famous and most scandalous poem, Swinburne turns Sappho's lyricism into a lurid meditation on the pleasures of rhythm: the beating of Sappho's Lesbian into a lesbian body. In contrast to the playful troping on the name of Sappho by Michael Field, Swinburne therefore makes a lesbian reading of Sappho sexually explicit.

The differential use of Sappho within male and female homoeroticism is an important issue, as Thais Morgan points out: through his identification with Sappho, Swinburne constructs a male lesbian body, a transgressive female figure for "homoeerotically inclined masculinity, but a masculinity that continues to define itself in difference from femininity, including a lesbian femininity" (1992: 52). This subtle formulation allows us to distinguish between various "lesbian" versions of Sappho and may explain in part why Michael Field is so easily eclipsed by Swinburne: the Victorian Sappho we remember is his dominatrix, a dominant poetic figure throughout the late Victorian period. But to read his masculine version of lesbian desire in terms of homosexual practice, as Morgan suggests in concurrence with Richard Dellamora and other recent critics, is not to read one important part of the Sapphic body as it is figured by Swinburne. While Morgan concludes that "in 'Anactoria,' Swinburne imagines homosexual practice between men through the analogy of lesbian coupling" (49), I suggest that the Sapphic body emerges in Swinburne's

poetry as a rhythmicized, eroticized form: less a "male lesbian body" than an embodiment of the rhythm of eros itself, a scattering movement too diffuse to be contained within any single body, and increasingly formalized by Swinburne into a metrical pattern.

For Swinburne, Sapphic eros is a structure of repetition that allows the body to emerge in the reiteration of its own undoing. His reading of Sappho derives from fragment 130, which dramatizes the effects of eros on a body that trembles in violent contradiction, at the moment of coming apart:

"Ερος δ' ἦντέ μ' ὁ λυσιμέλης δόνει,
γλυκύτροπον ἀμάχανον ὄππετον
And eros again the loosener of limbs makes me tremble
A sweet-bitter unmanagable creature.¹

Eros is often called "the loosener of limbs" in archaic Greek lyric: "Ερος λυσιμέλης." The epithet *lusimēlēs* (associated with the verb *luō*, "to loosen," and the noun *melē*, "limbs,") describes a force so powerful it dissolves the joints and disjoins the body, disarticulating the parts from the whole. The grammatical subject of fragment 130 is *eros lusimēlēs*, turning "me" into its tremulous object, subjected to contrary sensations both sweet and bitter (*glukupikron*). This painful pleasure is enacted in the present tense, yet also repeated over time, as is evident in the adverbial phrase "and . . . again." While in Greek *d'ēute* follows the word *eros*, the elided postpositive particle "and" (*de*) is properly read as preceding *eros*, implying that this erotic subjection has happened before and will happen again: Sapphic eros is always already happening, a continual movement, a kinetic event.

The epithet for eros, "the loosener of limbs," is more than merely formulaic in this context, as it names a rhythmic effect that is also performed in the pseudo-dactylic rhythm of the fragment, making eros move insidiously like an *amkhanon orpeton*, a creature creeping up, impossible to fight off, relentlessly advancing in the meter itself. Indeed, fragment 130 has been preserved precisely because of its metrical appeal. We owe the transmission of this Sapphic fragment to the *Handbook of Metres* of Hephaestion, who quotes the two short lines as example of "the Aeolic dactylic tetrameter acatalectic" (Campbell 147). Metrical analysis (the verb "to analyze" is also derived from the Greek verb *luō*, "to loosen") is another way to measure the rhythms of *eros lusimēlēs*, since the Greek word for limbs (*melē*) can refer both to the parts of the body and to the parts of song. The *melē* or "limbs" of Sappho de-composed by *eros lusimēlēs*, may thus be recomposed in the *melē* or

¹ Fragment 130 (Campbell 146); the English translation is my own.

"melody" of Sapphic song. This is how Sappho, famous for the invention of new rhythms in her Aeolic dialect, came to be known in antiquity: Alexandrian scholars collected Sappho's songs into volumes entitled *Sapphous melē*, a Sapphic corpus celebrated for its metrical perfection, and anatomized by ancient colometrists such as Hephaestion. By analyzing the meter of Sappho's fragment—figuratively "loosening" its "limbs," again—Hephaestion repeats the rhythmic disarticulation and rearticulation of the Sapphic body, and turns Sappho herself into a metrical body that is manifested *through* and *as* meter.

There exists, then, a long tradition of reading Sappho as if she were a metrical body. Greek colometry described different kinds of meter by measuring poetry into body parts such as *kōla* (legs), *podēs* (feet), *daktyloi* (fingers), and the Longinian treatise on the sublime also draws on this established homology between poem and body. Meter, according to Longinus, is an important source of sublimity when it organizes language by analogy to the composition of various members of the human body: "None of the members (*melē*) has any value by itself apart from the others," he writes, "but if they are united into a single system and embraced moreover by the bonds of rhythm, then by being merely rounded into a period they gain a living voice" (Longinus 40.1, tr. Fyfe). His reading of fragment 31, as we saw in Chapter 1, makes Sappho speak as if "with a living voice" by turning the poem into a body, a formal composition that is held together by the bonds of rhythm. The rhetorical recuperation of fragment 31 therefore assumes a tradition of metrical reading that takes fragment 130 as one of its subtexts, enabling Longinus to exchange the *melē* of Sappho's body for the *melē* of her song: the body scattered by *eros lusimēlēs* is metrically reconstituted—bound together and "rounded" into a period—within the perfect cadence of the Sapphic stanza.

However, as I further argued in my first chapter, the Longinian reading of Sappho also calls into question the doctrine of organic unity. What we discover in the treatise on the sublime is not the rounded body of Sappho's poem, but a fragmentary text, quoted out of context: when Longinus cites fragment 31, he breaks it off from the Sapphic corpus, and when he further paraphrases the fragment, he enumerates the parts of Sappho that have "wandered apart from herself" in a sentence that also pulls apart the body of the poem. While arguing for Sappho's recuperation as a unified poetic subject, Longinus therefore perpetuates the fragmentation of Sappho; her poem is a mutilated text rather than a living organism, ironically anatomized as if it were a body, yet resisting integration into an organic whole. Thus Longinus performs not only a movement from literal fragmentation to figurative reconstitution—the sublime turn described by Neil Hertz—but a reversal of that sublime turn, from figu-

rative reconstitution back to a literal fragmentation.² Such a reversal points to a counter-reading implicit within the Longinian sublime, a systematic disarticulation of the body that manifests the materiality of language rather than producing a sublimated figure.

It is within this rhetorical tradition that I wish to locate Swinburne's Sapphic sublime. Swinburne judged Sappho to be "the very greatest poet that ever lived," as he wrote in a letter of 1880: "Such, I must confess, judging even from the mutilated fragments fallen within our reach from the broken altar of her sacrifice of song, I for one have always agreed with all Grecian tradition in regarding Sappho, beyond all question and comparison to be . . . Sappho is simply nothing less—as she is certainly nothing more—than the greatest poet who ever was at all.—There, at all events, you have the simple and sincere profession of my lifelong faith." (*Letters* IV:124) According to Swinburne's sacrificial logic, Sappho is "nothing less" and "nothing more" than the greatest poet precisely because nothing survives, other than "mutilated fragments." The long clause ("judging even from . . .") that seems to qualify his judgment is hardly concessive here, for it defines the necessary condition of Sappho's afterlife. What makes Sappho sublime is the mutilation of the Sapphic fragments, allowing her to be simultaneously dismembered and remem-

² We might recall once more that Longinus paraphrases fragment 31 in the form of a rhetorical question: "Is it not wonderful how she summons at the same time, soul, body, hearing, tongue, sight, colour, all as though they had wandered off apart from herself?" (10.2, Fyfe 156–57). Here the doctrine of organic unity—which the fragment is meant to confirm—is also the question most urgently posed by Longinus in his reading of Sappho, and elsewhere in the treatise. Hertz certainly recognizes the ironic implications of the question, as he traces "the persistent play throughout the treatise of the paired terms 'body'/'fragment'" (21.4). By turning this irony into the pathos of self-loss, however, Hertz repeats a rhetorical reading that depends on the doctrine of organic unity, which he seems to take unironically within the context of the Longinian argument. "It is certain that Longinus takes the doctrine seriously," Hertz insists (4), and in a note on the rejection of inorganic discourse he adds, "It would be a mistake to see in this either inadvertence or irony." (241) As Jonathan Lamb points out, this "oddly unironic recuperation" (Lamb 1993: 548) provokes a critique of Hertz by Paul de Man, who claims that the post-Longinian sublime is a tradition "finally ironized, though not necessarily exorcized" in Hertz's essay (*de Man* 1996: 110). In several late essays, de Man pursues an account of a material sublime, disarticulating the figure of the human body (as in "Phenomenality and Materiality in Kant," *de Man* 1996: 70–90), and developing a nonmimetic model that "reduces to nought . . . the pathos of rhetorical analysis" (as in "Hegel on the Sublime," *de Man* 1996: 105–118, 116). Frances Ferguson observes that de Man's deconstructive materialism "provides the basis for imagining the text in hyperformalist terms that both exceed and repeat the doctrine of organic unity that de Man has repeatedly attacked" (Ferguson 1992: 13). We might try to imagine the poetry of Swinburne in such "hyperformalist terms" even if (as Ferguson says of de Man) such a reading "makes . . . masochists of us all" (15). Indeed, that would be the point (and *pace* de Man, pathos) of Swinburne's Sapphic sublime.

bered, in a complex mediation between corpse and corpus: the body of the poet is sacrificed to the body of her song, and this body of song is sacrificed to posterity, which recollects the scattered fragments in order to recall Sappho herself as the long-lost origin of lyric poetry. What is "fallen within our reach" is thus uplifted—sublimated—by Swinburne into a sublime persona, the immortal Sappho; her afterlife is the profession of his "lifelong faith," and he defines his vocation as lyric poet by worshipping at the broken altar of her sacrifice.

Swinburne's own poetic corpus, I argue, is also constituted on a Sapphic model, as Swinburne is increasingly cast—by himself as well as by his readers—in the role of Sappho. But just as the Longinian reading of Sappho is predicated on catachresis—the figure of abuse, disfiguring the body—Swinburne's Sapphic imitations also perform the undoing of the Sapphic body. Swinburne turns Sappho into a *figure for the figure* of abuse, a double catachresis that makes her both cause and effect of a rhetorical violence that forcefully scatters the body. In "Anactoria," the notorious Sapphic monologue that provoked the succès de scandale of *Poems and Ballads* in 1866, Swinburne presents Sappho as a body simultaneously abusing and abused:

My life is bitter with thy love; thine eyes
Blind me, thy tresses burn me, thy sharp sighs
Divide my flesh and spirit with soft sound,
And my blood strengthens, and my veins abound.
I pray thee sigh not; speak not, draw not breath;
Let life burn down, and dream it is not death.
I would the sea had hidden us, the fire
(Wilt thou fear that, and fear not my desire?)
Severed the bones that bleach, the flesh that cleaves
And let our sifted ashes drop like leaves.
I feel thy blood against my blood: my pain
Pains thee, and lips bruise lips, and vein stings vein.

(1–12)

The opening lines of this dramatic monologue are a repetition of fragment 31: eyes are blinded, ears are suffused with sound, fire burns under the skin, and the entire body trembles on the verge of death. But whose body? Sappho's or Anactoria's? "I" and "thou" suffer equally in a mutual subjection that divides subject from object, rending them apart yet also rendering them interestingly interchangeable. The enjambments in this passage suspend the body in a perpetual state of self-division: "thine eyes / Blind me," "thy sharp sighs / Divide my flesh," and culminating in "my pain / Pains thee." This enjambed chiasmus doubles the pain and directs it both ways, like the verbal doubling in "lips bruise lips" and "vein stings

vein," leaving us unable to distinguish any longer between "thy blood" and "my blood." Divided into many parts, separate but also together, different but also the same, Sappho and Anactoria embody the paradox of "flesh that cleaves;" here, as so often in Swinburne's verse, the verb "to cleave" is used antithetically—meaning both "to join" and "to separate"—in order to describe a body held together only by falling apart. Thus Swinburne's Sappho is undone as she is made by the force of her own sublime rhetoric.

Not only is the fragmentation of the Sapphic body enacted rhetorically in the address to Anactoria, it is also manifested graphically in the manuscript of Swinburne's poem itself. In a draft of Anactoria, we see how Swinburne decomposes his Sapphic imitation in the very act of composing it. The draft is an extraordinary visual spectacle: it puts the text on display like a *corps morcelé* with its disjointed limbs scattered across the page, severed and played in every direction (figure 7).³ The lines are written at several different angles, with interpolations and revisions in tortured writing along the margins. Line 9, for example, disintegrates under the pressure of Swinburne's revisions: "(Severed the) (Divided) *Severed the* bones that bleach, the flesh that cleaves." What is severed, divided, and severed again is the "body" of language itself, disarticulated in the assertion of its own severing. A similar linguistic disintegration occurs in Swinburne's revision of lines 11–12, as they are scribbled in the margins of his draft: "I feel thy blood against my blood; (thy veins) (*my pain*) *my pain* (Fill my) (Filling) (Pains thee,) (Pains thee *all through*, and vein throbs hard on vein.) Pains thee, (and mouth) and lip hurts lip, (and) *and* vein (aches on) stings vein."⁴ While these fragmentary lines are reintegrated in the final version of Swinburne's poem—harmonized into the lyricism of his couplet—they nevertheless reveal how the composition of Sappho into a lyric figure depends on the recombination of many decomposing parts.

Swinburne's Sapphic sublime therefore vacillates between an ironic or ganicism and a linguistic materialism; Swinburne remembers Sappho by dismembering the Sapphic corpus, and like Longinus, he uses the figure of her mutilated body to materialize a fragmentary text. Of course the sublime sadomasochism of "Anactoria," a poem vehemently attacked by the critics, was a deliberate attempt to scandalize Swinburne's readers; but it further serves to demonstrate what Isobel Armstrong has aptly called "Swinburne's fevered sense of the brute materiality of language" (1993: 403). I agree with Armstrong that his poetry tends toward "a ma-

³ I am referring in particular to the draft of "Anactoria" dated 1863, in the special collection at the Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center at the University of Texas, Austin. For a discussion of the draft, see Gosse 1919 and T. Burnett 1993.

