



LACAN
ON
LOVE

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

BRUCE FINK

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)

Lacan on Love

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

Bruce Fink

polity

Copyright © Bruce Fink 2016

The right of Bruce Fink to be identified as Author of this Work has been asserted in accordance with the UK Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988.

First published in 2016 by Polity Press

Polity Press
65 Bridge Street
Cambridge CB2 1UR, UK

Polity Press
350 Main Street
Malden, MA 02148, USA

All rights reserved. Except for the quotation of short passages for the purpose of criticism and review, no part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the prior permission of the publisher.

ISBN-13: 978-1-5095-0049-9

ISBN-13: 978-1-5095-0050-5(pb)

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Fink, Bruce, 1956- , author.

Lacan on love : an exploration of Lacan's Seminar VIII, Transference / Bruce Fink.
p. ; cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-1-5095-0049-9 (hardcover : alk. paper) -- ISBN 1-5095-0049-9 (hardcover : alk. paper) -- ISBN 978-1-5095-0050-5 (pbk. : alk. paper) -- ISBN 1-5095-0050-2 (pbk. : alk. paper)

I. Title.

[DNLM: 1. Lacan, Jacques, 1901–1981. Séminaire de Jacques Lacan. Livre 8, Transfert : 1960–1961. 2. Love. 3. Transference (Psychology) 4. Psychoanalytic Theory. WM 62]

RC454

616.89--dc23

2015009802

Typeset in 10.5 on 12 pt Times NR MT by Servis Filmsetting Ltd, Stockport, Cheshire
Printed and bound in the US by Courier Digital Solutions, North Chelmsford, MA.

The publisher has used its best endeavours to ensure that the URLs for external websites referred to in this book are correct and active at the time of going to press. However, the publisher has no responsibility for the websites and can make no guarantee that a site will remain live or that the content is or will remain appropriate.

Every effort has been made to trace all copyright holders, but if any have been inadvertently overlooked the publisher will be pleased to include any necessary credits in any subsequent reprint or edition.

For further information on Polity, visit our website: politybooks.com

Contents

Preface	vii
Introduction	1

THE SYMBOLIC

I.	Freudian Preludes: Love Triangles Obsessives in Love • Hysterics in Love	9
II.	Freudian Conundrums: Love Is Incompatible with Desire “Where They Love They Do Not Desire” • “Where They Desire They Do Not Love” • On Women, Love, and Desire • Too Little • Too Much	16
III.	Lacan’s Reading of Plato’s <i>Symposium</i> Love Is Giving What You Don’t Have • Not Having and Not Knowing • Love as a Metaphor: The Signification of Love • The Miracle of Love • Love in the Analytic Context	33

THE IMAGINARY

IV.	Freudian Preludes: Narcissism Narcissism and Love • Love for the Ego-Ideal	55
V.	Lacan’s Imaginary Register Animals in the Imaginary • Animals in Love • The Formative Role of Images in Human Beings • The Mirror Stage • The Image We Love More Than Ourselves: The Ideal Ego • The Myth of Narcissus • Sibling Rivalry • Lacan’s “Beloved”: Crimes of Passion • “Family Complexes” • Transitivity • The Intrusion (or Fraternal) Complex and the “Solipsistic Ego” • Love and Psychosis • The Dangers of Imaginary-Based Love • Imaginary Passion in the Analytic Setting	62

THE REAL

VI.	Love and the Real	93
	Repetition Compulsion • The Unsymbolizable • Love at First Sight • The Other Jouissance • Love Is Real? • Love and the Drives • Love as a Link	
	GENERAL CONSIDERATIONS ON LOVE	
VII.	Languages and Cultures of Love	107
	Dependency (or so-called Natural Love) • Attachment • Friendship • Agape (or Christian Love) • Hatred • Attraction • Fixation on the Human Form (Beauty) • Physical Love, Sexual Desire, Lust, Concupiscence, Sex Drive • <i>Fin' Amor</i> (Courtly Love) • Romantic Love • Falling in Love (à la Stendhal) • Other Languages and Cultures of Love	
VIII.	Reading Plato with Lacan: Further Commentary on Plato's <i>Symposium</i>	163
	The Relationship between Form and Content in the <i>Symposium</i> • Homosexual Love as a Simplified Model • Phaedrus: Love and Theology • Pausanias: The Psychology of the Rich • Eryximachus: Love as Harmony • Agathon's Speech • Socrates' Speech and the In-Between (<i>Metaxú</i>) • Love Triangles Revisited • The Six Stages of Socrates' Speech • After Socrates' Speech • The "Mystery" of the Relationship between Socrates and Alcibiades • Socrates' "Interpretation" • Socrates' "Mistake" • Parting Shot	
IX.	Some Possible Conclusions about Love	200
	Unanswered Questions • Love and Psychoanalysis	
	Notes	207
	References	236
	Index	246

