

# Passionate Beauty: Carman's *Sappho* Poems

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D.M.R. Bentley opens his "Preface: Minor Poets of a Superior Order" with a passage from Wallace Stevens:

At the library yesterday, I skipped through a half-dozen little volumes of poetry by Bliss Carman. I felt the need for poetry — of hearing again about April and frogs and marsh-noises and the "honey-colored moon" — of seeing — "oleanders/Glimmer in the moonlight." You remember the fragments of Sappho. Carman has taken these fragments and imagined the whole of the poem of which each was a part. The result, in some instances, is immensely pleasant — although distinctly not Sapphic. Sappho's passion came from her heart. Carman's from a sense of warm beauty. ([v])

Carman himself, in *A Vision of Sappho*, refers to these poems as "a sheer invention" (5); it thus comes as no surprise that *Sappho: One Hundred Lyrics* is seen as having little to do with the original Greek fragments. What is surprising is the way in which critics of this work tend to ignore the poems themselves. Whether they view the poems favourably or unfavourably, commentators search to relate the *Sappho* lyrics to some greater schematic design such as their relation to Sappho's works (Cappon), their relation to other literary influences (Stephens), or their relation to some form of religious impulse (Sorfleet, Bentley). This does Carman's poems the injustice of assuming that they are incapable of supporting critical exploration. Indeed, with the exception of Bentley, this is the attitude Carman critics seem almost inevitably to display. A survey of the critics themselves, however, in conjunction with a close reading of merely one of the *Sappho* poems, shows that this attitude is the result of critical misapprehension rather than any lack of merit in the poems themselves.<sup>1</sup>

Though still responding to the critical argument about Carman's supposed lack of philosophic development, Bentley manages to avoid the trap into which the majority of critics seem almost wilfully to fling themselves.<sup>2</sup> These critics react to Carman and his poetry in a manner very similar to much nineteenth and twentieth-century "critical" response to poetry written by women. The question of whether or not the poetry has artistic merit is sidestepped in favour of one which deals with the artist's delicacy and lack of vigour (or with her unladylike vigour and strength). Pelham Edgar states that one of Carman's "prime devotions was to beauty" (45). As beauty, until recently, has been considered "feminine," especially in contrast to the "masculine" and "virile" sublime, it comes as no surprise that Edgar sees "the magic of his phrase" and "the charming waywardness of his fancy" as Carman's "strong points" (48). Norman Newton informs the reader that:

Bliss Carman ruined his talent, as Desmond Pacey has pointed out, trying to be the spokesman of a crudely vigorous optimism which was alien to his sensuous, feminine and melancholy temperament. (13)

Cappon, obviously a virile critic, treats one to a veritable tour de force of value-laden phrases. "Carman, who is naturally delicate" (168), has a "modern and very transcendental sense of nature" (176), as well as a "philosophically romantic expression" and a "mystical emotionalism" (177). Cappon refers to Carman's "fine idyllic bits . . . graceful, lightly touched

vignettes . . . tender elegiac notes . . . [and] vague and languid [erotic sentiment]" (178). Carman's "languidness" contrasts unfavourably with Sappho's "vigour and passion" (Cappon, 178). The apex of this small mountain of highly subjective criticism comes with Donald Stephens, who damns with very faint praise indeed. In "Carman and Tradition," Stephens condemns Carman as lacking, in idea and diction, "the vigour of a Shelley or a Browning" but allows that Carman does have a "delicacy of expression, a haunting melancholy, and a musical lyricism" (188) all his own. This is a more moderate condemnation than that presented in Stephens' earlier work, *Bliss Carman*: "As a poet, [Carman] is a sentimentalist, an eternal child" (15). "[Carman's] poetry," says Stephens, "is always naive, and often personal" (130); "when there is emotion it is couched in terms of highly exaggerated tension, and the surface structure of individual poems is rarely artful" (16). *Bliss Carman* creates a picture of poems that are "soft and muted" and which exhibit a "tender beauty" (77) and a "sentimental emotionalism" (124). This offensive recital is put in perspective by Stephens' description of Carman as "the legendary poet who wore turquoise jewelry" (128) and by Stephens' need to reassure the reader that, although Carman was "feminine" in appearance, "aside from his feminine mannerisms, there is nothing to prove that Carman was a homosexual" (32). Carman's marginalization, in a very "feminine" sense, is complete.

