Sappho: Fragments
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Carol

Carol is the title given to British editions of Patricia Highsmith’s The Price of Salt (1952) and to the 2015 film based on Highsmith’s novel, directed by Todd Haynes, with a screenplay by Phyllis Nagy.¹ I speculated about the conjunction of Highsmith and Haynes in my book about melodrama.² There, I had located Haynes in a genealogy that includes Douglas Sirk and Rainer Werner Fassbinder; Highsmith I treated beside Hitchcock (Strangers on a Train being the starting point), and with Cather. These two groupings correspond to two ways of thinking about melodrama — as a plot situation of impossible human relations (impasses of race, class, gender, and sexuality); as the media crossing of word and music that defines melodrama etymologically and formally. In a coda, I proposed a number of alternate routes between and across these two groupings and these authors and filmmakers. At that time, I only could speculate about the meeting of Haynes and Highsmith that was forthcoming in Carol, scheduled to open just as I was sending the copyedited manuscript back to the publisher (I first saw Carol on Christmas Day, 2015). Based on Cate Blanchett’s previous work with Haynes in I’m Not There (2007), where she played the only version of Bob Dylan that is a recognizable simulacrum despite the fact that she does not share his gender, I expected Haynes’s foray into Highsmith’s lesbian novel would further the

¹ I parenthetically cite the novel from the 1990 Norton edition that includes Highsmith’s 1989 afterword.
queer path he has taken in what he referred to as “my women’s films” in his introduction to the screenplays he wrote for Far From Heaven, Safe, and Superstar.3

The Price of Salt, although generically related to lesbian pulp fiction, is neither a coming out story nor a tragic tale of thwarted love. Its final paragraph holds out the possibility of its protagonists being together: Carol has just ended her marriage; Therese, at the beginning of a career as a set designer, also is through with her boyfriend and sometimes bedmate Richard. Therese words the possibility as a stunning fantasy: “It would be Carol, in a thousand cities, a thousand houses, in foreign lands where they would go together, in heaven and in hell” (257). Their future extends into an eternity of Carol, multiplying Carol into the name of all future lovers.

The film offers versions of the novel’s final scene twice, at its opening and again at its close. The first time, the camera, at a distance, follows the back of a young man as he enters the bar of a posh hotel and exchanges words with the bartender. As he looks around the room, he sees the back of a young woman whom he recognizes; he approaches her (it is Therese; we see the face of the blond she is sitting with, Carol; he does not know her), interrupting their conversation; he and Therese leave together, heading to a party. In the novel, Therese leaves Carol, too, alone, and with a great deal of ambivalence; Carol has just asked her to move in with her, as she does at the end of the film; she has refused, but also seems to want Carol to realize that no isn’t her final answer—“Hadn’t Carol heard the indecision in her voice?” (250). In the film, the decision made is accepted by Carol (“That’s that,” she says in both scripts); its finality is enforced by the young man’s intrusion on the scene. He is a stand-in for demands of the world that would keep women from being with each other. In the novel, Therese heads to a party that ushers her into the possibility of a successful career (she will be designing sets for a major play; the well-known actress who will star in it meets her and wants to bed her); in the film, she goes to a party where she knows no one except some people from her

3 Todd Haynes, Far From Heaven; Safe; and Superstar, the Karen Carpenter Story: Three Screenplays (New York: Grove, 2003), viii.
past, one of whom helped her land a job at *The New York Times* (she is the only woman in her department); her old boyfriend is there, dancing close to some woman; Therese is approached by a woman who knows her old friends; she flees to the bathroom.

