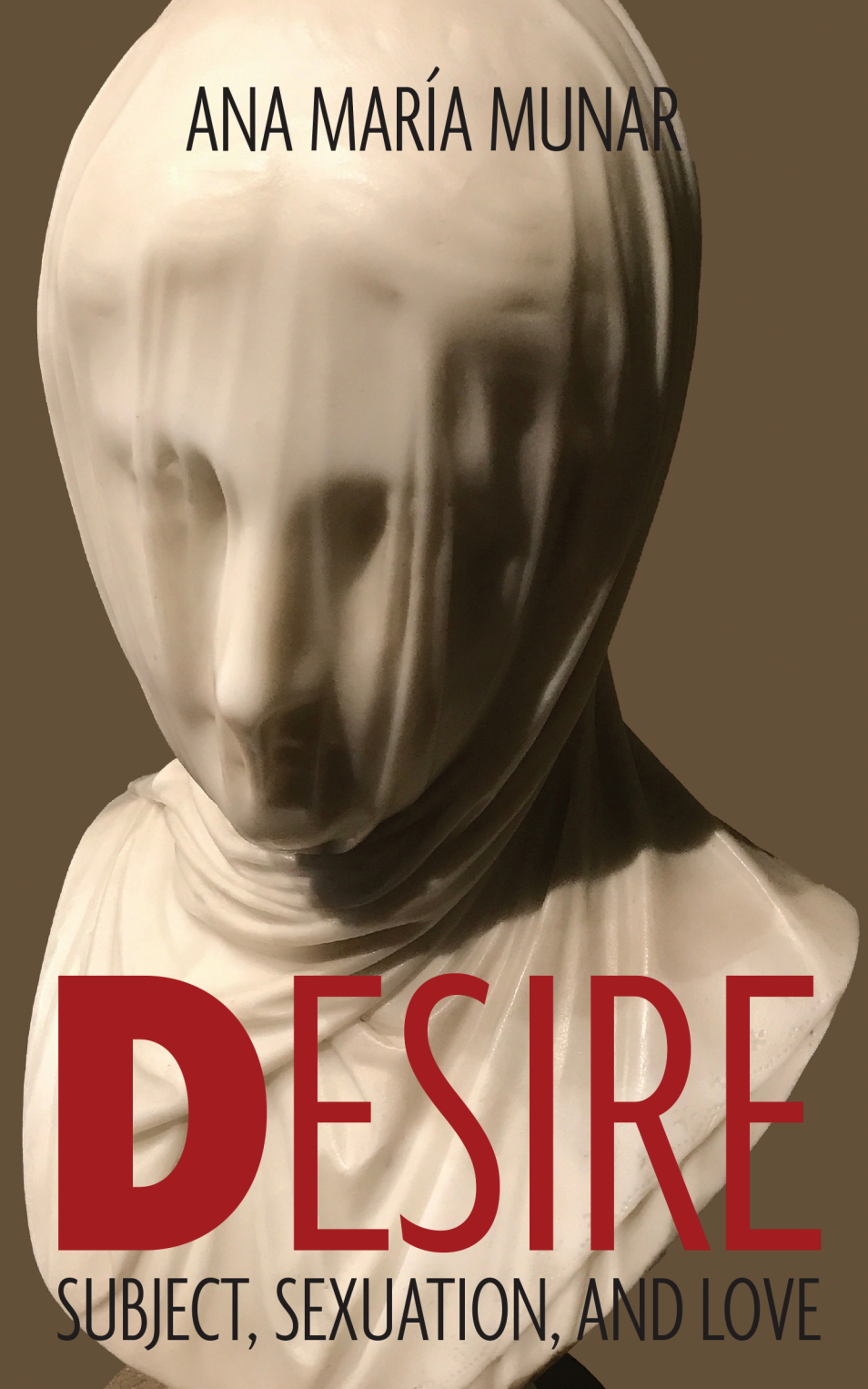
ANA MARÍA MUNAR



DESIRE

SUBJECT, SEXUATION, AND LOVE

DESIRE

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Fig. 1. Detail from Hieronymus Bosch, *Ship of Fools* (1490–1500)

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In the summer of 2022, I found myself at a writing retreat surrounded by friends who I had not seen since the beginning of the global pandemic. There, we were asked to share our reflections on the question: Who is in your room when you write? Who was in my room when I wrote the book that you hold in your hands? An overflow of grace which appeared in my life unexpectedly and gave me hope and meaning; desire cascading into me from thinkers, artists, mi amor Bjarke, my beloved sons Kristian and Anton, family, friends, pine and sea, coffee and bread. I am deeply grateful to my daughter Karen, the loving reader of the many drafts of this book, and to Cathrine Bjørnholt Michaelsen. The many walks and conversations I had with Karen and Cathrine about philosophy, psychoanalysis, and desire were deeply inspiring and a daily joy. I want to thank: Adam Doering and Adriana Budeanu for their love and support during these years; My Kellee, always; Mia Larson for asking—What do you want?; Maya for her enthusiasm about this work when I most needed it; Sara Louise Muhr for her feminism and sisterhood; Javiera Aguirre for her insightful comments; Emmi Höckert for her warm friendship; Mariandre my future reader; Morten Sørensen Thaning, Mads Peter Karlsen, and Daniel Souleles of the philosophy group at Copenhagen Business School for their generous suggestions; the Diversity and Difference Research Platform for the financial support, and Florence Villesèche, Claudia Eger, Amira Benali, Marta Juarez, Bryan Grimwood

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To my grandmother Ketty

Preface

Let me whisper these words. I would like you to feel them with the intimacy of a whisper, the way it should be when the topic of our conversation is desire. They will not be spoken out loud, preached or proclaimed, but shared in the same way as you would speak with a loved one on a summer evening when it is getting late, but it is too lovely and warm to stand up and leave. I must begin with a confession. I can't catch what desire is. I can't lay it at your feet like an offering for you to devour and enjoy, summarized and simplified into a bite for you to consume. I can't capture it, and that is why I need to write about it.

Desire came knocking on my door a few years ago. It kept appearing in my readings. I would be lying if I said that it only appeared in my readings of philosophy. It was in them, of course, but it was also in the books on psychology, in poetry, and in novels and short stories. I could no longer see past it, even though desire was never the protagonist. The protagonist was often the self, being, identity, gender, becoming, emotions like love and anger or contempt, truth, and beauty. Desire would appear around them and in all of them, mentioned, perhaps, but undefined. Is desire jealous of not taking center stage? No. It is so powerful that it does not need to be. Like the charismatic guest who does not need to be the life of the party because her very presence changes the nature of the party itself.

We need to whisper around desire, so it will stay with us among the drinks and the conversation on that late summer night. I imagine desire standing at a distance, patiently smiling an ironic smile to the protagonists, knowing that if it left the

room, all of them would dissolve into nothingness or transform into flat caricatures of their own being, like balloons without air. All life would be sucked out of everything. Not the biological one, maybe that could continue, but only as long as it was determined, repetitive, cloned, without evolving. No existence in time would be possible without desire, and it knows this.

It is not like we have desire; desire has us, and sometimes it deserts us. Sometimes it gets killed in us, and sometimes we try to imprison it so we can keep it with us forever, without realizing that it is impossible to capture air and flame. Other times, we try to manufacture it. We have become very good at this, the manufacturing part. We create synthetic desires in a lab, put them into a catalog, and consume them in earnest. Because it feels too difficult, at times, to wait, pray, and let desire manifest itself. That demands us to be still and just be, pay attention, and sense what calls out to us, what pulls us, and what turns us on. And that is terrifying, like the call of the wild, the northern lights entering your soul. It is alluring, but also dangerous. We would rather distribute the synthetic candy version, pseudodesire. We have even created a whole economic system that centers around the belief that desire can be produced and obtained.

Moving towards desire and trying to grab it does not mean we will end up catching it, even though pseudo desires are right there, ready to be caught. Instead of leaning forward and reaching out, try falling backward, expanding, and letting the energy and vitality of eros run through you, be unconsciously and joyfully attentive to everything. What will follow is an awakening that will fill you with air, and rush like fire through your chest, like being called towards something without you knowing.

Many believe that what makes us human is our capacity to reason. I think it is our capacity to desire. Desire is also one with time, as heat is time and change is time. If we could stop time just for a second, or if we could move out of time, desire would vanish. Desire is often portrayed as fire or air. Both of these elements fit our understanding of the nature of time, the law of thermodynamics, and its constant directionality. They are characterized by movement and energy, but also by their unpredictability. As air, desire can awaken as a breeze and intensify into hurricane. As fire, it burns, hypnotizes, makes you feel alive, and

when out of control, it can kill you. If it is extinguished, it will also kill you in another way, it will kill your soul. If our personal, human experience of time stopped, desire would stop too. When is it that desire leaves or abandons us? It leaves us when the love for ourselves has abandoned the room. Desire as a word seems to encapsulate its very nature. It always eludes us, yet it always insists on being present.

As our nocturnal bodies, the pages of this book are held by a long list of specters, the many readings that left me wanting and invited me forward in my search. Although I found inspiration in books like Simon May's (2011) *Love: A History* or Ronald de Sousa's (2015) *Love: A Very Short Introduction,* their Western historical and cultural understanding of desire tends to follow a categorization based on typologies of love, presenting desire as an emotion, as a component of some forms of love and sometimes as opposed to love. Then there were other contemporary psychological or anthropological approaches such as the courageous work of Esther Perel's (2006) *Mating in Captivity: Unlocking Erotic Intelligence,* Helen Fisher's (2016) *Anatomy of Love: A Natural History of Mating, Marriage, and Why We Stray,* or the pragmatic approach of Alain de Botton's (2016) *The Course of Love: A Novel.* From them I gained knowledge of desire as opposed to or subsidiary to love, or as sexual desire; however, I was left wondering. Yet I am grateful to these authors because unsatisfied curiosity and the many times that I thought "not this" or "not enough" became the contours surrounding the manifested space of this book.

Something drastically changed when, by chance, I read Joan Copjec's (2015) *Read My Desire: Lacan against the Historicists.* The reading of Copjec's work, while it felt enigmatic for a scholar like me who comes from a different philosophical tradition, immediately sparked a deep sense of recognition. My meeting Lacanian thought through Copjec was the event from which this book springs. Have you ever wondered what makes you wake up in the morning? Why not just lay down, stay, and eventually disappear? What is the wanting, the energy, and the grace of liveliness? What makes you *you?* In Lacanian psychoanalysis, I finally found a line of scholarship that addressed that form of wonder. Copjec marked the beginning of several years of

reading feminist and psychoanalytical thought. The collection of essays, fragmented writing, and poems of these pages show how, far from being a subcategory to love or a catalog of needs, desire is the very structure that allows an individual to become a human subject, a core constitutive part of humanity, and therefore of our societies.

Despite the many books that exist on the topic of desire and love (Perel 2006; May 2011; Berlant 2012; Ronald de Sousa 2015; de Botton 2016), you are holding the book of desire that I wanted to read but could not find. The first part of this book, "Desire and Subject," addresses how we become subjects through a given language and culture of humanity. The focus of this work is on Jacques Lacan's theories of desire, sexuation, and love, and specifically on *Seminar XX: On Feminine Sexuality, the Limits of Love and Knowledge* (Lacan 1998), and *Seminar VI: Desire and Its Interpretation* (Lacan 2019). Lacanian scholarship is renowned for its difficulty. My hope is that what I learned will become yours and that you will not need to make the, at times, strenuous effort that I had to make to get them. I hope that after reading the first part of this book, desire will stop being something unapproachable or a confusing abstraction, and instead you will understand how desire is central to our becoming and to the relationships in our lives.

