It was Sappho who first called eros “bittersweet.” No one who has been in love disputes her. What does the word mean?

Eros seemed to Sappho at once an experience of pleasure and pain. Here is contradiction and perhaps paradox. To perceive this eros can split the mind in two. Why? The components of the contradiction may seem, at first glance, obvious. We take for granted, as did Sappho, the sweetness of erotic desire; its pleasurability smiles out at us. But the bitterness is less obvious. There might be several reasons why what is sweet should also be bitter. There may be various relations between the two savors. Poets have sorted the matter out in different ways. Sappho’s own formulation is a good place to begin tracing the possibilities. The relevant fragment runs:

′Ερος δεύτε μ’ ὀ λαυριέλες δῶνει,
γλυκόπικρον ὁμάχανον ὑπατον

Eros once again limb-loosener whirls me
sweetbitter, impossible to fight off, creature stealing up

(EP, fr. 130)

It is hard to translate. “Sweetbitter” sounds wrong, and yet our standard English rendering “bittersweet” inverts the actual terms of Sappho’s compound glukopikron. Should that concern us? If her ordering has a descriptive intention, eros is here being said to bring sweetness, then bitterness in sequence: she is sorting the possibilities chronologically. Many a lover’s experience would vali-
date such a chronology, especially in poetry, where most love ends badly. But it is unlikely that this is what Sappho means. Her poem begins with a dramatic localization of the erotic situation in time (deute) and fixes the erotic action in the present indicative tense (donei). She is not recording the history of a love affair but the instant of desire. One moment staggered under pressure of eros; one mental state splits. A simultaneity of pleasure and pain is at issue. The pleasant aspect is named first, we may presume, because it is less surprising. Emphasis is thrown upon the problematic other side of the phenomenon, whose attributes advance in a hail of soft consonants (line 2). Eros moves or creeps upon its victim from somewhere outside her: orpeton. No battle avails to fight off that advance: amachanom. Desire, then, is neither inhabitant nor ally of the desirer. Foreign to her will, it forces itself irresistibly upon her from without. Eros is an enemy. Its bitterness must be the taste of enmity. That would be hate.

"To love one's friends and hate one's enemies" is a standard archaic prescription for moral response. Love and hate construct between them the machinery of human contact. Does it make sense to locate both poles of this affect within the single emotional event of eros? Presumably, yes, if friend and enemy converge in the being who is its occasion. The convergence creates a paradox, but one that is almost a cliché for the modern literary imagination. "And hate begins where love leaves off..." whispers Anna Karenina, as she heads for Moscow Station and an end to the dilemma of desire. In fact, erotic paradox is a problem antedating Eros himself. We find it first enacted on the wall of Troy, in a scene between Helen and Aphrodite. The interchange is as sharp as a paradigm. Homer shows us Helen, embodiment of desire, fed up with the impositions of eros and defying an order from Aphrodite to serve Paris' bed. The goddess of

love responds angrily, wielding erotic paradox as a weapon:

μη με ερεβε συκτηλη, μη χωσαμενη σε μεθευω,
τως δε α' απεχθημω ου νων εκποιηλ' δφιλησα

Damn you woman, don't provoke me—I'll get angry and let you drop!
I'll come to hate you as terribly as I now love you!
(Il. 3.414-15)

Helen obeys at once; love and hate in combination make an irresistible enemy.

The simultaneity of bitter and sweet that startles us in Sappho's adjective giukupikron is differently rendered in Homer's poem. Epic convention represents inner states of feeling in dynamic and linear enactment, so that a divided mind may be read from a sequence of antithetical actions. Homer and Sappho concur, however, in presenting the divinity of desire as an ambivalent being, at once friend and enemy, who informs the erotic experience with emotional paradox.

Eros appears in other genres and poets, too, as a paradox of love and hate. Aristophanes, for example, tells us that the seductive young libertine Alkibiades was able to inspire a feeling like lover's passion in the Greek demos:

ποτει μεν, ἐσχατη δέ, βούλεται δ' ἐχειν.

For they love him and they hate him and they long to possess him.
(Ran. 142.5)

In Aeschylus' Agamemnon, Menelaus is described wondering about his empty palace after the departure of Helen. The rooms seem haunted by her; at their bedchamber he stops and cries out for "ruts of love in the bed" (411). There is no question it is desire he feels (pothos, 414), yet hate seeps in to fill the void (echthetai)
Because of his longing for something gone across
the sea
a phantom seems to rule the rooms,
and the grace of statues shaped in beauty
comes to be an object of hate for the man.
In the absences of eyes
all Aphrodite is vacant, gone.

(Ad 414-19)

Love and hate furnish a subject for the Hellenistic epi-
gram as well. Nicharchos' injunction to his beloved is
typical:

Εἰ μὲ φιλεῖς, μοιεῖς μὲ: καὶ εἰ μοιεῖς, σὺ φιλεῖς μὲ:
ei me phi leis, moi ei me: kai ei moi ei me, phi leis me.

If you love me, you hate me. And if you hate me, you
love me.
Now if you don't hate me, beloved, don't love me.

(Anth. Pal. 11.252)

Catullus' epigram is perhaps the most elegant distillate
we have of this cliche:

Odi et amo. quare id faciam, fortasse requiris.
nescio, sed fieri sentio et exercior.

I hate and I love. Why? you might ask.
I don't know. But I feel it happening and I hurt.

(Catullus 85)

The poets of the Greek lyric tradition sometimes con-
ceptualize the erotic condition as starkly as this, but Sap-
pho and her successors in general prefer physiology to
concepts. The moment when the soul parts on itself in
desire is conceived as a dilemma of body and senses. On
Sappho's tongue, as we have seen, it is a moment bitter
and sweet. This ambivalent taste is developed, in later
poets, into "bitter honey" (Anth. Pal. 12.81), "sweet
wound" (Anth. Pal. 12.126), and "Eros of sweet tears"
(Anth. Pal. 12.167). Eros knocks a lover flat with the
shock of hot and cold in Anakreon's poem:

μεγάλος δετέη μ' ἔρως ἔκοψεν ὅστε χαλκίνης
πελέκει, χειμερίη δ' ἔλουσεν χαράδρη.

