After-Party: Sappho Meets Freud

by L.O. Aranye Fradenburg Joy

Where does likeness stop? What does it delimit?
— Goldberg, 63

After-parties happen when people don’t want to go home (yet), have no place to go, feel the drive, can’t bear to give each other up, want more intimacy, want more fluidity, want to meet new people. Most people who have read Sappho wish there were more Sappho. Jonathan Goldberg’s book gives us more Sappho, and gives Sappho more afterlife, as have the writers and artists who appear in his own fragmentary, dis/seminal, hospitable responses to her writing and legend and multifarious reappearances. Goldberg’s book is an act of generosity in more ways than one, formally, historically, thematically. It begins by declaring its affinity with Page duBois’s stance that “Sappho baffles the categorical when it comes to sex and gender and sexuality” and that we “might reconsider the possibilities inherent in looking backwards differently…to the model of an ancient world in which the structures of heterosexual norms…had not yet been

* This essay is dedicated to the ever-festive, eternally-begetting Eileen A. Fradenburg Joy, and to Julie Carlson and Felice Blake, whose practices of and thinking about friendship are an unending source of delight and inspiration.
instituted in the name of the one god” (19). One of Goldberg’s chief findings, e.g. in Willa Cather and Sarah Orne Jewett, in Michelle Cliff and Audre Lorde, in Patricia Highsmith’s *The Price of Salt* and Todd Haynes’s *Carol*, is Sapphist friendship, which may or may not be sexual, but is always alive to the embodied and embedded and hence erotic and loving and vulnerable nature of those who engage in it and share together their love of nectar and coming undone.1 “I love the sensual,” writes Sappho; “[f]or me this / and love for the sun / has a share in brilliance and beauty” (Fragment 9).2

Goldberg’s Sappho participates in this aesthetic; it is beautiful, tactful, elliptical, redolent. And if it begins with duBois as Muse and interlocutor, it begins even earlier with Eve Sedgwick’s writing, and “turns out,” “in the end,” to be also a love letter to Sedgwick and her speculations on identity and identification—“the pages above have been my attempt, as has been the case with much of my writing since I first met and read Eve in the early- to mid-80s, of trying to find words for hers” (132). Goldberg’s Sappho is loving to many other women, and men, of many combinations and permutations (one of my favorite fragments, “Sappho to Philaenis,” is on John Donne’s “lesbianism”). Traces, hauntings, untranslatability, all the accoutrements of deconstruction familiar to readers of Goldberg’s *oeuvre* act here as practices of finding, invitation, welcome, responsiveness. “The female–female desire” that Goldberg finds “goes unnamed

1 In his Fragment 5, “Histoire de Sappho,” Goldberg figures “Anne Carson’s analysis of sapphic love as a striving for a relationality that breaks through conventional limitations”; with / through his friends and colleagues, Joan de Jean and Karen Newman, he formulates Scudéry’s representation of Sappho in this way: “Sapho, who declares she wants friends, not lovers, or wants a lover that is also a friend, wants ‘to love innocently,’” that is, unconstrained by institutional forms and rituals (45). “Friend” is Willa Cather’s word in Goldberg’s Fragment 6, “Chance Encounters.”