How to have an intellectual engagement that can remain open while still deeply caring for the work of other thinkers such as Lacan? How to create those spaces in a written text? These are the questions that have inspired my writing. You will find in these pages a conversation with Lacan and not a treatise on Lacan. As you enter the second part of the book, where I explore how desire relates to love, the focus on Lacanian theory recedes, opening a space that is more paradoxical and multiple. The chapters in "Desire and Love" introduce a wide variety of voices; multiple works of literature, art, philosophy, psychoanalysis, poetry, and biographical reflection. The act of placing multiple thinkers and works side by side with the ideas of Lacanian thought opens a space of inbetweenness and relationality where different perspectives on desire manifest. This eclectic approach also follows a Lacanian impetus, as his work is exemplary in combining multiple sources of knowledge such as philosophy, mathematics,

religion, literature, or social sciences. Lacan insisted throughout his life on a multidisciplinary and experimental relation to thinking and writing.

What I share through the pages of this book is the act of creating spaces of fragmentation and paradox that can invite our unexpected thinking. I have aimed towards such spaces through formal and stylistic experimentation inspired by, in addition to Lacan, the tradition of essayistic and fragmented writing of Jean-Luc Nancy (1991, 2002), Françoise Héritier (2013), Audre Lorde (2017), and the latest Ronald Barthes (2018), and in poetic and literary analyses such as those by Margaret Atwood (2002), Mary Ruefle (2012), Ursula K. Le Guin (2004), and Chris Kraus (2015). While not all of these works focus specifically on desire, their inspiration is the energy behind the creative impulse in the book, where the experimental form is applied as an expression of critique.

I learned through the process of writing that the moment in which we are most ourselves is when we wish, deeply, to be able to speak as if we were another. I wrote the second part of this book, "Desire and Love," feeling that I was taking my heart out and leaving it there for you to see. This provoked a sense of panic and an intense need to use a pseudonym, as if I were trying to hide behind an identity that could speak from knowledge instead of the one from my beating heart. My desire for the second part of this book is that after reading it you will become a friend of your own desire, that you will hold it with a compassionate gaze and accept the constant invitation to be alive that desire always is.

I have to end with a confession. There is always the book on desire that I could write now, after I have written this one. How could it be otherwise when the topic is desire? This other book would be different, with other emphases and inspirations because the very writing of these essays and poetic imaginings has expanded my own self, moved it elsewhere, because the book that I would wish to find after having read this one would be different. It is an act of courage to stay in restlessness and wonder, but also a consolation. The consolation is knowing that there is no final word to be said about desire. Desire exceeds its own signification as a cascade of liveliness and energy that sustains us, fails us, and gives us human life. We can't catch desire, but we

can invite it to stay with us for now, for one lovely summer night. My desire is that you may find a space of desire in these pages and welcome the invitation to make them your own.

Note on Texts

References to Lacan's *Seminar VI: Desire and Its Interpretation* (published by Polity Press) and *Seminar XX: On Feminine Sexuality, the Limits of Love and Knowledge* (published by W.W. Norton) are translations by Bruce Fink. I cite the translations by Dennis Porter for *Seminar VII: The Ethics of Psychoanalysis* (published by Routledge), Alan Sheridan for *Écrits* (published by Routledge), and David Macey for *My Teaching* (published by Verso). Lacan held his Seminar XX in the years 1972–1973 and it was first published in French in 1975. Seminar VI took place in 1958–1959 and was first published in French in 2013. Seminar VII took place in 1959–1960 and appeared first in French in 1986. *Écrits* was originally published in French in 1966, and *My Teaching* in 2005. The translation of H.C. Andersen "The Little Mermaid" is by John Irons, for the Hans Christian Andersen Center at the University of Southern Denmark. All citations in Danish refer to the edition *Samlede eventyr og historier* (*Collection of Fairy Tales and Stories*) published by H.C. Andersens Hus. "The Little Mermaid" was originally published in Danish in 1837. Notice that translations of Danish, Catalan, and Spanish texts are by me or modified by me. A modified version of a couple of pages of Chapter 3 are included for future publication in a chapter with Lonni Hall entitled "Begærs Fortryllende Kraft" ("The Enchanting Power of Desire") in Annika Hellman and Jonas Alwall, eds., *Nordiska Rhizom* (*Nordic Rhizome*) (Malmö University Press, forthcoming). The poem "Foreign Desires" in Chapter 8 was previously published in my book *I Am Man.*

Part I

Desire and Subject

Margaret Atwood (2002) says that writing is talking to the dead, an ongoing conversation with authors and others who talk to us from their written pages. Writing in 49 CE, Seneca (2004) observed that too, and he called this the treasure of an inheritance that becomes larger when shared. But there are dead authors, and there are dead authors, and some are more intimidating than others. Jacques Lacan, for one, loved to create distance between himself and his audience, and he let them notice. You can even imagine him smiling sarcastically at your difficulties and thinking: "Do not believe for a second that I thought this hard to make it easier for you." The evolution of Lacan's thinking and his courageous practice of revisionism, reveals a trajectory that is exceptionally creative as well as difficult. His rhetoric exudes stubbornness, but his work speaks of someone with a highly inquisitive mind who could transform and expand his own theories over the course of his life. There is always a Lacan and a Lacan and a Lacan, depending on the work and the period. Reading Lacan is like embarking on a quest. You have to earn the hidden treasure by demonstrating resilience and the determination to not give up, although, at times (and there will be many of them) you will feel so entangled in and estranged by his mathemes, neologisms, and witticism that you will want to shout: Oh, please, can we stop this hide-and-seek game? Can't you just say it as it is? Reading him can make you feel like you are studying to become a member of a cult with a specific credo and symbols. Other times, you would rather throw his books out the window and go for a walk.

At those times, I found consolation by reading other Lacanians like Slavoj Žižek, Joan Copjec, Renata Salecl, Bruce Fink, Charles Shepherdson, and Sean Homer, who only partly adopt his obscure, disruptive argumentation, keeping the concepts but giving their analysis another emotional imprint. They provide you with insightful examples and show you how they learned to make friends with the "teacher." You read them only to find yourself missing Lacan and his rebellious attitude. Take, for example, his first sentence after presenting his formulas of sexuation in *Seminar XX:* "After what I just put on the board, you may think you know everything. *Don't."* (Lacan 1998, 78, my emphasis). How bold is it to begin a lecture with a warning for a start? Was he annoyed that, at this point in the 1970s, he had become something of an academic star, with hundreds of people attending his lectures? If what he was presenting was so revolutionary, how could it be so popular? Forty years later "experts" would still not fully agree on the core concepts and meanings of this seminar (see Barnard and Fink 2002), and feminist scholars and other philosophical traditions such as constructivism and post-constructivism would, more often than not, get his desire sexuation theory wrong. Appreciating Lacan is like developing an affection for Grumpy in *Snow White.* You need to keep a distance from him, have the courage to look him in the eyes and speak up. And still I am so deeply indebted to Lacan.

It all began with my fear of boredom. I could sense the shadow of seeing my self, my being, as boredom. I was on guard. In boredom, there is no meaning, no wonder, no devotion towards oneself, others, or the world. I have always sensed, as a form of intuition, that boredom is the absence of desire, but I did not know why. I read many different books trying to find an answer; most of these authors described desire as a state or feeling, often as erotic desire or sexual desire, sometimes as part of love and other times as opposed to love. But something completely revolutionary happened when I encountered the teachings of Jacques Lacan. Lacan showed me that desire is not a feeling — it is not only a form of energy or emotion that we may have for another — and it is not just craving. Desire is not a state of being, it is how the human is and becomes. I could sense that boredom is the absence of self. This was the reason behind the fear. The absence of desire

and the absence of self are one and the same. The disappearance of desire is the sleeping and at times the killing of your subject. It is being dead while alive. Desire can counteract the sense of dullness and meaninglessness of existential boredom because it is the core of being human. Desire is what makes it possible for us to become a subject, a "me" in the world. This is why to understand desire we need to understand how we become subjects; or it could be said the other way around, that it is in our efforts to understand how we become subjects that we finally encounter the understanding of desire.

H.C. Andersen is also a teacher of desire, but my personal encounter with him was very different. He seduced me with his kindness and fragility. He entered my consciousness softly like a breeze and transformed me from within, like music, psalms, and mantras, which also do silent work on our consciousness. I wanted his book of collected fairy tales (Andersen 1992) in my bedroom because, even when closed, its pages would protect me and remind me of a gaze of hope and compassion towards the world and towards yourself. I want to ask Andersen: Would you walk with me, sit with me on the sofa and keep me company? Would you read to me out loud? I am so grateful for our friendship. I wanted to reread him, to discover how he could create a world, many worlds, in such a small space, finding the ordinary in the extraordinary, the extraordinary in everything, and in everything the universal. He could speak in the tongues of animals and angels. He would always remind us that people, things, and beings are not what they seem to be, that categories fail us, that we should keep our self-righteousness and harsh judgement in check, that only love and compassion are able to see fully. Andersen's stories are not tools of admonition or reprimand. His pen does not bow to fear and social control like in two other fairy tales of desire, "L'Estel D'or" ("The Golden Star") (2014) and "La Flor Romanial" ("The Romanial Flower") (2015), which inspire the discussion at the end of this section.

H.C. Andersen's storytelling is a radical transformation of the fairy tale from a socialization tool to an emancipation tool, an invitation to recover our past child, the part of ourselves that could still get lost in presence and in playfulness. "The Little Mermaid" (Andersen 2014) is a master lesson in desire. There is

extensive scholarship on Andersen's work and life, and as equal an interest in studying and analyzing his travels and queerness as in his work. Trying to trace complex psychological relationships between his biographical experiences and his fairy tales is not the way I wish to converse with him. I engage with "The Little Mermaid" as a piece of art that can stand on its own, as a poetic work that evokes imaginations and understandings of desire(s). I make it my own, weaving it into my own thinking, trying to escape the multiple, critical distancing layers of interpretation and reinterpretation by opening up to the feelings and thoughts that the work fosters in me. Instead of diving into long analyses of who Andersen was, I had an urge to pay him a visit, to go to his grave, and suddenly it could not wait. I walked there in the afternoon of May 6, 2020 (fig. 1). It was a strange desire, which I explained later in a conversation with a good friend:

> What an amazing place, the graveyard. It's like a romantic gothic garden, with old trees and tombstones that go way back, some to the 1700s, narrow paths and many different trees and bushes. It's a place to talk privately and think. The day was so beautiful and there were several pairs of friends sitting on the grass patches. Such a contrast between the reality of death and the exuberance of the spring that is exploding everywhere with bright colors. His grave is not romantic but elegant. Neo-classical with balance and symmetry; without statues or symbols. Only one word on the tombstone that says "Digteren," the poet, plus his name and four verses from one of his poems: "That soul that God created / after its image is incorruptible, and cannot be lost / our life here on earth is the seed of eternity / our body dies but the soul cannot die." He is still so loved. There were flowers that people had left there, a letter, and some birthday flags (this is the way Danish people celebrate, with their national flags as decorations on cakes and at home) and a little gift package that was unopened with a silver ribbon. The detail of the silver ribbon was moving. I know now why I suddenly had this urge to go to the graveyard and visit his tombstone. I think I was there asking for his blessing for the work that I want to do, for taking his work and making it mine. He is resting in a garden that could be taken out of



Fig. 1. H.C. Andersen's tombstone and Assistens Cemetery, Copenhagen, Denmark. Photos by the author.

a fairy tale. And inside me it felt like I received a blessing of wind, light, and sweetness there today. Imagine a graveyard as a sweet place? But that is how it felt, like a space overflowing with sweetness. Respect can also be filled with sweetness, instead of fear.

