

NOTHING IS NOT ALWAYS NO-ONE: (a)VOIDING LOVE

Adrian Johnston

Introduction

What is it that one loves in another when one can truly speak of love? Furthermore, what does speaking have to do with the amorous? When it comes to love, Jacques Lacan says a lot of things. In his tenth seminar on anxiety, Lacan asserts that, “*l’amour est la sublimation du désir*.”¹ During the ensuing discussion of this assertion, he mentions La Rochefoucauld’s 136th maxim: “Some people would never have fallen in love if they had never heard of love.”² Lacan consistently maintains that nothingness/negativity is introduced into human reality via signifiers, through the symbolic order’s capacity to put phenomenally absent, lacking, non-instantiated elements into circulation within the field of the *parlêtre*’s mediated experience. Similarly, love, in Lacanian thought, is often described (in marked contrast to desire) as linked to an indeterminate *je ne sais quoi* in the beloved Other, to the void of an un-specifiable “x” that eludes being captured in a catalogue of determinate empirical attributes, characteristics, qualities, and so on (i.e., features of the other as an object bearing marks or traits responsible for igniting the emergence of desire – what one could call “libidinal predicates”).

So, if desire and love are to be contrasted in this manner – desire remains tied to the little-o other as a “thing” *qua* bundle of determinate attributes, whereas love is directed toward the Other as a “no-thing” *qua* indeterminate “x” – then, if love is indeed the sublimation of desire, how, exactly, does love arise from desire? How is a desired object elevated to the status of a beloved void? Is it even possible to develop an account according to which the height of the amorous immanently emerges out of the depth of the libidinal?

¹ Lacan, *Le Séminaire X: L’angoisse, 1962–1963*, Éditions du Seuil, Paris 2004, p. 209.

² La Rochefoucauld, *Maxims*, Penguin Books, New York 1959, p. 54 (*M*).

Several years prior to the above definition of love as the sublimation of desire, Lacan, in his well-known commentaries on courtly love poetry, observes that these literary productions tend to dehumanize their addressees. The figure of “the Lady” in such poetry is an inhuman structural position, a prearranged place into which flesh-and-blood women are deposited. In other words, this figure marks the clearing of a vacancy, a space hollowed out by signifiers, whose occupant, by virtue of inhabiting this vacant space, is (at least temporarily) “raised to the dignity of the Thing.”³ The Lady’s position is characterized as totally depersonalizing.

Thus, one might justifiably ask: Is courtly love poetry even really about love, or is this an unfortunate misnomer? If genuine, true love is inextricably intertwined with the non-empirical nothing(ness) of a void (i.e., the “x” of a certain *je ne sais quoi* in the recipient of one’s amorous passions), isn’t there then a difference between a dehumanized, impersonal void and another sort of void, one that is utterly specific and unique – more precisely, the beloved Other as an irreplaceable non-object? Posing the question at a greater level of philosophical generality, must a void be, in essence, anonymous and faceless? Can there be a (rather than the) void, namely, an absolutely singular no-thing, a purely particular incarnation of nothingness? If nothing else, love points to this possibility: One, the beloved Other is different from the other reduced to the status of a desired object – that is, the beloved Other is loved not for his/her positive attributes and qualities, for his/her manifest libidinal predicates; Two, the beloved Other, although the void/no-thing of a non-object in relation to the libidinal predicates displayed by desired objects, is nevertheless distinct to the point of uniqueness – put differently, no two beloved Others are equivalent; Three, voids, consequently, can manifest themselves in an absolutely singular fashion, more specifically, as the no-thing of the beloved Other *qua* “x” transcending the determinate marks and traits usually governing the vicissitudes of the libidinal economy, an economy that tends to operate on the basis of substitution and replacement, on iterability. There are indiscernible differences distinguishing beloved Others, despite one’s inability to specify, within a language relying upon the identification of delineable predicates, precisely what these differences are between distinct loved partners. The broadest philosophical upshot here is hence that at least two separate types of void need to be pinpointed: the void as an asubjective ontological notion versus a void (or, voids in the plural) as a unique instance of an “x” eluding capture within a catalogue of determinate empirical attributes. There are fungible and non-fungible voids.

³ Lacan, *Seminar VII: The Ethics of Psychoanalysis, 1959–1960*, W.W. Norton and Company, New York 1992, p. 112.

