

Presentation of the 2025 NLS Congress Theme

by Patricia Bosquin-Caroz

Painful Loves

The title, “Painful Loves,” [*“Les amours douloureuses”*] is one consonant with unhappy loves [*“Les amours malheureuses”*]. It evokes the dramatic, even tragic, dimension of love, or of loves. As for the word “painful,” it suggests a tone of excess in the pain experienced. Some affects, such as sadness, are a sign of malaise, while others, such as anxiety, imply the crossing of unbearable limits. Freud placed the tension between the pleasure principle and the beyond of the pleasure principle at the heart of the problem of mental suffering. Lacan, for his part, highlighted a strange satisfaction, a mixture of pleasure and pain, which he called *jouissance*. An entire literature, to which Roland Barthes refers in his essay, “A Lover’s Discourse: Fragments,” focuses on the pangs of love, lovesickness examined in a variety of forms: expectation, asceticism, ravishment, compassion, dependence, exile, wandering, jealousy and so on. More recently, the title of Sophie Calle’s work on love bereavement, *Exquisite Pain*, also resonates as a paradoxical satisfaction.

Drawing on different approaches to love in Lacan’s teaching, not without Freud’s contributions, we in turn will explore the mainsprings of painful loves.

Lack, Disappointment and Sadness

In his Seminar, *Transference*, Lacan places the function of lack at the heart of the problem of love. He extracts a definition: “love is giving what you don’t have”.¹ At the same time, he points out that what is lacking in one person is not what is lacking in the other: the dissymmetry between the lover and the beloved constitutes the problem of love. “To be involved in this gap or

¹ Cf. Lacan J., *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book VIII, Transference*, ed. J.-A. Miller, tr. B. Fink, Cambridge, Polity, 2017, p. 34.

discord”, Lacan says “it suffices to be in the thick of it, to be in love.”² But it is precisely from the non-conjunction of desire with its object that the meaning of love emerges at the end of a specific process: the metaphor of love. We can see here the premises of his later assertion: love makes up for the sexual non-relation [*le non-rapport sexuel*]. The metaphor of love is a matter of contingency. When it occurs, the miracle of love is produced; when it does not, disappointment or desolation is the result. In Plato’s *Symposium*, Alcibiades’ scene with Socrates bears witness to his frustration at Socrates’ refusal to give him any sign of love. Socrates does not love, says Lacan, who is already attentive to the value and impact of the sign of love in so far as it is addressed to being.

Lacan contests the concept of love as that which “unites, agglomerates, assimilates, and agglutinates”³ complementary beings. He sweeps away this illusion of love as fusion, based on the ideal form of the sphere. He also observes that *affective attachment* to these solid forms finds its basis in the imaginary structure and “*Verwerfung* (foreclosure) of castration.”⁴

Lacan also refers to Freud, for whom the foundation of love is the *Lust-Ich* and love the effect of narcissism.⁵

In his seminar, *La logique du fantasme*, he thus puts forward the following formula: “*You are only what I am. [...] You are not, therefore I am not.*”⁶ Or, “*If you are not, I die.*”⁷ A truth, he says, giving the meaning of *eros*, and which, because it has been rejected, reappears in the real in the form of a “monster whose effects we know quite well enough in everyday life.” He continues: “As I state with every *Verwerfung* [...], love manifests itself in the real through the most inconvenient and depressing effects. The ways of love are nowhere to be designated as being so easily traced.”⁸ As Lacan notes, love does not

² *Ibid.*, p. 40.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 89.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 93.

⁵ Lacan J., *Le Séminaire*, livre XIV, *La logique du fantasme*, ed. J.-A. Miller, Paris, Seuil, 2023, p. 157.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 144.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 157.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 144.

think. In other words, love ignores [*méconnaît*] the narcissistic fantasy from which it draws its support. This is when it can take on the colour of depression, or sadness, insofar as this affect indicates the refusal or rejection of unconscious knowledge.

In *Television*, Lacan explicitly correlates sadness with a moral failing, which, he says, is ultimately “located only in relation to thought, that is, in the duty to be Well-spoken, to find one’s way in dealing with the unconscious, with the structure.”⁹ He takes affect out of the emotional register and links it to the ethics of saying-well, “which consists in pinpointing, in circumscribing, in knowledge, that which cannot be said.”¹⁰ In contrast to sadness, as Jacques-Alain Miller says, which is a knowledge manqué.