With his huge hammer again Eros knocked me like a
blacksmith
and doused me in a wintry ditch

(PMG 413)

while Sophokles compares the experience to a lump of
ice melting in warm hands (Radt, fr. 149). Later poets
mix the sensations of hot and cold with the metaphor
from taste to concoct "sweet fire" (Anth. Pal. 12.63),
lovers "burned by honey" (Anth. Pal. 12.126), erotic
missiles "tempered in honey" (Anac. 27E). Ibykos
frames eros in a paradox of wet and dry, for the black
thunderstorm of desire drives against him not rain but
"parching madnesses" (PMG 286.8-11). These tropes
may have some basis in ancient theories of physiology
and psychology, which associate action that is pleasur-
able, desirable or good with sensations of heat, liquidity,
melting, and action that is unpleasant or hateful with
cold, freezing, rigidification.

But no simple map of the emotions is available here.
Desire is not simple. In Greek the act of love is a mingling
(mignumi) and desire melts the limbs (husimelēs, cf. Sap-
pho fr. 130 above). Boundaries of body, categories of
thought, are confounded. The god who melts limbs pro-

See also the section on "Ice-pleasure" in the Sophoklean fragment
below.
ceeds to break the lover (*dammatai*) as would a foe on the epic battlefield:

*άλλα μ’ ο λυσμελής ἄναρε δάμναται πόδος.*

Oh comrade, the limb-loosener crushes me: desire.

(Archilochos, West, *IEG* 196)

The shape of love and hate is perceptible, then, in a variety of sensational crises. Each crisis calls for decision and action, but decision is impossible and action a paradox when eros stirs the senses. Everyday life can become difficult; the poets speak of the consequences for behavior and judgment:

*οἶκ oϊδ ὅτι θεώ δίξα μοι τὰ νυμματα*

I don’t know what I should do: two states of mind in me....

(*LP*, fr. 51)

Sappho says, and breaks off.

*ἐρώ τε θητε κοῦκ ἐρέω καὶ μαίνομαι καὶ μαίνομαι.*

I’m in love! I’m not in love!

I’m crazy! I’m not crazy!

(*PMG* 428)

cries Anakreon.

*ἐς οὖ δὴ νέον ἐρως ἐν ἡδίσους Διόφαντον λέννασσαν οὔτε φογεῖν οὔτε μένειν δύναμιν.*

When I look at Diophantos, new shoot among the young men,

I can neither flee nor stay

(*Anth. Pal.* 12.126.5-6)

“Desire keeps pulling the lover to act and not to act” is the conclusion of Sophokles (*Radt*, fr. 149). Not only action founders. Moral evaluation also fractures under pressure of paradox, splitting desire into a thing good and bad at the same time. The Eros of Euripides wields a bow that is “double” in its effect, for it can bring on a lovely life or complete collapse (*IA* 548-49). Euripides goes so far as to double the god of love himself: twin Erotes appear in a fragment of his lost play *Sthenoboia*. One of them guides the lover in a life of virtue. The other is a lover’s worst enemy (*echthistos*) and leads him straight to the house of death (Page 1932, 3.128.22-25). Love and hate bifurcate Eros.

Let us return to the question with which we began, namely, the meaning of Sappho’s adjective *glukupikron*. A contour has been emerging from our examination of the poetic texts. “Sweetbitter eros” is what hits the raw film of the lover’s mind. Paradox is what takes shape on the sensitized plate of the poem, a negative image from which positive pictures can be created. Whether apprehended as a dilemma of sensation, action or value, eros prints as the same contradictory fact: love and hate converge within erotic desire.

Why?
Gone

Perhaps there are many ways to answer this. One comes clearest in Greek. The Greek word *eros* denotes ‘want,’ ‘lack,’ ‘desire for that which is missing.’ The lover wants what he does not have. It is by definition impossible for him to have what he wants if, as soon as it is had, it is no longer wanting. This is more than wordplay. There is a dilemma within eros that has been thought crucial by thinkers from Sappho to the present day. Plato turns and returns to it. Four of his dialogues explore what it means to say that desire can only be for what is lacking, not at hand, not present, not in one’s possession nor in one’s being: *eros* entails *endeia*. As Diotima puts it in the *Symposium*, Eros is a bastard got by Wealth on Poverty and ever at home in a life of want (203b-e). Hunger is the analog chosen by Simone Weil for this conundrum:

All our desires are contradictory, like the desire for food. I want the person I love to love me. If he is, however, totally devoted to me he does not exist any longer and I cease to love him. And as long as he is not totally devoted to me he does not love me enough. Hunger and repulsion. (1977, 364)

Emily Dickinson puts the case more pertly in “I Had Been Hungry”:

So I found
that hunger was a way
of persons outside windows
that entering takes away.

Petrarch interprets the problem in terms of the ancient physiology of fire and ice:

I know to follow while I flee my fire
I freeze when present, when absent, hot is my desire.
(“Trionfo d’Amore”)

Sartre has less patience with the contradictory ideal of desire, this “dupery.” He sees in erotic relations a system of infinite reflections, a deceiving mirror-game that carries within itself its own frustration (1956, 444-45). For Simone de Beauvoir the game is torture: “The knight departing for new adventures offends his lady yet she has nothing but contempt for him if he remains at her feet. This is the torture of impossible love . . .” (1953, 619).

Jacques Lacan puts the matter somewhat more enigmatically when he says “Desire . . . evokes lack of being under the three figures of the nothing that constitutes the basis of the demand for love, of the hate that even denies the other’s being, and of the unspeakable element in that which is ignored in its request” (1966, 28).

It would seem that these various voices are pursuing a common perception. All human desire is poised on an axis of paradox, absence and presence its poles, love and hate its motive energies. Let us return once more to the poem of Sappho with which we began. This fragment (*LP*, fr. 130), as it is preserved in the text and scholia of Hephaestion, is followed without a break by two lines in the same meter, which may be from the same poem:

“Ἀληθεῖας, σοι δ’ ἔμεθεν μὲν ἑπτήθειον
φρουτιάσθῃν, ἐπὶ δ’ Ἀνδρομέδαν πόσαν

At this, your care for me stirred hatred in you
and you flew to Andromeda.

