

THE PARADOXES OF LOVE

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In the teaching of Lacan love is the object of a series of paradoxes, especially in relation to desire.¹ We will attempt to demonstrate this paradox from the perspective of love and not just from that of desire.

A man believes that he desires a woman when he loves her.² When he desires, a man never has to do with any partner other than the object which is causing his desire. A woman is a symbol of lack for a man, and it is the value of prohibited *jouissance* represented by the phallus which is indexed on the object. A woman is desired as a fetish, as a piece of man's body, his rib, as it says in the Bible. For man, says Lacan, love goes without saying, to the point that he does not understand anything about it.³

One can say from the very start that the condition of love for a man is narcissistic. If a man does not request a woman's consent to desire her, to love her, it's not the same thing, since he loves her just to the extent that the way he imagines her can support him narcissistically in his phallic position. Hence the interest for the poor woman who can evoke, *a contrario*, for a man his phallic 'have'. This is, moreover, why a man, sharing this condition of love with a woman, loves in the other her castration.

Hence, his idealisation of a woman, his dependence on her that Freud speaks of when he describes the enamoured man as humble and submissive.⁴

So, when he loves, 'a man believes in a woman'.⁵ "A woman in the life of a man", Lacan says, "is something in which he believes. [...] He believes in a species, that of sylphs or water sprites", a fantastic, evanescent species which obeys a mysterious logic. From this point of view a woman is for a man a horizon of freedom, condition of poetry; but should she escape him, he is caught, bewitched. Thus, in the beautiful novel of Frédéric de La Motte-Fouqué, *Ondine*, rewritten later for the theatre by Giraudoux, when the chevalier had a premonition that Ondine, siren become woman, could, like the water people who created her, have no soul, he was struck with terror. Double face of the enigma. Lacan adds that a man believes in a woman like one believes in one's symptom.

On this point, a man believes in a woman in so far as she can make present for him his relation to phallic *jouissance*; a woman is for a man that which anchors him in the field of the real. Hence, the chevalier says to Ondine in the play by Jean Giraudoux: "Since my childhood a fish-hook has torn me from my chair, from my boat, from my horse. You would draw me towards you": the fish-hook of the symptom, the symptom in this way more real than the unconscious. What a woman makes present for a man is the way in which in the real "...the effect of the symbolic is imagined",⁷ since a woman as a symptom only makes present the closing of the unconscious. That's how one has to understand Lacan's remark that in order to know what a man is worth, one has to look at his wife.⁸ It does not mean that he looks like her, but rather that she represents in the real the particular way he has of enjoying [*jouir*] the unconscious. He thinks that she is going to say something about it, that he is going to decipher her like a symptom, but she remains, as Lacan says about the symptom, a suspension point, a question about the sexual nonrelation. 'What does she want?' is the question from which man dangles. And even if he thinks that he has perceived the cause eliciting his belief, he admits that he knows he is fixed, riveted there for no reason. So, Swann, un-stunned [T.N: In French *désidéré*, formed by a reversal of the verb *sidérer*. Hence the hyphen to distinguish it from the simply negative adjective *unstunned*. The 'un-' here then has the value of that of 'undo'], remarks: "to say that I spoil years of my life, that I wanted to die, that the greatest love I had was for a woman who did not please me, who wasn't my type!". Men understand nothing about the meaning of love.

So, to believe in a woman, a man is going to start 'to believe her'. There, 'the symptom passes through a limit'. This time he no longer believes that she is going to say something true or false, but that she is saying something that concerns him directly in his being. He is signified by what she is saying. It is not 'What does she mean?' but rather "That is what she is saying..." disconnected from any other meaning. He believes it, adds Lacan, like one believes a voice. The unutterable of his being is given to him, stated by a woman, in the very place of his unutterable surplus-of-enjoyment [*plus-de-jouir*], as if by a voice.

He does not encounter Woman — who does not exist — but, Lacan says, he believes in Woman: a false belief, that the man creates.⁹ The man believes but, in fact, he creates, he creates the existence of woman as Other in the real. "Believing her serves as a plug for believing in her".¹⁰ "Believing in her" here is correlative to a questioning; believing her is correlative to an index of certainty. This can lead him to the worst: thus, the hero of the novel of William Irish, *The Siren of Mississippi*, prefers his belief to his life. That the adventuress and liar he married is his symptom, and that he knows it, is not enough. He has to go to the very end of his belief; till the very end he is going to believe her, believe what she says. Knowledge and truth are, when she speaks, foreclosed. In order to hear what that voice is saying, a few brief words of love — it matters little that they are lies — the hero will consent to the worst: he will let himself be poisoned. Fiction, no doubt, but one can say that a man who loves believes 'Woman to be all women', without perceiving that he is only creating there an empty set. He creates the signifier of Woman and at the same time begins to believe in the sexual relation. In creating Woman, he creates a fiction to which he strives. He is thus feminised, and that is certainly what makes love comic. Love is comic, says Lacan, and this is the comic of psychosis. One can grasp the comic of this in the imaginary axis a-a': 'my wife says that...', but it is also the object as unrepresentable and not the phallus, this time, which dominates the scene. Man strives through his belief 'for this something which is his object'.¹¹ Hence this very particular type of comic. Thus, Alceste, the misanthrope, who Lacan considers as a delusional, addresses Celimene:

'You are surely deceiving me with such gentle words.

