



LACAN ON LOVE

An Exploration of Lacan's Seminar VIII, *Transference*

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Lacan's Seminar VIII, *Transference*

Bruce Fink

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Lacan on Love

Pour Héloïse, mon amour

As for what it means to love [. . .], I must at least, like Socrates, be able to credit myself with knowing something about it. Now if we take a look at the psychoanalytic literature, we see that this is what people talk about the least. [. . .] Isn't it astonishing that we analysts – who make use of love and talk about nothing else – can be said to present ourselves as truly deficient when compared to [the philosophical and religious] tradition? We haven't made even a partial attempt to add to – much less revise – what has been developed over the centuries on the subject of love or provide something that might be not unworthy of this tradition. Isn't that surprising? (Lacan, 2015, p. 16)

Preface

Whether to vilify and bury love once and for all or, rather, to praise it – the dilemma has preoccupied poets and philosophers for millennia. Whether to celebrate the incomparable joy love brings or denounce the intense pain and desperation one suffers in its wake, whether to glorify its life-giving virtues or expose its cruelty and illusions – that is the question certain psychoanalysts, too, have weighed in on, following in the footsteps of the bards and literati.

Relations between Eros, the Greek god of love (Cupid to the Romans), and psychoanalysis have not always been cordial, to say the least. Freud at times reduced love to the dependency of a child on its mother, the child's affection for her deriving essentially from her ability to satisfy the child's hunger for food, warmth, and closeness. Jekels and Bergler, well-known first- and second-generation analysts, decried love as nothing more than the wish to be loved – hence a narcissistic project.¹ Driving a further nail in the coffin, they alleged that we seek love from someone toward whom we feel guilty, reasoning that we will feel less guilty if we can make that person love us.² Wilhelm Reich, on the other hand, who was to become a pariah of the psychoanalytic establishment, conceived of the achievement of utter and complete love as the foremost aim of treatment.³

It seems that psychoanalysts have long been divided over the question whether to condemn love as a form of self-deception – a mirage, a cover for something else, a simple narcissistic project parading as altruism – or as the holy of holies, the greatest of all possible psychical accomplishments. Erik Erikson attributed to Freud the well-known formulation that psychoanalysis strives to restore the patient's ability to "love and work"⁴ (at least one of them making the considerable assumption that the patient had such an ability at some prior point in time). And yet kissing was at times described aseptically by the father of psychoanalysis as the rubbing together of "mucous membranes,"⁵ "affectionate love" as

resulting merely from the inhibition of sexual desire,⁶ and the more sublimated forms of so-called selfless love for others (charity, for example) as often but a poor disguise for self-aggrandizement and condescension toward others.

Nevertheless, the early analysts were hardly the first to propose conflicting appraisals of love. Centuries before Plato and Aristotle held court in Athens, Hesiod taxed women with generally being “bad for men,” warning men that:

A bad [wife] makes you shiver with cold;
 A greedy wife roasts you alive with no help from a roaring
 blaze,
 And tough though you be brings you to a raw old age.
 (Hesiod, trans. Wender: 1973)

But he also opined that “No prize is greater than a worthy wife.” Love, in his account of it (in the context of marriage) and depending on the character of one’s beloved, could give rise to the worst of evils or the very best life can offer.

In ancient Greece and Rome, it was common to characterize love as an attack, Cupid being depicted as physically burning the lover with a torch or shooting the lover with arrows, even as Love was celebrated as a great god.⁷ In the early Middle Ages, Andreas Capellanus provided an apparently spurious etymology for the word love itself, deriving *amor*, the Latin for love, from *amus*, meaning hook: “He who is in love is captured in the chains of desire and wishes to capture someone else with his hook.” This medieval chaplain referred to love as a form of suffering of which “there is no torment greater,” but went on to say, “O what a wonderful thing is love, which makes a man shine with so many virtues and teaches everyone, no matter who he is, so many good traits of character!”⁸

Hélisenne de Crenne, the Renaissance author of *Torments of Love*, depicted love as a “lamentable illness” and a most cruel calamity. It is “a passion in the soul that reduces us to perplexity and sadness because we cannot enjoy what we love.”⁹ She went so far as to anticipate certain analysts’ views that there is something rotten in the State of Love, some paradox baked into human desire. And our sixteenth-century novelist foreshadowed Freud by introducing the term “libidinous” and by maintaining that “one who is capable of loving ardently is also capable of hating cruelly” – leaving it to Sigmund, following in Kierkegaard’s footsteps,¹⁰ to add that hate is the flipside of love and to Lacan to invent the term *hainamoration* (combining *haine*, hate or hatred, and *énamourer*, to become

enamored). Yet, as tormenting and calamitous as love is in her novel, Crenne's characters live only for the enlivening sensations it brings.