⁴ Here I follow the system of transcribing variants, and specifically the transcription of lines 11–12 of Swinburne's poem, as described by T. Burnett 1993: 149–50, 156.

terialism which leaves us with the literal sign and that only" (404), and in the pages that follow, I will suggest why and how Swinburne discovers this radical literalism through Sappho in particular. Swinburne considered fragment 31 "a poem that could not be reproduced in the body" and in "Notes on Poems and Reviews," he defends "Anactoria" as a free imitation of the fragment because "I felt myself incompetent to give adequate expression in English to the literal and absolute words of Sappho; and would not debase and degrade them into a viler form" (Hyder 1966: 21). When he incorporates the Sapphic fragments into the body of his own writing, Swinburne therefore performs the undoing of an organic figure for poetry; the impact of the missing "body" of Sappho is felt precisely in the pathos of Swinburne's literalism, in his attention to the "literal and absolute words" that are never adequate to or always "viler" (more fevered, more brute) than Sappho's.

To illustrate different versions of Swinburne's Sapphic sublime, I shall consider in further detail "Anactoria" and "Sapphics," both published in the first series of *Poems and Ballads* (1866), and "On the Cliffs," published in *Songs of the Spring-Tides* (1880). This long and complex later lyric reflects on Swinburne's earlier identification with Sappho, by reinvoking "the singing soul that makes his soul sublime / Who hears the far fall of his fire-fledged rhyme." Swinburne makes his claim to the sublime by measuring a long line of descent from Sappho to himself, as he echoes the cadence or "far fall" of Sappho's poetry in his own. This echo is heard in the repetition of her "singing soul" in his "soul," even while we also hear the word that is not repeated: the "singing" itself. Swinburne's Sappho emerges in this way as a decadent figure, a descending cadence, a song fallen into decline. Without repeating Sappho verbatim, Swinburne recalls her in his poetry by means of a rhythmic reiteration that takes the place of Sapphic song. What survives is a Sapphic rhythm, never fully remembered but also never forgotten.

In "Satie te Sanguine," another early lyric from *Poems and Ballads*, Swinburne describes Sappho dissolving into a sea that is his recurring figure for pure rhythm:

As the lost white feverish limbs
Of the Lesbian Sappho, adrift
In foam where the sea-weed swims,
Swam loose for the streams to lift.

(9-12)

Sappho's suicidal leap from the Leucadian Cliff into the waters below is her immersion in a larger rhythmic body: forever dissolving in the streams that set her adrift, the body of Sappho is now absorbed in the sea's undulations. Her limbs are lost, loosened, and lifted by the waves in

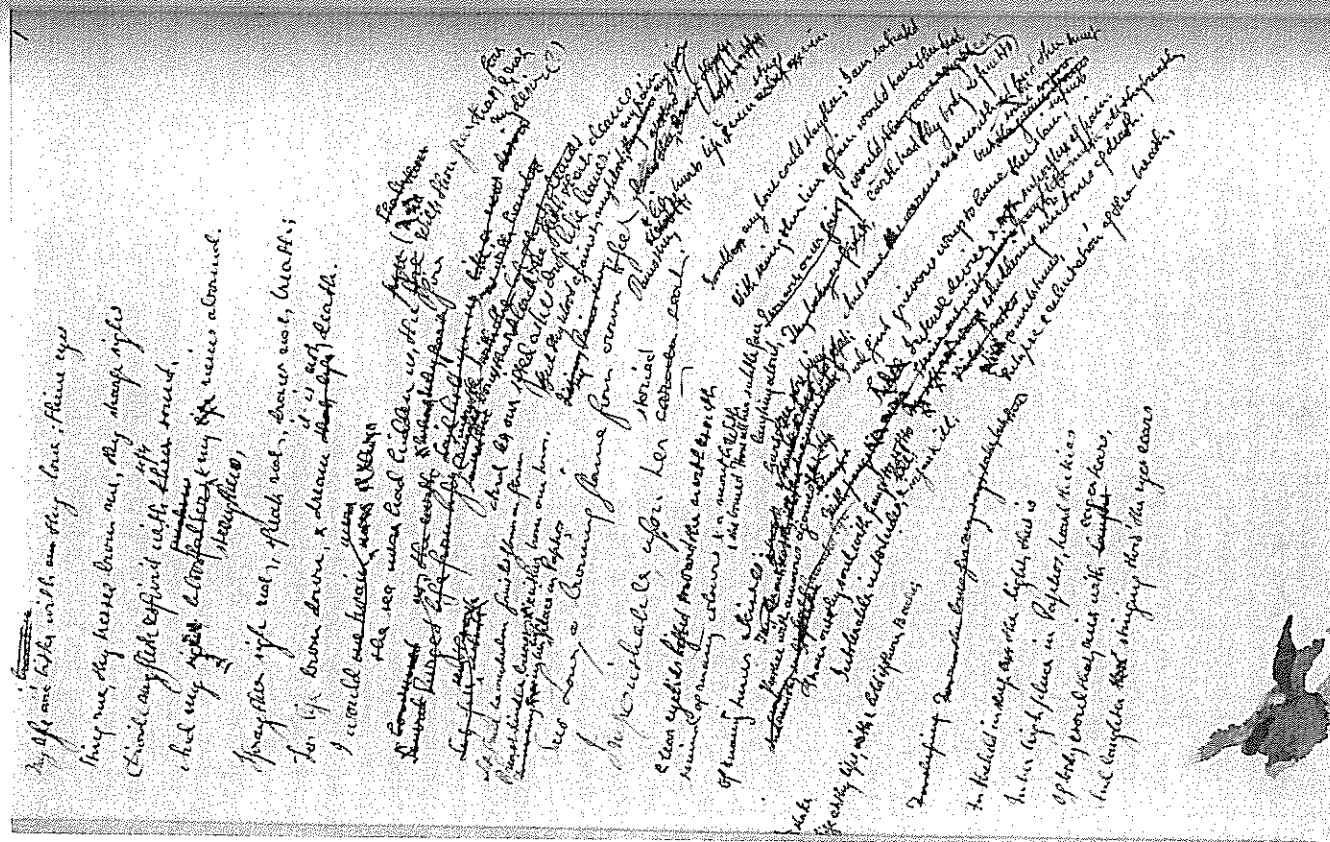


FIGURE 7: Draft of "Anactoria," Algernon Swinburne (1863). Courtesy of Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center, University of Texas at Austin, and by permission of Random House UK Ltd.

a perpetual motion that repeats the movement of the Longinian sublime: rising and falling, falling and rising, Sappho is suspended between literal disintegration and figurative reconstitution, a sublimated body no longer defined as an organic unity. She is, rather, a rhythmicized body that disappears and reappears in the rhythms of its own scattering: in the dissolution of her limbs is the melody of Sapphic song.

Swinburne therefore incorporates the fragments of Sappho into his own poetry by undoing the Sapphic body: his stanza recalls the "feverish" body of fragment 31, pale and trembling on the verge of death, and points to the rhythmic repetition of *eros lusimelēs* in fragment 130 as well. In his Sapphic imitations, Sappho is the embodiment of a rhythm that Swinburne increasingly turns into an abstract metrical principle. In the following section of this chapter, I read "Anactoria" as an allegory of sublimine rhythm: in this dramatic monologue, Sapphic eros is allegorized as a rhythmic effect that recollects the scattered body of Anactoria into Sapphic song and scatters the body of Sappho into the world. This Sapphic vision is projected into the future, when Sappho will be remembered in all the rhythms of nature, and live on in the memories of men. "On the Cliffs"—written more than two decades later—is the memory of one such man, namely Swinburne himself, who creates a lyric autobiography by projecting his own future vision of Sappho back into the past. He recalls a nightingale heard in youth and calls it Sappho, yet as I shall argue, the song he remembers proves to be a memory of memorization. In the long apostrophe of this poem, Sapphic song is necessarily mediated by writing, a structure of citation and reiteration that repeats the words of Sappho in written form and performs the conversion of Sapphic rhythm into meter as a form of material inscription.

In the third section of the chapter, I demonstrate how meter itself materializes in graphic form, in Swinburne's poem "Sapphics." It is a display of metrical virtuosity, written in Sapphic stanzas, and published along with "Anactoria" as a less scandalous yet equally spectacular exploration of Swinburne's Sapphic sublime. Here the sublime affect of "Anactoria" is transposed into a metrical effect; rather than personifying Sappho in a dramatic monologue, Swinburne embodies her in the form of the Sapphic stanza. This body of Sapphic song—the "Lesbian music" that Sappho is said to have inspired—is visualized graphically, in a metrical pattern presented to the eye: the "visible song" of Sappho is a music we no longer hear but see. I place my reading of "Sapphics" within the context of Victorian metrical theory, and in particular the 1857 "Essay on English Metrical Law" by Coventry Patmore, who defines meter as the corporeal element in language. Swinburne's experiments in meter can be read as a perverse response to Patmore. He displays the corporeality of language in his early Sapphic imitations, and, even more hyperbolically, in his fla-

gellant verse from the same decade. But this imposition of a metrical pattern on a rhythmicized body also refuses an organic reading of meter. By surrendering to compulsory form, or "suffering meter," Swinburne offers himself up to another account of meter that makes the body legible only through the counting of marks and the measuring of intervals between: a formal abstraction.

My chapter concludes with a brief recounting of Swinburne's reception, insofar as it repeats the logic of his Sapphic sublime. Abused by critics, Swinburne becomes a body *for* abuse, mutilated and sacrificed to posterity so that he may emerge, not unlike Sappho, as an exemplary lyric figure. Toward the turn of the century Swinburne is increasingly admired for his metrical virtuosity, and after his death he too is read as the perfect incarnation of meter: his poetic corpus is remembered as a metrical body, inspiring the next generation of poets to renewed experimentation in quantitative verse, and reflecting the emergence of the new prosody in mid-century England. Thus, although Robert Buchanan in "The Fleshly School of Poetry" famously attacked "the Swinburnean female" as "the large-limbed sterile creature who never conceives," Swinburne's conception of Sappho generates a rebirth with Victorian poetry. In his famous elegy for Swinburne, Thomas Hardy echoes the melody that issues from the limbs of Swinburne's Sappho: "His singing-mistress verily was no other / Than she the Lesbian," Hardy writes in "A Singer Asleep." He imagines Swinburne repeating the rhythms of Sappho, fallen into a sea "where none sees," dissolving into the waves like Sappho, and sighing as a phantom to her "spectral form." Having memorized the Sapphic cadence of Swinburne, however, Hardy never fully remembers him; the elegy is also a way of forgetting Swinburne, a repetition that leaves behind an empty form. This melancholy emptying out of form is a keen response to the formalism of Swinburne's poetry and initiates a tradition of reading that recollects Swinburne, like Sappho, in scattered parts.

The Sapphic Scene of Instruction

"We in England are taught, are compelled under penalties to learn, to construe, and to repeat, as schoolboys, the imperishable and incomparable verses of that supreme poet; and I at least, am grateful for the training" ("Notes on Poems and Reviews," Swinburne 1966: 20). In Swinburne's reminiscence "that supreme poet" is of course Sappho, and the compulsory—indeed, for Swinburne, compulsive—repetition of her verses introduces what I would like to call the Sapphic scene of instruction. It is a primal scene, surcharged with libidinal investments that make his initiation into Classical learning the origin of both pain and pleasure:

not merely a translation from Greek into English, but a stern discipline enforced by corporal punishment. In Victorian England schoolboys were whipped for not knowing the rules of Greek grammar and prosody, or, in the case of Swinburne, knowing them only too well. He attributes his metrical virtuosity to the time in his youth when Classical meters were literally beaten into his body. Thus in a personal letter, Swinburne recalls a tutor whose "pet subject was *metre*," and although "my ear for verses made me rather a favourite," he is pleased to confess that this rigid disciplinarian "never wanted reasons for making rhymes between his birch and my body" (*Letters* I: 78). The tutor, playing on the boy like an instrument, has taught him a masochistic relation to language: through rhythmic beating Swinburne learns to internalize the beat of poetry. Memorization becomes a form of incorporation for him, the figurative repetition of a literal violence as well as the literal repetition of a figurative violence. This is how Swinburne has memorized the verses of Sappho, by incorporating their rhythm into his own punished body, "compelled under penalties" yet "grateful for the training."

Sappho serves, then, as part of Swinburne's education in the disciplinary measures of meter. "More than any other's, her verses strike and sting the memory," he writes in "Notes on Poems and Reviews" (1966: 21), transferring the painful punishment of English schoolboys to the aesthetic pleasures of learning Sapphic rhythm. Indeed, he casts Sappho in a role not unlike his fantasmatic tutor: a singing mistress, verily, who teaches Swinburne the striking power of her poetry by forcing him to submit to its rhythm. In this respect the Sapphic scene of instruction replays a scenario of domination and submission familiar to us from the Longinian treatise on the sublime. According to Longinus, sublime language has the power to thrill and enthral the reader, who is variously struck, pierced, stung, burned, scourged, beaten, and enslaved when the sublime strikes, like a bolt of lightning. "Such passages exercise an irresistible power of mastery (*dunastēian kai bian amachon*) and get the upper hand with every member of the audience," Longinus asserts (1.4; tr. Fyfe). This overwhelming force (*amachon*, Longinus calls it) resonates with the description of Sapphic eros as an irresistible (*amachanon*) creature, impossible to fight off, thus associating Sappho herself with an irresistible power of mastery that seduces Swinburne. Dominated by the sublime Sappho, Swinburne is only too eager to give her the upper hand; she is the mistress, he the slave. Thus he worships Sappho's "divine words which even as a boy I could not but recognise as divine" ("Notes" 20) and he "would not debase and degrade them into a viler form" (21). As a Sapphic imitator he would rather abase himself, degrading his own poetry in a self-reviling pose: "No one can feel more deeply than I do the inadequacy of my work. 'That is not Sappho,' a friend said once to me. I could

only reply, 'It is as near as I can come; and no man can come close to her.' Her remaining verses are the supreme success, the final achievement, of the poetic art" (21). By placing Sappho on a high pedestal, Swinburne measure his descent from her; in both senses: no man can come close to her, but also, no man has come closer than he.

