PART I

SAPPHO IN LEVKAS, AND OTHER POEMS
PART I

SACRED TO LUXURY AND OTHER POEMS
SONG

O singing heart, think not of aught save song;
    Beauty can do no wrong.
Let but th' inviolable music shake
    Golden on golden flake,
Down to the human throng,
And one, one surely, will look up and hear and wake.

Weigh not the rapture; measure not nor sift
    God's dark, delirious gift;
But deaf to immortality or gain,
    Give as the shining rain,
Thy music pure and swift,
    And here or there, sometime, somewhere, 'twill reach
    the grain.
SAPPHO IN LEVKAS

Zeus, my Father, once again
I stand before Thee; once, and then no more.
Here in the calm, deep night,
Far, far from Lesbos and the madness there,
Here, where the alien sea about my feet
Is clean and sacred with Thine awe,
I come, Sappho, Thy child alone,
To speak with Thee as in the old, exalted days.
In this last hour,
Before the cool, regardless hand of death
Erase me quite, desiring most to be
Most noble, I would break like nard before
Thy night-encurtained majesty my heart —
From hurt or shame withholding naught;
Tell all, give thanks, and cease.
Nor would I have the flame of this, my prayer and baring,
Shake with the breath of bitterness.
Nor stay my heart, self-pitying,
On that last human littleness,
Resentment 'gainst the gods.

Thanks, Father, for
The life that Thou hast given me.
For it was high and full of joy — akin
To those bright mountain spaces where
A golden exaltation holds the peaks.
Never, methinks, with more enamored hand
Hast Thou coaxèd fire into the clay, than when
In Lesbos, mine own mother grew with me.
To Thee be thanks that in all life
"Twas mine to see goodness; that I, a woman,
Beyond the tragic and the base of life,
Have seen to that serenity of right that flows
Increasingly and always onward. Mine
Companions were that proved the race Thine offspring;
Heroes and kings, sea-wanderers, poets, priests, —
All, all, who, fervent, pass
The flame of righteousness and truth
To sequent generations yet asleep; and I
Among them equal, praised and loved.
More, Father; Thou hast given me the gift
Of fragrant, fiery speech.
Beyond the violet-circled isles, yea, to
The confines of the habitable world
My singing reached; nor can I think
The time comes ever when the hearts of men
So stripped of brightness be
But they will shake with rapture of my songs.
Thou has made beauty mine own element,
Taught me to drift, a burnished leaf,
Down the long winds of ecstasy;
And ever loveliness has swept my heart
With lyric hand of rapture. Mine to feel
The majesty and tears and color of the sea;
The awe and high obedience of the stars;
To watch at eve the saffron of Thy garment's hem;
To wake unto Thy midnight messengers,
The purple winds that roam infinity.
Yea, I, undoubtedly, have known
The signs of immanent divinity
In darkness, dawn, and dusk; and most,
In music’s passioning, when on the green,
Beneath a frail, enchanted moon,
Some bard with mad, pale mouth sang urgently!

To think nobility like mine could be
Flawed — shattered utterly — and by —
This, this the shame, O Zeus, that Thou must hear —
A slim, brown shepherd boy with windy eyes
And spring upon his mouth!
Mine Thou hast made the courage to face truth,
Tho’ truth were death; but face alone!
Before Thine eyes to strip my passion till
Naked its evil gleams — here — now — oh, all
The harsh and iron of my soul must forth
Ere shame’s rebellion in my blood be quelled,
And Thou familiar made with my reproach!

Courage and truth, these two are not of earth!
Hearken Thou, Zeus, and judge if, at the last,
In spite of all, I am not half divine,
Loving these two.

It was the hour of fleeing stars —
If I should live to see a million dawns,
Each magic with a strange perfection of its own,
The memory of none could stir as that
The pool of tears and longing here within,
The hour of fleeing stars —
And I, too, fled into the stillness,
Up from the quiet village to the hills
Where walk the morning-mooded gods.

A dawn of dew and hyacinths,
With grey-eyed, silver-footed April loose
Upon the hills. The arching air — the last few stars —
Each little leaf, tho' hushed, a-tremble to
The throbbing up of azure-hearted spring.
The upper meadows I had gained,
When on the eager silence came a sound,
A sleepy sound of many little feet.
Above the road I drew me up, and watched
The flock drift by. They passed, a huddled herd,
Shyly, and after them, with loitering foot
And bent, dark-curving head, the shepherd lad.