For the nineteenth-century Stendhal, love and its attendant uncertainties and palpitations are the leisure classes' antidote to boredom, and the less contact one has with one's beloved, the more deliciously sublime one's love can be. His British contemporary, Jane Austen, prefers the language of attachment to that of Stendhal's *coup de foudre*, the "thunderbolt" of love at first sight that so preoccupied him. Charlotte's pronouncement in Austen's novel *Pride and Prejudice* is decidedly pessimistic:

Happiness in marriage is entirely a matter of chance. If the dispositions of the parties are ever so well known to each other or ever so similar beforehand, it does not advance their felicity in the least. They always continue to grow sufficiently unlike afterwards to have their share of vexation; and it is better to know as little as possible of the defects of the person with whom you are to pass your life. (p. 17)

Yet Austen's overriding view rejects both Charlotte's cynicism and Stendhal's quintessentially Romantic-era celebration of love at a distance (consider Marianne's gradual attachment to Colonel Brandon in *Sense and Sensibility*).¹¹

To round out this thumbnail sketch of contrasting appraisals of love with a jump to the twentieth century, we need but juxtapose Carole King's 1976 conclusion that "Only Love Is Real" with the J. Geils Band's 1980 assessment that "Love Stinks."

The situation becomes far more complex when, instead of simply giving love the thumbs-up or the thumbs-down, instead of praising love as a munificent marvel or skewering it as a pestilent affliction, we raise the thorny question, "What is love?"

For one person, to discuss love is to discuss theology, love being sent to us by the gods; for another, it is an investment in someone whose value should be ascertained conclusively before one becomes enamored; for a third, love is what resolves differences among partners in a sort of musical harmony; for a fourth, it is the attempt to find and fuse anew with our other half; for a fifth, love is peaceful and just, moderate, temperate, and sound-minded; for a sixth, love is a messenger between mortals and immortals, and is tantamount to the worship of beauty – and all six of these views of love are found in but one of Plato's dialogues, the *Symposium*!

In the seventeenth century, Spinoza defined love as a joy

accompanied by the idea that the pleasure comes from something outside of ourselves. In the thirteenth century, Saint Thomas Aquinas distinguished concupiscence-type love (better known as lust) that comes from inside us and seeks to penetrate the beloved's heart, from friendship that brings the beloved into one's own heart. For Aristotle, "to love is to wish someone well,"¹² that is, to take a genuine interest in his welfare; for Erich Segal, "love means never having to say you're sorry," a horse of a different color.

For some, love involves dependency and shameful submission to another's will; for others, both partners must be self-actualized, independent beings for true love to exist between them. For some, love is sweet surrender and steals upon us like God's miraculous grace; for others, love seeks to subjugate and possess the beloved. Love is blind; love is clairvoyant, piercing our social masks. Love is ephemeral; love is everlasting. Love is grasping and envious; love is guileless and giving. Love is incompatible with desire and marriage; love and desire can and must fuse in marriage. Love enriches both parties; love enriches the beloved at the lover's expense – it is a rip-off. Love is tragic; "love is a comical feeling."

How could love be so many different things to people, and even to one and the same person at various times? Could it be that love is different for the beloved than it is for the lover? Different for men than it is for women? Different for the ancient Greeks than it is for our contemporaries? Is love merely a product of culture and history, being something totally different for a Chinaman of the Ming Dynasty, a noblewoman of Imperial Rome, an eighteenth-century Austrian musician like Mozart, and a twenty-first-century American country singer like Sara Evans trying to figure out "what love really means"?

Rather than immediately assume that different cultures define love differently, or that love has been experienced in opposing manners in different historical periods, let us note that virtually all of these varied notions of love can be found in our own culture and era. Many rock musicians depict love as an attack; blues singers often cast love as pain, agony, and torture; and other songwriters represent love as the greatest of pleasures ("you get too much, you get too high"). If love were nothing more than a cultural/historical product, it would seem that most everyone within one and the same culture would experience love in the same way. Nothing, however, could be further from the truth.

What do we mean by the simple word "love"? Do we mean passion? Affection? Concupiscence? Attachment? Lust? Friendship? Each language divides up the amorous sentiments in different ways.

The Greek tradition provided us with the well-known term “Eros,” which seems to cover a vast spectrum of experiences, much like Freud’s term “libido” which, as Lacan suggests, is “an extremely broad theoretical entity that goes well beyond the specialized sexual desire of adults. This notion tends rather toward ‘desire,’ antiquity’s Eros understood very broadly – namely, as the whole set of human beings’ appetites that go beyond their needs, the latter being strictly tied to self-preservation.”¹³

Freud strove to define some of the components of libido, and was led to use widely diverse terms at different times in the development of his theory – love, attachment, desire, affectionate love, cathexis, sensual love, and drive – and even to define each of these terms somewhat differently from decade to decade. There is, in my view, no singular theory of love to be found in Freud’s work or in Lacan’s work: there are only multiple attempts to grapple with it at different points in their theoretical development.