(*LP*, fr. 131)

Who ever desires what is not gone? No one. The Greeks were clear on this. They invented eros to express it.
Let no one enter here who is ignorant of geometry.

(inscription over the door of Plato’s Academy)

There is something pure and indubitable about the notion that eros is lack. Moreover, it is a notion that, once adopted, has a powerful effect on one’s habits and representations of love. We can see this most clearly in an example: consider Sappho’s fragment 31, which is one of the best-known love poems in our tradition.

He seems to me equal to gods that man who opposite you

---

The poem floats toward us on a stage set. But we have no program. The actors go in and out of focus anonymously. The action has no location. We don’t know why the girl is laughing nor what she feels about this man. He looms beyond the footlights, somewhat more than mortal in line 1 (*isos theos*), and dissolves at line 2 into a pronoun (*ottis*) so indefinite that scholars cannot agree on what it means. The poet who is staging the mise-en-scène steps mysteriously from the wings of a relative clause at line 5 (*to*) and takes over the action.

It is not a poem about the three of them as individuals, but about the geometrical figure formed by their perception of one another, and the gaps in that perception. It is an image of the distances between them. Thin lines of force coordinate the three of them. Along one line travels the girl’s voice and laughter to a man who listens closely. A second tangent connects the girl to the poet. Between the eye of the poet and the listening man crackles a third current. The figure is a triangle. Why?

An obvious answer is to say that this is a poem about jealousy. Numbers of critics have done so. Yet, just as
many readers deny that there is any hint of jealousy here.\footnote{The two most recent commentators on this poem: assemble scholarship for and against jealousy: Burnett 1983, 232-43; Race 1983, 92-101.} How is such blanket disagreement possible? Are we all operating with the same idea of what jealousy is? The word ‘jealousy’ comes from Greek ἔλος meaning ‘zeal’ or ‘fervent pursuit.’ It is a hot and corrosive spiritual motion arising in fear and fed on resentment. The jealous lover fears that his beloved prefers someone else, and resents any relationship between the beloved and another. This is an emotion concerned with placement and displacement. The jealous lover covets a particular place in the beloved’s affection and is full of anxiety that another will take it. Here is an image of the shifting pattern that is jealousy, from more modern times. During the first half of the fifteenth century a type of slow pacing dance called the bassa danza became popular in Italy. These dances were semidramatic and transparently expressive of psychological relationships. “In the dance called Jealousy three men and three women permute partners and each man goes through a stage of standing by himself apart from the others” (Baxandall 1972, 78). Jealousy is a dance in which everyone moves, for it is the instability of the emotional situation that preys upon a jealous lover’s mind.

No such permutations jeopardize Sappho in fragment 31. Indeed, her case is the reverse. Were she to change places with the man who listens closely, it seems likely she would be entirely destroyed. She does not covet the man’s place nor fear usurpation of her own. She directs no resentment at him. She is simply amazed at his intrepidity. This man’s role in the poetic structure reflects that of jealousy within Sappho’s feelings. Neither is named. It is the beloved’s beauty that affects Sappho; the man’s presence is somehow necessary to delineation of that emotional event—it remains to be seen how. “Lovers all show such symptoms as these,” says Longinus, the ancient critic to whom we owe preservation of Sappho’s text (De Sublimitate 10.2). Jealousy may be implicit in the symptoms of love whenever they occur, but jealousy does not explain the geometry of this poem.

Another popular theory about fragment 31 is the rhetorical theory, which explains the man who listens closely as a poetic necessity (see note 2). That is, he is not to be thought of as a real person but as a poetic hypothesis, designed to show by contrast how deeply Sappho is affected in the presence of her beloved. As such he is a cliché of erotic poetry, for it is a common rhetorical maneuver to praise one’s beloved by saying “He must be made of stone who could resist you.” Pindar, for example, in a well-known fragment (Snell-Maehler, fr. 123) contrasts his own response to a beautiful boy (“I melt like wax as the heat bites into it”) with that of an impassive observer (“whose black heart was forged of adamant or iron in a cold flame”). The rhetorical point may be reinforced by adding a comparison with divine impassivity, as in the Hellenistic epigram that says “If you looked upon my beloved and were not broken by desire, you are totally god or totally stone” (Anth. Pal. 12.151).\footnote{See Dover 1978, 178 n. 18; Race 1983, 93-94.} With this contrastive technique, the lover praises his beloved, and incidentally begs sympathy for his own suit, by aligning himself with normal human response: it would be an unnatural heart or supernatural heart that failed to be moved by desire for such an object. Is this what Sappho is doing in fragment 31?

No. In the first place, the register of normality is missing from Sappho’s poem. Her record of erotic emotion is singular. We may recognize her symptoms from personal memory but it is impossible to believe she is representing herself as an ordinary lover. Moreover, praise of the beloved does not stand out as the principal purpose of this
poem. The girl's voice and laughter are a significant provocation but she disappears at line 5 and Sappho's own body and mind are the unmistakable subject of all that follows. Praise and normal erotic responses are things that occur in the real world: this poem does not. Sappho tells us twice, emphatically, the real location of her poem: "He seems to me. . . . I seem to me." This is a disquisition on seeming and it takes place entirely within her own mind.4

Jealousy is beside the point; the normal world of erotic responses is beside the point; praise is beside the point. It is a poem about the lover's mind in the act of constructing desire for itself. Sappho's subject is eros as it appears to her; she makes no claim beyond that. A single consciousness represents itself; one mental state is exposed to view.

