LOVE IN PLATO’S SYMPOSIUM AND LACAN’S TRANSFERENCE SEMINAR

By

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This article focuses on Lacan’s eighth seminar on Transference, specifically his references to Plato’s Symposium, and more particularly the attention he pays therein to the interaction and dialogue between Alcibiades, Socrates and Agathon. Addressed will be Lacan’s specific take on the development of characters and plot as he outlines the dialectic of love. The interaction between the positions of ‘lover’ and ‘beloved’ will be examined as will the progression, according to the law of metaphorical substitution, which culminates in the birth of love. All of this, in an attempt to better appreciate the dynamics of the transference relationship in the psychoanalytic situation.

Keywords: Plato’s Symposium; transference; love; lover-beloved; dialectic; metaphor

Love is one aspect of the transference; the other is repetition, the automatism of repetition. Lacan points out that these two aspects can be situated on the Graph of Desire, on ‘the two signifying chains in which the subject is constituted’ and while he explains that his intention is to join up the ‘two methods of approach’ to transference, he specifies that he is particularly interested in looking at the ‘consequences [of transference] at the most intimate level of our practice [and therefore in] paying attention…to love’. It is the love aspect of the transference that will be the specific focus of this paper.

1 Based on a paper I presented at the fourth Intercartel Study Day of the Irish School for Lacanian Psychoanalysis on 18.6.2011, this article arose out of the work of a cartel (Dermot Hickey, Marion Deane, May Byrne, and myself). I particularly wish to thank the PLUS ONE, Helen Sheehan, for encouraging a reading of Plato’s Symposium and for her insightful comments on this article in the making.
3 Ibid. p.147.
4 Ibid. p. 146.
Situating the subject matter of the *Transference* seminar in relation to the clinic of psychoanalysis, Lacan rhetorically enquires as to the actual purpose of the practice of psychoanalysis, asking why one isolates oneself with another. It is ‘[to teach him] what he is lacking,’ he says, and the way to do this is to teach the subject to love. By the very nature of the transference, ‘what he is lacking’ is going to be learned by him as a lover, therefore, says Lacan, ‘I must teach him how to love’. This should be the aim of every analyst: ‘You should indeed not have...as a first term of the end of your action, the supposed good or not of your patient, but precisely his *eros*’. This begs the question of love, what it is, where it can be situated and how it relates to the transference. It is for this reason that Lacan, in this seminar on transference, addresses the ‘problem of love’.

About love, we already know that in this lover – beloved partnership, what the lover loves in the beloved bears no relationship to what the beloved actually has. And furthermore, and this is ‘the whole problem of love’, it is at the very moment when this beloved object is revealed as inadequate that there emerges the signification which is called love: it is ‘the moment of tipping over, the moment of reversal where, from the conjunction of desire with its object, *qua* inadequate, [that] there must emerge the signification which is called love’.

The concept of this very precise moment of reversal is the concept which is at the core of this paper, since it is this reversal and the ongoing reversals in the metonymy of desire that captures the essence of love, that is, love as a dialectic of birth and re-birth in the reversals entailed in the repeated inadequacy of the supposed object of desire. It would be impossible to understand this strange and automatic ‘effect’, which is called *transference*, if one has not grasped this articulation of the dialectic of love, says Lacan and therefore his aim in this seminar is ‘to compare what is the part, the proportion between this *transference* and *love*, what there must be attributed to each one of them and reciprocally, in terms of illusion or of truth’.

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5 Ibid., 16 November 1960, p.10.
6 Ibid., p. 11.
7 Ibid., p.6.
8 Ibid., 30 November 1960, p.28.
9 Ibid., p.31.
11 Ibid. p. 27.
It is to this end that Lacan turns to Plato’s *Symposium* and the dialectic of the *Symposium*, the dialectic of love played out in the particular triangle of the characters, Alcibiades, Socrates and Agathon, to try to explain the dynamics of transference in the analytic situation.