That same year, in his “*Note Italienne*,” Lacan expresses his wish, with regard to psychoanalysis, “to enlarge the resources thanks to which we can do without that unfortunate relation, in order to make love more worthy than the profusion of chatter that it constitutes to this day.”¹¹

Loves and Discourse

It was not until the Middle Ages, however, that the promotion of unhappy reciprocal love appeared in the form of courtly love. Lacan attributes the emergence of this form of love to the contingency of an encounter between the Cathar heresy and the new poetry of the troubadours. For him, passionate love is first and foremost a fact of discourse that did not just come about at any given period. He describes it as an “impossible bad dream known as feudalism,” where “for woman, there was something that could no longer work at all.”¹² In his Seminar, *Encore*, he situates this invention of discourse as the only way for the man, whose Lady was entirely his subject, to

⁹ Lacan J., *Television, A Challenge to the Psychoanalytic Establishment*, tr. D. Hollier, R. Krauss, A. Michelson, New York/London, W. W. Norton & Co., 1990, p. 22.

¹⁰ Miller J.-A., “Les affects dans l’expérience analytique,” *La Cause du désir*, Issue 93, 2016, p. 110.

¹¹ Lacan J., “Note italienne,” *Autres écrits*, Paris, Seuil, 2001, p. 311.

¹² Lacan J., *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book XX, Encore: On Feminine Sexuality, the Limits of Love and Knowledge, 1972-1973*, ed. J.-A. Miller, tr. B. Fink, New York/London, W. W. Norton & Co., 1999, p. 86.

“elegantly pull off the absence of the sexual relationship.”¹³ Indeed, the man deals with this by idealizing the Lady and valorising her inaccessibility, while the amorous discourse feeds on lack, mourning, loss and death. In his Seminar, *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*, Lacan notes the precision of the “artificial and cunning organization of the signifier” in this discourse “that lays down at a given moment the lines”¹⁴ of an asceticism. The suspension of carnal pleasure, the negotiation of the detour [in the psyche], and the inaccessibility of the object are then considered as a discipline of pleasure or non-pleasure. This is demonstrated by the arbitrary demands of the test inflicted on her servant by the Lady, not without a certain cruelty. Lacan notes that the most ascetic practices of love have been borrowed from Ovid’s *The Art of Love*, which compares love to a kind of military service.

He likewise points out the decisive impact that the signifier and passage to the letter of this art of loving had on culture. Romantic love will be a form of resurgence of it.

As we can see, love is not unrelated to the Ideal conveyed by tradition, ordering relations between the sexes. But this old order, the “Age of the Father,” structured by a vertical logic, has been replaced by a horizontal logic, by networks¹⁵ in the era of the *not-all*, as J.-A. Miller has proposed. In this perspective, do current reconfigurations of the conjugal unit into a variety of arrangements, such as “polyamory” or the “throuple,” replacing the standard duo, change the nature of the torments of love? In any case, the sufferings of love are being interpreted differently today compared to the past. The discourse of love, understood in terms of lack, the lost object or the unattainable Ideal, has been replaced by another discourse that places the failure of love on the imaginary dominant-dominated axis. At the last WAP Congress, J.-A. Miller noted its impact on love relationships.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 69.

¹⁴ Lacan J., *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book VII, The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*, ed. J.-A. Miller, tr. D. Porter, New York/London, Routledge, 2008, p. 187.

¹⁵ Cf. Miller J.-A., the back cover of *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book VI, Desire and Its Interpretation*, ed. J.-A. Miller, tr. B. Fink, Cambridge, Polity, 2019.

Just when the field seemed more open and conducive to invention, signifiers belonging to the lexicon of the battle of the sexes – already prophesied by Lacan – burst onto the scene: control, manipulation, domination, forcing, abuse, ghosting... At the same time, a supposedly consensual form of love is being promoted, based on mutual recognition and governed essentially by the homeostatic principle of the pleasure principle. Feminist movements have politicized the private sphere. In the name of the equality of legal subjects, they have helped to ensure that legal discourse stands between the sexes, often for the better. But today, with the coalescence of neofeminism and victim ideology, we are witnessing a politicization of the intimate. While embracing the new norms of discourse, this politicization is attacking a patriarchy already in decline. The war of the sexes is heating up, often for the worse. So, in this attribution of amorous suffering to the domination of one sex over the other, namely that of men over women, may we not see a new form of rejection of love and its risks? The recent worldwide success of the film *Barbie* certainly seems to show this.