With his ear attuned to the sadomasochistic subtext of the sublime, Swinburne performs a perverse turn on Longinus—yet another example of the "poetic perversities" described by Richard Dellamora and other recent critics who find a transgressive eroticism in Swinburne's writing.⁵ Mixing aesthetic and pornographic discourses, Swinburne produces ironic inversions of both semantic and sexual categories, reversing the hierarchy of masculine over feminine, making the female principle dominant, and implicitly feminizing the male subject. It is not surprising, then, to find a chapter devoted to Swinburne in Camille Paglia's *Sexual Personae*, imagining Sappho as his dominatrix: "Swinburne's Sappho, like the lesbian marquise of Balzac's *The Girl with the Golden Eyes*, is a female hierarch," Paglia writes (474), with emphasis on Swinburne's relish for suffering under such a despotic figure: "He revives Sappho in *propheta persona* in order to be crushed yet again beneath female superiority" (477). While Paglia's wishful projection of a sexual persona for Sappho assumes a critical strategy of personification that my own argument calls into question, it is true that Swinburne's Sapphic sublime is a violence he rather suffers than asserts. Thus he defends "Anactoria" not as an attempt to identify with Sappho by imitating her words, but "to work into words of my own some expression of their effect: to bear witness how, more than any other's, her verses strike and sting the memory in lonely places, or at sea, among all loftier sights and sounds" ("Notes" 21). Here Swinburne strikes a characteristically masochistic pose, as he bears witness to verses that strike and sting by willingly bearing their pain; he expresses the effect of Sappho's words as a traumatic inscription, leaving their mark on his memory.

We encounter variations on the Sapphic scene of instruction in *Lesbia Brandon*, a novel that was indeed inspired by Balzac but left unfinished by Swinburne and unpublished during his lifetime.⁶ Drafted when Swin-

⁵ In his chapter on "Poetic Perversities of A. C. Swinburne," Dellamora describes Swinburne as a subversive poet "basing critique in perverse somatic processes" (1990:89); see also Sieburth 1984 and Psomiades 1997: 76-79. Over the past decade, critics have increasingly emphasized strategies of subversion and perversion in the poetry of Swinburne, and particularly in his use of Sappho. For relevant readings of "Anactoria," see, e.g., Cook 1971, Birde 1978, Brisman 1984, Morgan 1984, Paglia 1990, Anderson 1993, Wagner-Lawlor 1996.

⁶ Swinburne's unfinished novel, which he called "an étude à la Balzac plus the poetry" (*Letters* I: 224) is an experiment in several genres including personal memoir, narrative fiction, prose poetry, and lyrical ballads. The title *Lesbia Brandon* was assigned by Thomas Wise

burne was also composing his early imitations of Sappho, this mock autobiography narrates the education of young Herbert Seyton, preparing for Eton. Like Swinburne, Herbert has a tutor whose "chief diversion was to play upon the boy's mind as on an instrument" (21): a euphemism for his rigorous and regular application of the birch to the boy's body, especially after Herbert's lessons in Latin and Greek. If he does not learn his Classical meters, Herbert is forewarned he will be "swished" even harder at Eton. Meanwhile, Lesbia Brandon is held up to Herbert as an instructive example for achieving perfect meter: a girl who "can do Sapphics fit for a sixth-form" (53) and writes English verses as if she were "the real modern Sappho" (54). When Herbert reads a volume of Lesbia's published poems, he discovers "a certain fire and music in the verse at its best which had stung and soothed him alternately with gentle and violent delight" (87). Struck by the power of her poetry, Herbert later confesses his passion to Lesbia; but she, "ignorant of man's love," is like an unapproachable goddess whose cold reply leaves him "wringing and stung meantime by strange small tortures" (100–101).

The sentimental, if not to say sensational, education of Herbert Seyton thus conflates subjection to a schoolmaster who whips with the birch, and eroticized submission to a Lesbian mistress who whips with words, making him particularly susceptible to poetic rhythm as a source of painful pleasure. Herbert's sister explains this peculiar susceptibility by describing poetry as another form of flagellation: "Things in verse hurt one, don't they? hit and sting like a cut. They wouldn't hurt us if we had no blood, and no nerves. Verse hurts horribly. . . . You have the nerve of poetry—the soft place it hits on, and stings" (148). The effect of verse is painful, not only by means of the simile "hit and sting like a cut," but in the very cadence of that phrase, as well as its repetition later on: "the soft place it hits on, and stings." It is through rhythmic beating that "verse hurts horribly," transferring the effect of "things in verse" to the action of the "verse" itself: it is like flagellation and it flagellates, it is both the whipping and the being whipped. Herbert's vulnerability to that painful reversal gives him "the nerve of poetry," in both the active and the passive sense, as the rhythms inscribed on his body by whipping are repeated in his experience of poetic rhythm.

Herbert feels this rhythmic effect on the body while swimming, as well. In the sea he hears "suppressed semitones of light music struck out of shingle or sand by the extended fingers of foam" and the waves are like "hard heavy hands that beat out their bruised life from sinking bodies of

men"; thus he imagines the sea as a "visible goddess," who seems to "stroke and sting him all over as with soft hands and sharp lips" (9–10). Herbert submits to this goddess, just as he submits to the beatings of his heavy-handed tutor. In one particularly painful episode, Herbert returns from his swim, whipped by the sea, only to be whipped again by the tutor who makes him sing out sharply in pain: the half-suppressed sobs and gasps struck out of his body repeat the suppressed semitones of light music heard at sea (32–33). The tendency to associate the rhythms of the sea with flagellation and poetic rhythm—especially the sting of Lesbia's verse—recalls Swinburne's description of Sappho, whose verses also seem to "strike and sting the memory in lonely places, or at sea." Whipped and scourged like Herbert Seyton by the waves of that visible goddess—the sea as figure for Sappho, and Sappho as figure for the sea—Swinburne wants to feel her rhythms on his body.⁷ Thus in a letter he confesses a desire "to satiate my craving (ultra Sapphic and plusquam-Sadic) list after the sea" (*Letters* I. 305). This is more than a passion for swimming. The juxtaposition of Sappho and de Sade in parentheses suggests to what degree Sapphic imitation is already a sadomasochistic fantasy for Swinburne: to repeat Sappho's leap into the sea, to yield to its cold and cruel torture, to submerge himself in a Sapphic rhythm.

Such is the poetic fate that Lesbia, "the modern Sappho" of *Lesbia Brandon*, aspires to as well in the final chapter entitled "Leucadia." Here the suicidal Lesbia longs to dissolve like Sappho into a sea that will repeat the disarticulation and rhythmic rearticulation of the Sapphic body. "I dreamt once I saw her fall over a cliff. I wish I were dying out of doors, and by day. I should like my body to be burnt and the ashes thrown into the sea. It is I who have taken the leap now, not she," murmurs Lesbia in her dying words to Herbert (164–65). He visits "the living corpse of Lesbia" after she has swallowed poison; she looks "like one whom death was as visibly devouring limb-meal (158) and dies a sublime death, relaxing 'her lifted limbs' (161) until finally 'her limbs shuddered now and then with a slow general spasm' (165) and her Sapphic apotheosis is complete: 'And that was the last of Lesbia Brandon, poetess and pagan' (166). The limbs of Lesbia's dying body repeat the rhythms of *eros hisimelēs*, so that she may become the reincarnation of Sappho, dissolving into the sea. This is the lesson learned—by Herbert, Lesbia, or Swinburne himself—through the Sapphic scene of instruction: a painful subjection to rhythm, rendering the body an aesthetic object by rhythmicizing it.

The sketchy plot and allegorical characters of *Lesbia Brandon* follow in narrative form—more or less, since Swinburne's draft reads less like a novel than an extended prose poem—the lyric logic that structures "An-

⁷ On Swinburne's passion for swimming, see Sprawson 1993: 89–99.

to the manuscript, which was not completely collated and published until 1952 by Hughes. For a brief discussion of Swinburne as novelist, see Riede 1986; for a more recent discussion of *Lesbia Brandon* in particular, see Vincent 1997.

actoria." In Swinburne's dramatic monologue, the exquisitely excruciating torture of Anactoria by Sappho also serves to rhythmicize the body. Although Anactoria is mute throughout the poem, she is lifted into language and articulated by the rhythms of Sapphic verse into "dumb tunes and shuddering semitones of death"—echoing the suppressed semitones struck out of Herbert and the shuddering death of Lesbia, in order to demonstrate, once again, how much "things in verse hurt." Addressing Anactoria, Sappho subjects her to a verbal violence that turns pain into poetry:

I would find grievous ways to have thee slain,
Intense device, and superflux of pain;
Vex thee with amorous agonies, and shake
Life at thy lips, and leave it there to ache;
Strain out thy soul with pangs too soft to kill,
Intolerable interludes, and infinite ill;
Relapse and reluctance of the breath,
Dumb tunes and shuddering semitones of death.

(28–34)

The "intense device" found by Sappho is an intensification of her own poetic language. To "vex thee" the words of Sappho are themselves vexed and tortured into a curiously self-reflexive literalism, as if the rhyme and rhythm are both cause and effect of Anactoria's pain. Thus "shake" rhymes with "ache," "kill" with "ill," and "breath" with "death," and in the attenuation of phrases like "relapse and reluctance of the breath," the verse also corresponds rhythmically to the very rhythm it wishes to induce. The entire passage is a superflux of doubled meanings, turning Anactoria into the musical instrument or "device" for Sappho's melody, as Cecil Lang points out: "intense' means 'keen,' but also has its Latin sense of 'strained or 'stretched,'" much as "'strain,' another pun, suggests 'stretch' or 'make taut' (as on the rack, in torture) and also the musical sense of tightening strings for raising pitch" (Lang 1968: 523–24). Anactoria's cries of pain will be the music played on the instrument of her tortured body: her tunes and tones are, literally, "interludes."

If initially Anactoria is made to feel the violent impact of Sappho's words on her body, increasingly that body becomes the very embodiment of Sapphic song, its lyre:

Would I not hurt thee perfectly? not touch
Thy pores of sense with torture, and make bright
Thine eyes with bloodlike tears and grievous light?
Strike pang from pang as note is struck from note,
Catch the sob's middle music in thy throat,
Take thy limbs living, and new-mould with these

A lyre of many faultless agonies?
Feed thee with fever and famine and fine drouth,
With perfect pangs convulse thy perfect mouth,
Make thy life shudder in thee and burn afresh,
And wing thy very spirit through the flesh?

(134–44)

The reiteration of "pangs" produces a rhythmic shuddering, in the verse as well as on the body of Anactoria: by hurting her "perfectly" with "perfect pangs"—striking "pang from pang as note is struck from note"—Sappho creates a "perfect mouth," expressing each painful pang as melodious note or rhythmic tone. In this way she can "catch the sob's middle music," making the voice "catch" or stop before words, in order to catch a melody that is beyond words and purely musical. Here Swinburne performs in poetry what he elsewhere declares in prose: "There is a value beyond price and beyond thought in the Lesbian music which spends itself upon the record of fleshly fever and amorous malady" (Hyder 1972: 147). He defines Lesbian music in terms of fleshly fever, in an implicit slip from "malady" to "melody," suggesting that Sappho's poetry records—literally, incorporates into the heart—a song of the body that is the only real body of song. Anactoria is the reincarnation of this Lesbian music, but only at the moment of dying, as the body disintegrates. Thus she is tortured into the lyrical form: her living limbs are dismembered so that Sappho may remember and "new-mould with these / A lyre of many faultless agonies."

The eroticized torture of Anactoria is, of course, another repetition of the *eros lusimelēs*. Her transfiguration into a lyre reconfigures the parts of the body—her limbs or *melē*—into the *melē* of Sapphic song. We can read Swinburne's dramatic monologue not only as an imitation of Sapphic fragment 31, where the body is undone by eros, but also as a rhetorical expansion of fragment 130, allowing the body to reappear rhythmically. That fragment is paraphrased by Swinburne to suggest the conversion of Anactoria's limbs into metrical feet:

Ah, ah, thy beauty! like a beast it bites,
Stings like an adder, like an arrow smites.
Ah sweet, and sweet again, and seven times sweet
The paces and the pauses of thy feet!

(115–18)

Eros strikes again, as in fragment 130: "like a beast it bites," an *amachanon* impossible to fight off, stinging like an adder, smiting like an arrow, to produce the rhythmic repetition of "ah, ah" and the measured cadence of "Ah sweet, and sweet again, and seven times sweet." In the very act of apostrophizing Anactoria, Sappho is subjected to the striking rhythm of her own language, traversed by "the paces and the pauses of

thy feet." As a perfectly lyricized body, Anactoria is also the perfection of Sapphic meter; and indeed her very name lends itself to a metrical reading; we can scan the five syllables of "Anactoria" in English to correspond to the number of syllables in the final line of the Sapphic stanza. These five syllables serve as equivalent (more or less, since English does not follow the rules for quantity in Greek) to the metrical unit called adonic, a short fourth line left dangling at the end of the *kōlon*—another metrical "fimb"—that concludes the stanzas composed by Sappho in the meter most directly associated with Lesbian song.

Anactoria is therefore invoked by Sappho as a musical body greater than her own: "but thou—thy body is the song, / Thy mouth the music; thou art more than I" (74–75). Contrary to what we might expect, the dramatic monologue is not named after Sappho herself; it is called "Anactoria," to identify Anactoria as the proper name for a Sapphic rhythm that is allegorized in Swinburne's poem. Although this name is nowhere to be found within the poem itself, and despite her silence throughout the poem, the title names "Anactoria" as the rhythmicized body produced by the poem; a silent, absent body made present through Sappho's verse, much as (on another level of representation) Sappho is also presented by Swinburne in the rhythmic form of his own verse. His poem, in other words, is an example of the poetic paradox that Aviram calls "telling rhythm"; he refers simultaneously to "an allegory that attempts to tell rhythm and a rhythm that tellingly cannot be allegorized" (1994: 24).⁸ The violent force of Sapphic rhythm, played out on the body of Anactoria, can be understood, in Aviram's terms, as "an interpretation or representation—an *allegory*—of the bodily rhythmic energy of poetic form," even while this rhythm remains "uninterpretable and sublime" (19). Thus Anactoria appears in the title, as if in quotation marks, as a proper name for the Sapphic rhythm that she embodies: a figure fleshed out by the rhythms of Sappho and bodied forth as rhythm itself.