It can be difficult to cast a new gaze on a story that is already fixed in us and in our childhood, or to awaken our curiosity to look at a familiar plot in a new way. H.C. Andersen's "The Little Mermaid" is a story that many of you may know well or would at least have heard of. Far beyond the musical portrayal and happy ending of the Disney movie, Andersen created a masterpiece, a story of profound and radical beauty, a revolutionary tale. His text combines the biblical power of parables, the fantasy of fables, and mythology, and turns the value systems of traditional fairy tales upside down. It is a story of transgression that takes us out of historical time and transports us into a deep, universal time. And in this poetic masterpiece, published in 1837, Andersen draws out, so elegantly and playfully, Lacan's (1998) analytical and tireless struggle to understand the nature of desire and his famous and polemical *Seminar XX,* on sexuation. In fact, I believe that Andersen's poetics even expands it.

My reflections in "Desire and Subject" are a conversation with and between these two works. Despite having such different writing styles, affective characters, genres, and epochs, they seemed destined to meet. Although I aim to present Lacan's ideas on subject and sexuation using a variety of sources, "The Little Mermaid" will stay on its own. We begin with Lacan's ideas about the subject and follow our lovely mermaid into another type of garden. This is a journey into the Lacanian universe of how we become subjects and the role of desire in that process of becoming. We take one step forward into the twentieth century, so we can later jump backwards and catch H.C. Andersen in the nineteenth century.

1

The Subject of Desire

Our story begins a long time ago, when there was no paper, no screens, and no writing, when the word was only an enunciated sound that was heard and remembered. It was at that time that there was an organism made by another being. In the beginning, that organism born with the potential for thinking was only a mouth and a pair of eyes and a bundle of emerging and bursting needs. But more than that, it did not know what it was. It could gaze around, first at very short distances and for a short time, and it could pronounce a loud sound of urgency, but otherwise it was helpless. Due to its vulnerability, this biological being, which had been brought into an outside space too early and too dependent on the support of others, was navigating between calmness and a storm of negative affects and sensations that demanded of it to crave and ask for help from its surroundings. Help would come and go, in the form of touch, liquid, sounds, warmth, presence, and absence. Affects would come and go in the form of anxiety, pain, frustration, softness, warmth, and sweetness. This organism is the human as *being,* and it still does not feel differentiated from the mother. The baby feels as being "all," which in Lacanian terms is not wholeness or fullness. This "all" is the state that characterizes our first months of life when a baby is not aware of being a separate singular body. This stage is a baby as a being before she has emerged as a subject, as a speaking being. Human existence and reality will appear to her in this journey of becoming a subject of desire.

Like the waves of the sea touching and leaving the shore, a human consciousness will start to ebb and flow and become

weaved into this being. At this stage, the mother (i.e., the primary caretaker(s), parents) of the infant is noticeably present or absent. "See, this is you," the caretaker tells the infant. She is older now and is not just a pair of eyes and a mouth with needs; other parts of her have started to emerge, for example, a hand or feet, to reach, hold, and sense with. "Hello, here you are!" the caretaker says, smiling. "Oh, and now you are also smiling!" they say, rejoicing. The infant cannot understand this yet, but she begins to sense her presence being reflected in their gazes, in the hands that hold and comfort her, in the smiles and attentive looks, in the tone of the voices, and in the unpleasantness and frustration that arises when her needs are not noticed and help does not arrive. Most importantly, she is both falling into and emerging from the structure of language that is spoken by her caretakers. Words, *signifiers,* made of letters and sounds that interrelate, form a landscape of symbolization from which she cannot yet capture meaning. The first stop in the process of subjectification is when our baby being meets a universe made of spoken words. Born into a world of sensations and contingent historical symbolic practices, she begins to form a sense of self through these fragmented body images and sound images, like a bodily collage.

Our baby is emerging through a process of splitting from the being in the "all" with the mother, and the first part of this trajectory is what Jacques Lacan calls the emerging of the *subject of statement.* What does he mean by this? He provides the answer in an extensive explanation of the subjectification trajectory in his *Seminar VI: Desire and Its Interpretation* (Lacan 2019). The initial division into becoming a subject happens when our baby begins to feel immersed in the world of signifiers; the caretakers speak words and the baby can't make sense of them yet, but she finds herself surrounded by them. Lacan points out that babies first believe their caretakers to be omnipotent and all-knowing (2019, 308). Words represent at this stage a radical otherness, which is obscure, foreign, and seems powerful. Language is there before our infant is born and language is made of an unequal relationship, with the signifiers dominating the signifieds (concepts) (Lacan 2001, 164). The signifier is the hearers' psychologi-

cal imprint of the acoustic image of a word (Lacan 1998, 33), the impression it makes on our senses.

To maintain the vital connection with the mother, our baby is thrown into language. This launches a first process of becoming through signifiers, through language as structure. Thanks to language, the mother is not only the mother as the being of all for the baby, she is now a *speaking* being who introduces structural symbolic language — signifiers — to her infant. Like the three wise kings of the bible who bring the world to baby Jesus through the symbols of gold, frankincense, and myrrh, the mother gives her child the world of the symbolic by sharing language with her. In this way, a third element is introduced into the mother-baby relationship. Besides the structure of language common to all speaking beings, parents also introduce a particular, historical discourse. The parental discourse is the one that says: "you are," and "you should"; this subjectivity of the epoch responds to the social relationships and orders of a specific society (Lacan 2001, 51; Asociación Psicoanalítica del Uruguay 2020). The combination of language as structure and of a specific discourse is for Lacan the "big Other," that which constitutes social life, the language of history, culture, social law, and prohibition.

The Emergence of Thought

It's early morning, "I would love to stay longer, but I can't. I need to go to work," or "do not cry, I have to cook…," the caretaker says to the baby. The infant does not yet understand what these signifying chains (go to work, have to cook, etc.) mean, though she experiences the effect of these signifiers as a separation from the caretaker (Bailly 2009). If babies were not born with such immaturity, they would not need their caretakers in the same way, but our infant is in a state of deep dependency. The need to think and talk, the need to master the signifier, appears as what allows us to survive this insufficiency. Our infant is guessing what causes the presence and absence of the caretaker. This curiosity gets linked to the signifiers that the caretaker uses in her explanations and daily talk with the baby: work, cooking, etc. These signifiers appear as a powerful, strange materiality of sounds as causes that are, to start with, without specific mean-

ings. Signifiers, however, have effects: the caretaker leaves, the caretaker returns. Lacan theorizes that the infant has from the outset a protocapacity to think and that in entering the world of signifiers — becoming a speaking being — this ability to think evolves hand in hand with the appearing of the unconscious (2001, 161–97). Subjectivity emerges first as a sense of wonder born of need. The necessity to yield to language is thereby linked to our primordial relationality and fragility, anxiety, and pleasure — bodily affects and sensations. The signifiers that we listen to and begin to master will be inscribed in flesh.

Psychoanalysis suggests that becoming a subject demands different stages of estrangement and loss. One stage is entering language. Another is realizing our primary caretaker is a stranger to us, that we do not know what she wants, and that she cannot fully know our wants. What is this "work"? What is this "cooking"? What does my caretaker want? An additional stage is conceiving of the father — or rather, that which takes the mother's attention and separates her from us, for example, a partner, a job, social duties, tasks, etc. — as what can fulfill the mother's desire.

Mastering the Signifier and the Agency of "The Letter"

Our infant is in the park with her mother. "Oh, look at the little dog! Bow wow!" the mother says, smiling. The infant looks at her and repeats: "Dog, bow wow. Cat, meow meow," and then continues: "dog, meow meow. Cat, bow wow." The mother corrects her: "No, no, the dog says bow wow." Now the infant looks distressed and insists: "Dog, meow meow." This is the exact example Lacan uses to explain how the infant engages in language games, not only by following a simple, conventional, and imitative connection with reality — pointing at things and naming them — but by playing with the signifiers by crossing and exchanging them (2019, 165–66). What seems like nonsense is actually extremely important. With his sharp sense of humor, Lacan calls this infant language game a "literary genre" to make us realize how precious this nonsense is (2019, 166). Signifiers relate to concepts — the ideas of things — and not to things in themselves, and they elicit feelings and behaviors towards specific conceptions or meanings (Bailly 2009). Interchanging "meow

meow" and "bow wow," the baby is practicing her mastery of signifiers, with their multiple possibilities of combination, association, and substitution. The example highlights how the signifier is primary and highly autonomous, in relation to the signified.

Language structure is characterized by signifiers organized in signifying chains (a signifier linking to other signifiers), "rings of a necklace that are rings in another necklace" (Lacan 2001, 169), and by two basic figures: the metaphor and the metonymy. Language is "a chain of materially unstable elements" (Lacan 2001, 316) and the effects of the play of combination and substitution of these elements. Language combines signifiers in multiple ways to produce multiple meanings. The parents of our infant might use proverbs or sayings when talking to her, for example, "a stitch in time saves nine," or "all that glitters is not gold." The combination of many signifiers in these sayings results in a meaning different from the meaning of each signifier (e.g., stitch, gold) taken separately. Additionally, a meaning or an idea can be expressed by a multitude of different combinations of signifying chains. For example, as she grows older she will become familiar with the idea of "success" and how it can be expressed in multiple ways: "she won the medal," "he graduated," etc. Furthermore, a signifier by its very nature makes us anticipate meaning by "unfolding its dimensions right before it" (Lacan 2001, 169). Like the sentences "'I shall never…,' 'All the same it is…,' 'And yet there may be…'" (Lacan 2001, 169). As these examples show, signifiers do not link or mirror a presupposed exterior "reality," instead signifiers shape and institute "places" as reality, and they do this by referring to each other and forming a specific structure. We can imagine our baby's emerging consciousness and unconsciousness as the obtaining of a structure of elements that can make many necklaces, and her subjectification as the locus for this structure.

Becoming a speaking being entails a journey where our most important psychic and social relationships — the ones with our primary caretakers, our siblings, objects, ourselves, and the world of society and culture in which we find ourselves — are marked by basic language structures. The primacy of the signifier in our becoming is one of the most important teachings of Lacanian thought. The infant finds herself immersed in a space of form

and signifiers, thrown into the universal of language, and it is in this space, with its specific structure which Lacan names "the letter,"[1] that she will evolve as a subject. "By 'letter' I designate that material support that concrete discourse borrows from language" (Lacan 2001, 163). He explains further in another text,

> the subject in question has nothing to do with what we call the subjective in the vague sense [...] and nor does it have anything to do with the individual. The subject is what I define in the strict sense as an effect of the signifier. That is what a subject is, before it can be situated in, for example, one or another of the people who are there in an individual state, even before they exist as living beings. (Lacan 2008a, 79)

The signifier "does not need to answer for its existence in the name of any signification whatever" (Lacan 2001, 166). Rather, the signifier is "the difference of places, the very possibility of localization [...the letter] does not divide itself into places, *it divides places* — that is to say, *it institutes them.* This amounts to saying if you will, that there is not a division because there is materiality, but rather that there is materiality because there is division" (Nancy and Lacoue-Labarthe 1992, 42–43, my emphasis).