The device of opening and closing the film with versions of the same scene derives from *Brief Encounter* (David Lean, 1945), itself based on a play by Noel Coward. Its romantic story of an affair that ends in the adulterous wife's return to her marriage may be a coded gay story; it raises the expectation for an unhappy ending that would signal the impossibility of a future for Therese and Carol. In the novel, Therese hurries from the party back to Carol, out to dinner; when Carol sees her, a smile crosses her face; she raises her arm in a gesture, “a quick, eager greeting Therese had never seen before.” The gesture embodies what Therese feels; that she is “a different person” now, where “she” is ambiguously both herself and Carol; they are starting anew: “It was like meeting Carol all over again, but it was still Carol” (257). At the end of the film, the camera follows Therese as she approaches the table where Carol is holding forth to two men and a woman (presumably people from her married life that Therese does not know). The camera holds Therese’s face still as she looks, then tracks back from her as she approaches. A smile slowly appears on Carol’s face. The music by Carter Burwell that has underscored every moment of their erotic attraction stops abruptly; the screen goes black—a cut that is unlike others in the film. It signals The End. Are there thousands and thousands of possibilities ahead?

* * *

*The Price of Salt* is an enigmatic title. Salt is cheap, yet without it food lacks savor; it might keep a person alive, but that’s all, like the milk Carol gives Therese the first night she stays over at her home: “The milk seemed to taste of bone and blood, of warm flesh, or hair, saltless as chalk yet alive as a growing embryo” (54). Without salt there may be the life a mother gives a child, biological life. Therese wants more. She does not want to be an object, the way she is in her boyfriend Richard’s hands; described as “extremely soft, like a girl’s, and a little moist,”
they also are “inarticulate,” touching her in the same way “they picked up a salt shaker” (23). After Therese has lost Carol, forever, she supposes, she wonders, “[H]ow would the world come back to life? How would its salt come back?” (233). The thought arises hearing some unidentified tune that she associates with Carol (it could be “Easy Living”): “The music lived, but the world was dead.” Salt appears in the text a few pages later. Therese is with Dannie, a physicist (in the film he is a journalist who got her entree to the Times). With him she feels “something suspenseful, that she enjoyed. A little salt, she thought” (240). She recalls an earlier moment when he had put his hands on her shoulders: “The memory was a pleasant one”; actually, when it happened “she was uneasy at his touch” (106). The gesture of hand-on-shoulder is an erotic touch in the novel and in the film, as when Carol stands behind Therese at the piano picking out the notes to “Easy Living,” and, again, just before they have sex in the motel room in Waterloo; in the novel, the first time Carol holds her that way she kisses her (152); the next time is the novel’s Waterloo sex scene.

When Therese sees Carol in the novel for the first time after the divorce, she gives her a present — a candlestick. “It looks like you,” Carol says to Therese — of the candlestick. “I thought it looked like you,” she answers back (247). Therese looks at Carol's hand handling the gift, “the thumb and the tip of the middle finger resting on the thin rim of the candlestick, as she had seen Carol’s fingers on the saucers of coffee cups in Colorado, in Chicago, and places forgotten” (247). “A little salt, she thought. She looked at Dannie’s hand on the table, at the strong muscle that bulged below the thumb” (240). When he had touched and kissed her before he had talked about “a kind of right economy of living and of using and using up” (106). These similarities, identities and identifications, these questions about kinds of relations, are central to the novel.

*    *    *

Joan Schenkar suggests biblical allusions may explain Highsmith’s title, thinking it most likely recalls André Gide’s Counterfeiters, “his novel about the transgressive love of adolescents,” as
Schenkar summarizes the plot, going on to quote from Dorothy Bussy’s translation: “If the salt have lost its savor wherewith shall it be salted? That is the tragedy with which I am concerned.”

Gide is probably quoting Matthew 5:13 from the Sermon on the Mount, or perhaps its echo in Luke 14:34. Either way, salt seems to refer to the belief required of would-be disciples. In Mark 9:50 the sentence appears to refer to a way to live that necessitates self-sacrifice. Highsmith’s novel glances both ways, to a world that exists only with Carol and to possibilities that might include Dannie. “I don’t know what to do / two states of mind in me” (Sappho, Fragment 51). Before she decides to go back to Carol, the novel has Therese’s mind “caught at the intersection” of Dannie, Carol, and the actress (256).