If we pursue an allegorical reading of rhythm along these lines, we see how Anactoria is made to appear through rhythm in fragment 16 of Sap-

pho as well.⁹ The fragment begins with a priamel, a rhetorical device that depends on repetition, in order to describe the movement of desire. What moves the heart, it tells us, is not a host of horsemen, nor an army of footsoldiers, nor a fleet of ships, but "whatsoever one loves" (*ὅττω τις ἐπάται*): less the particular object of desire than desire itself, stronger than any other force on earth.¹⁰ Helen of Troy is adduced as example, set into motion not only as desired object but as desiring subject, simultaneously passive and active in following the desire that fed her away from home. Helen "went away" (*ēba*) and thus introduces the memory of Anactoria, who has also gone away. At this point (after a lacuna in the text), fragment 16 leaves the epic past for the present moment of its own lyric performance, describing the loss of Anactoria and the desire to see her again:

... νῦν Ἀνακτορί[ας ὅ]ν ἐμει-
σ' οὐ] παρεούσας

τᾷ[ς κε βολλοίμην ἔρατον τε βᾶμα
κάμάρυγμα λάμπρον ἴδην προσόπω
ἢ τὰ Λύδων ἄρματα κᾶν ὄπλοισι
πεσδομ]άχεντας.

...[something] now reminds me of Anactoria
who is not here

I would rather see her lovely walk
and the bright lamp of her face
than Lydian war chariots and full-armed
footsoldiers

Despite her absence, Anactoria is represented—made present again—in the vivid language of fragment 16; it describes her appearance, her lovely

⁹ The papyrus on which fragment 16 is written was found in Egypt in 1906 and first published in 1914 (Grenfell and Hunt 1914). I do not argue that Swinburne was influenced by this fragment, but rather that "Anactoria" sets a precedent for reading the appearance of Anactoria in fragment 16 as a rhythmic allegory.

¹⁰ For further discussion of the priamel in fragment 16, see, e.g., Snell 1953: 47–50, A. Burnett 1983: 281ff., Winkler 1990: 176–77, all of whom argue that the poem is less concerned with a specific object of desire than a meditation on desire itself. According to this argument, the rhetorical structure of the priamel ("some say . . . and others say . . . and others say . . .") allows for the emergence of a lyric subject, a first-person *ego* capable of reflecting on itself. Feminist readings of Sappho develop this reading into a discussion of Sappho as female lyric subject, whose use of the priamel asserts a specifically female desire; see duBois 1995: 120–24; Williamson 1995: 166–71. To insist on the *ego* in fragment 16 as placeholder for the female "voice" of Sappho is, in my view, not the only way to trace a gendered difference in the Sapphic fragments.

⁸ In *Telling Rhythm*, Aviram points to a new interest in rhythm and meter (as an object of critical inquiry within lyric theory, at least, since poetic practice is never far from such questions). Since in recent decades lyric reading has been primarily rhetorical in emphasis, Aviram calls for a theory of poetry that can account for the appeal of rhythm to the body, although in the course of his argument it becomes difficult to tell how literal he wants this bodily figure to be. Another approach to the reincorporation of rhythm is offered by Susan Stewart, who discovers in "rhythmic forms" the "possibility of a recovered somatic meaning." While acknowledging that the term *somatic* is "not coterminous with the *body*" (1995: 38–70), Stewart uses a psychoanalytic model that also tends toward an organic and expressionist reading of meter.

way of walking, her radiant face, in order to make her reappear before our very eyes.

This vision of Anactoria is conveyed not only visually but rhythmically as well. There is a recurring emphasis on movement in fragment 16, as Page duBois points out, linking the figures of Helen and Anactoria. In the description of Helen, according to duBois, "the line expresses motion," not only in the verb *ēba* ("went") but in participles that "catch her endlessly moving, taking steps" (102). Likewise Anactoria enters the poem by taking steps, in the description of "her lovely walk" (*eraton bama*), duBois observes: "The *eraton*, 'lovely,' echoes *eratai*, 'one loves,' of line 4, makes whatever is lovely about Anactoria, her step, her way of walking, partake of the general statement at the poem's beginning. The *bama*, 'step,' 'stride,' is linked etymologically with the verb *ēba*, 'went,' of line 9, and stresses the connection of Helen with the poet's desire, with the woman Anactoria" (103–4). Both Helen and Anactoria are set into motion as figures of desire, and in their movement—the taking of steps—they also seem to embody "the poet's desire," registered rhythmically in the poem itself, in the movement of its own "feet." Fragment 16 implies how desire might be mobilized to different ends than Homeric narrative; as a lyric composed in the Sapphic stanza, it moves according to another rhythm and with other consequences. The "lovely walk" of Anactoria manifests a rhythm that distinguishes the melodies of archaic love lyric from the military measures of heroic epic: in contrast to the relentless approach of Lydian armies, Anactoria moves gracefully into view, and the motion of her feet is more desirable than the noise of many footsoldiers (*prozomachentas*). Thus fragment 16 turns away from a familiar epic theme, the story of Helen's departure that is remembered by all, and toward a more intimate memory of Anactoria. While duBois does not read fragment 16 as a rhythmic allegory, she writes suggestively that "much of the intensity of the poem derives from the force of [Sappho's] personal preference, her ability to make Anactoria walk before us" (106), as if the very cadence of her walk might be conveyed in the Sapphic stanza.

Rather than referring the "force" of the poem back to Sappho's "personal preference," however, we might consider it in terms of the force of its own rhythmic articulation. Since desire is set into motion through (and as) rhythm, it is only by subjection to such forces of rhythm that "Sappho" or "Anactoria" can be constituted, interchangeably, as either subject or object of desire: both are produced by the rhythm of the Sapphic stanza, rather than preceding it.¹¹ If indeed "Anactoria exists briefly

for us, recalled to presence through poetry" (duBois 106), she is therefore recalled through poetic rhythm in particular. The recollection of Anactoria depends on the rhythmic recalling of her name, as the very mention of Anactoria brings her into the present tense, propelling the poem out of the past into the lively description that animates her memory. "The moment of presence," according to duBois, "arrives with the name of Anactoria. We are made aware of her absence with *ou pareoisas*, 'not being present'; the participle allows us to imagine her presence as well" (103). To this subtle rhetorical reading, which discovers Anactoria's presence to be already implicit in the proclamation of her absence, I would add that the participle also makes Anactoria present again as a rhythmic repetition, in the five syllables that repeat the syllables of her name: *Anaktorias . . . ou pareoisas*, "Anactoria . . . who is not here."

The name of Anactoria also echoes in Swinburne's poem, allowing us to hear what is here, namely "Anactoria." While the Greek participle *ou pareoisas* is not visible in the title of his poem in English, it is still audible as a silent echo of the name of Anactoria, a spectral repetition that reminds us how she is simultaneously absent and present. It is only a step further (so to speak) from this allegorical reading of rhythm to reading "Anactoria" itself as an allegory of rhythm, transposing the feet of Anactoria who seems to "walk before us" into metrical feet. Throughout his Sapphic monologue Swinburne sustains a pun on feet, beginning in line 18 with Sappho's invocation to the "cruel faultless feet" of Anactoria and again "in the paces and pauses of thy feet" in line 118; as we have seen, this line announces the embodiment of Sapphic meter in Anactoria, as she reincarnates the metrical limbs of Sappho's song. In the second section of the dramatic monologue, modulating from address to Anactoria to defiance of God, Sappho further imagines herself as the embodiment of a larger rhythmic principle, with reference to her own "feet":

If my feet trod upon the stars and sun,
And souls of men as his have away trod,
God knows I might be crueller than God.

(150–52)

Increasingly the treading of Sappho's feet is a rhythmic force opposed to the "iron feet" of God (172) or the "slow feet" of Death (256), and the poem culminates in the assertion of a sublime Sapphic rhythm that strikes like lightning "with feet of awful gold."

however, we might consider lyric subjectivity in archaic lyric in terms of a subjection to the forces of rhythm (cf. Archilochus fragment 67a: γίγνεσκε δ' ὅτιος πνευμάτων ἀνθρώπων ἐγγεῖ, "Know what rhythm holds human beings").

¹¹ DuBois seems to endorse a reading of fragment 16 as "personal testimony" from Sappho (1995: 107), who emerges as a gendered lyric subject through the expression of desire for Anactoria. Rather than insisting on fragment 16 as the personal expression of a self,

But me—

Men shall not see bright fire nor hear the sea,
Nor mix their hearts with music, nor behold
Cast forth of heaven, with feet of awful gold,
And plumelless wings that make the bright air blind,
Lightning, with thunder for a hound behind
Hunting through fields unfurrowed and unsown,
But in the light and laughter, in the moan
And music, and in grasp of lip and hand
And shudder of water that makes felt on land
The immeasurable tremor of all the sea,
Memories shall mix and metaphors of me.

(203–14)

The passage—an elaborate hyperbaton that exemplifies the rhetorical heightening of the Longinian sublime—is a grand refiguration and amplification of Sapphic fragment 31. Here, in the ten lines inserted between two assertions of “me,” Sappho reveals herself to be a power that structures the entire world: the lightning that blinds, the thunder that deafens, the water that shudders, and “the immeasurable tremor of all the sea” all repeat the rhythms of the tortured and torturing Sapphic body.

Thus Sappho is scattered around the world and recollected by “men” (like Swinburne himself, perhaps: a self-fulfilling prophecy) who “shall not see” without seeing a Sapphic trace in everything they behold; everywhere “memories shall mix and metaphors of me.” This complex line opens up multiple readings. If we take “memories . . . and metaphors” as the double subject of “shall mix”—a *zeugma*—then are metaphors turning into memories, or memories into metaphors? Where do these memories originate, in Sappho or in those who remember her? Are “metaphors of me” to be read as Sappho’s metaphors or the metaphors made of Sappho? Whose memories and metaphors are they, anyway? The conflation of subjective and objective genitive in “of me” makes Sappho both cause and effect of a metaphorical logic that makes it difficult if not impossible to read her as the “speaker” of this dramatic monologue. She is less a persona than the name for a catathesis that generates a seemingly endless series of similes. Indeed, the phrase “metaphors of me” introduces a long repetition of “like me . . . like me . . . like me” over many lines, enacting the syntactic dispersal of “I” throughout the poem while also describing how Sappho is dispersed all over the world: “Like me shall be the shuddering calm of night” (215), “Like me the one star swooning with desire” (220), “like me the waste white noon” (222), “like me / The land-stream and the tide-stream in the sea” (224–25). As Sappho is re-

vealed in the forces of nature, she becomes a force of nature herself; Swinburne’s similes, as Edward Thomas observes of Swinburne’s poetry in general, “are carried so far that the matter of the simile is more important in the total than what it appeared to intensify” (90). The confusion of tenor and vehicle in this metaphorical logic turns Sappho into the vehicle for the tenor, so that increasingly all the world is but a manifestation of Sapphic rhythm: “And the earth,” Sappho proclaims, “Has pain like mine in her divided breath” (236).

Out of these many versions of “me,” forever multiplying, emerges “I Sappho,” in a moment of ecstatic self-naming:

Violently singing till the whole world sings—
I Sappho shall be one with all these things,
With all high things for ever; and my face
Seen once, my songs once heard in a strange place,
Cleave to men’s lives. . . .

(275–79)

Rather than asserting a coherent identity, Sappho is identified here only as the effect of a self-displacing, self-disrupting sublime violence; “violently singing,” she exists in the form of a violent disjunction to which the dash after “sings”—already points. “I Sappho” disappears and reappears through this dash, as a declaration purely in the nominative: a proper name that cannot be referred back to any unified self or organic unity. Often Swinburne’s Sappho has been read by critics as a transcendent lyric subject, proclaiming her sublime transcendence of the material world.¹² However, if we follow the Longinian model that I have proposed, we can read Sappho as the medium for the disintegration of “the whole world” and its rematerialization in many parts. Swinburne’s Sapphic sublime would then be the revelation of a material trace left by Sappho in “all these things.” Each thing is part of “all high things forever,” not by sublimation into a unified whole but by manifesting a power that divides and separates everything. Such perpetual self-division is the legacy of Sapphic song, and it will “cleave to men’s lives” when they, too, are cleaved by it.

¹² The tendency to read Swinburne as a poet aspiring to transcendent song is evident in several generations of Swinburne criticism, surveyed by Rooksby and Shrimpton in *The Whole Music of Passion* (1993: 1–21); Rooksby himself also tries to recover a “core theme of transcendence” in Swinburne’s work (1995: 27). An antitranscendent strain is articulated in “Anactoria,” however, as several critics have argued: Cook emphasizes that “Sappho will a death that is absolutely untranscendent” in Swinburne’s poem (1971: 92); Brismar discerns a double impulse in Swinburne, simultaneously negating and reasserting the corporeality of things (1984: 210); Zonana argues that Swinburne’s Sappho is not a source of transcendent revelation but a means of reincorporation (1990: 59). This “corporeality” or “incorporation” can be understood as even more radically “untranscendent” if we read Swinburne’s poem on a nonorganic model, however.

To articulate more fully the implications of this Sapphic vision, Swinburne returns to the heights of the Longinian sublime in "On the Cliffs," virtually translating *Peri Hypsous* into the title of his poem as well as its location. Beginning with the preposition *between*, this later Sapphic lyric is precariously perched on a high point looking down, mediating between night and day, past and future, the Leucadian Cliff of Sappho and the North Sea landscape of Swinburne's own verse.¹³ "On the Cliffs" is Swinburne's version of a crisis poem: a long and complex ode that confronts spatial and temporal disjunction through the figure of Sappho. As Swinburne exchanges the form of his earlier dramatic monologue for second-person address, the central act of nomination in his later poem is no longer "I Sappho," but a sustained effort to recall "a name above all names" (xii) until finally Sappho can be properly named and addressed. This prolonged apostrophe creates a rhetorical elevation, a visionary revelation "on the cliffs" that allows Swinburne to make his own claim to the sublime by reinvoking Sappho:

The singing soul that makes his soul sublime
Who hears the far fall of its fire-fledged rhyme
Till darkness as with bright and burning rain
Till all the live gloom inly glows, and light
Seems with the sound to cleave the core of night.

