In her prose tribute, “The Wise Sappho,” H.D. locates Sappho’s wisdom in the double-seeing rooted in the sweet bitterness of erotic experience. The form it takes for H.D. is expressed most directly in Fragment 57, translated first by H.D. in her prose piece: “What country girl bewitches your heart who knows not how to draw her skirt about her ankles?” The poem can be taken to be self-addressed, mocking herself for a desire so much beneath her, yet finding that this simple country girl bewitches her. Anne Carson translates “bewitches” with the phrase “seduces your wits”: some kind of thinking otherwise is involved. H.D. elaborates: “It is for the strange almost petulant little phrases that we value this woman” (60). In Fragment 160, Sappho claims (H.D. translates), “I sing and I sing beautifully like this, in order to please my friends — my girl-friends” (62). The poems bewitch us, inviting us, through the particularity of their severe observations, to see something else. “She constructed from the simple gestures of a half-grown awkward girl, a being, a companion, an equal” (65).

Hard specificity attaches to each of the many “girl-friends” in the fragments. H.D. summons their names; details suggest an entirety to her; for Atthis, for instance, a typology emerges, a biography of the beloved, adored, but perhaps not worth

adoration, a betrayer, unfaithful. “You have gone to Andromeda” (Fragment 131): she embodies the force of Eros the bittersweet: “I loved you, Atthis, once long ago / a little child you seemed to me and graceless” (Fragment 49). Sappho provides the small, petty detail in her sculpted lines: “She constructed perfect and flawless (as in her verse, she carved from current Aeolian dialect, immortal phrases) the whole, the perfection, the undying spirit of goddess, muse or sacred being from the simple grace of some tall half-developed girl” (65). Sappho, imagiste avant la lettre.

For H.D., Sappho accomplishes something akin to what the art critic Adrian Stokes found essential to artistic creation as he parsed it in *Michelangelo: A Study in the Nature of Art*, “a firm alliance between generality and the obdurate otherness of objects” that Stokes rephrases as “the suggestion of oneness, and the insistence on the reality of otherness if only by the self-inclusive object-character of the artefact itself.” Sappho the wise sees in these cruel, ungainly girls wisdom, perfection—identification. Stokes takes as an example a late drawing of Michelangelo’s (no. 441), perhaps his last, as Frederick Hartt speculates in his entry in his catalogue, describing the drawing this way: “[T]he essential forms of Mother and Child unite in a blinding embrace,” and completing his thought with lines of verse, “Extinguish sight and speech, / Each on each.” Stokes writes: “Just as the child is embedded in the mother, so she herself is embedded, it appears, in a homogeneous material which discloses her form, as might the adumbration of drapery” (72). The lines that suggest they are two also join them as one, making them manifestations of the line, “a homogeneous material,” Stokes intimates, like a single folded fabric.

2 Adrian Stokes, *Michelangelo: A Study in the Nature of Art* (London: Tavistock Publications, 1955), 66–7. Stokes was earlier a close friend of Ezra Pound’s; H.D. had been Pound’s fiancée; Stokes was analyzed by Melanie Klein, H.D. by Freud.

In Sappho, oneness takes form in the distributed name “Cleis”; she is, it seems, Sappho’s mother in Fragment 98, her daughter in Fragment 132. Fragment 98 comes in two pieces: the first recalls how her mother said that when she was young, her beauty — or any girl’s beauty — was enhanced by having her hair bound in purple. 98B addresses Cleis; Sappho tells her she has no such spangled hair band to give her. Is the Cleis she addresses her mother or a girl she wishes she could similarly adorn to make her thereby an avatar of her mother? Sappho’s daughter is explicitly named Cleis; Fragment 132 breaks off in the middle of an unfinished comparison of this daughter to someone else “in exchange for whom I would not” — would not what? Cleis is said to be “like golden flowers”; in 98 the purple band is refigured as “spangled” — golden? How does one thing become another and yet remain itself? “Cleis” asks that question by way of a name that may be called maternal.