But I can do no other, I have to follow my destiny:

For your belief my soul is abandoned' (Act IV, scene 3).

For a woman, the paradox resides in the fact that she thinks she loves when she desires. She desires the phallus of which man is bearer from the perspective of her identification with the lack in the Other. The phallus, says Lacan, is everything for her. The problem is that she can take the phallus as her compass, which can make her stupid: my husband this and my husband that. Sartre used to say that one could recognise a bourgeoisie by the fact that as soon as she opened her mouth she spoke of her husband. One could decline different forms of the relation a woman holds to the phallus: serve it like a master, want to steal it in hysteria, but also all the forms — often crafty — that women have of keeping it, to make it their private hunting ground.

Conversely, a woman loves a man when he is deprived of what he gives. She loves in so far as she recognises the man's lack. One does not love, then, a rich man, even if one desires him. The Other of love who stirs beyond the phallus is to be referred to the ideal father. Beyond the infinitude of love addressed to the maternal Other is the place of the love of the father, who gives to the extent that he does not have. In this way one can account for the erotomaniacal form of love in women that Lacan speaks of in *Proposal for a Conference on Feminine Sexuality*¹²: to begin with she is always imagining

she is loved. This erotomania which is not psychotic, is to be understood in relation to the phallus, for if it is to the same man that her love and desire are addressed, she will veil out with modesty [*pudeur*] that 'the phallus is everything for her', by imagining that she is phallicised by love and by the primary desire of a man; she is going to make castration and desire of a man emerge in order to be phallicised and to veil, at the same time, the lack which brings her to desire. In this, she realises at the imaginary level the substitution of the lover for the beloved, and is situated, in relation to the phallus, in the positions of being and having, on condition that she does not have it. That is why a woman acknowledges her love with such great difficulty; as one sees in the theatre of Marivaux, she uses strategies to force the man to declare his love first, not that she does not precede him in her desire, but she will never dare to love except with the support of that initial supposition.

Later, when Lacan puts forward his formulae of sexualisation in which the different ways of making up for the impossibility of the sexual relation are going to differentiate the sexes and their relation to the phallic function, it will be a matter, then, of thinking about the paradoxical duplicity of love and desire differently. A woman's love is no longer going to be thought of as that which veils desire addressed to the phallus but as belonging to contingency, as what can happen when a woman, not-wholly submitted to the phallic function, addresses herself to a man as an At-least-one who would not be submitted to it at all. But if the existence of this man, in a unique position, to whom a woman addresses herself, is necessary, it is, at the same time, not possible, since it is not possible that a man enjoys [*jouisse*] all the women — there is no 'all' of women, they exist one by one. Thus with a woman, even if the *jouissance* of the One is not excluded, it is, nevertheless, impossible. A woman does not make the exception exist, and when she addresses the One of exception from the place of her *jouissance*, from a not-all *jouissance*, she encounters the Other of lack. What she encounters, then, is an absence: the Other cannot be found. It is perhaps this that can account for the apparently mad character of love and of feminine *jouissance*. The relation of a woman to S(A) takes her outside the field of the phallus. Here, a woman touches the edges of a *jouissance* and of an infinite love which is different from the infinite love of the psychotic in that she attributes no meaning [*signification*] to it and does not localise this *jouissance* in the Other. *Jouissance* is glimpsed here, but it is only a glimpse, as beyond a limit. It is a kind of inkling of the infinitude of love and not, as in hysteria, an attempt to make the sexual relation exist. No longer the love of the idealised father, but a love with a poetical dimension, *dilectio*, a purified surge of the soul. In any case, it is the only love which, perhaps, escapes the field of narcissism; it can sacrifice the most precious thing.

Thus, one could understand otherwise Lacan's statement mentioned above on the erotomaniacal form of feminine love as love addressed to the Other of lack. It is precisely because she cannot say anything about this 'mixture of love and of *jouissance*'¹³ that a woman supposes it comes first from the Other. She only reaches the Other *jouissance* on the supposition of the *jouissance* of the Other. She can only suppose that what she cannot speak about, the Other will be able to do it for her. It is like loving God with the love by which God loves you, to hijack a formula of Master Eckhart: "The eye by which I see God is the same eye through which God sees me".¹⁴ Whilst a man believes the meanings [*significations*] that a woman proffers, a woman makes the word of love exist that would make her live in that nameless place where she is staying. Thus, in the loneliness of this love beyond the phallus, she elicits at the locus of the Other the well spoken [*bien dire*] to say the word of love 'which is always beginning again'.