In their review of Carman's poetry, the critics have refused to engage with Carman's own aesthetics. "They have consistently used Sappho's fragments as the standard against which Carman's lyrics are to be judged" ("Threefold" 29); they have, as well, ignored the text of the poems themselves. It is not as though Carman were ignorant of theoretical issues or had never alluded to the poetic qualities *he* valued. In 1896, Carman writes to his sister: "Keats, like all other poets, is remote from our daily life. Browning is at our elbow; he goes along with us in the street, he finds poetry everywhere" (Gundy 105). Carman's poetry is a poetry of "everywhere" which speaks the beauty of common nature. It is unproductive to judge the merit of his poetry without taking this fact into account. One would think an extensive close reading of a Carman poem an unnecessary addition to the critical discourse, but that such a reading clearly does not underlie much of the extant criticism. An exploration of even one of the *Sappho* lyrics reveals artistry and passion of a subtle and momentary kind perhaps unavailable to those who judge poets by their resemblance to Yeats and Keats.

Lyric LIV, which occurs very near the middle of the *Sappho* lyrics, is an exquisitely structured and presented work in and of itself:

How soon will all my lovely days be over,  
And I no more be found beneath the sun,—  
Neither beside the many-murmuring sea,  
Nor where the plain-winds whisper to the reeds,  
Nor in the tall beech-woods among the hills  
Where roam the bright-lipped Oreads, nor along  
The pasture-sides where berry pickers stray  
And harmless shepherds pipe their sheep to fold.

For I am eager, and the flame of life  
Burns quickly in the fragile lamp of clay.  
Passion and love and longing and hot tears  
Consume this mortal Sappho, and too soon  
A great wind from the dark will blow upon me,  
And I no more be found in the fair world,  
For all the searching of the revolving moon  
And patient shine of everlasting stars. (67)

Rather obviously, this poem is written in blank verse, a form that lends itself well to this dramatic monologue (of sorts) on personal mortality. It also lends itself to the rhetorical

*occupatio* which the poet uses in the first stanza, "no more . . . neither . . . nor . . . nor . . .," in the projection of future non-being. In the second stanza, the speaker turns to a concentration on temporal actuality, the present moment and the immediate future, and thus the poem takes on the speech and response form common to religious liturgy and Greek tragedy. Though temporally the stanzas move from projected future to real time, the content of the stanzas moves from every day occurrences and beauties to a more mystic emphasis. Each stanza is a clear subsection, lacking strong end stops in all but the final line. Alliteration, especially of the sibilant, and a preponderance of the coordinating conjunction assist in creating movement within the poem. The grammar thus mimics the content; a flowing of speech (life) moves continuously towards a definite and final end. However, the penultimate line, through the word "revolving" and through the moon's return to the search pattern prominent in the first stanza, emphasizes circularity and continuity. In recital, the repetition of the sibilant actually mimics the susurrant of the sea, one of the controlling images in *Sappho: One Hundred Lyrics*.

Beyond this cursory examination of form lies the content of "How soon will all my lovely days be over." To Bentley, this poem is "the faultless and much anthologized lyric which, as much as any piece in the *Sappho* volume, shows the poetess's increasingly painful awareness of mutability and mortality" ("Threefold" 45). Cappon also maintains that the poem deals with Sappho's fear of growing old (173). The circular structure and resolution of this poem, however, display a guarded acceptance of the inevitable. This acceptance resides in the very quality of mutability within eternal sameness which Cappon and Bentley believe causes the speaker so much pain. The poem begins on a plaintive and uncertain note which does indeed contain "[a] painful awareness of mutability and mortality": "How soon will all my lovely days be over, / And I no more be found beneath the sun, —" This note is soon subsumed in a description in miniature of the actions and realities of everyday living which continue whether or not the speaker is there to perceive them.<sup>3</sup> It is only the neither/nor construction that reminds the reader of the speaker's projected absence in a pastoral and peaceful landscape. The shepherds in the final line of the first stanza are an especially comforting image undercut only by the presence of the pipes, with their ties to Pan and sexuality within the *Sappho* text. The pipes are connected to the "great wind from the dark [which] will blow upon me." The second stanza becomes more and more frenetic, eager . . . burns . . . passion and love and longing and hot tears . . . consume," until it reaches an orgasmic finale. The sixth line of this stanza, "And I be no more found in the fair world," might be seen as pure lament except for the moon's search, which intimates that some "natural" memory of the speaker remains. The words "patient" and "everlasting" metaphorically take the speaker out of herself, as the "great wind" literally is expected to do. A tension between personal mortality and the immortality implicit in the beauty of nature, of the "everlasting stars," is thus developed. This tension is reinforced by the posit and response structure of the poem; the first two lines of the poem belong to the speaker, the next six to nature and "natural" occurrences; the first six lines of the second stanza belong to the narrator, the final two lines to nature in its transcendent aspect. Death, as a divinely inspiring lover, translates the narrator from the plane of "the fair world" to her final place in the memory of the "everlasting stars."