Conceptualizations of alterity are also affected by a consideration of the intimate rapport between love and nothingness: in particular, the Freudian-Lacanian thematic of the Real Other, of the *Nebenmensch* (neighbor) as *das Ding*. Lacan's Other-Thing is often characterized as being horrible, monstrous, and terrifying, an overwhelming abyss that draws the subject into it but, nonetheless, mustn't be approached too closely. This Real of the *Nebenmensch*, the unfathomable vortex of the Other, must be tamed and domesticated at all costs through incorporation into the registers of the Imaginary and the Symbolic, lent a reassuringly human face through inscription into the familiar fabric of reality. And yet, at the same time, this unknowable, mysterious Otherness is involved in love as well. Maybe there are two sides to this coin, two faces of the Real Other: On the one hand, the Real Other can be encountered as unbearably frightening, as an ominous, threatening enigma; On the other hand, the Real Other can be encountered as an unspeakably cherished ineffability, an incredibly intimate familiarity defying representational mediation. Succinctly stated, the status of the Real Other *qua das Ding* is radically ambiguous. This alterity can be repulsive or alluring, hated or loved, fought or fucked. The position the subject cannot maintain with respect to it is one of safe, tepid indifference, a risk-free aloofness. Maybe this is one of the reasons why Lacan warns, "There is nothing more dangerous than approaching a void."⁴

Part one: Love is not without its lust

In his *Manifesto for Philosophy*, Badiou proclaims that, "In the order of love, of the thinking of what it conveys with respect to truths, the work of Jacques Lacan constitutes an event."⁵ Several pages later, at the end of the sequence of remarks explicating this proclamation, he concludes by insisting that, "the anti-philosopher Lacan is a condition of the renaissance of philosophy. A philosophy is possible today, only if it is compossible with Lacan."⁶ Coming from Badiou, this is high praise indeed. Philosophy itself, as depicted in the Badiouian portrait of it, doesn't produce truths as an independent intellectual discipline. Instead, the truths it thinks through come to it from else-

⁴ Lacan, *Seminar III: The Psychoses, 1955–1956*, W.W. Norton and Company, New York 1993, p. 201.

⁵ Badiou, *Manifesto for Philosophy*, State University of New York Press, Albany 1999, p. 81 (MP).

⁶ MP, p. 84.

where, from separate domains of truth-production that “condition” it (i.e., the “generic procedures” of art, science, politics, and love). Philosophy’s task is to grasp how the current constellations of artistic, scientific, political, and amorous truths are “compossible.” Thus, whatever truth about love Lacan discloses is a disclosure that demands to be included in anything that could be dignified today by the title Philosophy.

However, a few years later, Badiou qualifies this praise. He contends that Lacan flirts with a problematic view of love linked to “a pessimistic tradition of French moralists,” a perspective according to which “love is merely an ornamental semblance through which passes the real of sex.”⁷ Undoubtedly, one of those pessimistic French moralists Badiou has in mind is La Rochefoucauld. Deeply cynical observations about the underlying nature of amorous passions in human life are peppered throughout La Rochefoucauld’s *Maxims*. This potential proximity between Lacan and someone like La Rochefoucauld is quite troubling for Badiou due to his insistence that the amorous, with its subject(s), isn’t merely epiphenomenal in relation to the carnal desires of the human animal’s sexuality. He treats the distinction between the lust lurking in the sexual individual and the love constituting the amorous subject as corresponding to his fundamental, overarching distinction between being and event respectively.

In attempting to construct a philosophically satisfying vision of love, Badiou seeks to avoid reducing it to either the “One” of a symbiotic fusion that drowns and dissolves the lovers in an undifferentiated ocean or the “Other” of a scenario orchestrated around the domination of an idealized alterity. Desire, as opposed to love, is bound up with the “One,” with a sexuality riveted to the immanence of a stifling corporeal sameness of entangled parts and holes, caught up in the *mélange* of copulation. Furthermore, the Badiouian approach insists that the “Two” of the amorous link is neither a situation in which one of the two is abjectly subjugated to the other as a prostrate, rapt supplicant nor a “couple” *à la* a pair of pre-existent individuals who are combined together to form a new unit through a rudimentary gesture of addition.