One can also consider the ravage aroused by a man in the exactly inverse dimension of the erotomaniacal form of love in a woman. Lacan defines 'ravage' as an affliction, worse than a symptom but which one is forced to specify as a symptom. If the ravage that a man arouses is only analysable as a symptom, it can also be grasped in the relation of a woman to the Other of lack. To the contrary of erotomania, I would say that ravage is being faced with silence and not with the word of the Other.

Stephan Zweig's *Letter of an Unknown* recounts how for never having been understood nor recognised by a man, a one-time lover, whom she has always loved, a woman can go to the extremes of havoc and privation in her life.

Thus, as far as love entirely saturated with belief is concerned, one can say that it is outside meaning and, Lacan also says outside sex, a limit phenomenon. Can one account for this character? In his Seminar called *The Logic of Fantasy*, Lacan qualifies it as *Verwerfung*, from the relation of the unconscious subject to the Other. The unconscious supposes a "you are not, therefore I am not" (A → \$), but love forecloses this relation by hypostatizing the being of the Other and by rejecting the unconscious. This cry of love: 'If you are not, I die', Lacan translates its truth: 'You are only what I am'. The truth of love is finally: 'You are nothing but what I am'. Angelus Silesius had an inkling of it when, addressing God, he proffered: "if I were not there, you, God, God existing as such, you would not be there either", the truest formula to account for love. In love, the entire dialectic of the subject to the Other is rejected, and, in this regard, love comes to make castration rejected.

When Lacan, in the very last part of his teaching, advances the formula of a generalised foreclosure of the sexual relation, it is no longer in terms of *Verwerfung* that he is going to qualify love but rather as an attempt to make up for the impossibility of the sexual relation, for the mystery of the two. Love is born out of these roots of the impossible.¹⁵ Of course, love promises that sexual meaning is going to stop not being written in the contingency of the encounter and that it is going to become necessary. 'The way of the mirage': the sexual relation cannot be written, the human being is exiled from it. Love, in fact, 'suspends sexual meaning.' It does, of course, give itself airs of truth, but the imaginary in that truth is nothing but 'a false second in relation to the real'.¹⁶ Love in this respect, does not keep its promises, and, as the lie is part of the truth, love is, to quote Aragon, 'to lie truly'. So, a man believes that he desires, a woman that she loves, and this paradoxical belief clings basically to the lie of love.

It is probably this failure that makes it so enthralling, for, while remaining entirely within limits, love is a border phenomenon. It explores the confines of the impossible. Simply, unless "the wall cracks [...], one can only get a bump on the forehead".¹⁷

Translated by Richard Klein

1. I have tried in a previous article in *La Revue* to consider this paradox from the perspective of desire.
2. J. Lacan, *Le Séminaire XV, L'acte psychoanalytique*, 1967-68, unpublished, the lesson of the 27th of March, 1968.
3. J. Lacan, *Le Séminaire XXI, Les non-dupes errent*, 1973-74, unpublished, lesson of the 12th of February 1974.
4. S. Freud, *On Narcissism: an Introduction*, 1914, SE XIV.
5. J. Lacan, *Le Séminaire XXII, R.S.I.*, 1974-75, unpublished, lesson of 21 January 1975, *Ornicar?* no.3.
6. J. Lacan, op. cit.
7. J. Lacan, *R.S.I.*, op.cit., lesson of 11 March 1975.
8. J. Lacan, *Le Séminaire XVIII, D'un discours qui ne serait pas du semblant*, (1970-71), unpublished, lesson of 20 January 1971.
9. J. Lacan, *Seminar XX, Encore*, Paris, Seuil, 1975, p.118.

10. J. Lacan, *R.S.I.*, op.cit., lesson of 21 January 1975.

11. J. Lacan, *Le Séminaire XXIII, Le Sinthome*, 1975-76, unpublished.

12. J. Lacan, *Ecrits*, Paris, Seuil, 1966, p.733.

13. J.-A. Miller, *Lacanian Orientation, Le partenaire-symptôme*, (1997-98), unpublished, teaching given within the framework of the Department of Psychoanalysis, Paris VIII.

14. M. Eckhart, *Traité et sermons*, Paris, Aubier, 1942, p.179.

15. J. Lacan, *R.S.I.*, op.cit.

16. J. Lacan, *Les non-dupes errent*, op.cit, lesson of 15 January 1974.

17. J. Lacan, *R.S.I.*, op.cit., lesson of 21 January 1975.

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