Love Revealed

The first room in the Tate Britain show *Queer British Art 1861–1967* (April 5–October 1, 2017) was labeled “Coded Desires.” That rubric, in fact, pretty much summarized the curatorial guidance throughout the exhibit. The placard accompanying Simeon Solomon’s 1864 watercolor *Sappho and Erinna in a Garden at Mytilene* (Fig. 1) informed viewers that “Sappho is associated with the island of Lesbos and her story gives us the word ‘lesbian.’” (True enough, Sappho did come from Lesbos, but anyone who comes from Lesbos is a Lesbian, not necessarily a lesbian; even Sappho — her story — has not been thought to have been one for much of her history.) We are told next that Swinburne may have influenced Solomon’s choice of subject matter. How does that follow? Was Swinburne’s sapphism the same as hers? As Solomon’s? Does male art constitute sapphism? It could seem so, but the text continues in a different (opposite?) direction: “While female same-sex desire was considered more acceptable than its male equivalent, Solomon’s depiction of Sappho’s fervent kiss and Erinna’s swooning response is unusually explicit and the image was not publicly exhibited.” So, has Solomon punctured acceptability by showing a coded non-sapphic, that is, male–male desire? Is the fervency of his desire for men coded as unacceptable female–female desire? Does “female same-sex desire” stand in a relation of equivalence to male–male desire, which thus enables this coding, or is the opposite the case, as the label first posited? We read on to the next contradictory sentence: “Yet for most people, there seems to have been little sense that certain sexual practices or forms of gender expression reflected a core aspect of the self. Instead,
this was a world of fluid possibilities.” If so, why did such fluidity come to a halt, what boundary did Solomon violate that kept this artwork from public display? He “attracted sustained criticism of ‘unwholesomeness’ or ‘effeminacy,’” we are finally told. For what? This image?

Was Solomon drawn to lesbian representation as a coded expression of a male–male equivalent that also would have overturned gendered distinctions? What made this image intolerable, incapable of public display? Is it really as “frank” as all that? The passionate kiss seems to be delivered into the air; lips do not meet lips. Possibly Erinna is restraining Sappho, not swooning. Such an image would still be sapphic, indeed, bittersweet, but not in being fervent and graphic, rather, in its non-consummation.

Is it a fact that the image was not displayed? According to the catalogue Colin Cruise edited for the Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery show, “Love Revealed: Simeon Solomon and the Pre-Raphaelites” (October 1, 2005–January 15, 2006), Solomon’s
image was displayed in the Goupil Gallery in 1896, a number of years after it was painted, but still in Solomon’s lifetime.¹

Solomon depicted Sappho a number of times. The Birmingham catalogue includes a drawing of her face identical to her face in the watercolor; she is represented alone. That may account for the possibility that in the watercolor, too, the two women are not in a fervid relationship. Another image by Solomon of Sappho and Erinna in the Birmingham show depicts Erinna with a man, Sappho apparently being rejected, an image that might have been inspired by Fragment 31. Rejection is part of the experience of sapphic love, indeed, constitutive of it. Of these images of Sappho, Cruise avers, “She appears to represent all same-sex desire and Solomon’s own sexual feelings” (112). What is “and” doing in this sentence—affirming Solomon’s desire as a kind of same-sex desire or differentiating it? The possibility that Solomon wants to represent all desire as sapphic in his watercolor may be suggested by the diminutive statue of Aphrodite on the right side of the image; the figure seems to be countenancing the relation between Sappho and Erinna. This statue may be inspired by the first fragment, addressed to Aphrodite. In it the voice of the goddess of love—any love—becomes indistinguishable from the voice invoking her and making known a desire that has, finally, a woman as its object, something not clear until almost the end of the poem (the boundary between voices remains indeterminate).