(XVI)

Here "the singing soul that makes his soul sublime" also makes each soul interchangeable with the other. As Jerome McGann points out, "All the terms have convertible referents" in this passage: "We may ask, for example, to what (or to whom) 'The singing soul' refers, or 'his soul . . . who hears,' or 'its fire-fledged rhyme.' In each case the answer waits upon the completion of grammar. 'The singing soul' is that which 'makes his soul sublime.' But this answer is only partially useful since we don't know to whom 'his' refers until we read still further: 'Who hears the far fall of its fire-fledged rhyme.' The referent of 'its' now becomes questionable, though one grasps soon enough that it goes back (for once) to 'singing soul'" (1972: 160–61). Where indeed does Sapphic song originate, in "the singing soul" or "his soul sublime"? And in "the far fall of its fire-fledged rhyme" does "its" refer to the song of burning Sappho, fledged in fire, or the fledgling rhyme that repeats it? Not only does the circularity of reference make "his," "who," and "its" questionable, it also raises questions about the status of song defined by a "far fall": a repetition of Sappho's cadence or a song fallen far from Sappho, a distant echo or a measure of distance from that origin? If, as McGann suggests, "the answer

waits upon the completion of grammar" (and if indeed, as he also argues, the whole poem "turns upon Swinburne's own desire for an 'answer' from Sappho," 76), then the answering voice that Swinburne awaits is already emerging in the course of his own apostrophe to her.

Swinburne therefore writes from the perspective of one of those men who (as prophesied in "Anactoria") cleaves to, and is cleaved by, the song of Sappho. But in "On the Cliffs" he envisions Sapphic rhythm on an even larger scale, surpassing his earlier vision of Sappho in "Anactoria." Not only will Sapphic song "cleave" anyone who listens, but it will "cleave the core of night" as well, subsuming all the forces of nature and history in order to penetrate the rhythms of time itself. The "cleaving" of Sapphic song (again, to be understood both transitively and intransitively, to describe the scattering effect of words that are themselves already scattered) anticipates the final stanza of "On the Cliffs," where Swinburne meditates on a metaphysical power that produces the physical universe; in this visionary moment, it seems that even "the sundering of the two-edged spear of time" cannot stop the eternal rhythm of Sappho's scattering. The last line of the poem proclaims that Sappho's song is "fire everlasting of eternal life," repeating a line from stanza V where the song she will "bear till time's wing fire" is "life everlasting of eternal fire." The line is repeated with a subtle variation that makes both "life" and "fire" everlasting, not because the repetition of her song transcends time but because it is a measure of temporality itself; measured in time, the cadence (or "far fall") of Sapphic song therefore lasts forever.

"On the Cliffs" can be read as a metalepsis of "Anactoria," a temporal inversion casting a vision of the future into the past and a vision of the past into the future. Swinburne moves from the scandalous rhetoric of "Anactoria" to the metaphysical rhapsodies of "On the Cliffs," in a strategy of revision and self-reversal that is characteristic of Swinburne's later poetry.¹⁴ In a letter Swinburne describes the new "rhapsody" he is composing, which abandons the pathos of his earlier dramatic monologue in order to meditate on his Sapphic sublime in more abstract terms. The inspiration for "On the Cliffs," he writes to Watts, is a nightingale he heard in youth and identified as Sappho:

You will regret to hear that in subject-matter and treatment ["On the Cliffs"] is not akin to ["Anactoria"]. . . I fear there is not overmuch hope of a fresh scandal and consequent "succès de scandale" from a mere rhapsody just four lines short of four hundred (oddly enough) on the song of a nightingale

¹⁴ "The contradiction between the aberrant and the transcendent produce[s] the thematics of Swinburne's later verse," Armstrong observes (1993: 417); Greenberg (1976, 1991) considers more specifically how Swinburne revisits and revises his earlier Sapphic imitation in the later work.

¹³ For a discussion of the sublime landscape in "On the Cliffs," see Fletcher 1986.

by the sea-side. I don't think I ever told you, did I? my anti-Ovidian theory as to the real personality of that much misrepresented bird—the truth concerning whom dawned upon me one day in my midsummer school holidays, when it flashed on me listening quite suddenly 1) that this was not Philomela—2) in the same instant, who this was. It is no theory, but a fact, as I can prove by the science of notation. (*Letters* IV: 78)

Here the Sapphic scene of instruction is no longer a discipline imposed on boys at school, but discovered "one day in my midsummer school holidays," in a seemingly natural setting, "by the seaside." The nightingale, "the truth concerning whom . . . flashed on me listening," is a strange bird, however; not to be found in nature: the poetic genealogy of "that much misrepresented bird" includes not only the Ovidian Philomela but the nightingales of Milton and Keats (as well as Shelley's skylark, another important Romantic precursor). By tracing the lineage of the nightingale back to its "real personality," namely Sappho, Swinburne discovers an earlier point of origin for a song that is echoed by all other poets but is itself also defined as echo or repetition. What this bird teaches Swinburne is a song that reveals, "quite suddenly," in a flash of recognition, the sublime power of rhythm.

Swinburne's insistence that his "anti-Ovidian" theory can be proved "by the science of notation" is more than an afterthought in this account, for it defines the way in which Sappho's song is remembered, or more accurately, *memorized*. "Notation" here refers to the act of transcribing the nightingale's song into Sapphic rhythm as well as inscribing it in graphic form: Sappho's tones survive as *notes*, a metrical notation or written record that Swinburne memorized in youth but remembers as pure song by forgetting its origin in writing. The Sapphic scene of instruction is therefore inserted in "On the Cliffs" as a memory of memorization. Swinburne calls upon Sappho by recalling the nightingale he describes in his letter, a bird whose cry of spring—in the spring of his youth—was an early revelation of Sapphic rhythm:

I have known thee always who thou art,
Nor ever have given light ear to storied song
That did thy sweet name sweet unwitting wrong,
Nor ever have called thee nor would call for shame,
Thou knowest, but inly by thine only name,
Sappho—because I have known thee and loved, hast thou
None other answer now?
As brother and sister were we, child and bird,
Since thy first Lesbian word
Flamed on me, and I knew not whence I knew
This was the song that struck my whole soul through,

Pierced my keen spirit of sense with edge more keen,
Even when I knew not,—even ere sooth was seen,—
When thou was but the tawny sweet winged thing
Whose cry was but of spring.

(XIII)

Swinburne represents his encounter with "thy first Lesbian word" as a memory of something already known ("I have known thee always") but without knowing its origin ("I knew not whence I knew") and without knowing what it means ("even when I knew not,—even ere sooth was seen—"); it is a memory of something memorized but forgotten as such, displaced onto a memory from childhood and projected onto nature.¹⁵

Despite the appearance of a natural setting, this passage self-consciously replays the sublime scenario by now familiar to us. Swinburne is "struck" and "pierced" by the song of the nightingale, even before learning to identify it "inly by thine only name," the name of Sappho; he knows the meaning of her cry because he has already incorporated its rhythm into his own body. Thus Swinburne distinguishes his lyric persona as a sublime Sapphic poet from imitators of Sappho who have merely "given light ear to storied song" about Sappho, without recognizing her as the embodiment of a larger rhythmic principle. Swinburne's inner ear, by contrast, is already attuned to the painful pleasures of such rhythm; like a bolt of lightning straight out of Longinus, Sappho's primal word "flamed on me" and with sublime violence she penetrates his "keen spirit of sense with edge more keen." The phrase "spirit of sense" recalls Sappho's desire "to wing thy very spirit through the flesh" in "Anactoria," and indeed, not unlike Anactoria, the body of Swinburne is rhythmicized by Sappho; she wings the spirit through the flesh, making body and soul inseparable from each other, interpenetrated by her rhythm. Throughout "On the Cliffs" Swinburne therefore emphasizes the power Sappho exerts over him, in terms that recall the pattern of domination and submission implicit in the Longinian sublime: in stanza XVI he worships her "sovereign Lesbian song," and in stanza XXVII he is ruled by "thy ruling song" and transported "in thy strong rapture of imperious joy."

The sublimity of Sappho's rapturous, ruling song inheres, paradoxically, in the written word. For it is only through reinscription of that song "by the science of notation"—meaning notes or marks or any other material trace produced by memorizing Sappho's words—that the idea of Sappho can emerge. Swinburne writes "On the Cliffs" in the vocative as a sublime ode to Sappho, but even while his long invocation creates the

¹⁵ In identifying "brother and sister . . . child and bird," and remembering a bird "whose cry was but of spring," Swinburne also revisits "Itylus," another early lyric from *Poems and Ballads*.

illusion of address, the echoing response he seeks from Sappho is achieved by textual repetition rather than vocal doubling; indeed, his poem emphasizes various forms of quotation, citation, allusion, and translation that mediate the claim to voice through writing. Such mediation is already announced in the epigraph to "On the Cliffs," where two words from Sappho are quoted (ἡερόφωτος ἠδῶν) to introduce the "lovely-voiced nightingale," or more literally, the nightingale with a voice that is both "desiring" and "desired." This nightingale celebrated by Sappho serves as Swinburne's figure for Sappho: simultaneously voicing desire and desiring voice, yet eternally unfulfilled in both. But as it is written in Greek, the epigraph also reminds us that the ἡερόφωτος ἠδῶν no longer sings in a pure unmediated voice; the song of the Sapphic nightingale is lost in translation, yet survives by being translated. The revelation of Sappho's "first Lesbian word" depends on multiple acts of translation from Greek to English, voice to text, past to present, bird to poet, all performed in Swinburne's poem.

Instead of smoothly paraphrasing Sappho in English, as he did in "Anactoria," Swinburne therefore presents the Sapphic fragments more explicitly as translated texts in "On the Cliffs." The words of Sappho appear in italicized passages, drawing attention to their own textuality even when they appear in the vocative. The first two lines of Sappho's famous "Ode to Aphrodite," for example, are repeated several times in italics:

*O thou of divers-coloured mind, O thou
Deathless, God's daughter subtle-souled—lo, now
Now to the song above all songs, in flight
Higher than the day-star's height,
And sweet as sound the moving wings of night!
Thou of the divers-coloured seat—behold,
Her very song of old!—
O deathless, O God's daughter subtle-souled!
That same cry through this baskage overhead
Rings round reiterated.*

(XVII)

The Greek epithet for Aphrodite (reconstructed by scholars as *poikilophrôn*, "possessing a crafty mind" or *poikilothron*, "sitting on a crafted throne") is translated here several times, to correspond to variant readings of the text: she is "God's daughter subtle-souled," a goddess "of divers-coloured mind" on her "divers-coloured seat." The multiple translations of this single phrase disrupt the continuity of Sappho's invocation, which is further interrupted by Swinburne's interpolated comments; he interrupts the vocative "O thou" by writing "lo now / Now to the song above all songs," and again between the vocatives "Thou" and "O deathless"

he inserts the comment, "Behold, / Her very song of old!" These demonstrative exclamations ("lo" and "behold") direct us to read the italics as the representation of pure voice, while also demonstrating that the reiteration of "that same cry" in Swinburne's poem inevitably takes the form of writing and *not* singing. At the very moment when Swinburne celebrates Sapphic voice, attempting to bring "her very song of old" into the present tense, he also marks the distance between that song and this poem; we see the repetition of her words made visible on the page, rather, than hearing an audible echo.

Insofar as Sappho reappears through textual citation rather than vocal recitation, Swinburne performs the sublime as a citational structure. He apostrophizes Sappho's apostrophe, taking the words of Sappho out of context and placing them in the context of his own writing. Her words are repeated to refer back to Sappho, self-reflexively, so that she herself becomes as "deathless" and "subtle-souled" as the goddess she once invoked; the meanings of Sappho multiply, like the multiple translations of Aphrodite's epithet, into a "divers-coloured mind" that takes on the diverse colors of whatever context in which she is reinvented. Sappho lives on forever through endless permutations and variations, in an infinite series of ever more subtle repetitions: her Sapphic song is an effect of writing, a reiteration and not an original utterance. Swinburne's Sappho is a catacoustic figure, whose song "heard once on heights Leucadian" is "heard not here / Not here" (XVII). What we cannot hear—ironically echoed in "not here"—is the voice of Sappho, absent from Swinburne's poem yet nevertheless presented as a series of reflected sounds. The inaudibility of this voice is made visible by Swinburne's writing, in the very italics he uses to quote Sappho's words.

To convey the absence of voice, Swinburne translates another Sapphic fragment with interpolated commentary as follows:

*I loved thee,—hark, one tenderer note than all—
Atthis, of old time, once—one low long fall,
Sighing—one long low lovely loveless call,
Dying—one pause in song so flamelike fast—
Atthis, long since in old time overpast—
One soft first pause and last.*

(XVIII)

Again we are asked to listen to Sappho—"hark, one tenderer note"—and again this "note" is seen rather than heard; it is marked in italics and presented for us to *read*. The song, thus written down, is defined by its decline into silence, the "low long fall" of a voice "sighing" and "dying" so that we hear only its cessation, the pauses before and after sound rather than the sound itself: "one soft first pause and last." Sappho's song, pre-

viously invoked as "her very song of old," is now revealed to be a song of the past, in all senses: it is written in the past tense, about the past, and in the past it will remain. Swinburne therefore uses Sappho's own words ("of old time, once" and "*long since in old time overpast*") to refer to the impossibility of their recuperation as a song in the present. These words can only be read as a pause in Sapphic song, measuring the distance between then and now, in silent intervals.