We see clearly what shape desire has there: a three-point circuit is visible within Sappho's mind. The man who listens closely is no sentimental cliché or rhetorical device. He is a cognitive and intentional necessity. Sappho perceives desire by identifying it as a three-part structure. We may, in the traditional terminology of erotic theorizing, refer to this structure as a love triangle and we may be tempted, with post-Romantic asperity, to dismiss it as a ruse. But the ruse of the triangle is not a trivial mental maneuver. We see in it the radical constitution of desire. For, where eros is lack, its activation calls for three structural components—lover, beloved and that which comes between them. They are three points of transformation on a circuit of possible relationship, electrified by desire so that they touch not touching. Conjoined they are held apart. The third component plays a paradoxical role for it both connects and separates, marking that two are not one, irradiating the absence whose presence is demanded by eros. When the cir-

* On seeming in this poem, see Robbins 1980, 255-61.
Eros is an issue of boundaries. He exists because certain boundaries do. In the interval between reach and grasp, between glance and counterglance, between ‘I love you’ and ‘I love you too,’ the absent presence of desire comes alive. But the boundaries of time and glance and I love you are only aftershocks of the main, inevitable boundary that creates Eros: the boundary of flesh and self between you and me. And it is only, suddenly, at the moment when I would dissolve that boundary, I realize I never can.

Infants begin to see by noticing the edges of things. How do they know an edge is an edge? By passionately wanting it not to be. The experience of eros as lack alerts a person to the boundaries of himself, of other people, of things in general. It is the edge separating my tongue from the taste for which it longs that teaches me what an edge is. Like Sappho’s adjective glukupikron, the moment of desire is one that defies proper edge, being a compound of opposites forced together at pressure. Pleasure and pain at once register upon the lover, inasmuch as the desirability of the love object derives, in part, from its lack. To whom is it lacking? To the lover. If we follow the trajectory of eros we consistently find it tracing out this same route: it moves out from the lover toward the beloved, then ricochets back to the lover himself and the hole in him, unnoticed before. Who is the real subject of most love poems? Not the beloved. It is that hole.

When I desire you a part of me is gone: my want of you partakes of me. So reasons the lover at the edge of eros. The presence of want awakens in him nostalgia for wholeness. His thoughts turn toward questions of personal identity: he must recover and reincorporate what is gone if he is to be a complete person. The locus classicus for this view of desire is the speech of Aristophanes in Plato’s Symposium. Here Aristophanes accounts for the nature of human eros by means of a fantastic anthropology (189d-93d). Human beings were originally round organisms, each composed of two people joined together as one perfect sphere. These rolled about everywhere and were exceedingly happy. But the spherical creatures grew overambitious, thinking to roll right up to Olympus, so Zeus chopped each of them in two. As a result everyone must now go through life in search of the one and only other person who can round him out again. “Sliced in two like a flatfish,” says Aristophanes, “each of us is perpetually hunting for the matching half of himself” (191d).

Most people find something disturbingly lucid and true in Aristophanes’ image of lovers as people cut in half. All desire is for a part of oneself gone missing, or so it feels to the person in love. Aristophanes’ myth justifies that feeling, in typical Greek fashion, by blaming the whole situation on Zeus. But Aristophanes is a comic poet. We might look, for a more serious exegesis, to more serious lovers. A feature of their reasoning will at once strike us. It is outrageous.
...with one impulse of the heart we only just grazed it—and sighing left the first fruits of our spirit there and came back to the sound of our human tongue where words have beginnings and endings.

Augustine, Confessions 9.10

When I desire you a part of me is gone: your lack is my lack. I would not be in want of you unless you had partaken of me, the lover reasons. “A hole is being gnawed in [my] vitals” says Sappho (LP, fr. 96.16-17). “You have snatched the lungs out of my chest” (West, IEG 191) and “pierced me right through the bones” (193) says Archilochos. “You have worn me down” (Alkman 1.77 PMG), “grated me away” (Ar., Eccl. 956), “devoured my flesh” (Ar., Ran. 66), “sucked my blood” (Theokritos 2.55), “mowed off my genitals” (Archilochos, West, IEG 99.21), “stolen my reasoning mind” (Theognis 1271). Eros is expropriation. He robs the body of limbs, substance, integrity and leaves the lover, essentially, less. This attitude toward love is grounded for the Greeks in oldest mythical tradition: Hesiod describes in his Theogony how castration gave birth to the goddess Aphrodite, born from the foam around Ouranos’ severed genitals (189-200). Love does not happen without loss of vital self. The lover is the loser. Or so he reckons.

But his reckoning involves a quick and artful shift. Reaching for an object that proves to be outside and beyond himself, the lover is provoked to notice that self and its limits. From a new vantage point, which we might call self-consciousness, he looks back and sees a hole. Where does that hole come from? It comes from the lover’s classificatory process. Desire for an object that he never knew he lacked is defined, by a shift of distance, as desire for a necessary part of himself. Not a new acquisition but something that was always, properly, his. Two lacks become one.

The shifty logic of the lover unfolds naturally from his ruses of desire. We have seen how lovers, like Sappho in fragment 31, recognize Eros as a sweetness made out of absence and pain. The recognition calls into play various tactics of triangulation, various ways of keeping the space of desire open and electric. To think about one’s own tactics is always a tricky business. The exegesis measures out three angles: the lover himself, the beloved, the lover redefined as incomplete without the beloved. But this trigonometry is a trick. The lover’s next move is to collapse the triangle into a two-sided figure and treat the two sides as one circle. ‘Seeing my hole, I know my whole’ he says to himself. His own reasoning process suspends him between the two terms of this pun.

It seems impossible to talk or reason about erotic lack without falling into this punning language. Consider, for example, Plato’s Lysis. In this dialogue Sokrates is attempting to define the Greek word philos, which means both ‘loving’ and ‘loved,’ both ‘friendly’ and ‘dear.’ He takes up the question whether the desire to love or befriend something is ever separable from lack of it. His interlocutors are led to acknowledge that all desire is longing for that which properly belongs to the desirer but has been lost or taken away somehow—no one says how (221e-22a). Puns flash as the reasoning quickens. This part of the discussion depends upon an adroit use of the Greek word oikeios, which means both ‘suitable, related,
akin to myself' and 'belonging to me, properly mine.' So Sokrates addresses the two boys who are his interlocutors and says:

... Τοι oikeiou δή, ὑς δοκεῖ, δὲ τὲ ἐρως καὶ ἡ φιλία καὶ ἡ ἐπιθυμία γνωσάντες ὑμᾶς, ὑπό σαρακαῖ, ὑπὸ Μενέκεων τε καὶ Λυσί.—Σωφράτης.—Γεμεῦσα εἰς φίλοι ἐστών ἄλληλοις, φόρευε τῇ οἰκεῖοι ἐστὶν ὑμῖν αὐτοῖς.