1 Nancy and Lacoue-Labarthe (1992, 27–29) explain the primacy of the signifier in Lacan as a form of philosophical logic centered around the idea of "the letter." The letter is language structure insofar as the subject is implicated therein. With the concept of the letter Lacan achieves two things. First, he points to the essential feature of the signifier as localizable and material. The sounds of a word take place as something, somewhere. But also, he tells us that this letter is what makes the literalization of the subject possible because language exists before the individual subject is born. It is the structure, "the material support" (Lacan 2001, 163) of the letter, that will make it possible for the subject to have a discourse, a combination of language structure and the individual performance of language (speech). Second, the letter is a form of strange materiality. On the one side, the letter as signifier is located, it has a relation to place, however this place is not the same as a localization in objective reality, this is not a traditional substantial materiality, but rather matter without substance (Nancy and Lacoue-Labarthe 1992, 29).

There are no limits to how the signifier can mark places through differentiation, to signifiers whose inscription is the exclusion of others, for example types of professions, nationalities, class, race, and so forth. The signifiable, the meaning, submits to the mark of the signifier. What is beyond language is not "reality," but as we will see in more detail in Chapter Two what Lacan names the real, that which is beyond signification.

The literacy of our infant and her acts of enunciation (i.e., her sociality) will depend on the constituted materiality of language. This first position in the signifier realm is what would allow her to speak as if knowing, as if speaking through the language of humanity, through the big Other of culture and history. This first face of the subject is the "I" that can take the position of the "I" of statements, of sentences where we speak as if we were speaking for humanity, like when we say "it is going to rain," or "today is Tuesday." It is the "I" that can inherit knowledge passed down through generations through words, as that generic subject that can take the position of the subject speaking as if with a view from nowhere. The "I" that applies knowledge to make interpretations will be the source of stories she tells herself about her life. This is also the face of the subject that has a knowledge that she is not aware off, for example the kind of knowledge one can access in hypnosis, the knowledge of the unconscious (Fink 2002). This is a knowledge that is not known but that can make itself known, that resides in the connection among the signifiers that have been inscribed in her. It is not yet the "I" that describes her own personal pleasure or suffering, it is not the "I" that expresses "I love you" or "I desire you." For this, we need the second face of the subjectification journey, the subject of enunciation.

The *unconscious* of the subject is made *as* a language. This famous Lacanian idea means that the elements that will constitute the unconscious of our infant, those images and thoughts that she will have in dreams, for example, link to each other thanks to associations in a chain, as signifiers do in language. They do not mirror meanings or sense-making, instead, they link to each other as a chain of sounds and images that express themselves through symptoms and slips of the tongue, dreams, mistaken actions. The subject of the unconscious has a knowledge that is registered and inscribed somewhere but unbeknownst to the

thinking, conscious ego (Fink 2002). The unconscious appears in the process of subjectification. It is not an organic realm or pre-social. Instead, our infant will develop the unconscious hand in hand with the evolving of her consciousness. The Lacanian subject manifests its agency in talk that is marked by language, by the unconscious and unintentional discourse of the Other. Although this talk can be located somewhere beyond the conscious talk of the ego, even our ego's dependence on language is othered and alienated. As Lacan expresses, "the world, the world of being, full of knowledge, is but a dream, a dream of the body insofar as it speaks, for there's no such thing as a knowing subject" (1998, 126). Further:

> Once born an infant is "doomed" to orient himself therein, locate himself therein [in the signifier and the big Other]. The Other's demand having necessarily fragmented and fractured him, if he is to be able to locate himself, he must go through a fundamental stage in which what becomes his discourse is taken beyond the Other. (Lacan 2019, 283)

Besides locating the subject of knowledge, this quote also shows us the crucial discovery that, for her discourse to appear, a speaking being needs to go beyond the Other. Our infant will need to go through a process of understanding that the caretaker is not omnipotent and all-knowing. This is not the trauma of being marked by entering language. Rather, this trauma occurs because we do not know what our parents want, their desire appears as opaque (Lacan 2019). This awareness of the other as "not knowing," and as "object" or "an-other," as a separate entity, launches the child's trajectory into a subject of desire. If on one side, the infant has to find her bearings in the big Other, on the other side, she is going to evolve by being introduced to the little other, to the persons around us that we identify as other egos, and desire is going to appear as constitutive of the subject in that process.

Desire Is Not the Direct Representation of Needs

"Are you hungry?" they ask her, bringing the milk to her lips. "Maybe it is not that … are you tired? Is it too hot?" The caretak-

ers look at the helpless baby and interpret her apparent *needs* as *demands,* as something they have to respond to and act upon. They express their interpretation and representation of the infant's needs through language, through multiple combinations of signifying chains. "Let me try this, let me hold you and rock you, sing to you." Our vulnerable infant is now feeling that her needs are being attended to, a pleasurable relief from the frustration of a need like hunger. However, she also feels something that goes beyond the covering of her basic survival needs. This surplus is linked to what the mere presence of the other gives simply by being there. The baby feels the love and attention of her caretakers, a surplus, something that is difficult to grasp. It is the relationship between the three elements of needs, demands, and love/something more that for Lacan constitutes the core structure of desire:

> [I]n the expression of his needs, the subject finds himself initially caught in and poured into [the mold of] necessities that are characteristics of demand, and that are based on the following: the form of demand is already altered and alienated by the fact that we are obliged to think in (the form of language), and that demand must already be inscribed in the Other as a register and in the Other's code. [...] There is a gap between the purely and simple *interrogative* language of demand, on the one hand, and the language with which the subject answers the question of what he wants and constitutes himself in relation to what he is, on the other. It is in this gap that what is known as desire arises. (Lacan 2019, 172)

True to his love for negations and double negations, Lacan defines desire as a subtraction. Desire is what remains after need is subtracted from demand (Homer 2005, 72). What he means is easy to understand when looking at the example above. There are the innate needs that an infant has to survive (e.g., for food). These needs are expressed by the child and have to be interpreted by the caretakers (e.g., you must be hungry), and this interpretation is understood by them as demands. The "animal" needs of the infant, conditioned by survival and reproduction, are now subjected to demands. Demands are very different from needs

because demands are part of the symbolic, part of language beyond biological need, and limitless both in their nature and in their quantity. There is no specific limit to demands such as love, attention, care, etc., but there is also no limit to the "types" of demands. Thanks to language, we can imagine an endless list: admiration, safety, likeability, respect, joy, and so on. Similarly that there is no end to the possible combination and substitution of signifiers. The "object" of demand, as in metonymy, can be displaced from one object to the next, ad infinitum. There is a myriad of ways that admiration, joy, respect, and so forth can be represented by situations, places, goals, people, etc. The subject–object relation grounded in language takes on numerous forms. We can imagine the realm of demand as this "infinite displacement" of signifiers, an "endless play of symbolic substitution" (Shepherdson 2008, 6). This primal repression of the child, that alienates parts of its needs because it has to express them as demands, in language, reappears as desire, but desire with its "paradoxical, deviant, erratic, eccentric, even scandalous character" (Lacan 2001, 317) is radically different from need.

As time passes, the child expands the way in which she expresses demands through her acquisition of language and inscription into the symbolic world of culture, values, and norms, and a link is created between what were biological needs and socially mediated demands. In response to the expression of her needs, the child receives care that goes above and beyond meeting these needs. She not only gets food, but also experiences the attention and care of her parents in a complex combination of sensual and verbal experiences. "What is desired when a demand is addressed to another is not so much the meeting of the thus expressed need, but, in addition to this, the very love of another" (Johnston 2018). When we subtract the pure aspect of need from this demand for attention (love), what we have left is desire (Lacan 2001, 344). Desire is the phenomenon that appears in this splitting (Homer 2005, 72). Lacan expresses the split from and submission to language — from having to express ones needs as demands — by barring the subject (S) $.

Desire as this limit between need and demand takes on a paradoxical character. Firstly, we can understand desire as what installs particular limits or shapes to the infinity of demand.

Shepherdson (2008) emphasizes that for Lacan desire acts as what gives direction to the constant displacement of one object of demand for the next. Desire gives a unique and personal shape to a realm that otherwise is unlimited: the vast sea of demand possibilities of the symbolic. Through desire, our infant will evolve into a particular subject that will be able to position herself towards some specific object demands, her desires. Second, while it particularizes, the interlinking of need and demand occurs in and through language and is thereby "altered and alienated" (Lacan 2019, 172). This internalization of discourse enables and alienates us. As a foreign presence, it never corresponds completely to our unique individualization. Our unconscious will be filled with the discourses and desires of other people, and we may find ourselves striving for goals and aspirations, such as attaining a specific profession or type of love, without knowing why (Fink 1995). Our most personal objects of desire are historically and socioculturally dependent.

The singularity of the infant will never receive full closure, and the excess aimed at the search for love (for the "all") cannot be captured or subsumed in any particular object. The paradox in the shift from demand to desire happens around something that is not only symbolic, but is instead our loss of being, what the organism loses when entering language and human existence. This points to the importance, in later works by Lacan, of the limits of language, "a certain dimension of the real, an aspect of the unconscious that is linked to the body and sexuality, and not to the symbolic order" (Shepherdson 2008, 15). It is because the subject "is cut off from that *essential thing* that would complete it" (Copjec 2015, 60–61, my emphasis) that human desire is always unsatisfied and endless.

Due to desire, the infant is evolving from a subject of statement, one immersed in signifiers and language as structure, to a *subject of enunciation,* a subject that says "I am…," "I want…," and "I wish…." This subjectification, which is not limited to the rational agent, is closely related to affect, to the embodiment of language and the body. Fink explains the subject of affect as defined by the moment when we enunciate language with our tone of voice, our accent, our lips and mouth, our breath, and the emotional charge of our words:

> The enunciating subject is the one who may take pleasure in speaking, or find it painful to speak, or who may make a slip when speaking. The enunciating subject is the one who may let slip something that is revealing as to his or her feelings, desires, or pleasures. (Fink 2002, 25)

To become the subject of enunciation or *jouissance,*[2] several things are going to happen: The ability of the subject to relate to objects will emerge; the appearance of desire will allow the relationship between the subject (as "I am me," as ego) and the other (as individual, as an other ego, as object) to appear; and this relationship between desire and an other will manifest itself as fantasy. Castration is the payment the subject will make in order to achieve her voice, her discourse; she must renounce being the desire of the mother.