Down, down, O heart of mine! — I feared to breathe
Lest breathing wake me from a dear enchantment;
I dared not move, lest moving stir the spell . . .
So leaned above the roadside — gazing —
Drinking the poison of his loveliness.

For he was lovelier than the youthful day;
More beautiful than silver, naked Ganymede!
Slowly he came beneath me on the road —
And suddenly I heard
The tremulous, soft magic give me speech.
"Shepherd, thy name!" He raised his head;
The wonder of his mouth and eyes and carven throat
Flooded me. And he smiled. So full
Of sweetness were those eyes, those curving lips,
A music as of tears swept through my veins;
And when his voice rose, answering,
As cool, unhurt, and clear it was
As is the bird-souled break of day.

"Phaon," he said, and, smiling still, passed on. —
Thus, Zeus, at dawn, seeking as was my wont,
The viewless gods' companionship.

Phaon I met, himself in curve and color godlike,
And, meeting him, lost Thee!

When shining day aroused the earth and me,
I turned me from that roadside home, full-fledged
In Aphrodite. Not the gales of spring
Dashing the tenuous, frayed clouds high up the sky,
Were plumed with wilder rapture than my heart!

Nor was the earth's red longing for fruition
More hot than mine for Phaon . . .

Oh, I had loved the colors of the world,
All lofty things, all daring enterprise,
The glint and foam of life's adventuring!
That hour changed all the world and me!
Cool sleep became a haunted thing,
Full of the boy untruly amorous;
And waking, pain — a disillusionment
That filled the lonely day with thirst.

At dawn, at dusk, my feet sought out the hills
Beloved of shepherd folk, that, haply, sight of him
Might stay the burning here.

To glimpse his loveliness, to hear his voice
Answering lightly my light questionings
Was sweetness more than mortal thing,
More than the gods' ambrosial dalliance —
And bitterness, my heart, and bitterness!
Oh, I grew studious in unlearning life,
    Till I could feign simplicity,
And use the simple speech of shepherd folk.
    My utmost intellect was bent to plan
    Assurance of chance meetings;
    My craft in beauty to devise which way
The yellow crocus in my hair might take his praise.
    At feasts and country festivals,
When came the dark and stars, I, too, came, there
    To see his bending body in the dance.
With not more grace, beneath the twilight breeze
Bending, the long-stemmed asphodel is swayed.
    But always something of his grace,
    His inextinguishable happiness,
Would seem to break my heart, and I would long to be
    Freed from that loneliness men call esteem,
    And there within the dance, a country wench,
    Touching his shining arms, and breathing close
    His lithe and burning youth.

O Thou hast known
The thousand years and each year’s thousand lovers —
    What need to tell the pangs and tricks of clay
Common to all; yea, e’en at last to me, Thy child!
Father, it seemed not evil then — so sweet
He was; and I, who, most of all the world
Loved purity and loathed lust,
    Became the mark of mine own scornful ere
    I knew — he was so sweet!
A something from the freshness of the woods,
Of cool and shining leaves, of laggard winds,
   His beauty seemed to catch. I think
The momentary blood that lights the rose
   Fired his veins with vintage of delight
Perpetually. No lovelier
The first strong tulip, whose crimson arrogance
Lords it above blythe Eresos, and daunts
   The lesser darlings of pale April, than
His mouth . . . And this, a shepherd boy!
His thoughts the thoughts of shepherds; his desires,
The bread and water cravings of the poor.
   No trembling from the madness of my songs
Could reach his heart; no lofty converse call
   One cloud of questioning within
His strange, unshadowed, listening eyes.
His lore was of the leaves, the clouds, the winds,
   What time the fields, a-frost with heliotrope,
Yield richer pasturage; what time,
The starrier meadows of wild broom.