2 Poems of Sappho, translated by Julia Dubnoff (University of Houston), modified November 4, 2001, [https://www.uh.edu/~cldue/texts/sappho.html](https://www.uh.edu/~cldue/texts/sappho.html). Fragment numbers are given in parentheses in the body of the text and refer to Dubnoff’s translations unless otherwise indicated.
in Carson’s *Eros the Bittersweet* has a name that is not one: Sappho, sapphism. It exceeds the usual binarism of gender since this female–female eros is not a matter of the same” (25). Goldberg’s Fragment 3 takes up Pater’s refusal, in an essay on Dionysius, to *decode* “one figure as another,” insisting instead “on the paradox of sapphic bittersweet erotics, self-shattering loss coupled with maternal solicitude. He sees this sapphism realized in the figure of Bacchus” (30). Goldberg’s “After-Party” returns and turns again to this coupling. “You know how we cared for you,” says Sappho to her heartbroken friend — in other translations, “how we courted you,” a semantic range this “After-Party” deeply appreciates) (Fragment 19); this is Dido’s care also, as she burns for Aeneas, before he abandons her for epic. Of course, self-shattering loss coupled with maternal solicitude is only a paradox when looked at from certain points of view; we might think of Kristeva’s maternal *jouissance,* of Bracha Ettinger’s “matrixial borderspace.” Both, it will be recalled, link the *jouissance* of pregnancy to split subjectivity or, more broadly with Ettinger, the experience of multiple partial self- and object-experiences capable of infinite reversal. We will return to this intimacy between care, hospitality, and arousal, on which every good party depends.

I wanted this book, because times are grim, and it has helped me feel better. Goldberg’s Sappho is the result of a long series of invitations and rekindlings and tensions both put to rest and (re-)quickened, of the kinds of changing minds and relationships, care(s) and curiosities that also brought punctum books into being and that brought me and Sappho to punctum.


Aficionados will know that the “punctum” in “punctum books” is the Barthesian punctum, an act/effect of transvaluation I have long admired in Goldberg’s writing and in Sappho’s. (The trope of “reversal,” discussed below, can be used to similar effect, since it points to what lies between and outside the positions thus reversed.) I think it is to be felt in Sapphic satire, though this is perhaps too obvious an example (but one that entertains me). When Sappho is satirizing her stupid brothers, she reverses the charges on epic:

If [the gods]…have a whim, they make some henchmen
fix it up, like those idiots in the Iliad.
A puff of smoke, a little fog, away goes the hero.

In another mood, it’s a particular love that’s worth far more than the massive stuff of epic: “[s]ome say an army of horsemen,/some of footsoldiers,/some of ships,/is the fairest thing on the black earth,/but I say it is what one loves” (Fragment 16). “I say.” One loves reading and writing and saying for their ability to link and hence transform minds and bodies and the strange non/human lives of signifiers. “[Y]ou must find your own quiet centre of life and write from that to the world that holds offices, and all society…in short, you must write to the human heart, the great consciousness that all humanity goes to make up” (71). Love creates beauty, as Freud well knew; love spreads beauty over the body of “what one loves,” in garlands,

7 Goldberg, in this volume: “I cite the passage as Edith Lewis does in Willa Cather Living; Lewis goes on to say, ‘I am sure Willa Cather never forgot this letter…I think it became a permanent inhabitant of her thoughts’” (71).
leather, soft bedding, writing, feces. “You know how we cared for you…

For by my side you put on many wreaths of roses and garlands of flowers around your soft neck.

And with precious and royal perfume you anointed yourself. (Fragment 19)

The power of jouissance to undo the “I” that “says” is well known, thanks to Sappho, and the power of her lyric voice lies precisely in its formal and forceful registration of transformation, wherein “I say” enters me (unforgettably) and makes me someone else, someone more sure, but less of a “one,” different from what I was before, like the oak taken by the mountain winds. Loving Sappho’s words loosens my limbs, “rattles” me, punctuates me. “My” identification, attachment, enchantment, is the paradoxical result of being struck, impressed, inhabited. Reading Goldberg, I recover the reach of enjoyment, its meaning for politics and sociality, its value, so depressed in us culture today, including the academy. I am given Sapphic friendship, in the form of relationships that remake the persons involved in them, whereby we become (aspects of) one another, because of our awareness of the other as capable of repose, suffering, pain, pleasure, joy, jouissance, expression, impression. Because languages of all kinds are necessary to

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these becomings, they too are ornamented, care-full—“I shall sing these songs / Beautifully / for my companions” (Fragment 3)—as the troubadours and trobairitz, the “finders,” in one of Sappho’s afterlives, would sing of the joy of singing. (“Le but n’est rien; le chemin c’est tout.”)9