Caught by the Image, the Mirror Stage, and Subject-Object Relations

When the caretaker is taken away, the baby realizes that the mother, who at first was "all," is not "me," and therefore can be given to someone else. It is only in this loss that we realize the existence of an object. To explain this, Lacan reinterprets Sigmund Freud's child game of *fort-da.* Freud witnessed his eighteen-month-old grandson playing with a cotton reel, which

2 The Lacanian concept *jouissance* does not have a direct translation in English. It is often translated as enjoyment, but the meaning of enjoyment is too broad. Instead, jouissance is a very specific type of enjoyment related to the drives, which are the way instincts metamorphosize in the speaking being. Jouissance is how the drives enjoy once we have been socialized through language and the symbolic, for example once we have learned to control the anal function through potty training. Through our drives we get a type of enjoyment that has to do with repetition, an enjoyment for its own sake, instead of the enjoyment of obtaining a goal or calming a need. Think of the repetitive enjoyment/jouissance of the smoker, how their mouth "uses" or "enjoys" smoking, or imagine the comfort and enjoyment we get from sipping repeatedly from a personal water bottle (oral drive), versus the satisfaction of a single glass of water when we are thirsty.

the boy would take out of the cot saying "Oo" and wait for his mother to retrieve it for him, to which he would say "Ah." Freud interpreted these baby noises as meaning "gone" and "here" and saw this as a child training to master the presence and absence of his parents. Lacan sees in this game not only emotional training, but also how it is after the loss of something that this something becomes an object. This insight will be crucial for the development of subject–object relations and desire in the child. How?

Our baby's imagination of herself as being an other who is split from her mother is enabled by her relationship with and imagination of what the other is to her, and her perception of her own body. She is now learning to recognize the others, her caretakers, as imagined coherent entities, as the ones who come and go, who respond or do not respond to her needs; they appear as a coherent image of voice, heat, and smell that approaches and disappears, whereby a being is perceived as an image. She is developing an understanding of the other person as a coherent ego, side-by-side with her increased imagination of herself as being a larger bodily collage with ever more distinctive contours. This collage is an image reflecting an increased consistency of self that she is perceiving through others, like an armor that can hold the fragments of eye, mouth, hand, needs, and affects together as one entity. A complex imaginary of the self is slowly, but surely, emerging from the many interactions between the baby and the caretakers, and this being that was mouth, eye, and mixing affects is now perceiving itself as a body-image that will soon be a self, as "me."

Lacan was inspired by the study of how animals could reach different stages of development by seeing and fixating on an image. The power of the image, what we see, the ocular, was not only a question of form or aesthetics. Instead, the "seeing" of an other could launch a new trajectory of the physical and psychic development of a being. The image seizes and bonds biological beings and also speaking beings. Lacan explains this other moment of becoming a subject as the mirror stage (a theory he developed in the 1930s and expanded in the 1960s) (Lacan 2001, 1–32). Affects make the baby fascinated by those who gaze at her, the mother or primary caretaker(s), resulting in the awareness that there is a gaze outside of herself that looks at her and,

therefore, that she must be something "other" and different from the one who gazes. The mirror stage is equally caused by a prematuration at birth, generic to humans, from which results the joyful identification of an infant with her image in the mirror (Lacan 2001, 2), her sense of being "one" as returned to her by the image, an inversed and phantasmatic other that is interiorized as "me." "The child anticipates on the mental plane the conquest of the functional unity of his own body, which at that stage, is still incomplete on the plane of voluntary mobility" (Lacan 2001, 20). The imaginary allows the power of anticipation, the creation of something before its time, the "image of itself as coordinated and powerful assists the child in becoming coordinated and powerful" (Fink 2016, 71). This is the human being attaining an image of herself for the first time, but a "false" one in the sense that is always imaginary and phantasmatic. The moment the infant discovers her image is an intellectual act. The image of a body becomes the idea of "me" (Bailly 2009).

It is thanks to our senses that we conceive of objects as specific images and believe them to be singular autonomous entities separated from us and from each other. Lacan will name the realm of image and the senses the imaginary order. Think about what is a body? While we often depict our bodies as images, like in drawings and photographs, images are not what a body is; these are fundamental illusions. The imaginary is the order of appearances, imagination and deception, which hides more complex structure. Our bodies are not geometric skin containers (e.g., a circle or a box), instead they are closed-open (Nancy 2008) and in the orifices, like the mouth, the eyes, the anus, the ears, and the vagina we acutely sense the interior-exteriority of our bodies (Shepherdson 2008). To achieve a sense of bodily autonomy and unity, and to identify with the idea of "me" is not an easy task. Lacan will emphasize that this achivement relies on the imaginary and the identification with the object-image of our body. The imaginary is therefore the order of identifications.

The mirror stage showcases the power of the imaginary and it is the way our baby girl will get her subject (I-me) as ego. The ego is often criticized in popular discourse and reduced to a series of personality traits such as excessive narcissism or "selfishness." Rather, the ego is the consciousness that the speaking being has

of herself as the idea of being "one," a specular and fictitious "imaginary unity" (Lacan 2001, 151). This is not to be confused with being one with all nature, returning to a pre-subjective state, or with being "whole." For Lacan the ego is not a unified or fixed part of the psyche. Instead, the ego is the love of the image that is oneself (Bailly 2009), an identification and, as the word entails, to identify with a coherent image is always *a relation* to another. In Lacan's words:

> "I am a man", which at most can mean no more than. "I'm like he whom I recognize to be a man, and so recognize myself as being such." In the last resort, [...this is] to be understood only in reference to *the truth of "I is an other."* (Lacan 2001, 24, my emphasis)

Identification is a paradoxical movement that includes both splitting and fusion — I am me and I am my image — the simultaneous creation and confusion of subject and object. The ego allows the infant to relate in space and time as an "individual," perceiving herself as subject-and-object.

After entering the imaginary, the consciousness of herself as an ego and others as an ego, she will not have access to things themselves. In our human world, "organisms only manage to meet *through their representatives,* through the mediation of their egos [...], so that the imaginary is indeed the pivotal point at which the entire relation between the organism and the subject is denatured" (Shepherdson 2008, 195, emphasis in original). The process of subjectivity grounds the subject in lack, and specific forms of identity marked by signifiers (e.g., sexual, gender, racial, class, religious identities, and so on) might attempt to mediate our relationship to this lack, by providing a double fantasy: the mirage of a previous unified self (a phantasmatic oneness) and the imagination that there is an "ideal" or "another being," a lost being that has total and perpetual access to all jouissance. This is something that we will explore in more detail in the rest of Part I.

The Subject of Enunciation

Our infant, now close to one year old, sees in her mother's gaze the gestures, facial expressions, and moods that make it possible for her to be mirrored back. The mother of the imaginary corresponds to a little "other," but not just *any* little other. It is the subject to which the infant addresses its demand, the subject that was, at first, perceived as all and omnipotent (Lacan 2019, 308). This gaze is the mirror, which, in its very origin, includes images (reflections of or gazing at our body, figure, or bodily parts) and also words, that is, the symbolic, the world of language, and the projected desires and fantasies of parents or others. When the gaze of the parent confirms the child in her recognition of herself as a you/me (such as "oh, look at you!" or "hello, you look happy today"), they return to her the idea of herself as an image. This institutes the place of the ego-ideal.

The ego-ideal is the anchoring point created through the confirmation (like a nod of recognition) of who we are as seen by our primary caretakers. It is the caretakers' external gaze, a necessary alienation, that allows the infant to develop a sense of self, which depends on how others see her. This nod of recognition is considered by Lacan to be a key step in the process of installing the ascendency of the symbolic in the child. Thanks to the parental response, our baby, who was before a messy combination of sensations, perceptions, and affects, interiorizes or introjects her mirror image and the parental view of herself, the symbolic order. Thus, her individuality is interiorized as imaginary and formed from an outside position to herself (it is me, and what others see of me), allowing the self to be subjected to symbolization processes. During the mirror stage, the symbolic (the words and expressions the caretakers use about the child) begin to restructure and supersede the imaginary order made of sense perceptions (Lacan 2001, 341; Fink 2016, 222).

The imaginary order and the symbolic order are different and yet deeply interconnected. Through the nod of symbolic recognition, the imaginary object-image is instituted by the signifier as a place — *here you are.* The symbolic order (words/signifiers) interlaces with the imaginary order allowing the baby to emerge as *a subject* in the mindst of the chaos of fragmented multiplicity

that is her organism and the world around her. Together with the symbolic, the imaginary order and its specular capacity will be foundational for the development of the baby's ego, and for the perception of her body and other bodies (objects/people) as unitary and contained. The subject is dual, both a subject of statement/signifiers and a subject of jouissance/enunciation.

The infant fixes this image of herself as a "one" and from then on develops her ideal ego. If the ego-ideal was the fixing place for the interiorization of the symbolic order — an ideal vantage point from which the Other looks at her, an authority ideal — the ideal ego is the ideal imagination of coherence and wholeness that the infant gets through the mirror, her sense of "self" as different from other similar siblings, an imaginary projection (Fink 2016, 74–75). The ideal ego is an imaginary role where the subject finds herself likeable (Salecl 1998, 152). The ego is first and foremost a bodily ego and the meaning of the word "ideal" is that in order for us to invest libido and love in the idea of "me," to cathect ourselves, we need to feel this image of ourselves as totalizing, powerful, positive, and worthwhile (Fink 2016, 73–74).

Our infant sees herself in the others looking at and talking to her. She also sees herself in her counterparts, those siblings or other infants that may have access to the care and love of the mother. These little others gazing and speaking are, in Lacan's theory, imaginary others: those that we see and imagine as ourselves, whole, coherent egos who resemble our own imagination of ourselves as coherent individuals (Homer 2005). It is the ideal coherence — a wishful and fictional perception of the wholeness and permanence of object-images — that we imagine in the "others" that we chase in ourselves. Being imaginary, this coherence is an enterprise doomed to fail. This is another form of alienation, or splitting, which belongs to the order of the imaginary and is different from the one experienced through the symbolic. Our baby is now perceiving herself as an image (an ego) and perceiving others as egos, but her desiring relationship to caretaker beings such as her mother has been an unsettled one from the outset. While her needs are pushing her towards the other, while she is wanting to achieve fulfillment of her needs and subsequent pleasure, she is also exhibiting aggressiveness and frustration because she is at the mercy of the other to gain access to this pleasure or

balance (Lacan 2001, 9–32). This form of negative affect continues to appear later in life, such as the aggression that we may feel towards the Samaritan who comes to our aid, or the frustration mixed with guilt that often accompanies the experience of paternalism (so common in paternalistic social prejudice, a likeability without respect that expects gratitude; an infantilization).

This development has a "fictional direction" (Lacan 2001, 3) as something that bundles and sorts out the messiness and affectivity of the helpless being and her relationship to her own body. "We have only to understand the mirror stage as an identification [...] namely, the transformation that takes place in the subject when he assumes an image" (Lacan 2001, 2). Our own ego is created thanks to this imaginary process, as a virtual bundle of images, and later words, that I self-identify as me:

> The body does not automatically cohere by nature: it holds itself together as one entity, and is able to move through space, not naturally, with the physical coherence of an objective thing, but only with the help of imaginary and symbolic props that give space and time their consistency. (Shepherdson 2008, 5)

The imaginary becomes a matter of our own embodiment, and it forms the unconscious in a different manner than the symbolic. The imaginary is this semblance that subjectivizes objective reality (Žižek 2002, 64). Here the subject begins as if "furnishing" (Lacan 2019, 276) the material of her own unconscious (i.e., the signifier) with the imaginary (visual, olfactory, auditory, and tactile register) and with her own relationship to her own body and others, expanding what the unconscious will be once the process of subjectification is finished, creating the "alphabet" of the unconscious (Lacan 2019, 276). There is no break between the physical and the psychic (Lacan 2008a, 32), "it is with our bodily members that we create the alphabet of the discourse that is unconscious — and of course, we each do so in different ways, for, although we are caught in the unconscious, we do not all use the same elements" (Lacan 2019, 276). The ego of the imaginary is not an autonomous free agent. Rather, "the ego ultimately is something 'extimate' (i.e., intimately exterior, an internal exter-

nality)" (Johnston, 2018). The ego is an imaginary function that allows us to fantasize about ourselves as coherent beings (a mirror image), which is rooted in the gaze of the other. Here we can recall Slavoj Žižek's argument that "our very existence is 'responsive'" (2002, 69) and how relationality, insufficiency, and otherness are at the core of Lacan's subjectification.