This, this my lover! Mine, whose choice of mate
   Was bidden guest in all the courts
And goodly palaces of Greece!
Lo, I, whose name was crowned thro’ all the isles
   With praise and reverence,
Grew stranger to the life that had been mine;
   Transmuted from the very certitude
Of right example to reproach; become
As vacillant, weak flame before the wind of lust.
Yet, not, O Father, stained with deed of wantonness.
   I could not quite escape that holiness
The sacred years had bred!
Methinks, the shepherd boy will never know
But that one fragrant with a nobleness
He dimly felt, had found him for a space
In some strange wise companionable.
And at the last he loved me, Zeus! Oh, not
As lovers love — less than the shepherds' strife
Of skill, less than the glowing dance,
Or merry gossip when the wine-vat teems.
This irony for only anodyne
Of all my pain Thou tenderest me —
Out of the evil of my passioning came good!
For Phaon, Phaon loved me as a goddess sent,
And, curbing grossness, looked to me for praise...
Perhaps his blood was clean of lust,
The mountains and the winds being pure,
Or else his years, maturing loveliness,
Left green that mortal taint.
O soft, soft lies, beguile me not!
Altho' by me unroused,
No doubt his manhood's proof will flaunt before
The red and white of some broad-bosomed wench
Of his own kind — when I am gone!

Oh, swiftly, swiftly, scorning shame,
Tell all, my heart, and make perpetual end . . .
Thou send'st to mortals night as comforter;
And when the rounded moon breathes up the east,
Dost think to ease our most immedicable griefs
With loveliness. But I am still
Weary and broken with the memory
Of such a night, vouchsafed lately,
Lesbos, my own, lay drowned beneath
The warm and argent flood of light — so still,
The very olive trees unstirring slept
A silver sleep. But, ah, to me the night
Was terrible with perfumes from the hair
And breasts of Aphrodite; within my blood,
Unstainable, surged all the undertow of spring.
Dragging my soul unto the sea that knows no law.
Haggard and parched, love's frenzy caught me up
And bore me from my dream-hot bed into the night.
My feet unconscious chose those pastures known
To love. The way was haunted with him; here
He stood; here leaned upon his crook to watch the dawn;
Here lifted up the wonder of his eyes.
And on the visioning leapt all the pity of
My life — vexing and hounding me.

About me, moonlight, stillness, empty night;
Distraught, I stumbled on.
A light, near footstep sounded suddenly;
I lifted filmy eyes; saw; reeled; and saw
Again — Phaon, the shepherd. Then madness broke.
His argent throat and arms,
His mouth, the dew, the tenderness — O God! —
I bent me to him with the flaming cry,
"Phaon — I love thee; one kiss, one kiss — Phaon!"
A silence came. The night grew huge and cold.
Silence. I lifted heavily,
A nightmare weight, my lids and looked upon the boy.
Amazement held him, wonder, quick
His eyes avoided mine, then, dubious, sought;
And in the miserable stillness there,
I watched the radiance leave his face,
And pain steal up like age. Within me died
All fire. I closed my eyes; the night whirled past.
Anguish like bolted lightning showed
In that long instant what myself had been to him —
One alien to the lowness of his life;
Almost a holy thing, a-stir with God,
That now revealed stood of common grossness.
As dreadful as their lovelessness,
The scorn that I knew his eyes would show!
Thou' never loved, yet never to be loathed —
That mean respect at least my pride might save!
I woke, beheld the desperate urgency,
And faced him with a lie that heaven sent.
"O shepherd, I leave Lesbos, home, and thee
At dawn. Good-bye." Then hid from him my face,
And bowed before the surge of agony.
I needed not to see his joyous tenderness
Pulse back; I knew, how bitterly!
Before him, broken, cold, and blind, I felt
Him take me in his arms, all gentleness,
And on my mouth lay his, a long, long kiss.
The music of his voice was far away;
"Come soon again to Lesbos and the shepherds here
Who love thee" . . .

Thus,
As I had prayed, I lay upon his breast,
And in his cloudy glamour was wrapped close,
And breathed the fragrance of his neck and hair —
Yet not as I had prayed. Midmost
The snatch of starved, impossible delight —
His lips to mine — the reeling moonlight — passion —
I knew the irony, the tragic mockery.
While yet I clung to him, he seemed
Almost a child, sweet as a child is sweet,
Unsparingly; and I —
Old — in the world and sin and vision, old;
He but a shepherd boy, and I — Sappho!
So when he had released me from his arms,
Stricken and blind, with one swift kiss
Upon his brow, one sobbed "Good-bye," I turned;
So, fleeing, down into the darkness.