... Desire and love and longing are directed at that which is akin to oneself [tou oikeiou], it seems. So if you two are loving friends [philoi] of one another then in some natural way you belong to one another [oikeioi esth']. (221e)

It is profoundly unjust of Sokrates to slip from one meaning of oikeios to another, as if it were the same thing to recognize in someone else a kindred soul and to claim that soul as your own possession, as if it were perfectly acceptable in love to blur the distinction between yourself and the one you love. All the lover’s reasoning and hopes of happiness are built upon this injustice, this claim, this blurred distinction. So his thought process is continually moving and searching through the borderland of language where puns occur. What is the lover searching for there?

A pun is a figure of language that depends on similarity of sound and disparity of meaning. It matches two sounds that fit perfectly together as aural shapes yet stand insistently, provocatively apart in sense. You perceive homophony and at the same time see the semantic space that separates the two words. Sameness is projected onto difference in a kind of stereoscopy. There is something irresistible in that. Puns appear in all literatures, are apparently as old as language and unfailingly fascinate us. Why? If we had the answer to this question we would know more clearly what the lover is searching for as he moves and reasons through the borderlands of his desire.

We do not yet have an answer. Nonetheless we should pay attention to the punning character of the lover’s logic: its structure and its irresistibility have something important to tell us about desire, and about the lover’s search. We have seen how Sokrates makes use of punning language to slip from one sense of oikeios (’kindred’) to another sense (’mine’) when in the Lysis he is discussing eros as lack. Sokrates makes no attempt to conceal his wordplay here; indeed, he draws attention to it with an uncommon grammatical usage. He deliberately mixes up reciprocal and reflexive pronouns when he addresses the two philoi, Lysis and Menexenos. That is, when he says to them “... you belong to one another” (221e6) he uses a word for ‘one another’ that more commonly means ‘yourselves’ (hautois). Sokrates is playing, through words, upon the desires of the young lovers before him. Mix-up of self and other is much more easily achieved in language than in life, but somewhat the same effrontery is involved. Like eros, puns flout the edges of things. Their power to allure and alarm derives from this. Within a pun you see the possibility of grasping a better truth, a truer meaning, than is available from the separate senses of either word. But the glimpse of that enhanced meaning, which flashes past in a pun, is a painful thing. For it is inseparable from your conviction of its impossibility. Words do have edges. So do you.

The punning logic of the lover is an important piece of cogitation. The lover’s puns show the outline of what he learns, in a flash, from the experience of eros—a vivid lesson about his own being. When he inhales Eros, there appears within him a sudden vision of a different self, perhaps a better self, compounded of his own being and that of his beloved. Touched to life by erotic accident, this enlargement of self is a complex and unnerving occurrence. All too easily it becomes ridiculous, as we see
for example when Aristophanes takes the typical lover's fantasy to its logical, circular conclusion in his myth of round people. But at the same time a sensation of serious truth accompanies the lover's vision of himself. There is something uniquely convincing about the perceptions that occur to you when you are in love. They seem truer than other perceptions, and more truly your own, won from reality at personal cost. Greatest certainty is felt about the beloved as necessary complement to you. Your powers of imagination connive at this vision, calling up possibilities from beyond the actual. All at once a self never known before, which now strikes you as the true one, is coming into focus. A gust of godliness may pass through you and for an instant a great many things look knowable, possible and present. Then the edge asserts itself. You are not a god. You are not that enlarged self. Indeed, you are not even a whole self, as you now see. Your new knowledge of possibilities is also a knowledge of what is lacking in the actual.

We might look, for purposes of comparison, at how this insight takes shape within the mind of a modern lover. In her novel *The Waves*, Virginia Woolf describes a young man named Neville watching his beloved Bernard approach him from across a garden:

Something now leaves me; something goes from me to meet that figure who is coming, and assures me that I know him before I see who it is. How curiously one is changed by the addition, even at a distance, of a friend. How useful an office one's friends perform when they recall us. Yet how painful to be recalled, to be mitigated, to have one's self adulterated, mixed up, become part of another. As he approaches I become not myself but Neville mixed with somebody—with whom?—with Bernard? Yes, it is Bernard, and it is to Bernard that I shall put the question, Who am I? (83)

Neville is less alarmed by the hole in him than are the Greek lyric poets when they record the degradations of eros. And, unlike Sokrates, Neville does not resort to puns to account for his mixed-up condition. He simply watches it happen and measures off its three angles: desire moves out from Neville himself, ricochets off Bernard, and bends back to Neville—but not the same Neville. “I become not myself but Neville mixed with somebody.” The piece of himself that goes out to Bernard makes Bernard immediately familiar “even before I see who it is.” As Sokrates would say, it makes Bernard *oikeios*. Even so, Neville goes on to appraise the experience as an ambivalent one, both “useful” and “painful.” As in the Greek poets, its pain arises at that edge where the self is adulterated and bitter verges alarmingly on sweet. Eros’ ambivalence unfolds directly from this power to ‘mix up’ the self. The lover helplessly admits that it feels both good and bad to be mixed up, but is then driven back upon the question ‘Once I have been mixed up in this way, who am I?’ Desire changes the lover. “How curiously”: he feels the change happen but has no ready categories to assess it. The change gives him a glimpse of a self he never knew before.

Some such glimpse may be the mechanism that originally shapes a notion of ‘self’ in each of us, according to some analyses. Freudian theory traces this notion to a fundamental decision of love and hate, somewhat like the ambivalent condition of the lover, that splits our souls and forms our personality. There is at the beginning of life, in the Freudian view, no awareness of objects as distinct from one’s own body. The distinction between self and not-self is made by the decision to claim all that the ego likes as ‘mine’ and to reject all that the ego dislikes as ‘not mine.’ Divided, we learn where our selves end and the world begins. Self-taught, we love what we can make our own and hate what remains other.

