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There seems to be a lack (as well as some contradictions) in Lacan’s conception of love. This is because, as Jean Allouch reminds us, Lacan’s love excludes the existence of its own theory (Allouch, 2007, 81). In line with the Pascalian philosophical tradition that Lacan often refers to in relation to the limits of love and knowledge, I shall name this lack “wager.” As is often the case, that which is absent or incipient in theories proposed by psychoanalysts, is already articulated in the words of the poets. I’d like to suggest that this “wager,” consonant though it is with Lacan’s theory of object a, cause of desire, figures in the first book of Marcel Proust’s *Remembrance of Things Past*, where it is made clear that what triggers love is not merely predicated upon some attraction / repulsion caused by the object a located in the other, but upon the subject’s symbolic *decision* to fall in love, a decision that takes the form of a wager. I dwell on a key passage in *Swann’s Way* and then continue to draw on Proust’s text in order to discuss Lacan’s ideas about love and narcissism, love and the sign, love and the One, love and jouissance, and finally love and knowledge.

It is a symbolic decision to fall in love that first motivates Swann’s attraction for Odette De Crécy as he was “at the time of life, tinged already with disenchantment … when a man can content himself with being in love for the pleasure of loving without expecting too much in return” (Proust, 1976 [1913-27] vol 1, 270). The wager consists in falling in love with a woman whose “style of beauty left him indifferent, which aroused in him no desire, which gave him, indeed, a sort of physical repulsion” (Proust, 1976 [1913-27], vol 1, 270). The narrator has just detailed Odette’s repulsive kind of beauty and its impact on Swann: “to give him any pleasure her profile was too sharp, her skin too delicate, her cheek-bones too prominent, her features too tightly drawn. Her eyes were fine, but so large that they seemed to be bending their own weight, strained the rest of her face and always made her appear unwell or in an ill humour” (Proust, 1976 [1913-27], vol 1, 269-70). Nonetheless, Swann’s love endures until he realises his mistake at the end of *Swann’s way*:

> to think that I have wasted years of my life, that I have longed for death, that the greatest love that I have ever known has been for a woman who did not please me, who was not in my style,

superimposing as he does, albeit narrated in the third person, his sense of disappointment with the memory of his first impression of Odette: “he thought once again of his dream; he saw once again, as he had felt them close beside him, Odette’s pallid complexion, her too thin cheeks, her drawn features, her tired eyes” (Proust, 1976 [1913-27], vol 2, 228). Thus Proust turns Swann’s love into “a long oblivion of the first impression”, for the sake of safeguarding the initial pledge to engage in a love affair despite the absence of prior desire—the wager (Proust, 1976 [1913-27], vol 2, 228).
I concede that Proust’s wager is not incompatible with Lacan’s conception of love, in particular, love as a failure of the unconscious, a view which is most prominent in Seminar XXIV. But it seems to me that Swann’s love for Odette is to be compared with the analysand’s “passionate love, as it is experienced literally by the subject, as a sort of psychological catastrophe” (Lacan, 1991, 24). The Wager is Swann’s pact with himself. In other words, there is a symbolic dimension to love.

1. Self-love
By way of an introduction, let us return to Swann in Love, at the point in the narrative where he is “at an age when it would appear—since one seeks in love before everything else a subjective pleasure—that the taste for feminine beauty must play the larger part in its procreation, love may come into being, love of the most physical order, without any foundation in desire” (Proust, 1976 [1913-27], vol 1, 270-71).

From Seminar VI to VIII, XI to XII, and XX to XXIV, Lacan has proposed quite a few definitions of love that are not necessarily compatible with each other. Thus in 1964 he apologised to his audience: “last year… I spoke badly about love…I said that the field of love was deeply rooted in the real, in the regulation of pleasure and at the same time seriously narcissistic” (Lacan, 1964, session of 16.12.1964). And indeed, in The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis he had made clear his repudiation of Freud’s way, so to speak. Even though love is rooted in the real of the drive, he insists, it should be distinguished from it:

_I suggest that there is a radical distinction between loving oneself through the other—which, in the narcissistic field of the object, allows no transcendence to the object included—and the circularity of the drive, in which the heterogeneity of the movement out and back shows a gap in its interval_ (Lacan, 1978 [1965-66], 194).