Solomon was sometimes lambasted by art critics for unmanliness; he was also highly praised. Walter Pater, for example, in an essay on Dionysius, seeking to complicate the notion that the god simply stands for inebriate excess, singles out an image of Bacchus by Solomon to advance his argument: “[I]n a Bacchus by a young Hebrew painter, in the exhibition of the Royal Academy of 1868, there was a complete and very fascinating

¹ The catalogue is included in Colin Cruise, Love Revealed: Simeon Solomon and the Pre-Raphaelites (London: Merrell, 2005). See 134 for information on the commission and the history of the exhibition of the image. However, in an essay in that volume, Elizabeth Prettejohn, “Solomon’s Classicism,” 39–45, claims that the image was not displayed (43).
realisation of such a motive; the god of the bitterness of wine, ‘of things too sweet’; the sea-water of the Lesbian grape become somewhat brackish in the cup.”

Dionysius is a “dual god” for Pater, “almost identical with Demeter.” Rather than decoding one figure as another, Pater insists on the paradox of sapphic bittersweet erotics, self-shattering loss coupled with maternal solicitude. He sees this sapphism realized in the figure of Bacchus.

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Among our contemporaries, no one has been more vocal than Neil Bartlett in his appreciation of Simeon Solomon. There are three versions of theatrical pieces entitled _A Vision of Love Revealed in Sleep_ — Bartlett takes his title from an 1871 prose poem by Solomon himself. Cruise notes that this poem’s sources include the _Song of Songs_, Dante, the _Roman de la Rose_, and the _Hypnerotomachia Poliphili_; if, as he says, “the book is now regarded as an important early defense of male–male desire” (158), it achieves that aim through a literary tradition that doesn’t so readily answer to that agenda. (What “codes” what?) The 1987 version of Bartlett’s piece appears in _Solo Voices_. Bartlett reprised it for a single performance for the Tate show on 7 July 2017. It was originally performed by Bartlett in the nude, “shaved and powdered — a marble statue, an artist’s model, a painting”; his solo voice is embodied but in a form that seems to make it a statue, a work of visual art. In his note accompanying the text, Bartlett describes the piece as employing “various kinds of garrulous, high or low, outraged or outrageous, theatrical effeminacy — both male and female.” This first version of the piece expresses, as Bartlett claims, his own homosexuality, but it is not something simply manifest in his naked body (powdered and shaved, it is not simply his body on view). And although it is a solo performance, it was scarcely univocal; as

he says, the voices we hear are not exactly his own; rather, he is taking “dictation . . . impelled by the sound of imagined voices.” Music accompanies the voice (these voices), Schoenberg and Kate Bush at first, while, towards the close, he describes the monologist (himself?) “morphing into a drunken impersonation of early Tina Turner,” before ending with a medley of songs famously sung by the early twentieth-century vaudevil- lian Marie Lloyd, including among them “The Boy I love is up in the gallery.” At the end of this version of the piece (this occurs in the later versions as well), an imagined letter from Simeon Solomon is delivered and read aloud. When it is displayed, it is shown to be a piece of blank paper. The text is not so much a code to be deciphered as it is a void filled with potential.

In the final version of Bartlett’s stage piece, first performed in 1989 and revived a year later, the solo performer, called Neil, was joined by Three Queens, originally Bette Bourne, Regina Fong, and Ivan. The original monologue, a solo voice doing voices, was extended to these other voices, not that each of these drag queens spoke in a singular voice, nor is one identical to the other; each has its (his / her) own production style. In the preface to this later version, Bartlett remarks that “it is always better to tell your own story by telling someone else’s.” Solomon provides text and subject for the actors and the author (whatever that category means in these circumstances); they are all themselves always in character (whatever that means). Indeed, the text inspiring these texts — Simeon Solomon’s A Vision of Love Revealed in Sleep — is haunted, and not only by its precursor texts. It involves an I’s encounter with another who is his Soul, and who serves as his guide in a search that ends in an annihilating union: “made one with the Heart of Love, its inmost, secret flame: my spirit was wholly swallowed up, and I knew no more.” Once again, Sappho is burning. Solomon

5 I cite Solomon’s text from Simon Reynolds, The Vision of Simeon
represents this as the union of Bride and Bridegroom, turning the trope of the *Song of Solomon* in an allegorical direction not quite congruent with how the Church handled that text to make its sexuality acceptable, but not entirely dissimilar either.