Schenkar mentions but does not linger over the most memorable use of salt in the bible, the pillar that Lot’s wife becomes when she looks back at the destroyed city of Sodom; her twofold gesture, of departure and retrospective turning back, may be pertinent to the novel, perhaps to the film’s structure as well. The biblical allusions come together in St. Augustine’s City of God (16:30): “Lot’s wife stood fixed in the spot where she looked back, and by being turned to salt supplied a bit of seasoning for believers, whereby they may be salted with wisdom to beware of following her example.”

In 1948, Gore Vidal’s novel about gay male desire, The City and the Pillar, appeared; its title unmistakably points to Sodom. If Highsmith’s title was fetched from Gide or from Vidal, it might signal a connection between her story of lesbian love and the archetypal site for condemnations of male–male sex—and not just in a Judeo-Christian context. “In Islamic legal formulations the crime of sodomy is known as liwāt and takes its name from Lot.”

Lot’s wife, the sole member of Lot’s family punished for the sins of the city, was not involved in his transgression of

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4 Joan Schenkar, The Talented Miss Highsmith: The Secret Life and Serious Art of Patricia Highsmith (New York: St. Martin’s, 2009), 272.
the laws of hospitality and the untoward sexuality it incited. She becomes the marker of the remembrance of what must be forgotten. She pays the price of salt. Her role raises questions about the relationship of female–female to male–male sexuality also found in the novel.

* * *

A sidenote on Gide’s translator, Dorothy Bussy. She was born Dorothy Strachey, sister to Lytton Strachey, Virginia Woolf’s best friend and almost husband; a bugger, she called him. Dorothy wrote one novel published under the authorial name of its title, *Olivia* (1949). It is about a girl’s love for her French boarding school teacher, Mlle Julie. The novel is dedicated “To the beloved memory of V.W.” Dorothy Strachey loved women; she married the French painter Simon Bussy; they had a daughter who became a painter; she loved Gide and translated him into English.

* * *

In an interview with Nick Davis that appeared in *Film Comment,* Todd Haynes comments on how unimaginable and therefore how possible lesbian sex was in the 1950s; two women living together would not raise the suspicions that unmarried male–female roommates would do (male couples, too, presumably). A visual equivalent for this un/imaginable possibility might be the opening shot of the film that appears beneath its titles, abstract filigree that turns out to be the cover in the pavement below which arises the subway noise first heard. The ordinary and extraordinary coincide, the hidden and the visible, the secret and the truth. How does the sex that is not one — lesbian difference — sit beside the Lacanian dictum that there is no sexual relationship?

* * *

In the novel Carol offers theories about sexual relations. In the long letter she sends Therese after she is compelled to break off their affair, and which is quoted in the fragments Therese reads, a citation that begins in mid-sentence seems to suggest a continuum from their kisses to heterosexual sex, but not without the difference gender makes: “But between the pleasure of a kiss and what a man and woman do in bed seems to me only a gradation…. I wonder do these men grade their pleasure in terms of whether their actions produce a child or not, and do they consider them more pleasant if they do” (229). Gradation, a continuum, becomes grading, scoring a point for reproductive culture. Much earlier in the novel, Carol opines that “people often try to find through sex things that are much easier to find in other ways” (68). By the time her desires are being debated by the lawyers, the value of sexual pleasure cannot be viewed as a substitute for something else. “But the most important point I did not mention and was not thought of by anyone — that the rapport between two men or two women can be absolute and perfect, as it never can be between men and women” (229). Not wanting to compare apples and oranges, she nonetheless does. “The resolution of those contradictory facts was nowhere but in Carol herself, unresolved” (188); so Therese thinks about Carol’s reckless behavior, her insisting on continuing their road trip together when they are being tailed by a detective conveying information back to the lawyers. Carol is of two minds. Is Highsmith?