Although it might sound as if Badiou clings to a rigid and naïve dichotomy opposing love to lust, he is well aware of the complications involved in pondering the relations between these two notions. He’s no proponent of so-called Platonic love. For Badiou, the amorous is delicately situated between the Scylla of sexual triviality and the Charybdis of desexualized sublimity, be-

⁷ Badiou, “What Is Love?,” *Sexuation*, Duke University Press, Durham 2000, p. 265 (WL).

ing neither one nor the other. Love cannot be grounded exclusively on either sordid fornication or serene friendship.

Badiou's philosophical efforts addressing questions about the bond between the amorous and the sexual directly tackle what makes this bond so slippery, so hard to grasp adequately: The amorous is (to put it in Lacanese) "not without" (*pas sans*) the sexual. Although love cannot be dismissed as an insubstantial illusion deceptively veiling mere lust – there is a real distinction to be recognized between these two – lust is somehow involved in the nuanced, subtle genesis of love's Two. In Badiouian terms, maybe one could say that the sexual furnishes the "evental site" out of which immanently arises, thanks to the chance occurrence of the encounter, the amorous thereafter transcending this sphere of corporeality.

Badiou readily acknowledges that, in relation to love, "the sexual disjunction is simultaneously its material and its obstacle."⁸ Sexuality is, at one and the same time, both a facilitator and an inhibitor of the amorous Two of love. Without, as Badiou designates it, the guidance of "the obscure star of the object,"⁹ the event of the encounter and the amorous "excess" it generates might not flash across the surface of drab, ordinary reality. But, one must avoid the genetic fallacy of treating love as reducible to lust simply because lust plays a part in sparking the emergence of love. Against (again) "the pessimistic French moralists, who see in love only an empty parade whose sexual desire is the only real,"¹⁰ Badiou proposes a reversal declaring that, "it is love which makes the truth of which sex is capable, and not the inverse."¹¹

Unlike these moralists, Badiou distinguishes between the individual and the subject. Just as Lacan tirelessly protests that psychoanalysis is not a branch or sub-category of psychology, so too does Badiou situate his analysis at the level of structures irreducible to empirical investigations into the anthropomorphic individual *qua* psychological creature of nature. Whereas an author such as La Rochefoucauld allegedly focuses on the natural passions animating the all-too-human animal, Badiou seeks to affirm love as, in its essence, something other than this mundane domain of the passions, this realm of impulses and urges.

And yet, is this sweeping dismissal of any and every "psychological" appreciation of the affects associated with the amorous really defensible? Couldn't Badiou's subjectifying process of love, although not itself simply a sentiment

⁸ Badiou, "The Scene of Two," *Lacanian Ink*, no. 21, Spring 2003, p. 45 (ST).

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 42.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 47.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 43.

to be handled by a psychology, also accurately be described as “not without” its proper passionate emotions? If loving feelings have absolutely nothing whatsoever to do with love, then what makes the Two-subject between lovers different from, for example, a Two-subject between friends who remain faithful to the fortuitous event of their having met? Isn’t the more interesting question/problem the mystery of how the volatile libidinal-affective ground of the sexual individual internally generates an amorous subjectivity that subsequently comes to achieve an autonomous status irreducible to its lustful origin? Much of Badiou’s work can be read as a plea for the forging of a secular conception of grace. The concept of transubstantiation cries out for a comparable reinvention.

Before returning to Lacan, the issue of whether La Rochefoucauld in particular is guilty of the unromantic cynicism condemned by Badiou merits further investigation. La Rochefoucauld’s 69th maxim speaks of “pure love” in a hypothetical mode – “If pure love exists, free from the dross of our other passions, it lies hidden in the depths of our hearts and unknown even to ourselves.”¹² As a hesitantly posed hypothesis, it remains uncertain whether love isn’t just mixed in with and contaminated by a swirl of other less-than-pure emotions and instincts; and, even if such a purified passion exists, people are unable to directly access it due to its concealed, obscured status. But, several of the immediately following maxims affirm that love proper is indeed something real. Both the 74th (“There is only one kind of love, but there are a thousand copies, all different”¹³) and 76th (“True love is like ghostly apparitions: everybody talks about them but few have ever seen one”¹⁴) maxims testify to this, although they emphasize the exceptional rarity of the amorous. Nonetheless, it appears that the stipulation of the 69th maxim is still in place: This one kind of true love whose existence is conceded by La Rochefoucauld “lies hidden in the depths of our hearts and unknown even to ourselves.”