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 psychological 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.

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).

I will attempt to explore some of the myriad facets of love by situating them at their corresponding levels: symbolic, imaginary, or real. The reader may be aware that Lacan's early work focused on what he referred to as the imaginary, his middle work in the 1950s and early 1960s on what he called the symbolic, and his work in the mid- to late 1960s and the 1970s on what he defined as the real. The imaginary, briefly stated, involves sensory images, above all, visual images of the self and others. The symbolic, on the other hand, concerns language and structure. And the real centers on the body and its range of possible satisfactions.

Lacan's focus on the various components of what we rather oversimplistically call "love" (and what the Greeks more generally called "Eros") tends to involve shifting vocabularies: at times he speaks of love where we might feel it clearer to speak of desire or even more specifically of sexual desire, and at other times he speaks of desire where it might seem it is actually love that is at issue. But such is our language of love in both French and English, or so it seems to me. As a first step toward clarifying things, I suspect many readers would agree that to tell someone, "I want you," is not exactly the same as to say, "I love you."

Eschewing chronology, the first part of this book, "The Symbolic," takes up Freud's and then Lacan's discussions of love as something tied to the symbolic register of experience since they are, perhaps, the easiest to grasp. The second part, "The Imaginary," covers imaginary phenomena and the third part, "The Real," the facets of love that can be characterized as real in the Lacanian sense of the term. In the fourth part, "General Considerations on Love," I review and examine a few of the many varied languages and cultures of love, found in the work of such authors as Aquinas, Aristotle, Augustine, Capellanus, Crenne, Gide, Kierkegaard, Rougemont, Stendhal, and others; then I provide a detailed exploration of Lacan's commentary on Plato's *Symposium* and, using Lacan's formulations as a springboard, my own further interpretations of the dialogue. In the final chapter, I enumerate a few conclusions that I believe we can safely draw from Lacan's discussion in Seminar VIII and highlight a number of still unanswered questions.

Although the later parts of the book generally build on the earlier parts, much of the fourth part can be followed without having read the second and third parts, and certain readers may prefer to return to those parts after reading the fourth part.

THE SYMBOLIC

I

Freudian Preludes

Love Triangles

One might wonder whether anything in psychoanalysis could better illustrate what Lacan calls the “symbolic order” – an order characterized by language and structure – than love triangles. Freud devotes several papers to discussing the kinds of love triangles in which specific groups of neurotic men and women, whom he refers to as obsessives (or obsessional) and hysterics (or hysterical), all too often find themselves entangled. We shall see to what degree what we learn from these subsections of the population is applicable to human beings more generally.

Obsessives in Love

There are certain men, Freud tells us in “On the Universal Tendency to Debasement in the Sphere of Love,”¹ who are incapable of falling in love with a woman unless she is already involved with another man. A woman is uninteresting to such men in the absence of this formal, structural, symbolic condition – a condition that obviously harks back to the Oedipal triangle where, right from the outset, boys had a rival for their mothers’ affections in the form of their fathers (and/or siblings).² Freud indicates that such men need to feel jealous of and have “gratifying impulses of rivalry and hostility” toward the other man, the man who was already involved with the woman before he came on the scene.³

Men who love in this way often end up having a whole series of triangular attachments, proving that it is not the particular women they fall for who are important but rather *the structural situation itself*: a situation including a woman who is already “taken” and the man who “possesses” her. Should the woman in question leave her boyfriend, fiancé, or husband, the triangle collapses and the woman is no longer of any interest to our lover, who can no longer

fancy himself an interloper or invader of the other man's territory. It is only the continued *impossibility* of the situation – the enduring hopelessness of ever possessing the other man's woman – that keeps him interested; as soon as the obstacle to possession disappears, so too does his love for her.