Extra-textual allusions and references reinforce the feeling of consummation and peace created in the final stanza. The sun and reeds, as well as the neither/nor/no more grammatical construction, tie this poem to Shakespeare's "Fear no more the heat o' the sun," the elegy spoken over Fidele/Imogen, who later "rises" from the dead — an encouraging background for a poem which dwells on death and dissolution. The statement/response structure, with its evocation of liturgical chant and the choral structure of Greek tragedy, recalls the preoccupation of these forms with the afterlife and the influence of divinity on humanity. As this poem is written by Carman and not Sappho, one may or may not be justified in hearing a faint echo of the twenty-third Psalm in "And harmless shepherds pipe their sheep to fold." The poem's occupation with imminent death in contrast to the passion for life recalls Keats' "When I Have Fears," although Carman's poem is the less gloomy and self-absorbed of the

two, holding out the possibility of something other than a sinking into nothingness.

Intra-textually, the pipes, song, and water of "How soon will all my lovely days be over" are associated with the question of immortality throughout the *Sappho* text. In his dedication, "Now to please my little friend," Carman contemplates the creation of the *Sappho* poems:

I must take a gold-bound pipe,  
And outmatch the bubbling call  
From the beechwoods in the sunlight,  
From the meadows in the rain. (xvii)

Carman's "Epilogue" repeats and amplifies the theme of permanence/ impermanence; it is the poems themselves, defying the fact that "Earth will hear this voice no more" and continuing to display the "passion, tenderness, and joy" which "must imperishably cling / To the cadence of the words/... wild and fleeting as the notes blown upon a woodland pipe" (127), which give the poet, the addressee (who may be Sappho, the reader, or Mary Perry King), and the passions themselves some form of immortality. The hundred lyrics are presentations of the moments of "passion and love and longing and hot tears" which number all of Sappho's "lovely days" in the "the fair world." Passion is the force connecting the speaker with nature; and passion, the narrator, and nature often become inextricably mixed. Read, for example, the brief lyrics XVIII:

The courtyard<sup>4</sup> of her house is wide  
And cool and still when day departs.  
Only the rustle of leaves is there  
And running water.

And then her mouth, more delicate  
Than the frail wood-anemone,  
Brushes my cheek, and deeper grow  
The purple shadows. (24)

And XLV:

Softer than the hill-fog to the forest  
Are the loving hands of my dear lover,  
When she sleeps beside me in the starlight  
And her beauty drenches me with rest.

As the quiet mist enfolds the beech-trees,  
Even as she dreams her arms enfold me,  
Half awakening with a hundred kisses  
On the scarlet lily of her mouth. (56)

"How soon will all my lovely days be over," which brings together "the flame of life," "Sappho," and "the fair world," displays the "Hermetic idea that all aspects of creation whether divine, human, or inanimate are permeated and linked by a hidden 'essence'" ("Threefold" 45), a "great wind." Because it is the site of confluence for a number of images and ideas which run throughout the *Sappho* lyrics, "How soon will all my lovely days be over" is exemplary of the way in which careful artistry informs the whole of *Sappho: One Hundred Lyrics*.

One hopes that this analysis of the hidden motivations and preconceived notions which inform the majority of the critical works dealing with Bliss Carman's *Sappho: One Hundred Lyrics*, along with a rather lengthy study of one poem from the collection, will help to dispel

the impact critical misapprehension about the intrinsic artistic merit of Carman's poetry may have had on his reader. Perhaps those who have agreed with Stephens' belief that "No core is ever found; nothing is forever in the poetry of Bliss Carman. It flares up, burns away, and then is gone!" (*Carman* 124) will come to appreciate the poignant and strongly affecting quality of Carman's work. Carman's *Sappho: One Hundred Lyrics*, while not filled with "huge cloudy symbols of high romance," yet has the "delicate" and "immensely pleasant" impact of "a match burning in a crocus."

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### Notes

1. One wonders, in fact, whether the current lack of interest in Bliss Carman's works is not, to some extent, a result of the way in which the critics have interpreted the poems for the reader. [\[back\]](#)
  2. For a demolition of the argument that Carman's poetry does not show philosophic development (an argument with which this paper does not fully engage), see Bentley's "Threefold in Wonder: Bliss Carman's *Sappho: One Hundred Lyrics*." [\[back\]](#)
  3. In this reading, the "Oreads" are seen as metaphor, rather than as actual figures (though one could make an argument for "real" Oreads as well). [\[back\]](#)
  4. Given Carman's interest in Sappho, he was perhaps aware that Greek courtyards are often yonic metaphors. [\[back\]](#)
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