The topic of “chance” is an important thematic thread running through the *Maxims*. La Rochefoucauld mentions it repeatedly (his basic idea being that individuals’ virtues and vices are dormant potentials buried within their natures, and that these various potentials are summoned to actualize themselves in relation to the unpredictably shifting vicissitudes of their life histories). The 344th maxim proposes that, “Like plants, most men have hidden properties that chance alone reveals.”¹⁵ Perhaps one could posit that the “pure love” lying “hidden in the depths of our hearts” spoken of in the 69th

¹² *M*, p. 46.

¹³ *Ibid.*.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 47.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 82.

maxim is just such a “hidden property.” Despite being extraordinarily uncommon, the genuinely amorous can indeed flower into full bloom if eventual chance happens to smile upon individuals in a special manner. Admittedly, the overall tenor connected with the insinuations of La Rochefoucauld’s parallel, cross-resonating reflections on love and chance is a pessimistic one. However, interpreted somewhat against the grain, La Rochefoucauld can be understood as not quite fitting the mold of the cynical, pessimistic French moralist as cast by Badiou. In fact, he seems to believe, like Badiou, that a love irreducible to lust actually does exist – and, moreover, that such love is a precious rarity arising from the grace of events, instead of being an everyday occurrence guaranteed to take place by the failsafe workings of an emotional nature pre-programmed to invariably transubstantiate all human individuals into amorous subjects.

Jacques-Alain Miller’s brief discussion of the role of chance in the genesis of the amorous underscores that love is a complex mixture of contingency and necessity. The event of the encounter prompts love’s emergence only if certain aspects of the object or situation forming part of the encounter fall within a pre-established fantasmatic frame, only if the contingent peg accidentally encountered (*tuché*) happens to fit the necessary hole (*automaton*). One side of this coin, the side revealing what Miller dubs “the *automaton* of love,”¹⁶ is typically identified as representing the sole depiction of “love” formulated by Freudian psychoanalytic thought. Analysis is often viewed as unromantically reducing the amorous passions to the lowly status of overdetermined epiphenomenal residues of repetitive mechanisms at work behind the scenes within the bowels of the libidinal economy. Freud does indeed emphasize (perhaps to the point of overemphasizing) this dimension of humanity’s love life – and, he does so because it had previously been underemphasized. Nonetheless, this doesn’t mean that analysis entirely discounts the possibility of an amorous encounter *qua* Badiouian event, namely, the unforeseen irruption of the New within the domain of desires and sentiments.

The psychoanalytic equation of love with transference epitomizes the risk analysis runs of theoretically foreclosing in advance the potential for the newness of eventual ruptures coming to disrupt libidinal life. However, in the eighth seminar on transference, Lacan hints at the illegitimacy of equivocating between it and love. He explains that transference is something which resembles love (i.e., they aren’t simply the same thing), that transference is capable of setting amorous trajectories in motion from time to time – importantly, this leaves open the possibility that the love generated by the subtle *tuché-au-*

¹⁶ Miller, “Love’s Labyrinths,” *Lacanian Ink*, no. 8, Spring 1994, p. 8.

tomaton dialectic of transferentially falling in love subsequently exceeds/transcends the disposable libidinal ladder of transferential triggers catalyzing its emergence. Lacan suggests that the phenomena grouped under the heading of transference aren't just faithful reproductions of a perpetually returning past subsisting as a frozen, static, and unchanging network of ideational traces; there's a transformative process of creation at play in these phenomena. Maybe a key indication that a person honestly loves another is that this Other actually makes enough of an impact upon the lover that the latter's libidinal template is significantly restructured by this new *rapport*. Additionally, given the nuances of metapsychological models of time, a great deal of space is cleared in the ontogenetic-temporal currents of psychical life for the radical alteration of the forces shaping these currents. How big a difference the little differences constantly creeping into the repetitions punctuating the unfolding of life's libidinal-amorous trajectories can or do make depends on a cluster of thus-far obscure factors and variables. It must be asked: What distinguishes the minor variations of desire from the major breaks of love?