Historians of the Greek psyche, notably Bruno Snell,
have adapted Freud’s ontogenetic picture to account for the rise of individualism in Greek society during the archaic and early classical periods. In the view of Snell, the first formation in Greek society of a self-conscious and self-controlled human personality, aware of itself as an organic whole distinct from other personalities and from the world around it, can be traced to a moment of emotional ambivalence that splits the soul. Sappho’s adjective *glikupikron* signals that moment. It is a revolution in human self-awareness that Snell calls “the discovery of the mind.” Blocked eros is its trigger. Its consequence is the consolidation of a ‘self’:

The love which has its course barred, and fails to reach its fulfilment acquires a particularly strong hold over the human heart. The sparks of a vital desire burst into flame at the very moment when the desire is blocked in its path. It is the obstruction which makes the wholly personal feelings conscious. . . . [the frustrated lover] seeks the cause in his own personality. (1953, 53)

Snell’s is a sensational thesis and has provoked excitement, wide dissent and ongoing controversy. No resolution of the questions of history and historiography involved is available, but Snell’s insight about the importance of bittersweet love in our lives in a powerful one, appealing to the common experience of many lovers. Neville, for example, seems to come round to the same conclusion, as he ponders his love for Bernard, in *The Waves*: “To be contracted by another person into a single being—how strange” (80).

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The self forms at the edge of desire, and a science of self arises in the effort to leave that self behind. But more than one response is possible to the acute awareness of self that ensues from the reach of desire. Neville conceives it as a “contraction” of the self upon itself and finds it merely strange. “How curiously one is changed,” he muses. He does not appear to hate the change, nor to relish it. Nietzsche, on the other hand, is delighted: “One seems to oneself transfigured, stronger, richer, more complete; one is more complete. . . . It is not merely that it changes the feeling of values; the lover is worth more” (1967, 426). It is not uncommon in love to experience this heightened sense of one’s own personality (‘I am more myself than ever before!’ the lover feels) and to rejoice in it, as Nietzsche does. The Greek lyric poets do not so rejoice.

Change of self is loss of self to these poets. Their metaphors for the experience are metaphors of war, disease and bodily dissolution. These metaphors assume a dynamic of assault and resistance. Extreme sensual tension between the self and its environment is the poets’ focus, and a particular image of that tension predominates. In Greek lyric poetry, eros is an experience of melting. The god of desire himself is traditionally called “melter of limbs” (Sappho, *LP*, fr. 130; Archilochos, West, *IEG* 196). His glance is “more melting than sleep or death” (Alkman 3 *PMG*). The lover whom he victimizes is a piece of wax, (Pindar, Snell-Maehler, fr. 123) dissolving at his touch. Is melting a good thing? That remains am-
What Does the Lover Want from Love?

My astonishing victory over Menti did not give me a pleasure one-hundredth part as intense as the pain she gave me when she left me for M. de Rospiec.

Stendahl, *The Life of Henri Brulard*

On the surface of it, the lover wants the beloved. This, of course, is not really the case. If we look carefully at a lover in the midst of desire, for example Sappho in her fragment 31, we see how severe an experience for her is confrontation with the beloved even at a distance. Union would be annihilating. What the lover in this poem needs is to be able to face the beloved and yet not be destroyed, that is, she needs to attain the condition of "the man who listens closely." His ideal impassivity constitutes for her a glimpse of a new possible self. Could she realize that self, she too would be "equal to gods" amidst desire; to the degree that she fails to realize it, she may be destroyed by desire. Both possibilities are projected on a screen of what is actual and present by means of the poet's tactic of triangulation. That godlike self, never known before, now comes into focus and vanishes again in one quick shift of view. As the planes of vision jump, the actual self and the ideal self and the difference between them connect in one triangle momentarily. The connection is eros. To feel its current pass through her is what the lover wants.

The essential features that define this eros have already emerged in the course of our exploration of bittersweetness. Simultaneous pleasure and pain are its symptom. Lack is its animating, fundamental constituent. As syntax, it impressed us as something of a subterfuge: properly a noun, eros acts everywhere like a verb. Its action is to reach, and the reach of desire involves every lover in an activity of the imagination.

It is no new idea that the imagination has a powerful role to play in human desire. Homer's description of Helen in the *Iliad* is perhaps the archetypal demonstration of it. The description is withheld. Homer merely tells us that the old men on the wall of Troy watched her pass and let out a whisper:

οὐ̄ νέμεινς Τρώας καὶ ἐκκυμήμας Ἀχαιῶς
ταῦτα ἀμφὶ γυναικὶ πολὺν χρόνον ἀλγεὰ πάσχειν

It is no discredit for Trojans and well-graved Achaeans
to suffer long anguish for a woman like that.

(*Il. 3.156-57*)

Helen remains universally desired, universally imaginable, perfect.

Erotic theorists spend considerable time discovering and rediscourving the lover's imagination from different angles. Aristotle defines the dynamic and imaginative delight of desire in his *Rhetoric*. "Desire is a reaching out [orexis] for the sweet," he says, and the man who is reaching for some delight, whether in the future as hope or in the past as memory, does so by means of an act of imagination (phantasia: *Rh. 1.1370a6*). Andreas Capellanus analyzes the pain of amorous longing in the same light in his twelfth-century treatise *De Amore*, insisting that this passio is a thoroughly mental event: "The suffering of love does not arise out of any action . . . but only from the cogitation of the mind upon what it sees does that suffering issue." (XIV). Stendhal, in his cele-
brated essay on love, uncovers in the lover a fantasizing process that he names “crystallization” after a phenomenon witnessed in the mines of Salzburg:

Leave a lover with his thoughts for twenty-four hours and this is what will happen: At the salt mines of Salzburg, they throw a leafless wintry bough into one of the abandoned workings. Two or three months later they pull it out covered with a shining deposit of crystals. The smallest twig, no bigger than a tom-tit’s claw, is studded with a galaxy of scintillating diamonds. The original branch is no longer recognizable. What I have called crystallization is a mental process which draws from everything that happens new proofs of the perfection of the loved one. (1957, 45)

Kierkegaard also devotes some thought to this “sensuously idealizing power . . . [that] beautifies and develops the one desired so that he blurs in enhanced beauty by its reflection.” The force by which Don Juan seduces may be found in this “energy of sensuous desire,” Kierkegaard concludes, with a trace of relief (1944, 86-102). Freudian theory, too, takes note of this projective faculty of the human erotic instinct, ascribing to it the scheduled mischief known as ‘transference’ in psychoanalytic situations. Transference arises in almost every psychoanalytic relationship when the patient insists on falling in love with the doctor, despite the latter’s determined aloofness, warnings and discouragement. An important lesson in erotic mistrust is available to the analysand who observes himself concocting in this way a love object out of thin air.