Why does Therese obliquely reveal her feelings about Carol by asking Richard whether he has ever been in love with a boy, qualifying her question by insisting she is not talking about people “like that” but about two people who find themselves in love? The film has an identical scene. Women “like that” are spotted in the film (in the record store where Therese buys Carol her Christmas present, Billie Holliday singing “Easy Living”), and in the novel (Therese thinks of two women she saw in a bar, one with “hair cut like a boy’s” [128], a page before she and Carol have sex; she worries that Carol will find her desires disgusting [165]). The novel has a large investment in thinking of Carol as sui generis, and in having Carol think the same thing about Therese; she embraces her as “my little orphan”
(163) although her mother, who abandoned Therese to a Catholic orphanage, is still alive. “What a strange girl you are,” Carol says to Therese when they first have lunch, after pondering her strange name — Belivet (believe it; does Highsmith have Ripley in mind?), “[f]lung out of space” (40). She repeats her words when they have sex the first time (the film’s script reiterates both exchanges), “My angel… [f]lung out of space” (168).

The sapphic fantasy of the novel is presented in an extraterrestrial world made by the couple; it is explored on their road trip when it leads them to places they hadn’t expected to go, where they might spend the night “without pyjamas or toothbrushes, without past or future, and the night became another of those islands in time, suspended somewhere in the heart or in the memory, intact and absolute” (190). It is then that pleasure is absolute, happiness so complete that “it was more often painful than pleasant” (191); “it seemed they flew along in a space, a little closer to heaven than to earth…a certain immeasurable territory of the mind” (191). In the film that other world most often takes place inside a car.

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It is Christmas Day. Therese is in Richard’s room. It has a green carpet, just like the room in Carol’s house where they sit most often. Carol’s car is green, its upholstery is green, green inside and out. Richard gives Therese a skirt trimmed in green and gold. Carol’s scarf is green and gold. “Carol was like a secret spreading through her, spreading through this house too, like a light invisible to everyone but her” (78). Richard kisses her: “‘Terry, you’re an angel,’ Richard’s deep voice said, and she thought of Carol saying the same thing” (79); she thinks of something Carol will say almost a hundred pages later when they make love. Are lesbians part of the world or apart from it? Outside it or a secret truth? “And she did not have to ask if this was right, no one had to tell her, because this could not have been more right or perfect” (168).

*   *   *
In the afterword she wrote in 1989 when *The Price of Salt* first appeared under her own name (it had been published under the name of Claire Morgan), Highsmith offers an account of the germ of her story, a concentrated fantasy, elements of which appear dispersed in the novel. Like Therese, she had taken a part-time Christmas job as a salesgirl in a department store: “One morning, into this chaos of noise and commerce, there walked a blondish woman in a fur coat.” That the woman was “blondish” was one reason she drew Highsmith’s attention: “Perhaps I noticed her because she was alone or because a mink coat was a rarity, and because she was blondish and seemed to give off light” (259–60). First described as walking, she is immediately redescribed as having “drifted” into view, becoming disembodied light; distracted, her gaze is hard to reckon, “a look of uncertainty.” What is she looking for? What is Highsmith seeing? A vision, the cause of vision: the empirical becomes something else. Is she looking for a doll or for a substitute for it? (The opening encounters with Therese in the novel will play out these possibilities.) The detail that she was, or, rather, that Highsmith recalls her “slapping a pair of gloves,” whatever else it suggests, gives off the erotic charge of a dominatrix. In the novel it is summed up in sentences like this: “Carol gave her the derogatory smile that Therese loved” (163). This woman comes from somewhere else—class marks her, but also the fact that she is alone and looks lost, looks as if she is looking for something other than a doll. With her came the story Highsmith invented “as if from nowhere” (260), writing it as soon as she recovered from the flu symptoms that attended her encounter: “I felt odd and swimmy in the head, near to fainting, yet at the same time uplifted, as if I had seen a vision”; “fire is racing under the skin / and in eyes no sight and drumming / fills the ears” (Fragment 31). Cate Blanchett embodies this vision. Love as disease, eros the bittersweet.