The infant who is now becoming a subject (I-me) appears through the gaze but does not become one with the gaze. On the contrary, from a Lacanian perspective, the subject is created as being "cut out from" the gaze. The motherly gaze of the other appears to the infant as, on the one hand, too omnipotent and important, representing the guarantor of her survival and needs, and, on the other hand, as an enigma that does not want to know about her; it is fixed elsewhere and cannot confirm or validate her (Copjec 2015, 36; Lacan 2001, 343–45). In subjectification, the sense of me emerges, dialectically, when I discover that there is an other that can nonetheless never reassure me. In both cases, the mother for Lacan holds this double-threatening logic: it is too much/it is too little; it is too close/it is too far. For the fragile, emerging ego of an infant, the caretakers are at the same time too powerful and too distant.

Castration and the Phallus

When our infant enters the mirror stage towards enunciation, she is also going to experience a different form of castration to the symbolic castration of being thrown into language. What Lacan means by castration in the imaginary represents a revolutionary reinterpretation of the Oedipus complex of Freud. In the classical Greek tragedy of Sophocles, *Oedipus Rex* loves, has sex with, and marries his mother, the queen, although he did not know at the time that his beloved was his mother. In Freudian psychoanalysis the Oedipus complex represents the desire of the child to have sex with his mother, and the repression of this desire for incest through castration. The prohibition of incest or of being the father is what Lacan calls "The Name of the Father" (Lacan 2001, 74), and is a symbolic representation of the "law": As the one that makes the law the father is therefore also beyond the law. This prohibition regulates desire, but it also launches desire

as the energy that wants to transgress or overcome the law. Lacan tells us that this happens during an important moment of the development of the infant, when she realizes that her mother is an independent being and that she is neither omnipotent nor all-knowing as the infant first assumes. Instead, the mother doesn't know. At this moment, the infant stops relating to the mother only as a presence or absence, as the messenger of the symbolic, and begins to see her as part of the imaginary, as an image of mother separated from herself, as an object.

Her realization that her mother is an other and does not know all raises a series of questions, and with them the need to think, wonder, and hypothesize. "What do you want?" This question begins the formation of desire, of wanting. Our infant addresses this question to the mother, but she has no chance of receiving an answer (Lacan 2019, 326). The baby cannot identify what the mother wants in herself. "Am I *it?*" she doubts. "I cannot know, I don't have the answer. If it is not me, what my mother wants must be another." This questioning and the absence of clear answers allow the imaginary third to enter: the father — that is, something outside the dyad of mother-child, something that the mother expressed in signifiers such as "work," "need to," "your father" — as the one who could have what the mother desires.

What the mother desires is, in Lacan's theory, the phallus. If our baby is ever to become the subject of enunciation, the one who can say "I am me and not you," she must abandon her desire to be the father, the phallus. But if she is still to receive her demand of the love of an other, she cannot stop wanting to be or have the phallus, to identify with the third. In this tension, one of the core learnings of Lacanian theory appears: Subjectification is paradoxical. To become a subject, I have to want and I have to not want to be the object of my mother's desire. Our infant has mixed feelings. She thinks: "I want to be the father, this imaginary father who must have what my mother desires," but she also has another wish: "I should not be the father, I have to be me to obtain my enunciation as I am me (not my father, not an other)." She is being called to find her own foothold in the general structure of language as an individual. At this impossible point, in order to continue on the trajectory to become a subject that speaks and enunciates and still is loved, our infant has only

two options: To pretend to be the object of desire, or to pretend to have the object.

The tragedy of the journey towards final subjectification is that if I am to find my bearings as a subject of enunciation in and through language, and that is the only place where I can do that, I need to be castrated. In the Lacanian sense, castration means to go through a process of separation and to lose the possibility of being the phallus, the object of desire, of the one I love. If the subject of knowledge is the one that takes the position of knowing, the subject of enunciation responds to the realization that the mother as ego does not know, she is not omnipotent, and she is separated from me; she is an object. At this second stage of the subjectification journey, our subject experiences, "I am like that counterpart," the other infant who wants to enjoy the mother, but also "I am not the one who enjoys the mother." "I want to be the father who has the phallus and I should not be that if I have to be me." In all cases, at this level of the imaginary the object-cause of the desire that appears is the desire of the other (of the mother, the counterpart, the father), and it is in that space of the desire of the other that our infant is asked as a human to find her own wanting.

Jouissance and the Lack-in-Being

Our baby sees her mother breastfeeding her younger sibling. Now she has access to a new form of experience, the enjoyment of the other as a counterpart, *semblable* (someone similar to her), and she is also experiencing a negative emotion different from hunger. For example, she feels a form of loss caused by the split of the mother-child unity because she is not in the other's place to have and enjoy the mother. She is cut off from her mother by another and finds herself having an emotional experience that is situated in that cut. The imaginary is the realm of our human passions. This loss, a feeling of jealousy, can only occur because we are able to identify with the perceived pleasure of another, which is supposed to be ours. Lacan, in his predilection to create new words, calls this "jealouissance," a mix of jealousy and jouissance (Lacan 1998, 100). This basic scene exposes how becoming a subject of jouissance is to enter the realm of "passionate

attachments" (Hook 2022, 40). When I look at another such as my sibling, the image, the representation, and my ego will not be able to capture everything about them. There will always be a form of excess. While our child is not able to understand this excess, she imagines her sibling, who she identifies with, as having jouissance, access to the breast or mother.

Jouissance is a key term in the Lacanian universe. For Lacan, subjectification is deeply interlinked with jouissance, a form of enjoyment with sexual or corporeal connotations that is beyond pleasure, a form of pleasure in pain. What in Freud was the difference between representation and affect is reimagined by Lacan as the difference between language and libido, that is, between the signifier and jouissance. This distinction marks the two faces of the subject (Fink 2002, 22). The subject of jouissance and the subject of knowledge come together in speech, which relies on language as a system of signifiers, but also needed is enunciation, a particular body. It is in each unique speech that the subject might reveal something about feelings and pleasures (Fink 2002).

From birth our baby as an organism or being has been full of affects, feelings and sensations of pleasure and need like feeling hunger and getting satiated, however, jouissance expresses something different. Jouissance links directly to what we lose when we become subjects. For Lacan, subjectification, becoming human, entails the double loss of being and sex (George 2022, 244–45). When our baby accesses meaning through language she "pays" with a loss of being and of the access to "the pleasures the instincts promise" (George 2018, 271). Once our baby has entered language and gained the ability of conceptual representation, there will be thoughts — that is, signifiers in a specific relationship — that will be felt as unbearable, and as such they will be repressed, constituting the unconscious. As a subject, she will lose sex: She will not be able to have sex in an animal's instinctive ways (Salecl 1998, 48). She will lose "being": She will always be more than what she or anyone can say or think. Signifiers in their social and familiar meaning will write her body, and her bodily pleasures will involve a relationship to the Other.

Through socialization her body is overwritten with language, which then divide it into zones, parts. Therefore, by becoming a speaking being, she is given a consciousness and an unconscious,

and deprived of some libidinal enjoyment. In psychoanalytic terms, this is the lack that results from symbolic castration, from the fact that,

> we are required to express our needs in words, in a language not of our own making [...] and from the sacrifice of satisfaction or jouissance each of us had to make in being weaned, toilet trained, and separated from our primary source of satisfaction, our mothers in most cases. Strictly speaking, all human desire stems from this lack, this lack-in-being, or want-to-be (*manqué-à-être*), as Lacan puts it. Where there is no lack, there can be no desire. Desire aspires to make good this lack, to compensate for it. And each desire for something new is but the continuation and displacement of the selfsame desire stemming from the same old lack; this is what allows Lacan (2006a, p. 623) to qualify the endless unfolding and multiplication of human desires as the "metonymy of the want-to-be." (Fink 2016, 35)

Drive and Jouissance

If subjectification entails this double loss of being and sex, what happens with this lost part of herself, that which escapes language? It does not disappear; instead throughout her life it will insistently be manifested as an urge and as repetition, as the libidinal energy of the drive. The symbolic order is that which "excludes" being and sex, and it is this elision that produces the drive, which is relegated as repetition to the unconscious. The drive connects to desire, but it is not desire. It is the enjoyment that our infant will have through the constant search and push of the drive, which Lacan also terms jouissance (2008b, 258). Jouissance gets a double meaning, as that form of enjoyment which marks what is lost and that which returns in a different form. This form is not anymore the enjoyment of the animal instincts, but the jouissance of the corporeal speaking being.

Lacan "describes jouissance as 'the point of flesh' or the 'sacrificed' pleasure that all subjects forego through entry into the symbolic world of meaning" (George 2018, 271). The jouissance of the drive is born out of a loss or a lack, but this lack is differ-

ent from the lack in the symbolic. It functions as an impossible excess haunting reality (Barnard 2002, 173). Lacan invites us to imagine this loss as similar to the loss of the placenta. The placenta represents an excess, something that confounds the inside and outside of an organism, the loss of something that is not the complete union or fusion of two complementary beings, but instead a "no not One" (Barnard 2002, 175). The very process of instituting the symbolic and social third is traumatic, producing in the organism of the baby an exclusion. The social gets instituted through "a negative founding gesture" (Žižek 2002, 73). Through subjectification a negative excess from what was "the all" of being of the baby is thereby created and at the same time left behind as something traumatic.

The subject's predicament of combining signifiers (language) and jouissance (there is no signifier that can account for this) is not easy. Jouissance is libidinal enjoyment or lust, that sexualized energy that lies in the drive, a "getting off" (Fink 2016, 213) or what underlies our varied passionate attachments (Hook 2022). The infant gets off by seeing the pleasure of the sibling, while suffering the jealousy of not receiving this. She experiences the loss, the lack, and the wanting. The emptiness of something that is missing (i.e., the all, being, and the omniscience of the mother) fosters something different—jouissance. Importantly, this libidinal enjoyment of the drive is itself detached from its natural foundations, the animal needs, and gets organized by circling and insisting on an object, by the relation between egos, by image and representation (Sheperdson 2008). Derek Hook in his analysis of psychoanalysis and race provides one of the most incisive explanations of Lacanian libido and jouissance:

> [Libido] is the "bonding agent" through which subjects, in both their own unique ways and via more conventionalized groups forms, become affixed to particular practices, objects and/or experiences. [...]*ouissance* can refer to virtually any object or activity—so long as it has taken on a libidinal value. This concept is in this sense open, and potentially over inclusive, yet for a good and anti-essentialist reason: Any facet of human behavior can, conceivably, take on an erotic charge. (Hook 2022, 39–40)

Difference as Positions

Because Lacan was highly influenced by anthropological traditions with differences in family structures, the mother and the father are, in this theoretical approach, "psychical-subjective positions, namely, socio-cultural (i.e., non-natural, non-biological) roles that potentially can be played by any number of possible persons of various sexes/genders" (Johnston 2018). But it is equally important to say that despite the urgency of some contemporary Lacanians to point to the relevance of the sociocultural in Lacan's theory (Barnard and Fink 2002), there is also an ethical choice in the selection of the word "mother" as the one representing the little other, and the word "father" as the symbol reflecting the big Other. In the evolution of subjectification, the father, being the metaphor of the symbolic world, becomes linked as the representative of the mother, but is also something else. The psychical-subjective sociocultural position of mother is in many of our contemporary societies occupied by the female body gestating a fetus in her uterus, giving birth, and nursing this baby in its early helpless phase. In a way that resembles traditional divisions between the realm of the domestic and the realm of the public, the symbol of the father gets to represent the law, language, culture, and society; the sign of prohibition and also the power of transgression of that which is beyond the law; and the one that has the phallus and can enjoy without limit, as an omnipotent figure.