According to Lacan, Freud’s theorising about the passage from voyeurism to exhibitionism leaves something to be desired: it posits that the subject identifies with the object, i.e., his sexual member, and thus “looks at himself…in his sexual member” (Lacan, 1978 [1965-66], 194). On the other hand, it is not easy to accept that this same member “delights at being looked at” (Lacan, 1978 [1965-66], 194). In this light, Freud’s formula of the drive needs to be modified: the German passive Werden is not appropriate. Lacan suggests that instead of saying “being looked at” one should say “making oneself seen”: “The activity of the drive is concentrated in thus making oneself (se faire)” (Lacan, 1978 [1965-66], 194). Lacan’s point here is that there are no passive drives: a point already made by Freud. However, unlike Freud, Lacan also stresses the need for grammar to signify this state of affairs in the symbolic. The drive always entails some exertion: though one might speak of fantasies of being gobbled up, for instance, the oral drive is getting sucked, and it is the vampire (Lacan, 1978 [1965-66], 195). Or, as Lacan puts it elsewhere: “a masochistic drive… requires that the masochist give himself…a devil of a job” (Lacan, 1978 [1965-66], 200). Thus in the narcissistic field of love, “there is a reciprocity of loving and being loved” (Lacan, 1978 [1965-66], 200). However, since the image of the other is nothing but me, and since I constitute myself in the other’s image, narcissism is always split and splitting.
Conversely, what I shall call the romantic experience entails “going beyond the mirror” (Lacan, 1964, session of 16.12.1964). This position is that which gives way to the experience of love. At this point, though, Lacan eschews any definition of this experience of love. The context of the Seminar, however, locates this experience not within the field of narcissism, but in the field of the double encountered in “The Uncanny” (Freud, 1919). And so love is ghosted, so to speak, until Lacan returns to it in Seminar XX.

2. Love as sign
Whereas desire addresses itself to an object, love addresses itself to the signifier, for “love demands the signifier” (Lacan, 1998 [1972-73], 4). This is why one can say that love tends towards the symbolic. Thus just as desire is the desire of the Other, “love demands love” (Lacan, 1998 [1972-73], 4). As Proust puts it: “this linking of hearts...is bound to love by so strong an association of ideas that it may well become the cause of love if it presents itself first” (Proust, 1976 [1913-27], vol 1, 270). However, love is primarily discord: it is “a passion that involves ignorance of desire” (Lacan, 1998 [1972-73], 4). “Analysis”, stresses Lacan, “demonstrates that love, in its essence, is narcissistic” (Lacan, 1998 [1972-73], 6). It is a lure, an effect of the imaginary. And so, in Seminar XX, Lacan situates love in opposition to the signifier as well as in opposition to desire whilst suggesting that one cannot speak about love: “what I say of love is assuredly that one cannot speak about it” (Lacan, 1998 [1972-73], 12). Love is thus a sign in the sense that “the sign is not the sign of some thing, but of an effect...of the signifier much as smoke may be the sign of a smoker” (Lacan, 1998 [1972-73], 49).

It seems to me though, that Lacan does not quite distinguish between the different uses one can make of the signifier, for he ends up discussing love along the same lines as he discusses the sexual rapport—which, as we know, does not exist, since man only experiences one kind of jouissance, the phallic one. Sexual jouissance can follow no other path than the one opened up by the phallus. Though it has to pass through speech, it does not give access to the Other. Similarly, love fails to “make One”:

Love is impotent, though mutual, because it is not aware that it is but the desire to be One, which leads us to the impossibility of establishing the relationship between ‘them-two’ (la relation d’eux). The relationship between them-two what? Them-two sexes (Lacan, 1998 [1972-73], 6).