Part two: Desiring something, loving nothing

Lacan's gloss on La Rochefoucauld's 136th maxim is well suited to serve as a productive point of departure for a philosophical-psychoanalytic highlighting of a few select facets of love. In his 1953 "Rome discourse," he has a suggestion for how to re-read this particular maxim:

To confine ourselves to a more lucid tradition, perhaps we can understand the celebrated maxim by La Rochefoucauld – 'There are people who would never have fallen in love but for hearing love discussed' – not in the romantic sense of a thoroughly imaginary 'realization' of love that would make this remark into a bitter objection, but as an authentic recognition of what love owes to the symbol and of what speech brings with it by way of love.¹⁷

During the tenth seminar, Lacan alludes to a similar interpretation of this maxim. In the Lacanian view, falling in love as a result of having heard of love isn't some sort of degraded semblance of true love, an artificial imitation of "the real thing" of genuinely amorous passion.

¹⁷ Lacan, "The Function and Field of Speech and Language in Psychoanalysis," *Écrits: A Selection*, W.W. Norton and Company, New York 2002, p. 54.

These remarks about La Rochefoucauld from the tenth seminar appear immediately after Lacan's definition of love as the sublimation of desire. Lacanian sublimation is when an object within Imaginary-Symbolic reality is raised to the dignity of the Real Thing, that is, when a flawed and imperfect substitute for a supposedly lost primordial *jouissance* is treated as the very incarnation of this *jouissance*. In short, sublimation is when the libidinal economy somehow allows an inadequate object of *désir* to be the adequate Thing of *jouissance*. This conceptualization of sublimation surfaces as part of a discussion involving the figure of the Lady in courtly love poetry. In the twentieth seminar, Lacan refers to his earlier handling of courtly love in the seventh seminar: He identifies such "love" as "fake," arguing that the transformation of select women within reality into sublime, inaccessible Ladies is "a highly refined way of making up for (*suppléer à*) the absence of the sexual relationship" through "feigning that we are the ones who erect an obstacle thereto."¹⁸ One can therefore conclude that the genuinely amorous isn't to be conceived of as merely a screen raised in order to conceal the underlying inherent lack of a natural bond conjoining sexuated beings. On a couple of contemporaneous occasions, Lacan stipulates that love isn't related to the *rapport sexuel*.

However, elsewhere in the twentieth seminar, Lacan comments that, "What makes up for the sexual relationship is, quite precisely, love."¹⁹ Although it sounds as though he is at risk of contradicting himself – love has nothing to do with the sexual relationship, and yet love compensates for the sexual relationship – the stage has been set here for distinguishing between true love and its all-too-common semblances. The genuinely amorous and the disingenuously pseudo-amorous are each supplements for the non-existence of the *rapport sexuel*. But, the manners in which they supplement this lacking *rapport* are utterly and completely distinct. Courtly love, as an exemplification of the pseudo-amorous, is an ornate, stylized technique for preserving the illusion that a harmonious, symbiotic fusion-union between the sexes is possible, that flawless, perfect incarnations of the retroactively romanticized Real Thing of lost past enjoyment indeed do exist somewhere in present reality. The conventions of courtly love are designed so as to shield this fantasy from falsification, since to approach the Lady too closely would reveal that she is just another woman. Semblances of love are veils employed to conceal the truth that, "*Il n'y a pas de rapport sexuel.*" By contrast, the genuinely amorous entails an acceptance of this truth.

¹⁸ Lacan, *Seminar XX: Encore, 1972–1973*, W.W. Norton and Company, New York 1998, p. 69.

¹⁹ S., XX, p. 45.

What distinguishes love from its semblances is the mode through which the desiring subject is reflexively positioned with respect to his/her desire (it's crucial to recall Lacan's axiomatic proposition that desire is essentially self-reflexive, a "second order" structural phenomenon always involving questions in the form of, "Do I desire to desire what I desire?"). The pseudo-lover, impatiently and urgently demanding the beloved's love, desires while not desiring this desire, whereas the lover actually desires desire. In this vein, Lacan proposes that love arises out of the conjunction between desire and its necessarily inadequate object, out of the moment when desire chooses to maintain a tie with its object warts and all. An essential aspect of love is that the desired object comes to be desired not only in spite of its shortcomings, despite what it's missing in relation to the whims and wishes of the lover – it comes to be desired precisely because of these shortcomings, insofar as these deficiencies are inseparable from the beloved's absolutely singular and unique status as something more than a simple tangible object of lust, a bundle of libidinal predicates.