Lacan will speak of love and the birth of love in terms familiar to his audience at that period of his teaching, terms relating to the laws of signification, that is, the laws of metaphor and metonymy. He will speak of the metaphor of love, where the function of lover substitutes itself for the function of beloved,\(^12\) and he will speak of the metonymical function in desire. He will also speak of desire as articulated love,\(^13\) saying that the function of love is when ‘he desires’ substitutes for ‘he loves’; in other words, that love is articulated in desire so that, in the algebraic formula of metaphorical substitution, ‘he desires’, is situated over the bar, with ‘he loves’ underneath.

With reference to the Greek terms, *erastes* (lover) and *eromenos* (beloved), Lacan maps, in the interaction of the three characters, Alcibiades, Socrates and Agathon, the ‘miracle’\(^14\) of the birth of love, produced in accordance with the signifying law of metaphorical substitution in which it is a matter of the substitution of lover for beloved. Situating it in the algebraic formula for metaphorical substitution, ‘lover’ [*erastes*] is over the bar with ‘beloved’ [*eromenos*] underneath. In other words, the being lover replaces the being loved, or to put it in the reverse, the being loved is transformed into active loving.

Expanding on this explication of how the laws of signification apply to the phenomenon of the emergence of human love, Lacan explains how, in this beloved – lover couple, the beloved is the one who has something, the only one in fact to have something. The lover, on the other hand, the subject of desire, is the one in the couple who is lacking. However, and this is the essential point, what the beloved has does not coincide with what the lover lacks (and desires in the beloved), nevertheless, and indeed it is precisely because of this reality, that love is born. That is to say, it is born at the moment where there is this ‘conjunction of desire with its object, *qua*

\(^{12}\) Ibid., 30 November 1960, p.31.

\(^{13}\) Ibid., 18 January 1961, p.100.

The very inadequacy of the object, especially the object that owns up to its own inadequacy, its own lack, its essence as lack, means that this object of love can inhabit his/her own subjectivity as a desiring being. Furthermore, on the side of the lover, the emergence of the inadequacy of the object of desire reveals this love for what it is, that is to say, in its true status as narcissistic and imaginary in which what is loved in fact pertains more to the lover’s partial object or agalma of his fundamental phantasy than to the essence of the object per se. The unveiling of the object as inadequate, therefore, points the lover beyond this imaginary love object, the small o, to something closer to the true object of desire.

The moment of reversal is the precise moment of the metaphorical substitution; it is the moment of the birth of love and it is because Lacan identifies this precise moment in the love-game triangle of Plato’s Symposium and the three characters, Alcibiades, Socrates and Agathon, that a close study of this interaction in the play is warranted.

First, though, a slight detour to describe the relevance of one of the myths to which Lacan frequently returns in his seminar in order to highlight the process of the very birth of love. The image of the myth is that of a hand which, when it reaches out to poke a log, has the effect of making the log burst into flame. The action does not stop there, however, and indeed it is only then that the miracle happens for ‘…in this movement of poking, the hand has gone far enough…towards the object if, from the log, a hand emerges to encounter your hand, and that at that moment it is your hand which is fixed in the explosion of a hand which bursts into flame…what is produced at that point is love’. The miracle is in the emergence of the hand which appears from the other side. The hand reaching out, that is, this image which captures the desire for the beloved, elicits a response of love from the beloved thereby transforming this object of desire so that it becomes a desiring subject. “…we are face to face with love, I mean that it is yours when it was you who were first of all eromenos, the beloved object, and that suddenly you become the erastes, the one who desires”.