In this context, supported by scientific discourse, only the analytic discourse might still make room for the real of *eros*.

A Matter of Structure

Love is not just a matter of discourse, which varies according to the times; it is also a matter of structure.

Thanks to hysterics, Freud was interested in the phenomenon of love right from the start. He studied its workings on several occasions. In his work, *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego*,¹⁶ he devoted an entire chapter to being in love and hypnosis. He used the example of the young man's romantic passion to illustrate the impoverishment of the ego before the precious object, magnified in the place of the ego ideal. The state of being in love ultimately takes possession of the totality of self-love, dispossessing the ego of any critical spirit. Freud called this phenomenon “self-sacrifice” and

¹⁶ Freud S., “Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego”, *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, Vol. XVIII (1920-1922), London, Vintage, 2001.

likened it to the state of being hypnotized. His words are powerful: an ego devoted to and consumed by the object, subjection, fascination.¹⁷ It is hardly surprising, then, that in the event of bereavement, break-up or betrayal, the subject feels that part of himself has been amputated – a mutilation not without its share of pain.

In his last teaching, Lacan situates the drama of love per se in the context of the amorous encounter itself. This would no longer involve two subjects of the want-to-be [*manque-à-être*], but two speaking bodies “affected qua subject[s] of unconscious knowledge.”¹⁸ In his Seminar, *Encore*, he says, “For here there is nothing but encounter, the encounter in the partner of symptoms and affects, of everything that marks in each of us the trace of his exile – not as a subject but as speaking – his exile from the sexual relationship.”¹⁹ In *Analysis Laid Bare*,²⁰ Jacques-Alain Miller states that, in the perspective of there is no sexual relation – and thus of the partner-symptom – sexuated beings form a couple at the level of jouissance. As for the symptomatic connection, this is relative to the signifying structures of the body that determine a partner as a means of jouissance. Consequently, it is necessary to distinguish the structure of the *for-all* *x* from that of the *not-all*, which distributes the masculine and feminine modes of sexuation and determines the type of partner-symptom for each. In other words, one does not enjoy or suffer from love in the same way on either side. To the masculine parlêtre is attributed the fetishistic mode of jouissance relative to the object *a*, and to the feminine parlêtre the unlimited dimension of jouissance in its relation to barred A. Painful loves can therefore be distributed according to a logic specific to each sexuated position or each sex. For one, there is the circumscribed pain of the symptom, like the effect of a splinter in the flesh. For the other, the limitless pain of ravage and total devastation. For one, the bane of a split love life and its inherent debasement. For the other, the risk of mortifying nuptials with the ideal Incubus, beyond the real partner. But

¹⁷ Cf. *ibid*, pp. 113-114.

¹⁸ Lacan J., *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan*, Book XX, *Encore*, op. cit., p. 144.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 145.

²⁰ Cf. Miller, J.-A., *Analysis Laid Bare*, WAP Libretto Series, New York, Lacanian Press, 2023.

painful loves are just as much about the way in which each speaking body can remain hermetically sealed from the other's language.

The affect is thus not “the voice of the body,” its natural expressivity, but the signal of an effect of *jouissance* correlated with the signifying mark. In an analytic experience, we are led to emphasize the implication of the signifier in the affect, and, according to Lacan's expression, as underlined by J.-A. Miller,²¹ to verify the affect.²² If, in the most classical approach, it was a question of releasing the repressed truth, with the notion of an *affection tracée on the body by lalangue* [*l'affection traçante du corps par lalangue*],²³ it will be a question of isolating the impact of the traumatic mark on the misunderstanding between the sexes.

In our praxis, when painful loves present themselves, we invite them to let themselves be caught in the net of signifiers, in order to make *jouissance* enter into resonance with language.

Translated by Pamela King

²¹ Miller J.-A., “Les affects dans l'expérience analytique,” *op. cit.* p. 101.

²² Lacan J., *Television, op. cit.*, p. 20.

²³ [TN: cf. Miller, J.-A., “*affection traçante de la langue sur le corps*,” “*Orientation lacanienne. L'expérience du réel dans la cure analytique*” (1998-1999), teaching delivered in the framework of the Department of Psychoanalysis, University Paris 8, lesson of 9 June 1999, unpublished.]