These passages, excerpted from a poem that is a tour de force of poetic echoes,¹⁶ suggest how Swinburne aligns himself with a Sapphic tradition, not by recalling the voice of Sappho or remembering the body of her song, but by re-citing the Sapphic fragments he has memorized. His writing is structured like memorization, as it repeats by rote the words of which the meaning is forgotten, and indeed the transmission or "memory" of Sappho depends on this act of forgetting: no longer (if ever she was) a woman, poet, persona, or bird, but purely a recurring rhythm. "On the Cliffs" therefore leads into a more abstract, nonrepresentational concept of rhythm than does "Anactoria." While the earlier poem produces an ironically organic figure—the simultaneous composition and decomposition of the Sapphic body—through an allegory of sublime rhythm, the later poem moves beyond an organic reading of rhythm into another kind of formalism: the revelation of Sapphic song, "by the science of notation," as a form of material inscription. The poem that mediates between these two visions of Sappho is Swinburne's "Sapphics": a metrical imitation of the Sapphic stanza that presents itself as the reincarnation of Sappho's song but materializes, graphically, in writing. The conversion of "embodied" song into a written pattern, a conversion of rhythm into meter, will demonstrate yet again what Swinburne has learned from the Sapphic scene of instruction: the impact of Sappho's "literal and absolute words" on the body of his own writing.

Suffering Meter

Swinburne's Sapphic sublime, I have been arguing, is a revelation of rhythm: in "Anactoria" the Sapphic body is manifested rhythmically throughout the world, and in "On the Cliffs" all time proves to be a manifestation of Sapphic rhythm as well. In "Sapphics" this vision of rhythm

takes a metrical form. If Anactoria emerges as the proper name for an allegory of rhythm in "Anactoria," "Sapphics" goes one step further in formalizing this allegory by naming the meter for which Sappho herself has become the proper name. In his poem Swinburne describes a long tradition of poets who come after Sappho (these poets are "Sapphics") and they repeat the rhythm of her song (in the meter known as "Sapphics"); furthermore, the title of his poem refers to his own repetition of Sappho's meter (in stanzas that are "Sapphics," again). Thus Swinburne aligns himself with a Sapphic tradition, and its line of descent is presented in a visionary sequence: first the appearance of Aphrodite, then a vision of Sappho turning away from the goddess, followed by a vision of her Lesbian song, echoing long after Sappho herself has disappeared. These descending visions do not seem to originate within Swinburne himself but descend upon him in the movement of the verse itself, a cadence that takes the form of the Sapphic stanza. Swinburne's poem, a dazzling experiment in English "quantitative" meter on a Classical model, therefore appeals simultaneously to the eye and to the ear, attempting to mediate between what is seen and what is heard, and indeed representing one in terms of the other; as if the legible could be made audible and the audible, legible.

At the beginning of "Sapphics," a Sapphic persona emerges in the dreamlike description of an external force that "beheld me," taking hold until "a vision came" and "I too was full of the vision." The agency of this "I" is curiously suspended as Aphrodite, invoked by Sappho in her famous ode, reappears without ever being actively reinvented. The goddess is mobilized, instead, by the repetition of a Sapphic rhythm compelling her to leave the time and place when Sappho called upon her, to leave the past and move into the future, the present moment of Swinburne's poem. She approaches, in the cumulative effect of the opening stanzas:

All the night sleep came not upon my eyelids,
Shed not dew, nor shook nor unclosed a feather;
Yet with lips shut close and with eyes of iron

Stood and beheld me.

Then to me so lying awake a vision
Came without sleep over the seas and touched me,
Softly touched mine eyelids and lips; and I too,

Full of the vision,

Saw the white implacable Aphrodite,
Saw the hair unbound and the feet unsandalled
Shine as fire of sunset on western waters;
Saw the reluctant

¹⁶ "On the Cliffs" deserves longer analysis than I can give here. By focusing on Sapphic citations I have bypassed numerous allusions to other poets such as Aeschylus, Wordsworth, Shelley, and Keats; the poem is a chamber of many echoes. As is the case with most of Swinburne's later poetry, there are few sustained readings of this complex poem; but see Raymond 1971, McCann 1972, Ridenour 1978, Buckler 1980, Morgan 1992, Foss 1996.

Feet, the straining plumes of the doves that drew her:
Looking always, looking with necks reverted,
Back to Lesbos, back to the hills whereunder
Shone Mytilene;

Heard the flying feet of the Loves behind her
Make a sudden thunder upon the waters,
As the thunder flung from the strong unclosing
Wings of a great wind.

So the goddess fled from her place, with awful
Sound of feet and thunder of wings around her;
While behind a clamour of singing women
Severed the twilight.

(1-24)

Aphrodite enters the poem as a gradual vision, accompanied by sounds that are gradually amplified into song. At first the vision "touched me, softly" but then it is heard as "sudden thunder upon the waters" and in the "wings of a great wind," to reveal an awe-inspiring "awful sound" and "clamour of singing." This amplification may be heard, as well, in the sound effects of Swinburne's verse, his characteristic use of alliteration and assonance, the echoing repetitions of words and phrases, and the pacing of the language. Moreover, as the poem gathers momentum, its rhythm is figured in Swinburne's favorite pun on feet. Aphrodite's "feet unsandaled" are shaped to fit into the metrical feet of his poem, moving slowly in the early stanzas (as we see in the stanzaic enjambment of "reluctant / Feet"), but followed in stanza 5 by "the flying feet of the Loves behind her" and then surrounded in stanza 6 by "sound of feet and thunder of wings around her." Along with its rhetorical amplification, "Sapphics" therefore simultaneously enacts and allegorizes a rhythmic acceleration.

The arrival of the goddess is "reluctant," however, as the poem struggles to set itself into motion. In Sappho's poem, Aphrodite glides effortlessly into view in a golden chariot, drawn by "beautiful swift sparrows whirling their wings" (*ôkes strouthoi . . . pukna dinantes*), but in Swinburne's poem we hear the double entendre in "the straining plumes of the doves that drew her." Swinburne is straining to recreate the melody of Sappho in Sapphic stanzas, a vehicle of transport not quite so automatic as Aphrodite's chariot. The birds in his poem, while carrying the goddess forward in time, are "looking always, looking with necks reverted, / Back to Lesbos." Their reversion to the past defines "Sapphics" as a recursive structure or self-mirroring vision, as McGann points out: "It is as if Swinburne's poem were Sappho's Ode composed and read 'before

a mirror" (1972: 115). While Sappho calls upon Aphrodite in her ode, in the continuation of Swinburne's poem it is the goddess who calls upon Sappho: "Yea, by her name too / Called her, saying, 'Turn to me, O my Sappho.'" This reversal—Aphrodite returns, asking Sappho to return—demonstrates the degree to which Sappho is the proper name for a song already turning inward as its own inversion, reverting back to itself as a reversible reiteration. The song of Sappho is a tautology: "such a song was that song," we read in line 39, and again in line 66, a mirrored phrase that suggests the difficulty of defining "such a song" except by pointing to "that song." Therefore the recreation of Sapphic song leaves "all reluctant" (67), silent again in the wake of Sappho; all have "fled from before her" (68) and "all withdrew long since" (69).

Nevertheless Swinburne's poem tries to envision what Sappho saw and thus to recreate her Sapphic vision. Surpassing the nine Muses, Sappho is "the tenth," who "sang wonderful things they knew not" (29), and she even turns away from Aphrodite because her music surpasses that of the goddess. She sees her own Lesbian melodies reincarnated in the women of Lesbos:

Saw the Lesbians kissing across their smitten
Lutes with lips more sweet than the sound of lute-strings,
Mouth to mouth and hand upon hand, her chosen,
Fairer than all men;

Only saw the beautiful lips and fingers
Full of songs and kisses and little whispers,
Full of music; only beheld among them
Soar, as a bird soars

Newly fledged, her visible song, a marvel,
Made of perfect sound and exceeding passion,
Sweetly shapen, terrible, full of thunders,
Clothed with the wind's wings.

(49-60)

Here "the Lesbians" are the instruments for (and of) Sappho's song. Like Anactoria transformed into "a lyre of many faultless agonies," their bodies are "lutes with lips more sweet than the sound of lute-strings," and when they kiss "across their smitten / lutes," an apt enjambment divides the limbs of the verse in order to compose their limbs into Sappho's melody. Lesbian body parts are doubled "mouth to mouth and hand upon hand" and multiplied into many "beautiful lips and fingers," forming a composite body "full of songs" and "full of music"—a song of the body that is also the body of Sapphic song.

Published along with "Anactoria," "Sapphics" is therefore its compan-

ion piece; both poems use lesbian eroticism as a trope for Lesbian melody (and vice versa) and resuscitate the Sapphic corpus as a living body of song. While Anactoria embodies that song, or rather, serves as the figure for its embodiment, in "Sapphics" it is Sappho herself who emerges as the embodiment of her own poetic form. The vision of Lesbians leads to a revelation of "her visible song, a marvel," taking shape in the contours of the Sapphic stanza, "sweetly shapen" to reveal its own form: the rhythms of Sappho incarnated in Sapphic meter, and reincarnated in the "body" of Swinburne's poem.

But just as the Sapphic body disintegrates at the end of "Anactoria" without reintegration into an organically unified form, "Sapphics" simultaneously provokes and revokes an organic reading of poetic form.¹⁷ Sappho's melody may be figured as embodied song, but it is reconstituted in writing and thus anticipates Swinburne's vision of Sappho as a form of material inscription in "On the Cliffs." While there is an emphasis on sound throughout "Sapphics," culminating in the marvel of a "visible song" that is "made of perfect sound," the Sapphic stanzas of Swinburne are based on a meter more readily seen than heard: a metrical experiment that follows the quantitative model of Classical Greek verse. To scan Swinburne's lines on this model, we would mark the long and short syllables that comprise Sappho's meter in Greek, although strictly speaking such quantities are not audible in English. Swinburne therefore creates a stress-analogue pattern that allows the long syllables in Greek to coincide, more or less, with stressed syllables in English. For example:

Newly fledged, her visible song, a marvel,

Made of perfect sound and exceeding passion,

Sweetly shapen, terrible, full of thunders,

Clothed with the wind's wings.

(49–60)

In Greek the Sapphic stanza uses a so-called choriamb (long-short-short-long) as its basic unit: three lines (each composed of two trochees, a choriamb, and a bacchiac) are followed by a truncated fourth line (built on another choriamb). However, within an English accentual/syllabic tradition the Sapphic meter may also be understood more simply as three five-stress lines with a fourth half-line at the end of the stanza. The phrase

¹⁷ An example of such organic reading would be Rosanna Warren, who describes Sappho as a myth of form, a "metrical essence" that allows for the regeneration and rebirth of poetry; she considers Swinburne a "reincarnation" of Sappho because his poetry expresses her influence "genetically" in meter and stanza form (1989: 211–12).

"newly fledged, her visible song," for example, could be read according to traditional foot-scansion as two trochees and a choriamb, but we also hear it as a steady alternation of stressed and unstressed syllables according to the conventions of English prosody.

Despite Swinburne's virtuosity (itself a "marvel") in creating an English analogy to long and short quantities in Greek, what we hear is their inaudibility. Likewise, in our brief scansion exercise, what we see is a mark of their absence. If Sappho's "newly fledged" song is recreated in Swinburne's Sapphic imitation, taking wing in the rhythm of his own fledgling verse, we may hear it (as we heard "the far fall of its fire-fledged rhyme" in "On the Cliffs") as a question about what it is we are supposed to hear: a falling cadence or a fall into silence? Indeed, the closer Swinburne comes to perfecting the Sapphic stanza, the less audible it becomes, for Sappho's song can only be made "visible" by the conversion of rhythm into a metrical pattern: a visual representation of meter that seems to be "made of perfect sound," because it is now without sound. This visualization of Sappho's song turns her rhythm into an abstract metrical pattern. In English verse, as John Hollander points out, the Sapphic stanza is a formal scheme that functions as a written code: "We must conclude that the quantitative experiment is somewhat like a written code—one needs to count and measure letters in order to determine the system, while the ear will infer that all sorts of accentual patterns it hears are indeed intended to be systematic. Indeed, one mistakes the rhythm of the lines for their schematic meter, which latter is hidden in an arbitrary and arcane system" (1985: 66). On this view the meter of the Sapphic stanza is a graphic phenomenon, a pattern graphically marked for scansion and schematized diagrammatically, as follows:

By graphing the meter, we visualize the song of Sappho and allow it to materialize, in the lines on the page, as a written form that appeals to the eye instead of the ear, an inscription rather than an utterance.

All that remains of Sapphic rhythm, then, is a metrical grid: a ghostly form, or "haunting shape" as Rosanna Warren calls it (205), haunting all poets who follow Sappho. These are the "ghosts of outcast women" that Swinburne describes at the end of his poem:

By the grey sea-side, unassuaged, unheard of,
Unbeloved, unseen in the ebb of twilight,
Ghosts of outcast women return lamenting,
Purged not in Lethe.

Clothed about with flame and with tears, and singing
Songs that move the heart of the shaken heaven,
Songs that break the heart of the earth with pity,
Hearing, to hear them.

(73–80)

The women who "return lamenting" nevertheless return another version of Sapphic song to the world; they are now the "Sapphics" to which Swinburne refers in his title, singing songs that echo everywhere. Their singing moves heaven and earth into a shaken, broken rhythm, an echoic repetition of Sappho; the final line of the poem, "hearing, to hear them" is itself a repetition, to suggest the infinite repeatability of this Sapphic rhythm. These women do not reincarnate Sappho, however; nor do they fully remember her melodies. Unassuaged, unheard of, unbeloved, unseen, they are ghostly figures for the Sapphic song that cannot be re-embodied. "Purged not in Lethe," they do not forget; but instead of remembering Sappho, they repeat the memory of her loss. The song of Sappho therefore survives as a song about Sappho, proclaiming the loss of song rather than reclaiming it. The followers of Sappho, women "unheard of," can be read (as the title "Sapphics" encourages us to do) like the Sapphic meter of Swinburne's poem: less a reincarnation of that form than its spectral emanation, in stanzas that follow in the wake of Sappho and are also unheard, even as we read "hearing, to hear them."