3. Love and the One
It is to Lacan’s credit that he demystifies the “One” of the fusion between two beings: whether a man and a woman or two partners of the same sex, these will never escape the real of alterity, that which fundamentally divides them—that which presents itself as a left-over. There is no signifier of love in the sense that there is no science of the sexual which can be articulated, since nothing in language answers the supposed mythical “One”. But it is ironic that Lacan should invoke the myth of the “One” not only in order to repudiate it, but also (and more importantly), to seemingly construct a theory whose coherence stems from this very repudiation. To say that there is no sexual rapport, or that love is impossible because of it being real, only makes sense if one posits the One-possible. Now Lacan sustains the view that there has never been the One; that is, that the so-called primal scene envisaged as combined parents is but a fiction. In the child’s fantasy, mother and father are always
two distinct people. Lacan’s theory of love is thus a negative one: not only is love a lure, but it is impossible to speak about it. The blundering of the unconscious—the blundering that is the unconscious—arises precisely from the fact that there is no sexual rapport. It is the failure of the sexual rapport to make the One that produces love as an imaginary attempt to supplement radical discord.

The formula “there is no such thing as a sexual relationship” (Lacan, 1998 [1972-73], 61), has, one has to say, lost some of the staggering power it might have had when Lacan first said it, possibly because it is easier to situate it now in the context of the controversy that opposed Lacan to what one could call adaptive and psychologising psychoanalysis according to which the aim of the treatment was to achieve full object love; that is, genital love and self-denial. Still, the paradox recedes if one looks at this formula in the context of Lacan’s discourse: what Lacan is on about is the analytic situation where it is quite obvious that love arises because of the fact that the sexual relationship is excluded from it. For want of making love, the subject gives her love to the subject-supposed-to-know or supposed-subject-of-knowledge. “Transference is love…I insist”, says Lacan in his introduction to the German edition of *Ecrits*, “love that addresses itself to knowledge. Not desire: for the *Wisstriebe*, even with Freud’s imprimatur, pull the other one, there is not one little bit of it” (Lacan, 1972, 16). Proust would have agreed. Indeed, in the early stages of her liaison with Swann, Odette De Crécy is anything but self-deprecating. At one stage, she describes herself as “a little wild thing…beside a learned man like [Swann]”, addressing a demand to the subject supposed to know and supposed subject of knowledge: “I should so much like to learn, to know things, to be initiated” (Proust, 1976 [1913-27], vol 1, 272).

4. Love, sign, jouissance and the other love, plus one

One can see that jouissance cannot possibly be the sign of love, for jouissance is never the fusion of the two, but jouissance of the organ. In lovemaking, man does not enjoy a woman’s body, but the ownership of the penis as the source of the pleasure he cannot experience as the other of the other sex. Jouissance would be to know the jouissance of the other sex as well as one’s own.

Lacan says that love is a sign. But what does he mean by sign? Smoke, he says, is not necessarily the sign of a fire. Smoke can just as well be the sign of a smoker, or of the person who lit the fire. A sign, then, “is not the sign of some thing, but of an effect that is presumed as such by a functioning of the signifier”, an effect which is also “the starting point of analytic discourse, namely, the subject” (Lacan, 1998 [1972-73], 49). This is what enables Lacan to say:

*In love what is aimed at is the subject, the subject as such, insofar as he is presumed in an articulated sentence, in something that is organised or can be organised on the basis of a whole life.*

A subject as such, doesn’t have much to do with jouissance. But, on the other hand, his sign is capable of arousing desire. Therein lies the mainspring of love. (Lacan, 1998 [1972-73], 49-50)
A symptom is not a sign with a particular cause, like the sign associating smoke with fire in the French proverb Lacan refers to. A symptom signals that there is a subject. In fact, Lacan also says that a woman is a man’s symptom. There is, however, a problem. If love can give way to desire, desire does not necessarily give way to love. But where does this initial love arise from? It would seem that it is the mythical One. Love, Lacan suggests, arises from the primordial gap that separates the subject from the One, leaving in abeyance the anxiety that arises from the fact that there is no universal answer to need. This must explain why, as Proust conveys it in *Swann in Love*, love is not only triggered by some attraction/repulsion for the other, but also by a decision to fall in love, a wager in the guise of a series of associations on the signifier “love”.