Such concoctions fascinate the modern novelist. Anna Karenina’s passion for Vronsky depends on a mental act:

She put her hands on his shoulders and looked at him for a long time with a profound, passionate and

at the same time searching look. She was studying his face to make up for the time she hadn’t seen him. She was doing what she always did when she saw him—comparing the image of him in her imagination (incomparably superior, and impossible in reality) with him as he was. (pt. 4, chap. 2)

Emma Bovary’s love letters to Rodolphe enact the same process: “But as she wrote she saw in her mind’s eye another man, a phantom composed of her most passionate memories, her most enjoyable books, and her strongest desires; at last he became so real and so tangible that she was thrilled and amazed, yet he was so hidden under the abundance of his virtues that she was unable to imagine him clearly” (quoted in Girard 1965, 63-64). The heroine of Italo Calvino’s novel The Nonexistent Knight is a splendid voluptuary who finds she can only feel genuine desire for the knight of the title, an empty suit of armour; all others are either known or knowable and cannot arouse her. Here we arrive at the rub of the matter, not for the first time. That which is known, attained, possessed, cannot be an object of desire. “In love possession is nothing, only delight matters,” says Stendhal (1957, 112). Eros is lack, says Sokrates. This dilemma is given a still more subtle image by Yasunari Kawabata. His novel Beauty and Sadness (1975) recounts the early days of the marriage of Oki and Furuko. Oki is a novelist and Furuko, a typist in a news agency. She types all his manuscripts and this connection is the substance of Oki’s newlywed fascination with his bride:

It was something of a lover’s game, the sweet togetherness of newlyweds, but there was more to it than that. When his work first appeared in a magazine he was astonished at the difference in effect between a penwritten manuscript and the tiny characters in print. (34)
As Oki becomes habituated to this “gap between manuscript and published work” his passion for Fumiko fades and he takes a mistress.

It is in the difference between cursive and typeface, between the real Vronsky and the imaginary one, between Sappho and “the man who listens closely,” between an actual knight and an empty suit of armour, that desire is felt. Across this space a spark of eros moves in the lover’s mind to activate delight. Delight is a movement (kinēsis) of the soul, in Aristotle’s definition (Rb. 1.1369b19). No difference: no movement. No Eros.

A mood of knowledge is emitted by the spark that leaps in the lover’s soul. He feels on the verge of grasping something not grasped before. In the Greek poets it is a knowledge of self that begins to come into focus, a self not known before and now disclosed by the lack of it—by pain, by a hole, bitterly. Not all lovers respond to erotic knowledge so negatively. We were struck by the equanimity with which Virginia Woolf’s character, Neve, records “Something now leaves me” (1931, 83) and we saw what a gust of elation accompanies the change of self for Nietzsche (1967, 426). But then, Nietzsche calls the modern world an ass that says yes to everything. The Greek poets do not say yes. They allow that erotic experience is sweet to begin with: *gluké*. They acknowledge ideal possibilities opened out for selfhood by erotic experience; they do so, in general, by divinizing it in the person of the god Eros. Sappho, as we have seen, projects the ideal in the particular person of “the man who listens closely” in fragment 31. A more narcissistic lover, namely Alkibiades in Plato’s *Symposium*, subsumes the ideal to himself, blandly announcing his motive for pursuing Sokrates:

εμεὶς μὴν γὰρ οὐδὲν ἔστι πρεσβύτερον τοῦ ὡς ὁ ὅπιο
βῆλτιστον ἔμε γενέσθαι

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For me nothing has a higher priority than to perfect myself. (Symp. 218d)

But a sense of exultation at the thought of incorporating the self’s possibilities within the self’s identity is missing. In these ancient representations, bittersweet Eros prints consistently as a negative image. Presumably, a positive picture could be made if the lover were ever to re incorpore his lack into a new and better self. Or could it? Is that positive picture what the lover wants from love?

An ancient answer presents itself. Aristophanes puts this very question to a pair of imaginary lovers in Plato’s *Symposium*. He pictures the lovers locked in an embrace and dismisses as absurd the notion that this “mere amorous union” (sunousia tôn aphrodisión, 192c) is all they want:

ἀλλ’ ἄλλο τι βουλομένη ἔκατερον ἡ ψυχή δήλη ἔστιν, ὦ νῦν δύναται εἶπεν, ἀλλὰ ματαιεῖται ὃ ἔφεσθαι, καὶ αἰνιτείται.

No, obviously the soul of each is longing for something else which it cannot put into normal words but keeps trying to express in oracles and riddles.

(192c-d)

What is this “something else”? Aristophanes continues:

καὶ εἰ αὐτοῖς ἐν τῷ αὐτῷ κατακειμένοις ἐπιστάσας ὁ Ἡφαιστός, ἔχων τὰ ὀργάνα, ἔρησεν ὁ Ἴλαῖος ἤτοι "Τί ἔσθ’ ὃ βουλεύεται, ὃ ἀνθρώπος, ὃς πορ’ ἄλληλον γενέται;

καὶ εἰ ἀπορούντας αὐτοίς πάλιν ἔρων "Ἀρά γε τοιδε ἐπιθυμεῖτε, ἐν τῷ αὐτῷ γενέται ὃ καὶ ἀλλήλοις ἡ ἐν τῷ ἀνθρώπῳ ἐν τῷ ἀλλήλων ἑαυτοῦ καὶ ἄλλω ἶ χράτες, ἢτοι καὶ ὑπόκτησεν ἡ ἀποτελέσθαι ἄλληλοι: εἴ γὰρ τοῦτον ἐπιθυμεῖτε, θέλω ὅμοις συντρίβεσθαι καὶ συμφισώμεθα εἰς τὸ αὐτῷ, ὧσπερ δὲ ὅρθος ἔργος ἔσθαι γεγονέναι καὶ ἐφ’ ἔκ τὸ ὄρθος, ὧς ἔνα δύνῃ καὶ ἀμφότερος ζῆν, καὶ ἐπειδὴν ἀποθάνητη, ἢκεi

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What Does the Lover Want...?