Swinburne's interest in the Sapphic stanza, and his complex use of it as the simultaneous form and content of "Sapphics," can be understood within the context of Victorian metrical theory. A general revival of interest in classical meters influenced the emergence of "the new prosody" in mid-nineteenth-century England; not since Elizabethan experiments in "quantitative" verse had there been such extensive discussion about the possibilities of combining a classical model of meter based on quantity (long and short vowels) with an accentual/syllabic tradition of English poetry based on accent (stressed and unstressed syllables). The systematic elaboration of a quantitative model for English verse extends well beyond the claims of Renaissance prosody, however, and should be historicized as a particularly Victorian phenomenon. A Classical approach to meter reflects a philological turn within nineteenth-century British Classical scholarship and is part of the broader cultural discourse that advocates the return to Classical origins, as Derek Attridge points out: "Only with the new interest in Greece and Rome in the nineteenth century did foot-scanston come into its own as a mode of analysis, accompanied by another round of experiments in English classical meters" (1982: 5).¹⁸

¹⁸ Attridge offers an introduction to "the classical approach" with the proviso that "it is important to see this approach to metre in its historical context" (1982: 5). While much has

By the time Saintsbury published his *History of English Prosody* in 1910, he could therefore look back on the previous century as a progression toward a new metrical science predicated on the foot. Saintsbury argues with vehemence against the "extravagant accentualism" of Edwin Guest's *History of English Rhythms*, an influential nineteenth-century treatise (published in 1838, and again in 1882) that is criticized by Saintsbury for its "apodism" (276) or "unfaith in feet" (277). Guest's *History* is the last gasp of an old English tradition, according to Saintsbury, while his own *History* traces a different historical tradition that culminates in foot-scanston on a classical model; indeed, he hails Swinburne's poetry as "the triumph of the foot-system" (348). The recurring puns on "feet" that I have been tracing in "Anactoria" and "Sapphics" demonstrate how the foot has become the fetish of Victorian metrical theory. In the context of an argument about figuration in Swinburne's poetry, Armstrong observes how "the fetishising concentration on feet/foot . . . creates a metonymic universe of parts" (1993: 413); we may extend this observation into an argument about meter as well, for to the degree that "literal and figural are, as it were, on equal 'footing'" when we read Swinburne, his metonymic universe of parts also materializes metrically, in the foot.

What Saintsbury assumes to be self-evident—the foot as unit of versification—begins as a debate about the merits of classical scanston, earlier in the nineteenth century. Saintsbury himself acknowledges that Swinburne's metrical triumph "could not have come without the man; but it also could not have come without the hour. That hour was the result of two generations" (337). A classical approach to meter is developed in various treatises over several decades, ranging from *The Ancient Rhythmical Art Recovered* by William O'Brien (1843) to *On the Use of Classical Metres in English* by William Johnson Stone (1899). A new edition of Hephaestion's *Handbook of Meters* (to which we owe a metrical reading of Sappho, as I have already suggested) also came into circulation in 1843, edited by Thomas Foster Barham. This edition includes prolegomena on the application of rhythm to ancient meters, as well as imitations of Classical meter in English quantitative verse, in an attempt to bring together two different metrical traditions.¹⁹

Barham further develops his ideas about Classical prosody in a paper

been written on Classical meters in the Renaissance (e.g., Attridge 1974, Woods 1984), no comprehensive study historicizes this aspect of Victorian metrical theory in a way that moves beyond a sweeping historical survey or merely formal description. Studies of particular poets do sometimes lead into a broader discussion of Victorian prosody, such as Taylor 1988 on the meters of Hardy.

¹⁹ For further examples of classical approaches to meter in the nineteenth century, see Appendix A, "Of Books and Articles Dealing with Quantitative Verse and Pseudo-Classical Poems," in Omond 1968.

"On Metrical Time, or, the Rhythm of Verse, Ancient and Modern," delivered in 1860 to the Philological Society. Here Barham expresses regret that "all is left to the untutored ear" in the reading of poetry, both ancient and modern, and attempts a more scholarly exploration of "the principles of rhythm" manifested in various metrical forms. Barham singles out the Sapphic stanza in particular ("the first shall be that beautiful and well-known system named the Sapphic," he writes), and proposes a rhythmic reading that would group the stanza into three lines instead of four.²⁰ Citing the first stanza of Fragment 31 as example, he concludes, "With this rhythm, the effect of the metre is certainly different from our ordinary mode of reading, but, as it seems to me, it is preferable" (1860: 61). The certainty of his reading is qualified, however, by the phrase "as it seems to me," a perhaps unwitting translation of the words just quoted from Sappho's fragment (*phainetai moi*), and suggesting how much is rendered uncertain by the reading of rhythm through foot scansion: can we really hear the rhythm Barham discerns in the Sapphic stanza, even with a well-tutored ear? Or does it only *seem* audible? The dilemma anticipates Swinburne's representation of that which is inaudible in "Sapphics," as if to revive the lost form much admired by Barham and his contemporaries. Such critics urge the revival of classical meters, despite the difficulty of reconstructing their rhythm; indeed, Classical versification is considered a productive model for English poetry precisely because it departs "from our ordinary mode of reading."

These are questions hovering in the air, during the decades of the nineteenth century when Swinburne was being tutored in prosody, and in his own verse he responds to the new theories of meter. I would argue, in fact, that Swinburne's early metrical experiments are a response to Coventry Patmore's "Essay on English Metrical Law" in particular. First published

²⁰ Barham argues that while the Sapphic system is "technically termed epichoriambic," the verses are formed "essentially of dactyls and trocheys [sic]; and as originally written by the poetess, would seem to have been intended for three lines only, the two former time-ters, and the last a tetrameter." The example he offers looks like this (with alternating marks for "arsis" and "thesis"):

Φαίνεται μοι κῆνος ἴσος θεοῖσιν
 : 1 : : 1 : 1 : 1
 Ἐμμεν ὄντη ὅστις ἐναντίος τοι
 : 1 : : 1 : 1 : 1
 Ἰσάδνει, καὶ πλάσιον ἄδῃ φωνεῖσας ὑπακούει.
 : 1 : : 1 : 1 : 1

Needless to say, Barham's metrical notation is idiosyncratic and not further developed in either his century or our own, although now classical scholars do share his skepticism about a "choriambic" base for the Sapphic stanza and agree that the third and fourth lines might be joined more plausibly into one longer line; see Halporn, Ostwald, and Rosenmeyer 1980: 29ff.

in 1857 as a review of various English metrical critics (including Guest on the history of English rhythms, and O'Brien on the recovery of ancient rhythms), this essay was known and avidly read within the circle of Oxford poets, at the time when Swinburne was also a student there.²¹ In the essay Patmore develops the Classical approach to meter according to a new prosody that would mediate between the "metrical" or "temporal" model of Latin and Greek verse, and the "rhythmical" or "accentual" model of English verse. While he concedes that "a real change did occur in the transition from the 'metrum' of the ancients to the 'rhythmus' of the moderns" and further admits that "in modern verse, those collocations of accented and unaccented syllables which we call 'feet,' are not true measures" (19–20), nevertheless he devises a scheme that retains the foot as the measurement of "isochronous intervals." Thus he recuperates the possibility for measurement without insisting on the actual or hypothetical quantity of what is measured: "Time measured implies something that measures, and is therefore *itself unmeasured*," he concludes emphatically, in italics (15).

Patmore's paradigm for prosodic analysis (perhaps less original than he claims it to be) depends on a basic "ictus" that divides verse into a series of regular intervals. The division of time is here figured in spatial terms: "The fact of that division shall be made manifest by an 'ictus' or 'beat,' actual or mental, which like a post in a chain railing, shall mark the end of one space, and the commencement of another. This 'ictus' is an acknowledged condition of all possible metre" (15). On this account all meter, both ancient and modern, is a function of marking. The ictus marks intervals "like a post in a chain railing," simultaneously marking the end of one space and the beginning of another, but without itself taking up time or space. We perceive the spaces between, rather than the mark itself. While the ictus allows meter to materialize, "*it has no material and external existence at all*," Patmore insists, again in italics (15); it is the process of marking rather than the mark itself. What appears to be a practical lesson in prosody therefore leads Patmore into the more startling insight that meter might be a form of material inscription.

²¹ Sister Mary Roth's critical edition presents the original text of Patmore's essay (originally entitled "English Metrical Critics" and published in the *North British Review* in August of 1857) along with later revisions (titled "Prefatory Study on English Metrical Law" in 1878 and retitled "Essay on English Metrical Law" for Patmore's collected *Poems* of 1879, and subsequent editions). I refer to the 1857 version, as it circulated in Oxford during Swinburne's student years at Balliol (1856–60). Stobie discusses the early reception of Patmore's essay within "the Oxford set" (1949: 65), which surely would have included Swinburne, although she does not mention him by name. See also Roth's commentary on Patmore for further discussion of his influence on contemporary poets and critics interested in "the new prosody."

This insight is framed, however, by an equally insistent emphasis on an organic theory of prosody, derived in part from Hegel in the opening pages of Patmore's essay. Paraphrasing Hegel's *Aesthetics* on the increasing "spiritualisation" of language,²² Patmore defines meter as the necessary "corporeal element" within language: "Art must have a body as well as a soul, and the higher and purer the spiritual, the more powerful and unmistakable should be the corporeal element;—in other words the more vigorous and various the life, the more stringent and elaborate must be the law by obedience to which life expresses itself" (7). Meter manifests the corporeality of language in order to counterbalance its tendency toward "the spiritual," but it can do so only by means of an increasingly "stringent and elaborate" law. The imposition of this metrical law is another form of inscription, allowing the "body" of language to materialize through the marking of meter. Thus Patmore's philosophical justification for meter produces the figure of a body and makes possible an organic reading of poetic form, even while his detailed analysis of meter points in the opposite direction, to a "more stringent" formalism.

Throughout the essay Patmore describes a perpetual conflict "between the law of the verse and the freedom of the language" (9) in rather disciplinary terms that conflate submission to the laws of meter with an almost painful disciplining of the body. The bonds of verse are the necessary "shackles of artistic form," and "the language should always seem to *suffer* from the bonds of verse," he writes (8). Moreover, poets themselves should also be made to feel these bonds; at a time when most poets "know nothing and feel nothing of the laws of meter" (50), Patmore insists on the difficult discipline of Classical meters, a formal regimen to which all poets should submit. A slip from "should" to "must" resonates through the essay, as it preaches obedience to the metrical law that it elaborates over many pages, and concludes with a stern warning: even when poetry appears to be "unconscious of the rules," it requires "years of intensely 'conscious' discipline," and young poets in particular "must have the addition of hard discipline" to their inspiration (49).

Swinburne seems to follow Patmore's advice more literally than intended, as he is quick to turn the bonds of verse into a bondage that he would only too willingly suffer. He associates the hard discipline of meter with the even harder discipline of corporal punishment, as we have already seen in the Sapphic scene of instruction, and throughout his private correspondence his early instruction in classical meters is associated with scenes of flogging. In one letter Swinburne describes himself

flogged for attempting to write in Galliambics, a "*hard*" meter that led to a hard beating from his tutor; remembering this painful episode, he writes that nothing can "heal the cuts or close the scars which had imprinted on the mind and body . . . a just horror of strange metres" (*Letters* I: 110). And yet in the compulsive counting and recounting of his boyhood floggings, these cuts and scars also account for Swinburne's metrical virtuosity. Swinburne remembers the flogging as a form of rigorous inscription: what has been "imprinted on the mind and body" by flagellation is the experience of meter itself as a painful pleasure, playing out the "ictus" (perfect participle of the Latin *icere*, "to strike") on the body, and leaving its marks there. The rhythmic beating of his body becomes Swinburne's preferred figure for "the function of marking" that Patmore attributes to English meter. The marks left on his body allow it to materialize as a function of meter and make it legible as the body of a poet who has learned his lesson in prosody: a perverse performance of English metrical law that makes the language seem both to *feel* and to *suffer* from the bonds of verse.

Thus in another letter, Swinburne claims to surpass even Tennyson because of his education in the "rule of rhythm" at Eton: "As to my quantities and metre and rule of rhythm and rhyme, I defy castigation. The headmaster has sent me up for good on that score. Mr. Tennyson tells me in a note that he 'envies me' my gift that way. After this approval I will not submit myself to the birch on that account" (*Letters* I: 121). Although Swinburne claims he "will not submit to the birch" again, it is precisely by submitting to its rule that he has a "gift" for verse—not freely given, but strictly imposed by the headmaster at school. His memories of Eton (more hyperbolic than historical, one suspects) take the form of numerous flagellation fantasies, focusing in particular on the body of the boy being birched. From his friend George Powell, for example, he requests "a little dialogue (imaginary) between schoolmaster and boy—from the first summons . . . to the last *cul*" with a special plea to "describe also the effect of each stripe on the boy's flesh—its appearance between cuts" (*Letters* I: 123). The boy is disciplined by an imaginary beating, in a violent inscription that far exceeds Patmore's account of meter yet repeats its logic: just as the "ictus" marks the end of one interval and the beginning of the next, allowing us to perceive the spaces in between, so also Swinburne emphasizes the marking function of the "beat," not only in terms of the marks it leaves behind (the cuts and stripes) but also "its appearance between cuts," its metrical pattern.

Flagellation proves a necessary initiation rite for poets, as we see not only in Swinburne's private correspondence but also in his flagellant verse, and perhaps most strikingly in *The Flogging Block*, a series of twelve

²² Roth identifies Patmore's source in Hegel's *Aesthetics* and traces Patmore's various readings in Hegel (56–57).

unpublished "eclogues" in a mock-pastoral Etonian setting.²³ In the Prologue to this "Heroic" poem, Swinburne invokes "the Muse who presides over the Ceremony of Flagellation" to teach the budding young poet a lesson in rhythm:

Chief the Stripling Songster's Breech invites
The full Performance of thy frequent Rites,
Most the Nurslings of the Muse require
The Lash that sets their lyrick Blood on Fire,
The Lash that ever when they cry keeps Time,
When Stroke to Stroke responds in glowing Rhyme.
And still the humbled Bottom hails the Rod sublime,
Till Heart & Head the rhythmic Lesson learn
From Wounds that redden & from Stripes that burn,
As Twig by Twig imprints the Crimson sign in turn.

The "rhythmic lesson" is enforced by each lash, teaching the "Stripling Songster" to cry in time and respond "stroke by stroke . . . in glowing Rhyme." This rhythmic response is incorporated into the body, and imprinted on the bottom as a "Crimson sign," making the body legible through the marking of meter. The passage resonates, of course, with "Anactoria," where the body of Anactoria is rhythmicized by Sappho, who strikes "pang from pang as note is struck from note" in order to turn her into the very embodiment of Sapphic meter. Swinburne's whipping muse is therefore invoked as another version of Sappho: a mistress of perverse metrical discipline, wielding "the Rod sublime" in order to teach the fine art of suffering meter.