In the same session of the tenth seminar where Lacan both describes love as the sublimation of desire and cites La Rochefoucauld, he also proclaims that, "*Seul l'amour permet à la jouissance de condescendre au désir.*"²⁰ Examining this tangled knot of claims in the tenth seminar through the lens of the preceding analyses permits stating that Lacanian love entails raising *désir* to the dignity of *jouissance*. Expressed differently, love involves the realization that "the real thing" is nothing other than the specific Other that one is enmeshed with in a web of less-than-ideal (relative to desire's impossible fantasmatic standards) libidinal threads – and, the abandonment of these impossible fantasmatic standards is a prerequisite for desire becoming love through ceasing to measure the desired partner with respect to an idealized template of positive libidinal predicates. The fungible desired little-o other thereby becomes the non-fungible beloved Other. But, what does language have to do with this? Why does Lacan tirelessly insist on the crucial contribution of the register of the Symbolic to the dimension of the amorous?

The Lacanian reinterpretation of La Rochefoucauld's 136th maxim speculates that falling in love is, for everyone, always and necessarily conditioned by language. This reinterpretation asserts that the amorous is conjured into existence *ex nihilo* thanks to the intervention of the signifiers of the symbolic order. Lacan proposes that love is made in and by language, that one makes love with signifiers. Making sense of this requires returning to some fundamental Lacanian concepts, especially the need-demand-desire triad.

²⁰ S., X, p. 209.

Lacan does not believe that what truly deserves to be called “love” is an innate libidinal force or affective tendency hard-wired into the human individual’s natural constitution. The amorous emerges. Ontogenetically speaking, love arises through the passage of “need” into the defiles of “demand.” Humans are born saddled with a variety of different organically determined requirements for living. What’s more, during the first few years of life, they are unable to meet their own needs due to being stuck in a prolonged period of prematurational helplessness. Thus, as Freud underscores, infants and children are made to rely upon those older than them for vital required nurturance; this physiological fact of helplessness predestines human nature to come to be dominated by social nurture. Those adult significant others surrounding the child, forming his/her earliest social environment, instantiate and represent the symbolic order. In order to have their needs taken care of, young human beings are compelled to take up the signifying resources of the adults’ linguistic universe in which they find themselves inserted. Need becomes demand in being expressed by the child to another in and on the other’s terms. However, this signifying deflection of need, the routing of it into the Symbolic register of demand, introduces a set of foreign, extraneous concerns and implications within the realm of life’s material being, the domain of physiological requirements. More specifically, in becoming a demand, a need is no longer satisfied simply through the gratification of it as a basic impulse or urge. The organic body of need is overwritten by the signifiers it’s pushed into embracing in framing demands.

Lacan insists that every demand is ultimately a demand for love. In coming to be articulated as demands, needs and their gratification come to symbolize not only the meeting of rudimentary physiological requirements, but the attention and affection of the others to whom the demands are addressed. Demands point to this dimension of the desires of Others as something stretching beyond the circumscribed sphere of particular forms of satisfaction corresponding to corporeally dictated needs.

Desire, according to its Lacanian definition, is what remains when the gratification of need is subtracted from the demand articulating this same need. There’s a remainder precisely because a demand demands something in excess of the straightforward satisfaction of a particular need. Once introduced into the symbolic order, the human individual’s needs are transformed from vital organic phenomena into litmus tests of his/her status in relation to those significant others responsible for responding to these requirements. Demands go beyond the needs that trigger their emergence insofar as the love of Others is demanded (rather than just the offering of goods or services). In other words, love makes for the difference between need and

demand. An answer has been found here for why Lacan maintains that love exists solely for the *parlêtre* – “*L’amour ... ne se conçoit que dans la perspective de la demande. Il n’y a pas d’amour que pour un être qui peut parler.*”²¹

But, what does it mean to say that every demand is, at root, a demand for love? What is this thing called “love” that the demander demands from those he/she addresses? Time and again, Lacan responds to such queries by asserting that the demand for love aims, beyond all possible satisfactions *qua* gratifications of needs, at the being of the (Real) Other. This raises another question: What, precisely, is the Other’s being at stake in the demand for love? Lacan specifies that the “being” in question is the desire of the Other, the Other’s very capacity for loving as the nucleus of his/her amorous existence.