This is an obsessive configuration insofar as the obsessive's desire is always for something impossible: to attain an unattainable status (e.g., perfection, omniscience, or immortality), to complete an uncompletable project, or to possess what he cannot possess. In saying that the obsessive is characterized by an impossible desire, Lacan goes so far as to add that his desire is for impossibility itself.⁴ A relationship with a woman is not in and of itself appealing or gratifying enough to our obsessive: it must be mediated by a living, breathing, third party who renders his quest unrealizable, allowing him to go on dreaming “the impossible dream” (as the Broadway musical *Man of La Mancha* put it).

This third party may be no older than our lover, even if older men are the most enjoyable targets of his rage and shenanigans. The obsessive is most intrigued when the Other man is clearly designated, in socially recognizable linguistic terms of the historical era and culture, as having an official status as a boyfriend, lover, partner, fiancé, husband, or whatever the other terms of the time and place may be (for example, *mignon*, *favori*, “favorite,” or “servant”). Yet even when the third party simply is someone who occasionally hangs around the woman (actually or virtually), having some sort of nebulous, vague, undefined relationship with her, our obsessive can often imagine that he is far more substantial than he appears to be or than she lets on – that is, that he is a genuine father-like rival.

Although it may appear outwardly that our lover is captivated by another man's woman, it is the Other man himself who is of libidinal centrality to him – for it is the obsessive's competition with this Other man that gets his juices flowing, so to speak, that gets him angry or stirred up, feeling, by turns, inferior or superior to him. Consciously he believes that it is the Other man's woman who fascinates him; unconsciously it is the battle with the Other man that fascinates him.⁵

The ostensible goal here seems to be to defeat this man (and get his girl), just as one wished, but failed, to defeat one's own father back in the day. Perhaps at age three to five, the young would-be father slayer felt he knew what he would do with the prize of such a glorious victory (he would be with her always, cuddle with her, and take his father's place in the conjugal bed with her); but at age 20, 30, or 40, he no longer wants her once he wins her, should he ever – whether accidentally or inadvertently – win her.

It should be kept in mind that, although such obsessive love triangles are currently most common among men, they can also be found among women, many of whom are hardly strangers to obsession.

Let us turn now to hysterics and their triangles.

Hysterics in Love

There are certain women, Freud tells us, who are especially attuned to any expression by their beloved of even the slightest interest in another woman (the prime example he gives is that of the witty hysteric in *The Interpretation of Dreams*).⁶ Should he seem to appreciate, esteem, or compliment a woman he knows from work or some other context and express this in even the most tepid of terms, a chain reaction is set off: our lover becomes jealous – sometimes insanely so – and insistently inquires about this woman, seeking to discern what her beloved could possibly see in her. (Just as certain women are no strangers to obsession, certain men are no strangers to hysteria, and one can thus find such acute attunement to expressions of the partner's interest in another in both men and women, in heterosexual and homosexual couples alike.)⁷

The question that spurs the female hysteric on is, according to Lacan, “How can another woman be loved?”⁸ – in other words, how can this man, who professes to love *me*, find something to love in another? He claims to be well satisfied with me and yet along comes someone who is *nothing* like me and he finds plenty to praise in her! This proves that I am no longer the be-all and end-all of his existence – I must find a way to reclaim my rightful place.

“How can another woman be loved?” might be more colloquially formulated as, “What’s she got that I ain’t got?” Perhaps if I study her carefully and get to know all about her, I can fathom her secret, plumbing simultaneously the secret cause of this unsuspected desire in my beloved.

It is not terribly difficult to discern a parallel here with the little girl’s question: “Why does Daddy love Mommy more than me?” (after all, he shares his bed with her, not me, and he talks with her about my misbehavior but not with me about hers).⁹ What does he see in her? What can she give him that I can’t? One of the classic answers is a baby, explaining at least in part little girls’ interest in baby dolls, which they imagine to be babies they have had with Daddy.

Just as a little girl may observe her mother to learn how a woman must walk, talk, dress – in short, be – in order to attract Daddy, the hysteric becomes fascinated with the infamous “other woman”

to learn what she must do and how she must act to captivate her beloved. Her fascination with this other woman at times goes so far as to easily surpass her interest in her beloved.