In this book I shall explore and compare and contrast some of the different attempts to discuss love by both authors. In order to do so, it will be necessary to introduce a number of terms from their work, including “narcissism,” “ideal ego,” “ego-ideal,” “imaginary,” “symbolic,” “real,” “demand,” “desire,” “drive,” and “jouissance,” to mention but a few. Much as the reader might like it if I were to somehow clean up the enormous mess in the Augean stables of our philosophical and psychoanalytic literature, and come up with a clear, compelling, and all-encompassing theory of love, this is not possible and probably not even desirable! The reader will instead, I hope, glean a number of important insights that will lead to a deeper appreciation for the complexity of the human experience of love and passion, as we work our way through first a portion of Freud’s work, then a portion of Lacan’s, then another portion of Freud’s, and so on, relying all the while on Lacan’s registers of the symbolic, imaginary, and real.

There is no need to have read in advance all of the texts by Freud and Lacan that I delve into here, but it will be helpful to have at least reread Plato’s *Symposium* by the time we get to Chapter 8, and it will certainly not be disadvantageous to read the first 11 chapters of Lacan’s Seminar VIII as we proceed through Chapter 8. The exploration of literature from a wide range of periods and languages in Chapter 7 relies on the reader’s general knowledge.

Note on Texts

In this book, I cite the eminently readable translation of Plato's *Symposium* by Alexander Nehamas and Paul Woodruff that is found in C. D. C. Reeve's (2006) volume entitled *Plato on Love*. References to Seminar VIII, *Transference*, are to my recent translation of it published by Polity Press (2015). Note that virtually all translated citations by French authors here (Lacan, Stendhal, Rougemont, and so on) are either by me or have been modified by me; page numbers followed by a slash and a second number refer first to the original French edition and then to the available English edition.

Small portions of Chapters 2, 4, and 5 originally appeared in Volume 2 of my collection of papers entitled *Against Understanding* (London: Routledge, 2014); and about two pages of Chapter 5 appeared in Volume 1 of that same collection; everything has been significantly expanded and reworked for inclusion here. An early, condensed version of Chapter 6 appeared in *Sexual Identity and the Unconscious*, published by École de Psychanalyse des Forums du Champ Lacanien in 2011, and much of Chapter 3 appeared separately in *The Psychoanalytic Review* 102/1 (February 2015): 59–91.

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Introduction

Love is blind, and lovers cannot see
The pretty follies that themselves commit;
For if they could, Cupid himself would blush . . .

Shakespeare, *The Merchant of Venice*, II. vi. 41–3

In the Beginning Was Love

All of contemporary psychotherapy finds its origin in a love story. A well-respected Viennese nerve specialist – not Freud – is called in to treat a young woman whom he finds exceptionally vivacious, intelligent, and beautiful. Not only is she charming and exceedingly attractive, she also speaks several foreign languages and is highly creative. Her case is a very unusual one, and she becomes terribly difficult for her family to deal with if the dashing young doctor does not meet with her frequently. As it is 1880, he makes house calls, coming to see her almost every day, often for several hours at a time. Eventually, he begins coming both morning and evening.

The neurologist grows impassioned about their work together and speaks about nothing else, even at home. His wife becomes bored with such talk and grows increasingly unhappy and morose. She does not come right out and complain and, as so often happens, it takes her husband quite a long time to fathom what is fueling her changed mood. When it finally dawns on him that she feels neglected and is jealous, he realizes the tenor of his own feelings for his patient and becomes guilt-ridden.

The fine-looking physician abruptly resolves to put an end to the treatment, sensing that he has been doing something morally reprehensible, despite the patient's obvious improvement. Announcing to her the next morning that their work together is finished, he is

urgently called back by her family that very evening to find that the young woman is going through an hysterical childbirth, presenting all the signs of a real childbirth, having imagined that she is pregnant with the doctor's baby!

He manages to calm her down, but is profoundly shaken by the seemingly sudden amorous turn of the patient's fantasies. The good doctor professes to have had no idea she was in love with him. And far be it from him to fully admit to himself the degree to which he was enamored of her! He refuses to recommence treatment (referring her instead to the Bellevue Sanatorium in Kreuzlingen founded by Ludwig Binswanger) and whisks his wife off with him to Venice soon thereafter for an impromptu second honeymoon.

Psychoanalysis might well have been stillborn, for the love-struck doctor, Josef Breuer by name, vowed never again to employ the technique his patient Bertha Pappenheim had spontaneously invented – christened “the talking cure” by her – clearly finding its side effects too hot to handle.¹ If not for the curiosity of Sigmund Freud, who encouraged Breuer to go over the details of the case with him again and again, psychoanalysis might never have been anything but the story of one unfulfilled, unconsummated, and even largely unacknowledged love affair. Instead, thanks to Freud's lively interest in the case, Bertha (known in the psychoanalytic literature as Anna O.) ended up giving birth to talk therapy, which was to make the twentieth century, perhaps even more than “the space age,” “the therapeutic age.” (We might even call it “the therapeutic space age.”)