Intersubjective psychoanalysis refers to the discourse co-created by analyst and analysand as the “third” (that goes beyond “two”).10 I link this to Goldberg–Carson’s “something that exceeds” (24), which we might also imagine, perhaps to the surprise of some psychoanalysts, in the form of Lacan’s “symbolic order,” as a less personifying and enumerated way of naming the power of media to couple and uncouple and overtake the dyad and create chains and networks of / and companions.11 Hence Carson–Goldberg’s reflections on “that man” who seems to Sappho

equal to the gods, the man who sits opposite you
and close by listens
to your sweet voice
and your enticing laughter —
that indeed has stirred up the heart in my breast.
For whenever I look at you even briefly
I can no longer say a single thing. (Fragment 31)

The now-venerable association of queerness with rhetoric and vice-versa (per-version, turning, troping, pre-posterousness) is legible as an aspect of primary process, Freud’s term for the activity of the unconscious and the poetics of dreaming.12

9 Says Mr. Rosen in Willa Cather’s “Old Mr. Harris,” Goldberg, Fragment 6, “Chance Encounters,” 57, in this volume.
11 See Goldberg’s Fragment 2, γλυκυπρον, on “the pairing of love and writing,” 22, in this volume.
12 I refer to the work of Jonathan Dollimore, e.g. in Sexual Dissidence: Augustine to Wilde, Freud to Foucault, 2nd edition (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), and that of Patricia Parker in Literary Fat Ladies: Rhetoric, Gender, Property (London and New York:
Primary process is, for Freud, how the semiotics of the body might reach out to the semiotics of the brain–mind, and again *vice-versa*, always *vice-versa*-ing, through the medium of drive theory, drives being not “raw” instincts, but their “representatives.” By such means, Freud thought, words like “he” and “she” could be dis/embodied, and cells could be excited by language. (The study of psychosomatic messengering is still new, but gaining strength in many circles of inquiry.) Drive and desire ride the rails of sense-making. *Amor hereos*: Sappho makes beautiful the vicissitudes of the expressive drive entailed in joyful suffering.

…my tongue is frozen in silence; instantlly a delicate flame runs beneath my skin; with my eyes I see nothing. (Fragment 31)

The dream literature of antiquity knew the mechanism of reversal, as Freud notes: “Artemidorus says: ‘In interpreting the images seen in dreams one must sometimes follow them from the beginning to the end and sometimes from the end to the beginning.’” The concept was important in early

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psychoanalysis: Freud reflects, in *The Interpretation of Dreams*, on the use of “reversal” in the “Introduction” to Alphonse Gaudet’s *Sappho*, and remarks that “we derived our first hint of the existence of a dream-censorship” from analysis of a dream in which Freud feels “the greatest affection for my friend R., whereas and because the dream-thoughts called him a simpleton” (*id*, 471). “Reversal” has had a surprisingly vigorous psychoanalytic afterlife, even in contemporary (North American) psychoanalysis, which does not typically display much fascination with Freud’s First Topography, but, owing to its interest in intersubjectivity, has been known to turn to Ferenczi on occasion.\(^1\)\(^6\) In fact, reversal has consistently been seen in psychoanalytic literature as one of the mind’s most favored methods of transformation, at work in defense mechanisms, primary process, and counter/transference. The literature notes reversal of generations, of love into hate, of drive (in reaction-formation), of self-hurting and aggression, of activity into passivity, of sexual and gender identity, figure-ground, of libido from “in front” to “behind,” container/contained, fear of life/fear of death, intrusion-evacuation, of pleasure into anxiety, to name just a few.

Freud explains:

[R]eversal, or turning a thing into its opposite, is one of the means of representation most favoured by the dream-work and one which is capable of employment in the most diverse directions. It serves in the first place to give

by Alix Strachey and Alan Tyson, ix–627 (London: Vintage, 2001), at 327n1, cited parenthetically hereafter as *id*.