For, what is it that prompts this decision at the origin of love, if not the wish to make One: to give consistency to the signifier One? This is, at least what Lacan seems to suggest in the following statements: “the signifier is the cause of jouissance”, “the signifier is, first of all, imperative”, “jouissance of the Other…is not a sign of love” and “the Other, in my terminology, can…only be the Other sex” (Lacan, 1998 [1972-73], 24; 32; 38; 39).

5. Love and the sigh…

1. The signifier is the cause of jouissance. What does Lacan mean by signifier and jouissance here? The jouissance is not the jouissance of the Mother, here, unnameable Thing, nor what the father secures for himself in the secrecy of his death, but the enjoyment of some part of a body: “a body that symbolises the Other”, thus some part object” (Lacan, 1998 [1972-73], 23). Here, the signifier is not the phallus, but only that which isolates some body part in the other as possible source of pleasure. Does this mean that the signifier is the cause of pleasure—and not of jouissance, since for Lacan, both the signifier and pleasure are “what brings jouissance to a halt?” (Lacan, 1998 [1972-73], 24).

2. The signifier is, first of all, imperative. Enjoy! In this particular context, jouissance means two things: on the one hand it refers to pleasure, which is in fact only its limit, and on the other it means the vocative commandment. As we know, Lacan unpicks the word jouissance as *j’ouie sens* (*I hear sense*), hence collapsing the superego with the imperative signifier that manifests itself under the guise of the voice of the other (the voice of conscience for Sade and verbal hallucination for Kant). For the subject, the signifier is prescriptive: “the signifier commands” (Lacan, 1998 [1972-73], 32).

3. Jouissance is not a sign of love. This proposition can be deduced from Freud, for whom there is but one libido: the phallic one. In the act of lovemaking, both man and woman relate to the phallus and not to the other as such. A man relates to the jouissance of his own organ and to the signifier One, which means that “woman will never be taken up but *quod matrem* Woman serves a function in the sexual relationship only *qua mother*” (Lacan, 1998 [1972-73], 35). As to man, his function is “*quoad castrationem*, in other words, insofar as he has a relation to phallic jouissance” (Lacan, 1998 [1972-73], 35). Love is just as impossible as the sexual relation, since for man love tends less towards pleasure or possession of a woman than towards the making of One; that is, making
one with the (lethal) mother. As Proust puts it: “in his younger days a man dreams of possessing the heart of a woman whom he loves; later, the feeling that he possesses the heart of a woman may be enough to make him fall in love with her” (Proust, 1976 [1913-27] vol 1, 270). Love does, however, also tend towards the uncastrated and uncastratable Other, the signifier of the phallus ( ). Sexual pleasure prevents jouissance from erupting by containing it in the signifier. It turns out that the sexual act is always a kind of impediment to incest and anxiety, the affect impeding jouissance. To put it differently, the sexual act is the first step towards repression or sublimation. Conversely, the unity of thought is a fantasy, for “thought has to defend itself only against sexual acts, because in the sexual act the subject becomes split” (Lacan, 2001 [1966-67], 325. The sexual act also signifies the entry of sexuality in the realm of the Law. Both its pleasurable failure at joining the sexes and its finality explain not only why one repeats it again and again (encore!), but also why this repetition is unconsciously and symbolically necessary.

On the side of woman, the situation is a little more complex, for something escapes this problematics, even though feminine desire is partly phallic—and thus on the side of the Law. A woman desires what she does not have, notably, a penis. What she finds in her child, for instance, is not it, but a signifier: the phallus. What about feminine jouissance? Invoking the clinic and female clinicians, Lacan says that women cannot speak about their jouissance. Moreover, he says that it could very well be the case that women experience jouissance without being aware of it, which refutes the myth of frigidity. “There is a jouissance that is hers”, he claims, “that belongs to that ‘she’ (elle) that doesn’t exist and that doesn’t signify anything. There is a jouissance that is hers about which she herself knows nothing of it not that she experiences it—that much she knows” (Lacan, 1998 [1972-73], 74). Does this mean that men can speak about their jouissance? Lacan seems to imply here that whereas a woman can enjoy unconsciously, a man can’t.