Unto perfection I was born;
The shepherd boy, who would not see my sin,
Recalled me to myself. That was the end . . .
Imperative to keep my soul superb,
For his sake, mine, and Thine,
And one sole method to that end.
But lest my resolution should be wax
Beneath his nearness, and because I chose
To speak with Thee apart, in calm,
I minded me of those, my lying words.
Therefore, when morning bore the harbor ships
Upon their devious, blue wanderings,
Myself, beneath a glistening sail, wide-eyed,
Gazed on the fading island that I loved,
A last, long time on Lesbos . . .
Think not, O Zeus, I render me to death
Because the shepherd loved me not.
Such pain as many mortals bear,
Myself would scorn to shun.
Sterner than unrequited love the cause,
And not unpitiful... Perhaps in time
My burnt, high-bosomed beauty might have lured
His blood — No, no! not that! not possible!
Hearken, O God, the truth, the utter truth!
Had mine been siren sorcery
To draw him tremulous to my desire,
And had he answered love with love,
Passion with passion, ardent equally —
I know that I had cooled — the wanton’s trick —
Found tedious what had been bliss, grown strange,
At last, despised! More — more — I stifle —
If far from Lesbos and from him
I should remain — I should forget the boy!
And this — indignant heart of mine, I will not lie —
Could Phaon’s magic pass,
Yet other snares, perhaps as sweet — if such
Could be, — would trap and madden me as his.
Some summer-tinted mouth, some curved throat;
The Bacchic grace of some young body, bare
And glistening in the games — I know... I know...
Perhaps some throbbing, lawless-eyed barbarian,
Sea-burnt, gorgeous, and bestial —
Surely, not that, my God!
But always I shall be
Hurt with the vehemence of too, too perfect beauty;
Bare and resistless always
To all the sorceries of fair, fair flesh!

Enough... The truth hath sickened me...
But all is told, and now comes rest.
I would make calm my brow and heart for death.
One step across this darkling cliff, and in
The ocean's weary breathing I am caught,
Made one, assuaged forever. Yet I pause...
The bitter sea with its pale tentacles
Of foam half seen below my feet cannot
Now make me truckle unto cowardice,
Who knew not fear in life... But is it life,
Not death, I dare not face? 'Tis surely ill
The wine of life to spill contemptuously,
Weared, in wantonness, or in despite.
If, though, the wine of its own nature sour,
Lose all the jewel and the perfume, shall
The drinker pause to cast it back to earth?
Why spare the rose
Doomed to the worm? The soul incurably
Hurt with a crescent sin? 'T avoid
The loosened shaft of seen necessity
Is wisdom, not some trick of fear.

To me, my kinship with immortal things
Hath been too clear revealed that I should watch
With willingness my retrogression to the clay
And baseness mortals own as parent.
Either the starry, wind-swept, sea-enraptured soul
Of me, myself, myself shall last unto the end.
Or summonable death shall quench me out
Undimmed, exalted still.
No cowardice, O Zeus, I swear!
With all my spirit I have ever fought
Life's battles; nor testing conflict shunned,
When righteousness made part. But when the enemy
Thou sett'st against me is the sacred element,
The prime nobility that wings my spirit.
What boots the battle? And the event — defeat
Or victory alike — is utter ruin.
To me hath beauty been the ripple and the light
That proved a sea divine,
Sweeping the stars, our little universe, all, all,
Into the wave of some sublime and glittering doom.
Oh, always beauty was to me
Thyself half seen, my Father.
In windy leaves and grass, thy laughter loose,
In yellow noon, thy nectared, slumberous case,
Thy clean and lofty joy in high, sun-striken woods,
In storms thy restlessness, thyself
In this vast, darkling sea.
And this same beauty now betrayeth me.
So long as life by it is made divine,
So long by it am I made harlot-hearted.
No cure, no cure! but oh,
That such perfection in such wise should be
Rifted, and out of harmony!
Methinks, Thyself, the author of the flaw,
Must doubt Thy fathering wisdom.
Indeed, indeed, beneath their calm content,
Thou and the other gods must feel the tears
That make the human breast almost divine,
To see me thus, alone and lonely,
That once was Sappho, song o’ the world. . . .
And yet no wind of heaven beareth me
Breath of compassioning. . . . Perhaps they laugh or scorn.
Oh, can it be that in the halls of heaven
The very gods are tainted with the Cyprian’s sin?
What if the bestial gossip told of them be true,
And too authentic be the lecherous tales
Of Io and the rest?