H.D. opens “The Wise Sappho” by recalling a line from the Palatine Anthology that sums up Sappho’s poetic accomplishment in the phrase “little, but all roses” (57). Not so, says H.D., unless by roses the color is meant, a red that conveys the passion of the poet’s lines. Or is their color rather gold, she wonders; or is it both, or neither? After all, “it is not warmth we look for,” but something else that conveys the heat of passion at the same time as it negates it, as well as whatever qualities or color roses might convey. It is not this, nor that, yet this, yet that, but this, but that: in these conjunctions, H.D. phrases the relationships of two things at once. The double grammar she finds in Sappho — or in the name “Cleis” — is a “white, inhuman element” (57). “Sappho has become for us a name, an abstraction as well as a pseudonym for poignant human feeling,” H.D. concludes (67). This summary statement of opposing identifications prompts her to recall that Plato venerated Sappho as wise.

In closing, H.D. finally endorses Meleager’s phrase “little, but all roses” as true — it means that “Sappho” names at once inhuman abstraction and is a pseudonym for human feeling; her sentence continues: “[S]he is indeed rocks set in a blue sea, she is the sea itself, breaking and tortured and torturing, but never broken. She is the island of artistic perfection” (67). H.D. had made this final move from roses to rocks at the opening of her
tribute. There, she describes the fragments as rocks “between which flowers by some chance may grow but which endure when the staunch blossoms have perished” (58); the roses grow from the enduring rocks. The poem as object, like human relations as object relations, exists beyond the human. Stokes says that the art object is “a Whole, that nevertheless refers beyond itself without breaking the entirety” (19). Ultimately, this claim leads Stokes to the stones (inhuman white marble) that Michelangelo opens in his sculpture and conceptualized in his poetry: sonnet 151 declares that the artist has no idea in mind — no conception (“alcun concetto”) — that the stone does not circumscribe within itself. H.D. might not have thought of Michelangelo when she described the artwork as living stone, but she does mention Leonardo’s *Madonna of the Rocks* in “Notes on Thought and Vision” as exemplifying how the artistic idea becomes a physical thing. “The *Madonna of the Rocks* is not a picture. It is a window,” H.D. writes (18); not a window on the world but one that manifests the conjunction of mind and body, a conception.

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The *Madonna of the Rocks* is the name of two paintings by Leonardo, one in the National Gallery in London (see Fig. 3), the other in the Louvre. Art historians worry their dating and their authenticity. I am concerned with other doublings found in both of them. To the Madonna and Child, Leonardo has added the not entirely unexpected figure of the infant John the Baptist paying homage to the newborn Jesus. Balancing him there is a winged figure usually identified as an angel; in the Paris version his finger points at the baby Baptist; the hand gesture is missing in the London version, where his drapery is more subdued as well. The angel is a somewhat anomalous figure; I refer to him as “him,” but his face has that “androgynous” quality often ascribed to Leonardo’s figures (Marcel Duchamp added a mustache to the Mona Lisa). One doubling in the painting involves

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the question of whether gender is distributed as two separate kinds or as one. An answer perhaps lies in the other doubling so conspicuous that it has come to name the paintings, the rocks.

Figure 3. Leonardo da Vinci, *The Virgin of the Rocks* (about 1491/2–9 and 1506–8), National Gallery, London.
To say they form a background hardly begins to describe them. The human and divine figures are set within the rocks. Skin tones relate to their browns illuminated by the light that falls on both. Foliage between the rocks and bodies is in a grisaille akin to the wisps of the Madonna's hair; rocks fold like drapery. Apertures in the rocks lead to a distant prospect where they fade to gray; folds and depths are matched by the extraordinary golden drapery that swathes the Virgin's midsection, opening a pocket that suggests depths similarly unfathomable. Perhaps this conspicuously highlighted center of the painting suggests its origin; it is akin to the drapery Stokes summoned up for a simile to describe the embeddedness of figures in form that suggests at once their separation and their fusion. In the *Madonna of the Rocks*, what ensures it not being a picture, as H.D. averred, and thereby discloses the “inhuman element” that she affirms, are the rocks through which a vision of life is nonetheless disclosed.