οὐ ἐν „Αἰδών ἄντι δυόν ἔνα εἶκαι κοινῇ τεθνεώσθε· ἀλλ’ ὄρατε εἰ τοῦτον ἔρατε καὶ ἐξαρκεί ὕμν ἐν τοῦτον τύχητε”

Suppose that, as the lovers lay together, Hephaistos should come and stand over them, tools in hand, and ask: “O human beings, what is it you want of one another?” And suppose they were nonplussed, so he put the question again: “Well, is this what you crave, to be joined in the closest possible union with one another, so as not to leave one another by night or day? If that is your craving, I am ready to melt you together and fuse you into a single unit, so that two become one and as long as you live you may both, as one, live a common life, and when you die you may also, down there in Hades, one instead of two, die a common death. Consider whether this is what you desire, whether it would satisfy you to obtain this.” (192d-e)

Eternal oneness is Hephaistos’ offer. The lovers’ response is not heard. Instead, Aristophanes himself intervenes to pronounce: “No lover could want anything else” (192e). Now, how credible a witness is Aristophanes, or his spokesman Hephaistos, in the question of what a lover really wants? Two reservations strike us: Hephaistos, impotent cuckold of the Olympian pantheon, can be viewed as at best a qualified authority on matters erotic; and Aristophanes’ judgment (“no lover could want anything else”) is belied by the anthropology of his own myth. Was it the case that the round beings of his fantasy remained perfectly content rolling about the world in prelapsarian oneness? No. They got big ideas and started rolling toward Olympus to make an attempt on the gods (190b-c). They began reaching for something else. So much for oneness.

It is not the number ‘one,’ as we have seen in example...
Realist

No one contradicts me now and the salt has gone out of my life.

Queen Victoria, after Albert's death

Eros loves strife and delights in paradoxical outcomes.

Chariton, Chaereas and Callirrhoe 1.1

It is nothing new to say that all utterance is erotic in some sense, that all language shows the structure of desire at some level. Already in Homer's usage, the same verb (μναομαι) has the meaning 'to give heed, to make mention' and also the meaning 'to court, woo, be a suitor.' Already in ancient Greek myth, the same goddess (Φειθώ) has charge of rhetorical persuasion and the arts of seduction. Already in earliest metaphor, it is 'wings' or 'breath' that move words from speaker to listener as they move eros from lover to beloved. But words that are written or read place in sharp, sudden focus the edges of the units of language and the edges of those units called 'reader' and 'writer.' Back and forth across the edges moves a symbolic intercourse. As the vowels and consonants of an alphabet interact symbolically to make a certain written word, so writer and reader bring together two halves of one meaning, so lover and beloved are matched together like two sides of one knucklebone. An intimate collusion occurs. The meaning composed is private and true and makes permanent, perfect sense. Ideally speaking, at least, that is the case.

Realist

In fact, neither reader nor writer nor lover achieves such consummation. The words we read and the words we write never say exactly what we mean. The people we love are never just as we desire them. The two symbola never perfectly match. Eros is in between.

Both the experience of desire and the experience of reading have something to teach us about edges. We have endeavored to see what that is by consulting ancient literature, lyric and romantic, for its exposition of eros. We have watched how archaic poets shape love poems (as triangles) and how ancient novelists construct novels (as a sustained experience of paradox). We caught sight of a similar outline, even in Homer, where the phenomenon of reading and writing surfaces in Bellerophon's story. We speculated about writers' purposes (to seduce readers?) and we are finally led to suspect that what the reader wants from reading and what the lover wants from love are experiences of very similar design. It is a necessarily triangular design, and it embodies a reach for the unknown.

Desire for knowledge is the mark of the beast: Aristotle says "All men reach out to know" (Metaph.A. 1.980a21). As you perceive the edge of yourself at the moment of desire, as you perceive the edges of words from moment to moment in reading (or writing), you are stirred to reach beyond perceptible edges—toward something else, something not yet grasped. The unplucked apple, the beloved just out of touch, the meaning not quite attained, are desirable objects of knowledge. It is the enterprise of eros to keep them so. The unknown must remain unknown or the novel ends. As all paradoxes are, in some way, paradoxes about paradox, so all eros is, to some degree, desire for desire.

Hence, ruses. What is erotic about reading (or writing) is the play of imagination called forth in the space between you and your object of knowledge. Poets and novelists, like lovers, touch that space to life with their metaphors and subterfuges. The edges of the space are the
Realist

edges of the things you love, whose inconcinnities make your mind move. And there is Eros, nervous realist in this sentimental domain, who acts out of a love of paradox, that is as he folds the beloved object out of sight into a mystery, into a blind point where it can float known and unknown, actual and possible, near and far, desired and drawing you on.

Ice-pleasure

We cannot really say that time ‘is’ except in virtue of its continual tendency not to be.

Augustine, Confessions 11.14.17

Time watches from the shadow
And coughs when you would kiss.

W. H. Auden, “One Evening”

The blind point of Eros is a paradox in time as well as in space. A desire to bring the absent into presence, or to collapse far and near, is also a desire to foreclose then upon now. As lover you reach forward to a point in time called ‘then’ when you will bite into the long-desired apple. Meanwhile you are aware that as soon as ‘then’ supervenes upon ‘now,’ the bittersweet moment, which is your desire, will be gone. You cannot want that, and yet you do. Let us see what this feels like.

Below is a fragment of a satyr play by Sophokles entitled The Lovers of Achilles. The fragment is a description of desire. It turns eros subtly, permitting different aspects of its perversity to come to light. At the center is a cold, original pleasure. Around the center move circles of time, different kinds of time, different dilemmas set by time. Notice that this poem is an analogy. Neither its pleasure nor its various kinds of time are to be identified with eros, but the way they intersect may feel like eros to you.

τὸ γὰρ νόσημα τούτον ἐφύμερον παρόν·
θέμι ἀν αὐτῷ μὴ κακῶς ἀπευκάσαι.