16 The “First Topography” is the name given to Freud’s early mapping of the mind in terms of Consciousness, Preconsciousness, and the Unconscious, versus the Second Topography of ego, id, and super-ego. Freud’s work on primary process was developed in connection with the First Topography. For Freud’s discussion of Gaudet’s *Sappho*, see *id*, 284ff. Sándor Ferenczi discusses reversal mechanisms in *First Contributions to Psychoanalysis*, translated by Ernest Jones, *The International Psycho-Analytical Library* no. 45 (1916; reprinted London: The Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psycho-Analysis, 1952), e.g. “reversal of affect” at 148.
expression to the fulfilment of a wish in reference to some particular element of the dream-thoughts. “If only it had been the other way round!” (id, 326)

One might add: “if only I could have/be both sides of the coin, like Tiresias”; or, “if I could turn this around, my experience of life would double”; or, “the gender-marking I have endured, let it end now, let me have been both and neither”; or, “let me turn back time, to the time when I was neither.” (Reversal is a prominent symptom in Freud’s writing on “Dora’s case.”17)

Freud remarks of the end of “the interesting Up and Down dream” (id, 326) that it featured a reversal of “difficulty going upstairs as described in [Gaudet’s] Sappho… . In Sappho the man carried a woman who was in a sexual relation to him; in the dream-thoughts the position was reversed, and a woman was carrying a man…the reference was…to [a]…wet-nurse bearing the weight of [an]…infant in her arms…. Just as the author of the novel, in choosing the name ‘Sappho,’ had in mind an allusion to Lesbian practices, so too the pieces of the dream that spoke of people ‘up above’ and ‘down below’ alluded to phantasies of a sexual nature” (id, 322); “the end of the dream made a simultaneous reference to Sappho and to the wet-nurse” (id, 326). The dream changes a man into a woman and a woman into a man, and an adult into a baby and a baby into an adult. We might therefore add to “phantasies of a sexual nature” phantasies and even unconscious memory-traces of maternal and fetal jouissance, of uterine life, of being borne and born, of “carrying” in all senses: “You know how we cared for you”; “[e]vening, thou that bringst all that bright morning scattered,/thou bringst the sheep, the goat, and the child back to its mother” (Fragment 92). The evening, of course, also brings friends together in parties.

The lyric is often choric in Sappho’s writing and in her afterlife (cf. Goldberg on *Carol/The Price of Salt*); “Cleis the belovedest/woman I cherish more than all Lydia or lovely [Lesbos]” *(Fragment 82)*; it twins the mother and the daughter (Cleis–Cleis), the indistinction and fluidity of person in uterine existence, of gender too, not only in the early experience of the embryo but for the whole time in which what will later be named a “male” body is not distinguishable from what will be named a “female” body. This sharing of experience — thus far, both “men” and “women” begin their lives inside the bodies of “women” who may or may not identify as or “be” such — is articulated, one way or another, throughout Goldberg’s *Sappho*, which ends like this: sometimes “men are not women, women not men, but what is ‘between’ is perhaps nonetheless the same” *(46)*. The dreamer of “the Sappho dream” (who dreams in relation to Gaudet’s version of Sappho), moreover, turns “round in relation to his brother,” inhabitant of the same womb *(id, 287f.)*, whose contempt for that brother is legible as the unconscious “opposite” of his desire for him (reversals, perhaps, of *phobia* into *philia*): “[in] his earlier years [he] had greatly tormented his elder brother, to whom he had a homosexual attachment” *(id, 158)*; “It is remarkable to observe,” Freud writes in this discussion of reversal, “how frequently reversal is employed precisely in dreams arising from repressed homosexual impulses” *(id, 326)*.