In a review of the 2005–2006 Birmingham show that he wrote for *The Guardian*—his most recent response to Simeon Solomon—Bartlett pauses over two images. “Love in Autumn” conjures the vision Solomon wrote; Bartlett sees it as the visual equivalent to Lord Alfred Douglas’s dream vision that concludes “I am the love that dare not speak its name.” The figure of Love in Solomon’s image is a pink-winged nude whose genitals are covered by the windswept drapery of a Botticelli nymph. The face and figure resembles that of Eric, Count Stenbock, as Solomon described him: “[H]is appearance was that of a tall, graceful intellectual looking girl and although not exactly good-looking, his eye and expression are very beautiful.” Another early image that fascinates Bartlett shows a Jewish wedding ceremony: bride and groom are framed by two male figures, a “pouting” boy regarded with “tender seriousness” by a would-be suitor. This juxtaposition of joined and separated, cross-gender and same-gender couples anticipates the end of Solomon’s prose poem whose bridal figuration combines what this wedding image separates and juxtaposes. The effect is something that John Addington Symonds noted of Solomon’s painted figures more generally: “[T]hey have the sorrow of those who have no cause for sorrow except that they are as they are in a world not made after their pattern…These faces are without sex…” (quoted in Reynolds, 25). Symonds might have come to the same conclusion from Solomon’s prose poem; its vision of

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7 For the text of “Two Loves,” I quote from Brian Reade’s anthology *Sexual Heretics: Male Homosexuality in English Literature from 1850 to 1900* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1970), 362; this is also the source for my quotations of Solomon’s 1886 letter describing Eric, Count Stenbock, 37.
“Love imprisoned in an alien land of oblivion” (66) is akin to “a world not made after their pattern” he invokes.

Bartlett ends his Guardian piece with the images Solomon made at the end of his life. This also is the trajectory followed in his theatrical work. Solomon’s ruin as an artist followed his arrest—he was caught having sex in a public lavatory. His supporters (Swinburne, Burne-Jones) fled; he was alienated from his family. He wound up living in the poorhouse, drawing in chalk on sidewalks. In “Fallen Angel,” Bartlett asks: “[W]as the arrest in fact Solomon’s making rather than his undoing?” He answers that question in the final version of his theatrical spectacle when he insists “And he never never never never apologized for what he had done.” Stripped of all social support (such as it had been), his last works abandon the extravagance of his earlier art: “All that is left of his earlier repertoire of androgynous posturing is a handful of simple dream-like images,” often of “pairs of faces” side by side, or of a single face drawn to itself. Solomon “found his true subject—the introspective mind,” Bartlett avers. This is the place that leads to thinking otherwise. “By the end, the faces are not just androgynous, they are sexless, impersonal, living in a lonely realm of shame and hunger, of desire and dreams.” Pater had commended the melancholy of Bacchus because Solomon’s figure incorporated a bitter sweetness whose impersonality had everything to do with the occupation of an extra-personal identity. That is why in A Vision of Love Revealed in Sleep the Soul is outside the Self, its other, its image, its companion. That is why, too, this division of the Same refuses the category of gender.

In Bartlett’s original theater piece, androgyny is homosexuality. In the final version, this is enacted, embodied by the Queens who join Neil to voice Solomon’s vision. That play in fact begins by insisting that a vision is precisely what is not seen (that’s what makes it a vision). “Vision: Something which is apparently seen otherwise than by ordinary sight”—as in a dream. Indeed, we say of someone dreamy, it’s a vision (Gay Plays 87). Solomon’s final drawings, Bartlett avers, are “perhaps the most truly beautiful work of his strange and troubled life. Looking at these obsessively imagined faces 100 years later, it is hard not to think that their hungers remain unappeased, their dreams
still unrealised.” Sapphic trajectories. “I felt just like one who sets out on a journey but who doesn’t know where the journey is supposed to end,” Solomon’s dreamer avers in Bartlett’s first version of Love Revealed. If these texts and images are written in a code, it cannot yet be translated.