Lacan’ s conception is no doubt Freudian here, based as it is on the ‘enigma’ of femininity and on the notion of a preoedipal attachment to the mother often invoked to explain how a daughter’s love for her father is but a transference from her primary attachment to the mother as Melanie Klein thought.

If woman is not wholly subjected to castration, it is because she is not under the imperative rule of the phantasm of castration. Not only because, as the saying goes, she hasn’t got anything to lose, but above all because, as Lacan has shown elsewhere, she has not experienced—could not have experienced, the crucial moment of symbolisation that the little boy experiences when, under the threat of castration, he chooses to keep his penis by conferring upon his member a symbolic value: the phallus. For woman, it seems, there is only one solution: that she make herself into the object of the desire of the other, that she give herself as object, perhaps, in the hope of attaining the status of phallus. The Lacanian Other takes on yet another meaning here, since in Encore it is no longer the mother, father, locus of speech, language, but merely the other sex:
4. The Other, in my terminology can thus only be the Other sex. And a strangely disembodied sex at that, since both man and woman are now signifiers, which explains why love is homosexual, or “homosexual” (Lacan, 1998 [1972-73], 85).

A man is nothing but a signifier. A woman seeks out a man qua signifier (au titre de signifiant). A man seeks out a woman qua — and this might strike you as odd — that which can only be situated through discourse, since, if what I claim is true—namely, that woman is not-whole—there is always something in her that escapes discourse. (Lacan, 1998 [1972-73], 35).

In the light of these two quotations, Woman has to be defined as “notwhole”; as not entirely defined by phallic jouissance and femininity establishes itself beyond the control of these representational effects. I do not need to invoke the feminists to note that here Lacan rounds off a philosophical tradition which, from Plato and Aristotle up to Hegel and Freud, has attributed to women the status of inferior beings on the side of emotion, affectivity, the domestic and private, the incarnation of desire, etc. Woman, on the side of matter, finds herself through this pallocentric path on the side of the royal road of the symbolic; that is, in the real. Woman is notwhole because she does not make One before man and because there is no signifier to symbolise her. In other words, woman is but a signified without signifier.

Does this mean that a woman is incapable of love? Is this what the promiscuous Odette De Crecy means when she exclaims: “you are afraid of falling in love? How funny that is, when I go about seeking nothing else, and would give my soul just to find a little love somewhere!” (Proust, 1976 [1913-27] vol 1, 273).

By way of conclusion: the return of knowledge as real symbolic wager

By way of conclusion: the return of knowledge as real symbolic wager
If she is incapable of love, at least she can thank her lucky stars for remaining an enigma. Lacan proposes in Seminar XVII that knowledge is the means to jouissance. There is an echo of these words in Encore: “I love the person I assume to have knowledge” (Lacan, 1998 [1972-73], 46) But what knowledge does one endow woman with in her jouissance? I suggest that there is no answer to this vexed question as knowledge exists only by virtue of being an enigma: “knowledge is an enigma” says Lacan towards the end of Encore, precisely because it is a jouissance (Lacan, 1998 [1972-73], 137). Is it this enigma, this knowledge, that man’s love addresses itself to, then?

Ultimately, just as there is no sexual relationship, love is asymmetrical. Feminine love is a woman’s request to a man for what he does not have, whilst masculine love is a request to the woman for being what she cannot be. There is no completeness. No totality. This is where Lacan differs from Freud. For Lacan, the two sexes aim at complementing each other only by virtue of an imaginary fantasy, or aim at finding this union in an intensely frustrating symbolic decision to love, as in marriage, for instance, since “all marriages, and not only neurotic ones, carry castration with them” (Lacan, 1994 [1956-57], 213). Here lies love’s real symbolic wager.
Notes


References