“This turning of a thing into its opposite is made possible by the intimate associative chain which links the idea of a thing with its opposite in our thoughts” *(id, 470)*. These intimate associative chains, which we might imagine as neural pathways, are created by lived experience, by our embodied embeddedness in history, on the “black earth,” channeling also the lived experiences of the past, the ancestors, life in the “matrixial borderspace,” enacting (or defeating) the futures sought by our “wishes,” indeed, our prayers: “…my weeping: it and all care let buffeting winds bear away.”

18 I refer to Kristeva’s work on the “chora,” in *Desire in Language*, 6–7, 281ff.
19 Lobel-Page 37 / 14D / Wharton 17 / Cox 17, in Sean B. Palmer, *Sap-
placement,” reversal “can serve the ends of the censorship, but it is also frequently a product of wish-fulfillment” (*ID*, 470), as is, indeed, the censorship itself, not least in its later conceptualization as the “superego,” which so commonly, in our experience, sickens from its idealizations and the demonizations that are their “opposites.” Ambivalence, polyamory — “I am of two minds,” writes Sappho — and the intimacy of *phobia* and *philia*, love and hate, admiration and scorn, are legible here in terms of the reversal of “affects attaching to dream-thoughts” (*ID*, 470), a reminder that the taxonomic impulses of contemporary affect studies can tempt us to underemphasize the plasticity and interconnectivity of affect.20 “And all the wrong he did before, loose it,” writes Sappho of her now not so much annoying as “soul-ravaged,” tormented and tormenting brother. She prays to “Kypnus and Nereides,”

Make him a joy to his friends,

a pain to his enemies and let there exist for us

not one single further sorrow.21

Make it the other way round. Turning it around, turning one’s back, turning it down, or up.

That we suffer from our affects and that they can also transform into their “opposites,” or into their friends and neighbors, are obvious points, but (as Goldberg / Carson bring out in their reflection on “bittersweet”), reading Sappho defamiliarizes them, in the same way that (for me) reading Freud does, on, e.g., the fixity and lability of libido he sees in the process of mourning. *Amor hereos* again, yes, in the form of Sappho’s

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recognition of the power of language to summon, transform, disperse, “metabolize” the vicissitudes of desire.

And oftentime when our beloved, wandering abroad, calls to mind her gentle Atthis, the heart devours her tender breast with the pain of longing; and she cries aloud to us to come thither.22

This is the power of Sapphic friendship, of crying aloud to those who love us or at least can hear us, and this is also the power of psychoanalysis and the endless work of mourning. Remembering can make us suffer, but can also be a balm to the spirit, a “blessing,” bracha in Hebrew, as when we say, “may her memory be a blessing.”

Weeping many tears, she left me and said, “Alas, how terribly we suffer, Sappho. I really leave you against my will.”

And I answered: “Farewell, go and remember me. You know how we cared for you.

If not, I would remind you … of our wonderful times.

For by my side you put on many wreaths of roses and garlands of flowers around your soft neck.

And with precious and royal perfume you anointed yourself. (Fragment 19)

“She said,” “I answered.” The talking, singing, conversing, partying cure helps us to change and at the same time to remember, to remember in order to change, to change so that we

can bear our memories. Parties are prescribed for melancholy; in *Troilus and Criseyde*, neither the death-driven Troilus nor the narrator can bear the idea, but Pandarus’s attempts to make Criseyde’s absence bearable for Troilus are part of a therapeutic tradition as old as Sappho’s world, if a bit more problematic in the world of the “one god”:

…with al myn herte I thee beseche,  
Un-to thy-self that al this thou foryive…  
And lat us caste how forth may best be drive  
This tyme, and eek how freshly we may live…  
Rys, lat us speke of lusty lyf in Troye  
That we han lad, and forth the tyme drive;  
And eek of tyme coming us reioye,  
That bringen shal our blisse now so blyve…  
Go we pleye us in som lusty route.\(^{23}\)