Then will I break with all the gods,
And more divine than they, snuff out this flame
Ere it be vile with universal degradation!
O night, O night, am I the only struggling thing?
Doth any cry save mine rise to thy stars
Against the tyranny of flesh and mortal grossness?
O mothering darkness, fold
Obliteration closer round me, for
Mine eyes blur, and my throat is hurt
With welling pain. . . . Tears, tears,
Ye rob me of the little left me, godly pride,
And leave me woman. . . .

And I had thought the hour that summed
And closed my lonely struggle for perfection,
Had been a thing of triumph. It is pitiful.
Leaning across this sea here in the night,
A moment’s space from death, I can recall
No old, high legend whereupon to lean my heart.
Instead, I seem to know the rain-grey, hungering eyes
Calypso bent across the surge that gave
And took forever her delight.

The deep air, too, seems somehow cleansed with tears,
And cooler grown. The stars are not so close.
A breath of silver up the sky! Again —
    Dawn! dawn! O Zeus,
The dawn that I had thought to never see!
Eastward the cold light brims into the sky
And joyous sweeps away the stars that watched with me.
They come no more. . . . Dawn. . . . Dawn, and spring again!

This grey and lucent hour, light sleep
Steals from the shepherds' clustered curls,
And leaves them dewy as the bended grass.
At home it is a dawn of dew and hyacinths,
With silver-footed April loose upon the hills.
Along the curving road the flocks
Lag half asleep, lag, but still come
    Nearer and nearer till —
Oh, the insufferable beauty of his bending head!
    O home! O Lesbos!
To lean above that roadside, breathless,
And see again the shepherd boy I love —
    His thonged and sandalled grace —
    His bare, brown throat —
The violets careless round his head —
    Those eyes of spring and unawakened fire —
The dew and roses of the mouth that once I kissed!
Forget, forget all else, O gods, and grant this boon!
    Bear me back home to Lesbos and the boy!
Steep me but one short hour in his love!
Oh, let the anguish crimson of his mouth
Seek fire from mine, and all his brown, light grace
Flame into strength to crush my paleness; let
His morning eyes know drought and noon,
The haze of hidden tears, the film of hope,
And me the only cool and dew.
One misty, scarlet kiss within your arms —
Phaon! Phaon!
I would forswear song — beauty — Zeus, my father . . .

Ah, — madness — madness — uncoil, old anguish! . . . Ah!
O cool, grey wind of dawn! O sea! —
Thou harlot-hearted woman, sleep!
And wake thou, Sappho, leafy-templed child of God!
Upon the lovely world another day. . . .
Come, fearless, piteous heart of mine . . . come. . . .
At last the comfort and the cleansing of the sea.
CHORUS
(AFTER THE GREEK)

Surely in no benignant mood
The gods have fashioned us, but craftily
To send us homing to the sod
Wise only in our own futility.

With hyacinthine brows of youth,
We enter life as to a festival;
But, ere the feast is spread, the gods
Snatch back the wine, the song, the coronal.

And, lusterless, we turn, afraid,
Turn to the sole vouchsafed heritage,
And in the shaken darkness clutch
The disenchanted ledges of old age.
TO A MOCKING-BIRD

Thy taunting happiness,
Thy overbold upflashing bliss,
Pierces my heart to-night, O mocking-bird!
Beneath the limpid surge of darkness,
The awe of stars and all the hush,
Thou fiest far thy little joy, unawed —
Flushed with some momentary triumph,
Or stray, delicious whim.
The tumult of thy silver mockery
Shakes through the trees, across the tranced lawn,
And rouses weariness to pain within my heart.
Cease, cease thy rapture!
To-night the courage and the joy are gone;
I would forget the battles and the ceaseless clash,
The long, rewardless surge of strife,
The race run and no laurels,
The fight fought and no guerdon.
To-night, only to-night, 'tis sweet
No more to buffet with the winds of grief
But bend to them, luxuriously abandoned.
Again the light notes leap
In gusts of gaiety!
Ah, bird, thy song, derisive of defeat
And age and the inevitable doom,
Is but the song of mine own people —
The conquerors, the unafraid —
And thou, in thy bright arrogance and fearless bliss