It is not easy to say "mother" and instantaneously imagine a caretaker such as a father caring for his baby as that sign or psychical-subjective sociocultural position. Instead, you are likely to imagine it as your or a mother, the individual who represents that particular signifier in your life. What Lacan demands of us is that when we read his theory, we should de-read and, in some form of creative deconstruction, break the connection between our common meaning of the word and his terminology. I admire but I am also wary of this request. Decoupling can never completely occur. It is important to stress that the caretaker is not always necessarily the same as or solely the biological mother, and that the realm of the symbolic and public is not always necessarily the same as the masculine sex or gender space. But we need

to avoid the pretense of ahistoricity, or, to say it in another way, I felt the need to avoid hiding away from the sociocultural that also embeds Lacan's own choice of signifiers (mother and father) for his terms. Although the signified evolves with humanity's journey, it also becomes shaped and contained by our continued replication and choice of such signifiers and their significant historical weight. This includes how the use of imaginary versus symbolic and domestic versus public, named with feminine and masculine nouns, drags us into the core of patriarchal thought with its hierarchical logic. From its Freudian origins the psychoanalytical tradition had polemic patriarchal, sexist as well as colonial aspects. Lacanian thought is in complex ways a courageous break from this inheritance, but it is also linked to this history.

An engagement with Lacan demands of us an effort to not only understand, but also transcend such inheritance and this is not an easy thing to do. A residue of the habitual meaning of "mother" will follow us even if we, for example, imagine a trans* caretaker as the mother, and while writing this essay, I have found myself increasingly inclined to use the term "caretaker," and not only "mother," to represent the human being(s) who occupy this psychic position in the life of an infant. And I did it while trying to be more, and not less, respectful of Lacan's thought. Lacan would even refer sarcastically to the misunderstandings provoked by the ways in which he used the words "mother" and "father," "woman" and "man," and so on, like he expected this decoupling to be impossible. He sometimes delivered these musings with a sexist undertone. However, Lacan did not discriminate and could fire his sharp sarcasm and insults at anyone (words like "idiots" abound in his writings) in what at times appears as an impressive misanthropic performance (misanthrosexism?) (see Lacan 1998). However, showing disdain towards a larger group does not diminish the insult, although it casts doubt on the origin or cause of the contempt. Instead, it creates attributional ambiguity and makes us question: Is the disdain directed at me as a woman or at me as a human?

Nevertheless, it is good to remember that sarcasm often masks the fear of vulnerability and to examine one's own self-righteousness, such as the temptation for cruel or vain moralism, or the sadistic enjoyment of pointing out the wrongness of others.

There is an ethical duty to address what we perceive as mistaken and some feminist and poststructuralist authors have provided a departure from Lacanian thought — see for example Hélène Cixous (2009), Luce Irigaray (1985), and Julia Kristeva (2024). The same duty demands that we do justice to and be grateful for what is most exceptional and honest in another's work with the awareness to steer away from fantasies of perfection in oneself or others. I greatly admire the experimental aspect of Lacan's approach and the compassion that is found in his work. Yes, you read that correctly, compassion is not a word that often appears in his vocabulary or in that of Lacanians, but the more I engage with his work, the more I see that this is what his teachings provide, a deep compassion towards a deluded and pompous humanity. I hear the affective tone of his work saying: "I care so much for you idiots!" (contempt + compassion = contpassion. Would he approve of that word?) Lacan's conceptual world of the apparently dichotomous mother/father, feminine/masculine, woman/man depends on his mathemes, barred words, neologisms, and gender neutral terms, such as "speaking beings" and "sexed beings," proof of a major creative effort and a sensitivity in his own thinking against biological determinism or essentialism. Lacan invites you to imagine any possible speaking being occupying the mother's psychic-subjective sociocultural position.

Three Orders and the Subject of Desire

In the process explored in this chapter, the subject of enunciation gets woven into the subject of statement, which was itself linked to the raw, needy, vulnerable being which has now lost being and sex. Three orders are linked to each other, structuring the emergence of the subject in the infant: the imaginary, the symbolic, and the real. While here I have reflected extensively on the imaginary and the symbolic, the real will be explored in the next chapter. These orders do not occur as separate mental corporeal structures, but as one complex interdependent and relational one. The speaking being appears as a subject of desire, not one that fulfills a possibility but one that seeks an impossibility, a fulfilling recognition in the other, and the self-reliance

or independence of the other. In that way there is no me without the other having been incorporated from the very start into my structure of consciousness and unconsciousness. My ego is my other. Subjectivity places the subject in an external relationship to itself and creates a constant possibility of self-deception. Lacan recognizes how the tragic and existential negativity of the ego is also central to existentialist philosophy, but rejects what he sees as the failure of existentialists to see that the human ego is not centered on the perception-consciousness system — I perceive, I think — but on the function of what Lacan calls *méconnaissance* — that is, I fail to recognize, I misconstruct, I dream (2001, 7) — and by the structure of desire.

A deep engagement with Lacan's subject of desire challenges the critique that psychoanalysis is a liberal discourse that primes the idea of "happy normal individuals" (Berlant 2012, 16). Far from it, Lacan never believed in the idea of a normal individual or that the achievement of psychoanalysis was to help people adapt successfully to society (2001, 339). Lacan challenges us to face the servitude of the human to what is imaginary and phantasmatic, and to face the objectification of oneself and others and to understand love as that which aims to release us from such servitude. But the love Lacan emphasized towards the end of his long scholarly career was neither sexual love encounters, the romantic ideal, nor the "liberal" idea of philanthropy,

> this knot of imaginary servitude that love must always undo again, or sever. For such a task, we place no trust in altruistic feeling, we who lay bare the aggression that underlies the activity of the philanthropist, the idealist, the pedagogue, and even the reformer. (Lacan 2001, 8)

Instead he uses a Hindu expression for this love, as the meeting with "Thou art that," an ecstatic limit. "Thou art that" is a key teaching of the ancient Hindu texts the Upanishads (Gupta 1962). It expresses the non-binary relationship between the individual self and ultimate reality. Lacan invites us to see love as the expression of this relation beyond the imaginary character of the ego, instead of a return to a primordial fantasy of completedness.

Although the psychoanalytic tradition has often been accused, and not groundlessly, of being too individualistic and focused on mommy-dad-child relations (Berlant 2012), in the case of Lacanian thought, I believe this judgement to be somewhat misplaced. It is true that Lacan did not devote his scholarship to the direct analysis of historical injustices such as racism, poverty, xenophobia, etc. However, his emphasis on language structure, the big Other, and the symbolic order are all collective and social levels of inter- and trans-subjectivity. Lacan insisted on imperfection and lack, the always multiplied otherness and misrecognition of the self, and the importance of libidinal enjoyment, loss, and desire for the understanding of social relations. His complex theoretical corpus can be applied and further developed to critique the beliefs on the dominance of reason, the autonomy of the ego, or the historical "progress" of humanity. This is why contemporary Lacanian theory is extensively applied to the study of social injustices — see, for example, the scholarship of Slavoj Žižek (2009), Renata Salecl (1998), and Sheldon George and Derek Hook (2022), among others. Lacan saw the suffering of madness as a schooling in the passions of the soul and as an indication of the "passions in society" (2001, 8). His theories were developed on the basis of a clinical practice that centered not on the treatment of the psychological issues of the privileged but of the marginalized, patients in mental asylums.

Emancipation, inclusion, and civil rights are often a historical fight for "place," for erasing some places and instituting others, which shape, enclose, and expand our existence. What is to be done about the differentiations and inscriptions of bodies? Audre Lorde reminds us of the power and agency of "the letter" when she speaks of the material power of words. Lorde claims the political and revolutionary function of poetry as that which "gives name to the nameless so it can be thought" (2017, 11). The signifier shines with its power, says Lacan (2001). It also liberates, enslaves, burns, and destroys. To change signifiers is to change "places" and their "strangely" material consequences.

Facing Desire

There is something deeply valuable about the Lacanian way of understanding desire compared to other traditional perspectives such as some interpretations of Buddhism and Stoicism, which see desire as the cause of human passion and suffering and, therefore, something to surpass or get rid of. Abandoning desire is the erasure of subjectivity. For Lacan, the call of the human is to embrace her desire, to stand in her wanting despite the chaos, the alienation, and the meaninglessness. The discussion of desire is an ethical one. The problem is not avoidance of suffering; the problem is reducing the understanding of who we are to the imaginary ideal fantasy of the ego, or to a full identification with the "law," the symbolic. Being a subject, with its wonders, dependency, misrecognitions, joys, and sufferings is better, as human existence, than being the big Other or being the real, a being beyond language. It is in this choice to be you (to be us) that a glimpse into human freedom can appear, both freedom in face of the order of society and in face of the organic and biological.

The philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy (2002) expresses this challenge beautifully in his essay "L'Intrus" ("The Intruder"). Reflecting on the difficult choices related to his heart transplant, he asks whether avoidance of suffering should be our primary value. This is such a brilliant question. A life of no suffering means to never experience existence, jouissance, or the desire for an other. To want your desire is to want yourself to exist, you as I-me-we, while not reducing what you are to the identification of the ego or the big Other. Your corporal, thinking, dreaming you that is always already an us. Your unique voice, your affect, your suffering, and your joy; your insufficiency, your dependency, your dreams, your burdens, and your thoughts. This comprises the many fragments of an ever-changing, relational you, your body, and the many us, the many bodies. Psychoanalytical theory invites the wonder and appreciation of desire while recognizing that as subjects and as speaking beings we are indeterminate, relational, and estranged, we do not know, and we are oblivious to our own being.

2

The Object of Desire

The object cause of desire is a concept that evolves throughout Lacan's scholarship. The object of desire, which he also names *objet a* and *objet petit a,* is completely different from being an object of any specific need, for example, a glass of water when one is thirsty. Instead, this particular object is *what is missing*. It marks the place of what remains masked to the subject—the wanting to be what the mother desires, the Other (Lacan 1998, 126)—and of what the speaking being has had to sacrifice in order to be able to reach her own enunciation and be herself (Lacan 2019, 327). The relationship to *objet a* is always enigmatic and points to something hidden. *Objet a* is defined as, "the prop that the subject gives himself inasmuch as he falters [...] in his certainty and designation as a subject" (Lacan 2019, 366–67).