Here is precisely the metaphor of love, ‘the substitution of the erastes for the eromenos’ and it is this substitution that is being acted out in the

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15 Ibid., 23 November 1960, p.27.
16 Ibid., 7 December 1960, p.42-43.
17 Ibid. p. 43.
interplay of the three characters, Alcibiades, Socrates and Agathon in the scene which takes place in Agathon’s house where the guests have been each in turn speaking in praise of love. Alcibiades arrives late, ‘very tipsy and shouting’ just when everyone else has finished speaking his eulogy in praise of love. Alcibiades says that he wants to see Agathon in order to place a garland on him. He does not see Socrates at first, even though Socrates has actually moved from his place beside Agathon at the table to let Alcibiades sit there. Socrates is to his right. This is significant later on when there is another re-shuffle so that Agathon is to the right of Socrates, and in the subsequent ‘game’ of praising the person on one’s right, Socrates expresses delight at being afforded the opportunity to praise Agathon, whom, he confesses, he has a strong desire to eulogise.

When seated, Alcibiades, who has been invited to do as the others have done and to speak in praise of love, agrees that his contribution will be ‘to make a speech in praise of Socrates’. In the course of this eulogy, he confesses to the other guests how he had once tried to seduce Socrates, going as far as to even lie down beside him, however, he tells them, Socrates had unambiguously resisted this attempt at seduction.

This moment of Socrates’ refusal, recounted here by Alcibiades, is vitally important for Lacan’s purposes in his seminar. Socrates had refused this position of object of Alcibiades’ love; he owns up to the fact that he does not have whatever it is that Alcibiades thinks he has, indeed, Lacan explains, Socrates ‘takes exception to having been himself, in any way, an object worthy of the desire of Alcibiades, or indeed anybody’s desire…there is nothing in him that is lovable because his essence is…this vacuum’.

Retroactively, that is, from the perspective of this scene where Alcibiades articulates the love relationship and recounts his attempt at seduction, it is this moment of Socrates’ refusal that shows itself as the turning point, the reversal whence Alcibiades’ love emerges; ‘The miracle of love is realized in him in so far as he becomes the desirer’. Socrates, by not responding from the position of the beloved, the position of the object of love, the position of the one who has something, takes up the position of lover, a

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18 Ibid. 43.
20 Ibid., p.99.
22 Ibid., p.137.
position in which his essence is emptiness/kenosis. In that moment he is lover, not beloved, of Alcibiades and Alcibiades is in the position of beloved. However, in loving him, as it were, he inflames love in Alcibiades (as in the image of the myth above), thereby allowing Alcibiades to transform into a real lover. From the position of the one who is lacking and loving, Socrates ignites the miracle of the birth of love in Alcibiades.

It is important to emphasise here, lest any simplistic and potentially dangerous conclusions be drawn, that what is in question is not the dynamic of the Hollywood-type love story in which the game of love is enacted – indeed, it is precisely in this kind of game that Socrates refuses to engage. In his references to the dialogue and action of these three characters in *The Symposium*, Lacan is describing the two positions of lover and beloved in a markedly different dynamic in which it is not a question of whether or not the person of Socrates loves Alcibiades. Socrates is in the position of lover to the extent that he refuses to play the part assigned to him by Alcibiades in this game of love; he does not have the small o, the agalma. Alcibiades, despite his pronouncements and without knowing it, is not the lover of Socrates; he is merely playing the part of lover in the game of love.

Lacan, in spelling out the relevance of what he is doing in examining the interaction between these three characters – Agathon is always in the background - and the implications of his deliberations for the clinic of psychoanalysis, Lacan explains that ‘the principle of the [analytic] situation is that the subject [the patient] is introduced as worthy of interest, worthy of love, as eromenos. It is for him [the patient] that one is there but [that] that is what one can call the manifest effect’.23 There is an important distinction here between this manifest effect and the latent effect which...