One of Lacan’s oft-repeated one-liners describes love as being a matter of giving what one does not have. The beloved Other addressed by the demand for love is asked to give his/her desiring being to the demander. However, this is impossible. Individuals don’t possess this aspect of “their” being as a piece of personal property; one doesn’t own one’s “own” libidinal-amorous core. Their desire is neither an object-like entity capable of being gift-wrapped and handed over to another for good nor a dynamic of psychical life operating under conscious ego-level control. This desiring being is closer to being a no-thing, given its ephemeral elusiveness, than a thing (as an entity that can be captured and manipulated). Consequently, in response to the lover’s request to be given love, the beloved is, on a certain level, powerless to adequately respond – “*aimer nécessite toujours de refuser.*”²² There is nothing the beloved can give, no pleasure or promise, that would truly be equivalent to what is initially demanded in the demand for love.

So, what is elicited as a response instead? Given the impossibility of giving another the gift of one’s desiring being, how can and does the beloved Other answer the lover’s call to love? The sole possible gesture here is to produce signs of love, to repeatedly offer indicators of the amorous being within oneself that falsely purport to be the same as this being itself. Inadequate stand-ins are all that can be extended across the gap between lovers. Lacan names this gap “*l’amur*” – the “love-wall,” the barrier functioning as both the condition of possibility and condition of impossibility for love. Maybe one of the reasons why signs of love continually must be produced in an amorous relationship – a single once-and-for-all declaration of love never suffices – is that no one sign ever amounts to the wholesale transfer of the beloved’s desiring being to the lover. The interminably iterated failure of each and every

²¹ Lacan, *Le Séminaire VIII: Le transfert, 1960–1961*, Éditions du Seuil, Paris 2001, p. 418.

²² S., VIII, p. 419.

amorous indicator produced as a reply to the demand for love leaves a margin of dissatisfaction permanently in place, a margin out of which repeatedly arises yet another demand for ever more signs (“*Encore!*”).

Due to the impossibility of the one addressed by the demand for love satisfactorily responding to this demand by handing over his/her entire desiring being, the beloved resorts to engaging in acts of simulation, acts in which he/she pretends to give the lover what he/she doesn’t have (i.e., his/her “own” libidinal-amorous kernel). The beloved who loves the lover doesn’t tell the truth by honestly saying something like, “My heart is not my own to give” or “I can’t make promises that I’m unable to promise keeping in the future.” Instead, oaths of amorous fidelity are sworn in the face of the absence of any possible meta-level guarantee reassuringly cementing this fidelity in place for all time by freezing the unpredictable flux of desire. In the eighth seminar, Lacan proposes that, “*seuls les menteurs peuvent répondre dignement à l’amour.*”²³ Only liars can respond with dignity to love precisely because what amorous passion demands cannot actually be offered or obtained. Signs of love, produced in such a way as to elide or ignore this desire-arousing impossibility, are beautiful lies, futile phantasms vainly striving to embody a non-exchangeable no-thing.

Conclusion

Near the very end of his teaching, Lacan wonders aloud, “*Pourquoi le désir passe-t-il à l’amour?*”²⁴ – he concedes that there’s something enigmatic about this transubstantiation-like process. Herein resides love’s miracle: How is it that the genuinely amorous immanently arises out of the quagmire of need, demand, and desire? A passing invocation of the etymology of a certain French word might be of help at this juncture: *le rien*. This word originally derives from the Latin *res*. The etymological transformation of *res* into *rien* literally amounts to turning something into nothing. An analogous transformation must occur in the genesis of the genuinely amorous: Something (i.e., the fungible little-o other *qua* object of desire reducible to its libidinal predicates) must become nothing (i.e., the non-fungible Other *qua* beloved non-object of love irreducible to its libidinal predicates).

Interestingly, the word *rien* features prominently in the genre of courtly love poetry. In the twenty-fourth seminar, Lacan tries to tie together some of these threads:

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 39.

²⁴ Lacan, *Le Séminaire XXV: Le moment de conclure, 1977–1978*, 4/11/78.