Let’s remind ourselves of the good things we’ve enjoyed. Party on; more elegantly, let us go on becoming and, as Elaine Scarry would say, begetting.\(^{24}\)

The discourses of *amor heros*, medical, philosophical, historical, artistic, conversational, friendly, are meant, by turns, or at once, to heal, express, enjoy pain. These discourses variously foreground the intimacy of pain and healing, the *pharmakon*, and nowhere is this more evident than in the history of Sapphic writing. The *razos* and *vidas*, also phenomena of “unceasing begetting,” were the lovingly expansive medieval after-parties that celebrated the songs of the *troubadours* and the *trobairitz*, but they also tried to make sense of the notorious contradictions of a lyric creativity that ranged from praise of the cunt to


\(^{24}\) See note 8 above.
praise of the Virgin in the *oeuvre* of a “single” singer, and were unafraid, like Sapphic satire, to reverse the charges on Imaginary masculinist puffery, melancholic, epic, or otherwise. *Amor hereos*, as I have argued in *Sacrifice Your Love*, is part of the genealogy of psychoanalysis, as it is of queerness. It requires the queering of “health” and “happiness”—anathema to the mental eugenics of today’s “positive” psychologists. And psychoanalysis, consistently forgetting its queerness, is today celebrating it more so, if the wonderful transformations ongoing at my own institute, the New Center for Psychoanalysis in Los Angeles, are any indication.

I turn now to the “analytic functions” that, according to Borgogno and Vigna-Taglianti, “create the affective inter-psychic conditions that will enable the transmission of the emotional alphabet needed to master…lived experience.” Following Ferenczi, Winnicott, and Bion, they argue for an “inversion of roles”, a “role-reversal” that undoes the “dissociation within the analyst of the infantile and suffering part of the patient.” Through role reversal, the analyst “personifies and literally ‘embodies’ *in vivo*, within the unconscious dialogue, not only the parents but the suffering child in relation—through the patient—to a truly inadequate and traumatic parent.”


26 For one truly terrifying example, see Martin E.P. Seligman, *Learned Optimism: How to Change Your Mind and Your Life* (New York: Vintage Books, 2006). I am grateful to Oksana Yakushko for sharing her thoughts about positive psychology with me (personal communication).


generational “opposites” (as noted previously, a common reversal in the dream-work) must be embodied in the analyst as they are in the patient, just as, for Ferenczi and later Frankel, “identification with the aggressor” can even in “normality” lead to “identifying collusions both with the ‘aggressor’ and with the ‘victim.’”

“I am of two minds,” perhaps more; or, again, the intimacy of phobia and philia. For patients to be able to re-member their unspeakable because unknown histories, “the analyst will also have to be both the child the patient has been, and the child who is able… in all senses to make himself heard.”

Ferenczi draws our attention to “a certain phobia of us analysts as to… identification with the suffering child and his vulnerability,” the phobia also legible in positive psychology, to say nothing of those premodernists who have sought to empty amor hereos of its affective significance and wisdom.

Identification with the suffering child, further, involves (as Borgogno and Vigna-Talianti note, following Winnicott) the summoning up of something real within the analyst, perhaps of something Real, perhaps of the something Real that Bracha Ettinger locates at the level of uterine experience and the extraordinary experiencing of the suffering and jouissance of the other of whom “I,” who is no “I,” am also a part, and potentially in reverse, somatically as well as in every other way. I give Bracha Ettinger, who is a blessing to me, my penultimate words: “[T]he matrix is an unconscious borderspace of co-emergence and co-fading in the partial dimension, and metramorphosis


30 Borgogno and Vigna-Taglianti, “Role Reversal,” 320n3.
is its *noncastrative* process of passability and conductivity, repression and dispersal that creates transformations-in-differentiation and ‘makes sense’ beyond distinct representations and discourse,” in the space of reversibility.\textsuperscript{34} The experience of this matrixial borderspace does not just remain within all of us but reaches out and enables us to wish each (other) well.