...is linked to his [the patient] not knowing, to his unknowing...of what? Something which is precisely the object of his desire in a latent, I mean objective, structural fashion. This object is already in the Other and it is in so far as things are that way that, whether he knows it or not, virtually, he is constituted as erastes, fulfilling, because of this single fact this condition of metaphor, of substitution of the erastes for the eromenos which we have said constitutes by itself the phenomenon of love – and whose inflaming effects it is no surprise for us to see in the transference love from the beginnings of analysis.24

23 Ibid., 8 March 1961, p.167.
24 Ibid., p. 167.
Lacan highlights at this point that, while this phenomenon of love is not at all a contra-indication for analysis, another phenomenon would be a contra-indication. If the analyst ‘places his own partial object, his agalma in the patient with whom he is dealing’ this would be a contra-indication and there would be grounds for exercising extreme caution. If the analyst were to proceed and not recognise that he is placing his agalma in the patient, that, indeed would be the equivalent of Socrates actually playing the Hollywood-type game of love that Alcibiades wants to play. When Alcibiades had attempted a seduction of Socrates, he was not looking for a confirmation of Socrates’ love; he knew that Socrates loved him. What he had wanted was for Socrates to enter into the game of love, he wanted to subject Socrates to his desire, to ‘subordinate’ him to the object of his (Alcibiades’) desire and it is precisely this that Socrates refuses.

Alcibiades is obsessed by a ‘love’ but Socrates recognises that it is transference love and refers it ‘back to his true desire’. In the scene where Alcibiades confesses his love for Socrates to the assembled ‘jury’, as he calls them, Socrates offers an interpretation; he unveils Alcibiades’s true love, saying, ‘You seem to me quite sober, Alcibiades. Otherwise you wouldn’t try to conceal your real object with such an apparatus of artful circumlocution’. And he continues, ‘You think that I ought to be in love with nobody but you, and that nobody but you ought to be in love with Agathon’. Putting words on Socrates’ lips, Lacan adds, ‘…your desire is more secret than all the unveiling which you have given yourself over to and is now aimed at still another small o – and this other is Agathon’. This ‘interpretation of Socrates’, says Lacan, indicates ‘transference in the process of the search for the truth’. Socrates, as it were, “inflamed Alcibiades”, and if desire is in its essence the desire of the other, then this is how love is born. Referring back once again to the myth of the stretched hand and the log, Lacan says that ‘…love is what happens in this object towards whom we stretch out our hands by our own desire and who, at the

25 Ibid., p. 167.
26 Ibid., 8 February 1961, p.158.
28 Plato, op. cit., pp. 111,2
29 Ibid., p.112
31 Ibid., p.152.
32 Ibid., p.153.
moment that it breaks into flame, allows there to appear for an instant this response, this other hand, the one which stretches out towards you as *his* desire’.

In the clinic of psychoanalysis, the analyst does not know what the patient desires and it is precisely because he does not know ‘that he is in a position to have in himself the object of this desire’. Socrates, without knowing it, when he says that he has a strong desire to eulogise Agathon ‘bring[s] back Alcibiades to his soul by bringing to light this object which is the object of his desire’. It becomes clear that Alcibiades’s love of Socrates is transference-love; Socrates is not the true object of his desire and explicitly tells Alcibiades that his words were really meant for Agathon. Indeed Lacan goes as far as saying that Socrates is not ever *there* when Alcibiades is confessing his love; all that is there is the ‘envelope of what is the object of desire’. Socrates is pure desirer and so, when Alcibiades tries to situate him as the desired one, he is no longer there.

Throughout *Seminar VIII*, Lacan posits that Socrates’ position, as it is established and played out in the interactions with Alcibiades and Agathon in *The Symposium*, is analogous to that of the analyst’s position *vis-à-vis* the patient. However, it is on this very point that a close reading of the text of Lacan’s seminar is essential if one is not to fall into a simplistic interpretation of what that means. Explicitly spelling out in greater detail the implications of this analogy for the clinic of psychoanalysis is beyond the remit of this paper. Suffice it to recall Lacan’s words at the outset when he says that it would be impossible to understand transference-love if one has not grasped his articulation of the dialectic of love. Plato’s *Symposium*, especially the Socrates-Alcibiades dialogue, captures this dialectic and it is for this reason that it warrants the close and insightful reading afforded it by Lacan and addressed in this article.

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33 Ibid., 153.
34 Ibid., 8 March 1961, p.166.
35 Plato, *op. cit.* p.112