Swinburne's (per)version of Sappho reflects ironically on an image created by nineteenth-century Classical scholars of Sappho as chaste schoolmistress and leads directly into the underworld of Victorian pornography, where flagellating governesses taught young gentlemen a good lesson.²⁴ Swinburne's poetry did, in fact, circulate in such circles. John Camden Hotten, the rather shady publisher who took over the distribution of *Poems and Ballads*, also offered a special line of books devoted to flagellation, with tempting titles like *The Sublime of Flagellation*, *Exhibition of Female Flagellants*, *Lady Bumtichler's Revels*, and *Madame Birchini's Dance*.²⁵ The last

²³ *The Flagging Block: An Heroic Poem in a Prologue and Twelve Eclogues* by Algernon Charles Swinburne, with illustrations by Simon Solomon. The original holograph manuscript, written at intervals between 1862 and 1881, is at the British Museum (Ashley Ms. 5256).

²⁴ The nineteenth-century emergence of "Sappho schoolmistress" is traced by Parker 1993; for discussion of "the English vice," see Gibson 1978.

²⁵ These titles are included in the "Library Illustrative of Social Progress," attributed to "Henry Thomas Buckle" and dated "London, 1777," but printed in 1872 by Hotten. See Ashbee 1962: 239.

of these features an anonymous parody of Sappho, attributed to a boarding-school girl who has "just been corrected by her Governess." In the opening stanza, the sublime of flagellation is not so far removed from Swinburne's Sapphic sublime:

Curst as the meanest wretch is she
Th' unlucky girl just whipt by thee,
Who sees and feels thy stinging rage,
Which nought but time can e'er assuage.²⁶

The beating of the birch is repeated in the beat of the poem, and its "stinging rage" has the same impact on the unlucky girl as Sappho (whose verses, we recall, "strike and sting") on Swinburne. Swinburne's Sapphic sublime does not work on this level of parody, however; when we place it within the broader discourse of Victorian "flagellomania," we see how closely his "aesthetic" and "pornographic" writings are linked to the formal question of meter.

There is an obvious correspondence between the sublime sado-masochism of "Anactoria" and Swinburne's flagellant verse, but the more abstract formalization of meter in "Sapphics" also corresponds to passages in *The Flagging Block*. In the eclogue entitled "Algernon's Flogging," we see how a body materializes through meter, like the "visible song" of Sappho. The rigorous disciplining of Algernon strikes his body into musical response, and he cries out his pain in perfect lyric meters while a chorus of schoolboys traces the mark of the birch on his back. "Oh, isn't his bottom a pattern when stripped?" one observes with relish, to which another replies, "You can see the rod's marks all down Algernon's back." Disciplined by rhythm and marked by meter, Algernon becomes legible in the stripes and lines left by the flogging on his body. Indeed, these lines are written into Swinburne's manuscript. Three parallel lines that mark the end of the eclogue, at the bottom of the page, also appear to re-mark the lines on Algernon's bottom (figure 8):

²⁶ The poem appears as "Parody of Sappho's Celebrated Ode" in *Madame Birchini's Dance: A Modern Tale with Considerable Additions and Original Anecdotes*, in Hotten's "Library Illustrative of Social Progress," vol. 5: 51–52 [see above, n. 24]. Of course the attribution of the poem to "a child eight years of age, but remarkable quick" is spurious; the author is unknown. It is worth noting here that Hotten did solicit anonymous flagellant verse from Swinburne in the late sixties and early seventies, for publication in his "special" series; indeed in his preface to Swinburne's *Letters* (I: xlviii). Lang notes that Swinburne was blackmailed by Hotten into collaborating on books like *The Romance of Chastisement* and *Flagellation and the Flagellants*, both published by Hotten in 1870 (*Letters* II: 1–2, 227–28).

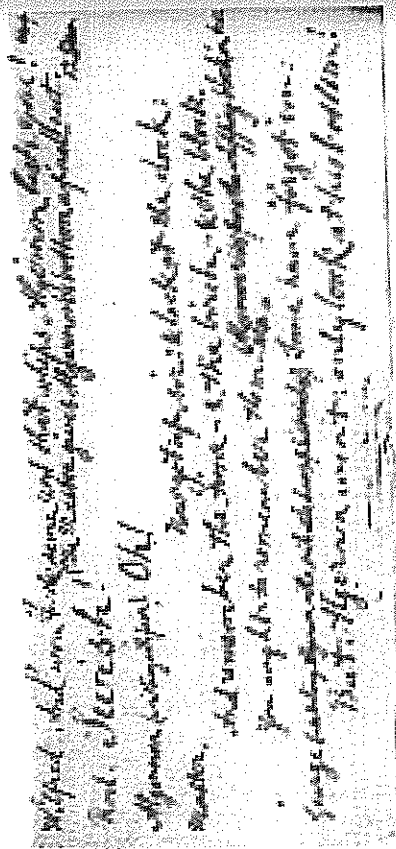


FIGURE 8: Excerpt from "Algernon's Flogging" in *The Flogging Block*, Algernon Swinburne (1862–1881). By permission of the British Library. Ashley MS 5256.

The inscription of these lines (in blood on skin, or ink on paper) is the imposition of a metrical pattern, a series of marks not unlike the graphic representation of meter in "Sapphics," allowing a body of song to be visualized graphically on the page. In this way Swinburne's flagellant verse enacts a subjection to English metrical law that produces his entire poetic corpus: the imprinting of a "Crimson sign" on Algernon is Swinburne's ironic lyric signature, outlined on the posteriors and presented to posterity for perverse reading.²⁷

Clearly, Swinburne is not among the poets who "know nothing and feel nothing of the laws of meter," according to Patmore's assessment. To the contrary, Swinburne's poetry is made not only to *feel* but to *suffer from* the bonds of verse, in a hyperbolic performance of suffering that puts "the corporeal element" of language on display, playing out the bodily figure produced by Patmore's essay while also undoing that figure. Thus, as we have seen, poems like "Anactoria" and "Sapphics" are simultaneously a form of suffering and a form *for* suffering. Here Swinburne makes explicit a masochistic relation to language that is implicit within British Romanticism. In the Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*, for example, Wordsworth looks to meter for the regulation of feelings when they have "an undue proportion of pain connected with them" or when "there is some danger that the excitement may be carried beyond its proper bounds"; yet, as Adela Pinch has persuasively argued, Wordsworth's poetry also figures meter itself as another source of pain and pleasure, demonstrating a connection

²⁷ This backward logic of lyric reading is further discussed in my forthcoming essay, "On *The Flogging Block*: Algernon Swinburne"; see also "A Poem Is Being Written" (Sedgwick 1993: 177–214).

between meter and masochism that Pinch further traces in a broader nineteenth-century discourse on corporal punishment and aesthetic education.²⁸ What distinguishes Swinburne from his Romantic precursors is his insistence on that masochistic relation, pushing excitement beyond its proper bounds—beyond a Wordsworthian reading of meter—into an undue proportion of pain.

Suffering meter is part of the "poetics of passion" in all of Swinburne's poetry, as Anthony Harrison reminds us: "Swinburne never forgot the etymological origins of the word 'passion' from the Greek *pathos* and the Latin *passio*, meaning suffering," and Swinburne's interest in "passionate experience" must therefore be understood in terms of self-loss rather than self-assertion, as the expression of suffering (1982: 696–97). I would go one step further, to suggest that what we read as passionate expression in Swinburne is the passion of meter itself: a pathos not inherent in the utterance of a lyric subject, but in subjection to a formal principle. Subjected to metrical law, Swinburne relinquishes control and surrenders to compulsory form, allowing it to speak for him or through him, as if possessed. His passion of meter is an even more extreme example of the "lyric possession" that Susan Stewart discovers in other poets who "employ redundant rhyme and meter as a means of representing the transport or waylaying of subjective intention," for "they demonstrate that we cannot necessarily conclude that strict form signifies authorial mastery or control; it as readily can signify the submersion of will within convention" (1995: 40). This form of lyric possession is a dispossession of the lyric subject, although Stewart is reluctant to give up a claim to the lyric subject altogether: by reading the "symptoms of meter," she describes various displacements of reference (the waylaying of subjective intention, the surrendering of will, the haunting of lyric voice), but with reference to a model of the unconscious that still assumes an individual consciousness.

But suppose, as is the case with Swinburne, that meter is not to be read symptomatically, as if it were the return of the repressed, but as the manifestation of a highly self-conscious nineteenth-century discourse on meter? By suffering meter, Swinburne "consciously" performs a formal structure that does not operate according to an intentional logic: in his poetry, rhythm is an automatic mechanism, a repetition compulsion that

²⁸ On meter and masochism in Wordsworth, see Pinch 1996; her argument is further elaborated in "Learning What Hurts: 'The School-Mistress,' the Rod, and the Poem" (1999), placing Shenstone's poem "The School-Mistress" within the context of early-nineteenth-century debates on corporal punishment and flagellant literature. Swinburne's flagellant verse demonstrates how these discourses are increasingly formalized and aestheticized toward the end of the century; thus a question about the "healthy" instruction of meter embodied in Shenstone's schoolmistress anticipates the teachings of the "Scholastic Dame" who is invoked as an even more perverse metrical muse by Swinburne at the beginning of "The Flogging Block."

takes control and makes authorial mastery redundant. Edward Thomas recognizes how Swinburne's "confessed experiments in sapphics" disclaim agency: "He does not, like another poet, have to think in his meter; his mastery compels the metre to think for him" (1912: 87–88). Likewise, in an 1889 review of "Mr. Swinburne," Oscar Wilde is interested in "the masterly experiments" of Swinburne's poetry precisely because he seems to have relinquished mastery: "It has been said of him, and with truth, that he is a master of language, but with still greater truth it may be said that Language is his master. Words seem to dominate him" (146). Swinburne appears to be a master of language because language has mastered him. Indeed, by capitalizing "Language" Wilde cannily displaces the proper name of Mr. Swinburne, who is no longer the proper subject of his own poetry; Swinburne's claim to lyricism can only be the surrendering of that lyric persona. "He is the first lyric poet who has tried to make an absolute surrender of his own personality, and he has succeeded," Wilde writes, not without ambivalence; "We hear the song, but we never know the singer. We never even get near him" (148).

Of course that is also how Swinburne describes his relation to Sappho, as we recall: "It is as near as I can come; and no man can come close to her," he writes in "Notes on Poems and Reviews," not only to defend his imitations of Sappho, but to imply that he might at least approximate her very condition of unapproachability: no longer a singer but a song, or rather, its reiteration. The reception of his own poetry is therefore a repetition of Swinburne's Sapphic sublime. Mastered by Sappho and subjected to a Sapphic rhythm, Swinburne is nevertheless admired for his mastery of meter. Saintsbury calls him "the one living master of English prosody" (1910: 334) and upon his death in 1909, Swinburne is eulogized in the obituaries as "an unrivaled master of meter" (Hyder 1970: 242). By the time his *Posthumous Poems* appeared in 1917, the reviews proclaim that he "the great singer was indeed singing for our age" (ibid.: 252), but only in the past tense: a posthumous recuperation of Swinburne, as if he might have been, after all, the Victorian reincarnation of Sappho, whose song also outlived the age of her singing. Thus Swinburne's poetic corpus is constituted, by analogy to the mutilated fragments of Sappho, as a body of writing initially abused by critics but increasingly read as the very embodiment of lyric poetry: a sublime metrical body, suffering meter.

Recollections of Swinburne

Swinburne's perverse reincorporation of "the mutilated fragments" of Sappho leaves us with a question about how to read Swinburne "himself." In the course of his reception, he is increasingly identified with Sappho,

according to a logic that repeats Swinburne's Sapphic sublime. In an early review, one of the few to defend *Poems and Ballads*, W. M. Rossetti reinstates the sublime as an aesthetic category for reading Swinburne: "There is a word which was once familiar to the critic of poetry—the word Sublime; now seldom produced, and still seldom aright producible," he writes. Without "attempting a definition of that word Sublime," Rossetti nevertheless insists that Swinburne deserves the epithet. His praise of Swinburne is fulsome, in a prolonged sentence gradually building up to "that word":

We find in him an impulse, a majesty, a spontaneity, a superiority to common standards of conception, perception, and treatment, an absoluteness (so to speak) of poetic incitement and subject-matter (rendering him perhaps not likely to be ever very widely admired, but certain to be as intimately and as enthusiastically admired at the latest date to which his works may reach as at the present or any intermediate time), and withal a power and splendour in all the media of poetic expression, a wizardry over the auroral brightness and the "sunless and sonorous gulfs" of song, such as we apprehend to be consistent if not co-extensive with any reasonable definition of the poetic sublime. (Hyder 1970: 89–90)

Superior to "common standards of conception, perception, and treatment," achieving an "absoluteness" that recalls the "literal and absolute words" of Sappho, flying high over the "gulfs of song," Swinburne is elevated—in the cadences of Rossetti's own high Victorian prose—to the status of sublime poet, in the present and in future time.

But if Swinburne appears "consistent if not co-extensive with any reasonable definition of the poetic sublime," the reason is that he extends the sublime beyond its reasonable limits. Throughout his review Rossetti describes Swinburne in distinctly Longinian terms, with a giddy sense of the poetry veering out of control: "a mighty intoxication of poetic diction mounts to his head, and pours in an unruly torrent through his lips, and he forgets the often still nobler office of self-mastery and reticence" (64). The unruly torrent of Swinburne, intoxicated by language that "mounts to his head," makes him sublime; yet this sublimating movement also makes him lose "self-mastery," as he is transported by a force that carries him upward and, at times, too high. "The author's defects," Rossetti concedes, "will be perceived to be ascribable to over-high, not to deficient pitch, and as such to be rightly classed under the terms perversion and excess rather than blunder and bathos" (89). Rossetti therefore introduces a Longinian account of the sublime ("now seldom produced, and still seldom aright producible") in order to demonstrate how Swinburne might produce the sublime, but only by reproducing it in extreme form, not "aright" but "rightly classed under the terms perversion and ex-