This vision posed a problem to Highsmith as a writer: “If I were to write a novel about a lesbian relationship, would I then be labelled a lesbian-book writer?” (261). Lesbians—if that is what Carol and Therese are—rarely do appear in subsequent Highsmith novels; she is best known as the inventor of Tom Ripley, the protagonist in five novels stretching over her career;
in *Plotting and Writing Suspense Fiction*, Highsmith claims that Tom wrote *The Talented Mr. Ripley*: “No book was easier for me to write, and I often had the feeling Ripley was writing it and I was merely typing” (76). Claire Morgan was not her only pseudonym. Sometimes she signed herself “Tom.” Did Highsmith ever stop being a lesbian writer? Did Sappho, when she wrote, “I am broken with longing for a boy by slender Aphrodite” (Fragment 102)?

*    *    *

Richard Brody, writing in *The New Yorker*, reports the experience of seeing *Carol* twice, first from the back of the large auditorium when it premiered at the New York Film Festival, then soon after closeup in a smaller venue. Initially he was taken by images that “didn’t so much arouse emotions as signify them.” The second time he was taken by the grain of the film, by the film’s favored shots that bring it out — the two women behind glass, spattered with rain or snow, glass that reflects light or that reflects themselves back. This camera work is transferred in the film to Therese; she is a budding photojournalist. Haynes and his cinematographer Edward Lachman have claimed inspiration from women photographers of the time of Highsmith’s novel, “Ruth Orkin, Ester Bubley, Helen Levitt and Vivian Maier,” Lachman lists in a piece in *Indiewire*. “We also looked at Saul Leiter,” his “layered compositions that are obscured by abstractions,” he continues. These visual effects correspond perhaps to the fantasmatic origin of her novel that Highsmith reports — indeed, of all of her novels, in which she transports herself through characters whose identifications lead them into boundary-crossing perilous territory. The nowhere out of which


her fictions come is expressed when Therese thinks over and again that what she wants by wanting Carol is to die. Carol is the ordinary name for an extraordinary fantasy; Highsmith played it out in her erotic life, as Schenkar details it: each year another novel; each year, more or less, another lover; each time, she was idolized; each time, the affair lasted as long as it took to write a book. A thousand cities, a thousand houses, is a way to name this pattern.

With Carol, Therese has a nagging sense of déja vu. Sister Alicia, the nun she adored, and who gave her a pair of green gloves, “Sister Alicia in a thousand places, her small blue eyes always finding her out among the other girls, seeing her differently” (5), is an early mentioned precursor of Carol. Before Carol appears, another older woman, Therese’s broken-down fellow worker, takes her home, dresses her up like a queen in a fairy tale, and puts her to bed. Therese feels terrified, as if “Mrs Robichek was the hunchbacked keeper of the dungeon” (13). When Carol brings her that warm drink of maternal milk, she swallows it “as people in fairy tales drink the potion that will transform, or the unsuspecting warrior the cup that will kill” (54). Therese keeps passing out from desire; passing out not to desire, becoming again the child of the mother who abandoned her. After Carol also has abandoned her she sees a portrait of a woman identical to one that had hung in her school; its head is “arrogant,” its look is “mocking.” “It was Carol” (232). Therese tells Carol about the picture that has haunted her. “Strange,’ Carol said quietly. ‘And horrifying.’ ‘It was.’ Therese knew Carol understood” (247). Like a magical scene of psychoanalysis, once told, the image dissipates. Carol is not the mother who betrayed her. Rather, she is like the atoms Dannie describes to Therese, fated to swerve and meet: “I think there’s a definite reason for every friendship just as there’s a reason why certain atoms unite and others don’t…. I think friendships are the result of certain needs that can be completely hidden from both people, sometimes hidden forever” (104). For Dannie, these connections point to the fact that “everything’s alive” (105); sometimes, he reports, he has had that feeling on horseback, as if “we were a whole tree simply being stirred by the wind in its branches” (106). When he says this, Therese thinks of Sister Alicia and the
gloves she gave her and never used, “neither worn nor thrown away” (106).