Women who can charm her man (and perhaps enchant other men as well) sometimes become so intriguing to the hysteric that the man himself becomes secondary – no more than a vehicle, vertex on a triangle, or traffic sign that points her desire in a certain direction. She begins to emulate these alluring women. Without thinking about it in most cases, she finds herself becoming like them in certain ways, even in ways that are of no interest whatsoever to her partner. She may well become fixated, for example, on clothing, hairstyles, and body shapes that are not attractive to him and that even turn him off.

Women's preoccupation in recent decades with a look that has been fostered in the media by fashion designers and photographers for the most part – skeleton-like thinness – has rarely, if ever, been appreciated by the kind of men who are actually excited by women. A vast swath of the current female population seems to have come to believe that, since such undernourished women were finding their way to the covers of magazines, men must find such boniness glamorous and attractive, failing to realize that the fashion industry has long been dominated by men who are *not* especially attracted to women (and who are often even disgusted by the mature female figure, especially insofar as it differs from a prepubescent boyish figure). Men who *are* sexually attracted to women, like the husband of the witty hysteric in Freud's early example, generally prefer fuller, more feminine forms to boyish figures.

Try as a man might to convince a hysterical partner that, although he finds certain women in their entourage vaguely interesting in one way or another, he is not turned on by their thinness, she may nevertheless latch onto their shape as something to imitate – after all, can he be trusted when he says he does not find that appealing? Perhaps he is just saying that to mollify me. Isn't that the most obvious, *visible* difference between them and me? Perhaps he does not know his own mind and will find himself inexplicably drawn to me if I become thin like them.¹⁰ In any case, it is not the specific qualities or personality traits of the other woman that are so important to her; what is crucial is her *structural position* as someone who finds a way to elicit a desire in a partner whose desire may well be experienced by the hysteric as flagging if not altogether dead.

Now what happens if the hysteric's love triangle collapses? Recall that the obsessive who inadvertently succeeds in breaking up the Other man's relationship – or who witnesses the splitting up of the couple through no doing of his own – suddenly has no more use for

the woman of his purported dreams than a fish for a bicycle. Unless there is a chance of her getting back together with her partner, in which case the regular intervention of the former partner can fuel the obsessive's continued interest. What happens if the hysteric's partner loses all interest in the other woman? Will the hysteric feel triumphant at having bested her rival? Perhaps momentarily, but it is likely that she will seek to discern an interest in yet another woman on her partner's part, failing which she may go so far as to introduce a new woman to her partner in the hope of eliciting a desire in him that she may then explore.

For when there is no desire in her partner to excavate, she feels that he is dead – and then she might as well be too. Desire is, as Spinoza tells us, the essence of humankind,¹¹ and we must ever be looking for something or engaged in a quest of some kind. Just as the obsessive must always have a rival rendering his desire impossible, the hysteric must always locate a desire in her partner for something outside of or beyond herself, suggesting that he is dissatisfied or suffers from a lack of satisfaction. If he wants something it must be, as Socrates would have it, because he feels that he does not have it and longs for it.¹² It is not enough if she detects a desire in him for something he does not have in a realm that does not involve her – work, sports, hobbies, or the like – for he will still be dead as concerns herself. If he does not have, or no longer has or expresses, a desire for something that involves or otherwise concerns her – as is very often the case, especially when the relationship has gone beyond the initial stages of infatuation – she may attempt to incite one in him.

It should not be thought that her goal, in detecting or eliciting such a desire in her beloved, is to satisfy him – to help him obtain, for example, whatever or whomever he wants – for once satisfied his desire would disappear and she would need to begin the whole process anew. He must continue to be wanting – feeling deprived of something – for it is his wanting that gives her a project and place in life.

She may consciously believe that his wanting troubles and frustrates her greatly, and that she would like nothing more than to be able to give him precisely what he wants (were such a thing even possible, but more on that later). Yet were she to do so, there would be nothing left to be desired, for him or for her. And a life without desire is to be avoided at all costs, for it is tantamount to nonexistence, death.

Hence, should she like nothing more than to give him what he wants (and it is not always clear that she does), she must frustrate this tendency in herself; she must resist her own temptation. She