Kenneth Clark closes a discussion of the enigmas in another painting of Leonardo's, the *Madonna and Child with St. Anne* in the Louvre, by summoning up the *Madonna of the Rocks*, contextualizing it by way of a passage he quotes from one of Leonardo's notebooks: “The earth has a spirit of growth. Its flesh is the soil, its bones the stratifications of the rocks which forms the mountains, its blood the springs of water; and the increase and decrease of blood in the pulses is represented in the earth by the ebb and flow of the sea.” “Everything comes from everything, and everything is made from everything,” Leonardo depends upon Anaxagoras to affirm (14); microcosm and macrocosm are both entirely elemental. “Spirit” exists only in bodies: “The

5 Kenneth Clark, *Looking at Pictures* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1960), 164. Clark does not footnote this citation from Leic. 34r; a fuller translation can be found in *The Notebooks of Leonardo da Vinci*, edited by Edward McCurdy (New York: George Braziller, 1958), 86. The next sentence reads: “And the vital heat of the world is fire which is spread throughout the earth.” This passage is not found in the *Selections from the Notebooks of Leonardo da Vinci*, edited by Irma A. Richter (London: Oxford University Press, 1952), from which I quote below.
soul’s desire is to remain with its body, because without the organic instruments of that body it can neither act nor feel” (281). Bodies, as Leonardo’s *sfumato* shows, are not ultimately separated from each other; edges touch. “The limitation of one body is that which begins another” (125). From Leonardo’s writing, Clark draws this conclusion:
Everything in nature, even the solid-seeming earth, was in a state of flux. But the source and centre of this continuous energy remained mysterious to him. He could only symbolise it by this ideal construction, in which forms, themselves suggestive of further lives, flow in and out of one another with inexhaustible energy; and at the apex of this vital pyramid is the head of Leonardo’s angel-familiar, smiling, half with love for human creatures and half with the knowledge of a vital secret which they can never possess. (164)

The “vital secret” of the angel — the secret of the vitality of the artwork — is perhaps available in the cartoon that shares the room in the Salisbury Wing of the National Gallery where the Madonna of the Rocks currently is hung (see Fig. 4). The Burlington Cartoon shows, once again, the Madonna and Child and the infant John. But in this depiction, the Virgin sits on her mother’s lap. St Anne looks at Mary. Mother is not visibly older than her daughter; they are versions of each other, like the Cleis Sappho multiplied. Behind the figures rocky mountains are suggested; St. Anne’s finger points upward, as if it were a peak in front of the background terrain; it points our thoughts. This cartoon is related to the Louvre Madonna and Child with St. Anne; there, a lamb substitutes for the Baptist. Jesus embraces it, his mother embraces him. She sits on her mother’s lap; Anne looks down on the scene. Her head is one with the mountains in the background, the top of her head the highest peak in the triangle formed by the figures, themselves composed of triangular shapes, draped bodies that match the shapes of mountains. Freud famously saw his infamously mistranslated vulture mother as the key to the psycho-sexuality of the artist displayed in this painting. His error nonetheless points to a truth of fusion of forms and bodies, if not of his reductive formula of the “blending of male and female natures” by which Freud designated the essence of male homosexuality by way of maternal identification, while almost conceding that such unions are found in everyone.6

6 See Sigmund Freud, Leonardo da Vinci and a Memory of His Child-
Mother and daughter are fused in Leonardo’s cartoon and painting. Mother and son are fused in that late Michelangelo drawing mentioned above, while an early drawing (no. 57), inspired by Leonardo, shows the Virgin on her mother’s lap. Michelangelo’s last sculpture, the Rondanini Pietà, spectacularly, heartwrenchingly displays this fusion as the sculptor’s attempt to find what lies in the rock he hews. An arm, polished, hangs detached, discarded from the bodies that yet emerge, barely formed, from the marble block. As Stokes says, “[T]he upright dead Christ is supposedly supported from behind by the Madonna…there is the effect, none the less, that the second figure rides on the back of the first” (85). As his language suggests, the erect dead figure is being taken from behind by the phantasmatic maternal form. Active aggression, passive reception, bisexuality, are terms for this union offered by Stokes. As one walks round this extraordinary sculpture in the Spanish Hospital in Milan’s Sforza Castle, the relation of two-in-oneness, the separations, the fusions, and the emotional relations involved, keep changing — hugging, falling, standing, parting and joining all at once. Were this statue “finished” it would only be to be hacked away further. As Michelangelo puts it in poem 152, by removing, the sculptor places a living figure in the stone that grows precisely where the stone grows less, effaced, until having become nothing that one could name, it would achieve the perfection that Stokes calls “identity in difference” (17), “identity with the pulse of things” (15).