In the film, figures arise from the grain. Brody treats this conjunction as a warrant for liberal identification: Carol and Therese are two ordinary people falling into a love unjustly condemned. “Their is a love that should be ordinary,” is the message Brody reads in the grain of the film. Perhaps the grain — or the atomic particles — means something else, more like what Leo Bersani makes out of what physicist Lawrence Krauss writes, that “we are all, literally, star children, and our bodies made of stardust.” Krauss calls this literality “one of the most poetic facts I know.”10 We are all made of the same stuff. Therese and Carol are made of words and images.

*    *    *

As Haynes told Davis in Film Comment, he worked with Nagy to try to restore to her script the intensity that Highsmith achieved from telling the story entirely from Therese’s point of view. Nonetheless, the film gives Carol a life separate from what Therese experiences and sees; Therese with her camera stands in for Haynes. The portfolio she finally assembles are stills from the film. Although Carol has separated from her husband Harge Aird (who erred?) and plans to divorce, as Carol tells Therese over their first lunch together, he still has a key to the house, still can get Carol to go to a party with him. She is shown trapped in their relation, locked into their marriage. Even more, she is tied to their daughter Rindy (in the novel the child is only a voice on the phone or a picture on a mantel; in the film, Carol shows Therese Rindy’s picture when she buys her Christmas present; when Therese arrives at Carol’s house, Rindy runs out; the Christmas tree that she and Carol buy and trim in the novel instead is trimmed with Rindy while Therese sulks in the kitchen). Carol is a devoted mother; to hold on to her daughter, she is willing to undergo psychiatric treatment and, even more unbearable, since we are shown it, to have dinner with Harge’s

10 Quoted in Leo Bersani, Thoughts and Things (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015), 77.
parents (Eisenhower on the tv, adding to the chill). We see Carol with her lawyer — it is because Harge is introducing a morality clause that the divorce proceedings have been delayed; that is why Carol takes her road trip with Therese; once things get ugly, she rushes back (in the novel the trip — and the sex — goes on for weeks). Carol gives up right away; she writes to Therese ending their relationship. Finally, she does give up Rindy for her own good. “We’re not ugly people,” she tells Harge; the film has presented him as an overbearing drunk with a violent temper who only misses hitting Carol because he can’t stand up. Carol remains in the film in the social position in which she is first depicted. Therese winds up looking like her when they have tea at the Ritz. The film presents their love as a seduction in style.

The life Nagy gives Carol no doubt reflects social realities, and not just from the 1950s; the novel minimizes what the film maximizes. Carol succinctly reports her dealings with the lawyers: “I refused to make a lot of promises…. I refused to live by a list of silly promises…I didn’t promise very much in court, I refused there, too” (248). As Carol announces that she is almost ready to give up Rindy, Therese thinks it’s time to get rid of Sister Alicia’s gloves. The realism of the film (including a brief for lesbians as good mothers) shortcuts the poetic/literalism that the film achieves in its inspired camera work. As the novel opens, Therese is reading the department store workers’ manual, which seems to her like an invitation to a life in prison while she eats the cafeteria food, gray meat swimming in brown gravy. She tries to think of something else: “The great square window across the room looked like a painting by—who was it? Mondrian…. What kind of a set would one make for a play that took place in a department store?” (4). Therese might be looking through Saul Leiter’s lens or out Ruth Orkin’s window. That other world is where the novel is set in Highsmith’s prose, and in Haynes’s extraordinary framing and cutting.