Freud was not deterred by patients' expressions of love. A female patient of his once threw her arms around his neck and kissed him affectionately, upon coming out of hypnosis; but rather than consider himself irresistible – indeed, he thought himself far less prepossessing than Breuer – Freud tried to figure out what it was about doctor–patient relationships that elicited such reactions. Strong emotions had been part of such relationships since time immemorial, even with less than charming or handsome physicians. Rather than feeling guilty for having aroused amorous feelings in his patients, or simply running away from them like Breuer, Freud came to view them as part and parcel of what he called “transference love” – love transferred onto the physician from some other real or idealized figure in a patient's life.

Transference was, he hypothesized, a case of mistaken identity: the love his patients expressed was not love for him, but rather love for the role he played, love for what he agreed to represent – the helpful, healing Other who listens to us and seems to know what ails us. Feelings stirred up in patients engaged in the talking cure were

incommensurate with what their doctor said or did, but those feelings could, he found, be harnessed and made to serve as the motor force of the therapeutic process.

Now, not only is love the mainspring of psychoanalytic work, it also turns out to be the number one source of complaints addressed to analysts, therapists, and counselors of every ilk even today. People more often than not enter therapy seeking help with or relief from what the minstrel calls “this crazy little thing called love”² and what writers go so far as to call a malady.³

Complaints about Love

For I have sworn thee fair, and thought thee bright,
Who art as black as hell, as dark as night.

Shakespeare, *Sonnet 147*, lines 13–14

Love has often been viewed as an illness of sorts and is experienced by people as debilitating for a wide variety of reasons. Some of the major complaints about love one hears, whether they are proclaimed over the airwaves, online, or on the couch, include:

- I never manage to meet anyone who measures up to my exacting standards or fits my criteria; or, if I do, that person is already involved with someone else.
- When I do manage to find someone to love who is available, my love is unrequited or never adequately returned.
- I can never achieve the kind of fusion that I seek with my beloved; and if, by some miracle, I am able to do so momentarily, love quickly fades.
- My beloved cannot handle the intensity of my feelings – passion, rage, jealousy, fury – and cannot stand what I most enjoy.
- My beloved is deceptive, fickle, unfaithful, disloyal, jealous, possessive, toxic, and unfair – in a word, impossible – bringing me nothing but pain.
- The person I am crazy about has fallen in love, not with me but with someone else: my best friend or my sibling.
- My best friend has fallen in love and forgotten all about me.
- I am constantly wracked by thoughts that someone will steal my beloved from me; night and day I worry my beloved will meet someone new, someone better.
- I walk on eggshells, fearing lest an unthinking comment I make may cool the fires of my partner’s passion for me – if my beloved knew me as I truly am, all would be lost.

- I am never loved for myself but only for my appearance, what I represent, or what I possess; what my beloved loves seems to have nothing to do with me.

These are just a few of the complaints about love that we hear, and many of them are as old as writings about love itself, going back well before Ovid's *Art of Love*, published in 1 B.C.

But are they all of a piece? Do they all involve the same facet(s) of love? To frame the question differently, are they all situated at the same level? Hardly. Some of them concern love triangles (for example, "I'm in love with her but she's in love with him"), which, I will suggest, are best understood from the *symbolic* or structural standpoint (for readers who are not already familiar with these Lacanian terms, I will give an account of what they mean as we go along).

Others involve looking for someone who fits a vast array of pre-established criteria, which is often a screen for seeking a "soul mate" – that is, someone believed to be just like us (or just like the us we prefer to imagine we are). These can perhaps be understood as *imaginary*-order phenomena, involving as they do a search for someone who is a perfect likeness, mirror image, or reflection of ourselves.

Still others involve being captivated by another person the way one is when one falls in love at first sight, like Kierkegaard did with Regina, knowing little or nothing about the beloved in advance. This may signal a process best situated in the register of the *real*, which short-circuits desire and the doubts and second-guessing often endemic to it.

Words, Words, Words

To speak of love is in itself a jouissance.

Lacan, 1998a, p. 83

Encompassing, as it does, such diverse things, our language of love needs to be refined if we are to grasp the complexity of love triangles (they primarily involve desire, which is a thing of language), the choice of partners based on how similar they are to ourselves (key here is narcissism, which is organized on the basis of images), and the experience of being thunderstruck upon first encountering someone with whom every joy seems instantly possible (the first glimpse of the person is perhaps somehow immediately associated with satisfaction of the drives).