*L'amour n'est rien qu'une signification ... Le désir, lui, a un sens, mais l'amour – tel que j'en ai déjà fait état dans mon Séminaire sur l'Éthique, soit tel que l'amour courtois le supporte – l'amour est vide.*²⁵

Despite courtly love being an elaborately contrived imitation of the amorous, its figures and themes harbor a grain of truth about true love. The idealized Lady is a particular version of *le rien*. As a structural position, the Lady is a name for a vacant slot in the libidinal matrix of her suitors, a slot into which they drop various mere women as representative substitutes. And, the suitors' desire is sustained insofar as no single woman-object ever quite perfectly fills in for the absent, missing Real Thing. In this arrangement, desire feeds on the gap between form (*das Ding*) and content (*die Sache*). Here, there is no specificity or uniqueness to *le rien*. The void of the Lady-Thing is an inhuman place, an unattainable locus never fully fleshed out by the dehumanized bodies of its temporary empirical occupants. Nonetheless, courtly love poetry confusedly discerns something essential about love: Whereas desire “has a sense” (i.e., like the meaningful Saussurian sign, it possesses a referent to which it's coupled), “*l'amour est vide*” – in other words, love is decoupled from the referents of desire, from signified objects as bundles of libidinal predicates. Courtly love is a distorted rendition of this truth about love's *rappor*t with the nothingness of the void, the distortion being the misrecognition of *le rien du vide* as a formal structure permanently divorced from those beings forcibly placed in relation to this fantasmatic *topos*. The genuinely amorous requires the collapse of the form-content distinction sustaining dissatisfied desire. The void must directly embody itself in a singular incarnation.

Desire becomes love when the demanding desirer's second order desire ceases to be one in which he/she vainly desires the impossible extinguishing of his/her desire itself through the Other at long last offering up its very being and finally filling up the structural vacancy of *das Ding*. Desire per se is accompanied by a meta-desire that doesn't desire to desire, a desire that desires the annihilation of the Real as the inaccessible dimension of alterity. Love, by contrast, is born when this meta-desire moves from discontent to acceptance, from desiring the death of desire to embracing Real Otherness at the level of its unique manifestation in the person of the beloved. The void of this particular Real is constituted by both the peculiar ways in which the singular loved Other fails to be a perfect desired object as well as how he/she negotiates this failure. Additionally, an authentic amorous fidelity establishes a love that en-

²⁵ Lacan, *Le Séminaire XXIV: L'insu que sait de l'une-bévue s'aile à mourre*, 1976–1977, 3/15/77.

dures with a constancy which isn't simply contingent upon changes and variations in the libidinal predicates of the desired little-o other as thingly object; the beloved Other is a no-thing insofar as he/she is loved apart from his/her shifting and unstable set of predicates. The demander of love becomes a true lover when he/she goes from desiring something to loving nothing.

And yet, although desire and love are different from each other, the amorous arises from and always involves the libidinal. Love is not without its lust. A love without desire wouldn't be genuine love as smoldering *eros*, but, instead, a Platonic "love" as temperate *philia*. As Badiou articulates it, "Love passes through desire like a camel through the eye of a needle."²⁶ The rarity of the genuinely amorous is due precisely to its unavoidable (but often unsuccessful) passage through "the eye of the needle" formed by the other tiers of the libidinal economy. Reduced to desire, love is nothing more than disguised lust. Without desire, love is mere affectionate acquaintance.

By describing the event of love as an "amorous encounter," Badiou is in danger of inadvertently helping to preserve the romantic myth of "love at first sight," an intoxicating-yet-superficial experience that's almost entirely reducible to fantasy-driven transference (and, if a true love does indeed blossom out of such a sudden meeting, it's more in spite of than because of this flashy emotional explosion). The event of love might very well happen much later, long after the heated infatuation of the initial encounter cools. It might not be an abrupt occurrence, but, rather, a gradual transformative transition, a slow coming-to-love that laboriously pulls itself out of the bog of libidinal life in fits and starts. Although many of the questions posed here haven't been satisfactorily answered, progress has been made through pinpointing with greater precision the mysterious, magical moment when desire is transubstantiated into love. Maybe the most opaque aspect of this is the reason why it happens, which perhaps even lovers themselves cannot really say.

²⁶ *WL*, p. 274.