In it first form, in the order of the imaginary, *objet a* allows for narcissistic passions and romantic and erotic encounters. The subject is an incomplete being that searches for something that will complete her. The substitution of this "something" is *objet a*. It is the subject's own lack, positivized and materialized as an external attribute that can be desired and possessed. The *a* stands for *autre* (other), and is an algebraic sign that corresponds to a gaze, a body part that turns us on and attracts our desire. Lacan links *objet a* to gaze, voice, the object of excretion, and the object of sucking, and never to the idea of another as "whole" (Lacan 1998, 126). It is because these objects act in the place of something else, as "substitutes" (Lacan 1998, 126) that they can be the cause of desire. In its second form, *objet a* occupies the space of the lack-in-being. This form of lack is what the speaking being has

had to sacrifice in order to be a human subject (Lacan 2019, 327). As such, this object cause of desire is a substitute for the loss of being and sex that literacy and socialization entail. Instituting the place that allows for a substitution to the lack-in-being, *objet a* stands for that which does not function in the symbolic order, what escapes language as a certain form of excess or deficiency (Shepherdson 2008, 9–10).

Why is this object needed? What is it that fails us? Subjectivity constitutes us as someone divided and with a loss. This is not something abstract; instead, it is the core of our primary relationships. For Lacan,

> there is nothing more concrete than this. It is in no way a stage in philosophical thinking; it is something primitive that is established in a trusting relationship. To what degree and to what point can I count on the Other? What portion of the Other's behavior is reliable? What consequences can I expect from what she has already promised? [...] This—and not pure and simply frustration and gratification [need]—is the basis of on which the principles of the child history are built; this is the mainspring of what is repeated at the deepest level of his destiny; this is what commands his behavior's unconscious modulation. (Lacan 2019, 376)

Once the subject has been instituted in speech as subject of the signifiers or the statement, she is going to try to find herself as the subject *of* speech, a speaking subject (Lacan 2019, 377). When the child asks the mother, "What do you want?" she also internalizes another question addressed to herself, "Is it?" (Lacan 2019, 376). These are the questions that are internal to discourse. But, as we have seen in the previous chapter, the individual tries to find the answer at the level of the speech and knowledge, of the big Other of history and culture, and there is no answer there. Instead, it encounters in the Other the hollow or empty space, no possible signifier that can guarantee the authenticity of the series of signifiers: "'there is no Other of the Other'; [...] There is nothing, at the level of the signifier, that guarantees or authenticates the signifying chain or speech in any way" (Lacan 2019, 377). It is because the infant meets opacity in the encounter with the desire

of the mother and the language that constitutes her (Lacan 2001, 340), that she aims at "her truth." It is in the organic, bodily, and symbolic that "I" must come into being. This duty of becoming (Lacan 2019, 378) is the human drama that makes the object of desire appear in order for the subject to be able to stand in her own life. The subject develops a faith in the other through different relationships that always take a problematic form.

Objet a, being the object cause of desire itself, cannot be represented. It is not an idea or an image, has no objectivity, and is the place of the lack of lack. In this way our *objet a,* that which represents our loss, our lack-in-being or our want-to-be, is also that which has the power to define us, it is our most subjective expression. It is like when we say to someone: You have something that corresponds to the lack in me (Fink 2016). It is in this way that *objet a* is constitutive of love and hate, and lies at the very core of what fuels our most intense passions. Paradoxically, that object which launches desire is also what can stop the movement of desire from one object to the next, and fix it in a circular, repetitive manner.

In the symbolic reality of desire, all objects can be interchanged and can circulate like signifiers in language structure, a potentially "infinite metonymic slippage of objects [lovers, goods, hobbies, etc.]" (Fink 2016, 214). Our desire wants this and then this, as if what desire really wanted was to go on desiring. We can envision this as a series: *a′, a″, a‴*... and so on. However, *objet a* in the real has the potential to stop this slippage. It is "the object to end all objects" (Fink 2016, 214). It does not belong to language and the symbolic and, therefore, can stop the infinite replacement of demand with another form of infinity, that of passionate circling and repeating. Fixation, circling around a desired object, is a feature that points to the meeting of desire with trauma and lack. It also points to how chance and fortune appear in our lives, that is, whether or not we meet others that appear to have our objet a. How human and how tragic (tragicomic?) is the desire to be the *objet a* of one's beloved, to be that unique object that cannot just be replaced with another?

Fantasy

Our infant from the previous chapter is now an adult, a woman in her twenties. She is now a being torn between two forces that fail for different reasons. She is a being who, through desire, aims to gain satisfaction by searching for pleasure — seeking to receive, feel balanced, belong, and so on, as expressed through language and culture — and always failing to reach it. She is a being who, through her drive, derives jouissance from the very same experience of failing. The failure to attain pleasure compels repetition. Our jouissance never achieves the aim, despite achieving the goal of maintaining this repetition. "One finds oneself inhabited by drives with no why or wherefore" (Fink 2002, 26) — drives which Joan Copjec (2015) calls non-sensical — with no easy alliance between the subject of the signifier and the subject of jouissance. The coexistence of these two forces is not harmonious, but conflictual. Lacan sees desire as a result of this relationship and of desire manifesting itself as fantasy. The split subject stands in some form of relationship to the object cause of desire (to *a*) that is doomed to fail but also gets jouissance from its repetitive action of trying.

While the symbolic allows for the relationship to many signifiers and their substitution, *objet a* has a double function in the fantasy structure of desire. It appears to allow for the covering of a lack marking the place for the phallus. It "promises" the regaining of the loss of jouissance, but it also shows how the lack and the loss cannot be closed. Desire is the castrated subject $ — the subject of signifiers that "finds nothing in the Other that can clearly guarantee the subject, that authenticates him" (Lacan 2019, 377) — standing vis-à-vis this *objet a* in a relationship that takes the form of fantasy. Fantasy is what allows this construction to stand as a prop for desire, giving all objects of desire a fetishistic character:

> Little *a* [in the formula of fantasy] is the essential object around which the dialectic of desire revolves. The subject experiences himself here as faced with an element that is alterity at the imaginary level [....] It is an image and it is pathos. (Lacan 2019, 312)

What characterizes the appearing of *objet a* is an alteration in the subject who is taken over or transformed by the presence of this object, as if fading (Lacan 2019, 377), like when we become fascinated by or obsessed with a voice or a posture, something that is embodied by another and that we cannot explain rationally. Johnston provides an elegant clarification of the formula or matheme of fantasy ($\$ \lozenge a$):

> As per Lacan's matheme, the subject's desires are scripted and orchestrated by an unconscious fundamental fantasy in which the desiring subject ($) is positioned in relation to its corresponding object-cause of desire (*a*). Hence, $\wedge$, $\vee$, >, and < (adding up to $\lozenge$) represent, in a deliberately loose and open fashion, possible variants of this positioning of $ *vis-à-vis a*. Singular subjects flesh out conjunction, disjunction, being "greater than," and being "less than" in their own styles, namely, as their unique fantasies of merger or symbiosis (conjunction), scorn or refusal (disjunction), mastery or domination ("greater than"), slavery or submission ("less than"), and any number of other possible particularizations of these four basic categories of rapport. (Johnston 2018)

As an adult, our young woman will have one or several of these fantasy structures of rapport. She visits a good friend and has something to tell her, that she is in love. She is like a hand reaching out to her lover, fantasizing about her, having sex with her. The key to Lacan's thesis at this point is that we can only guess what the other's desire is. What is the wanting and craving of the other? The question, "what does my mother want?" is now transformed into "what does my lover want?" We can never know for certain what that is or how to fulfill it. We can only speculate through fantasy. The meeting with the other always transforms into a bold existential question mark, "?" We can wish to be what the other desires, but we will never know. Fantasy is for psychoanalysis not only a positive space of imagination beyond our mundane lives, it involves negative passionate attachments and emotions such as envy or anger.

What we meet at the end of the question, "What do you want?" is a different form of "knowing" which takes the form

of an ethical duty. This is knowing manifested as the space of a question mark, as the lack of a guarantee or authentication in language or through our senses. At the end of the day, the only thing we can trust when it comes to relationships is the others's good faith when they answer. There is no higher authority to be found as the foundation for the language of the Other; instead there is a hollow. How can the human respond to the ethical command of "I must be," of "I must come into being," if our existential condition is that the Other appears as opaque and that our human body remains mysterious to ourselves (Lacan 2019, 378–79)? Lacan teaches that desire is what allows us to respond to this command. The becoming and naming of oneself, the becoming a subject of desire, then appears as a form of ethical duty in the place of an impossibility.

The Relation between *Objet a* and the Phallus

The *objet a* in the formula of fantasy of desire marks the place of what the subject lacks or is deprived of symbolically. Instead, the phallus is the "object" that we believe the other wants from us and we can only wish to embody, something powerful that as children we imagined the "father" to have, that is, what the "mother" wanted. The word phallus might immediately conjure the connotation of male sex organs, or similar, but it is much more complex than this. For Lacan, the phallus is the price the subject pays symbolically to be able to move along subjectification and become the subject of enunciation. It stands for the moment which breaks the mother–child dyad and iniates the symbolic. Due to the distance between a generic "I" (what is spoken) and "me" (the one who speaks), the phallus is lost, which Lacan calls, making a reference to William Shakespeare's drama, *The Merchant of Venice,* the payment of the pound of flesh.

At the level of the imaginary the phallus in Lacan is the unknown object that you want to be to fulfill the other's desire, and may include embodied aspects or an incarnation of the object. Because we operate without knowing what the other wants, the phallus has also a symbolic dimension. It represents our recognition that our desire to be the mother's desire cannot be satisfied (Homer 2005, 55–57). Therefore, there are two

options left to us as humans. Both are theatrical, and both imply that it is an object that we have lost: We can pretend to have the phallus or to mask being the phallus, that is, to pretend to have or pretend to be what the other desires. This is not an external mask, but the pretending and the veiling are part of an internal psychic structure. The theatrical and the phantasmagorical are at the core of the subject. Lacan names these two modalities as the masculine (to have) and feminine (to be) versions of trying to incarnate the object of desire of the other. This duality forms the desiring structure of the *phallic jouissance.* However, the core structure of the phallic jouissance remains the same for both the feminine and masculine modalities; it is a structure of fantasy (castrated subject vis-à-vis *objet a*), so while trying to be or to have we continue placing ourselves in relations of submission, domination, refusal, or symbiosis with the other.

Subjects who seek what they desire are doomed to experience the constant repetition of missing out on each other. They are reaching for their "object of desire" (*a*), which the other has now become, while imagining that they are the object of desire that they believe their beloved wants them to be. The subject that becomes "the desired" is no longer a subject, instead it has become an object. In Lacan's mathematical formulas, this is $\$ \rightarrow a$. This is the reason why subjects never meet. We can imagine the lover of our young woman as another hand reaching out to her. The lover desires her in return, but in the very same process she is also missing out by not knowing and by objectifying her other (Salecl 1998). Therefore, while there is a difference between pretending to have (masculine) or masking to be (feminine), in both cases the dynamics of lacking, impossibility, and failure are similar. They are both expressions of the same form of enjoyment and the structure of desire, the phallic jouissance. What is common to the phallic feminine desire and the phallic masculine desire is much more important than what is different. In both cases, they relate to each other in a form of fantasy. What is missing here is the encounter of the other as an alterity. What we encounter through the fantasy of phallic jouissance is our own lack, our own *objet a,* not the other as a "whole" person.

Here, we ask in desperation: In this phallic jouissance, is it impossible to escape the objectification of the desired by the

desiring? Is it possible to express what we want through language? The answer of Lacan is no, and that is why, according to him, there is no sexual relationship. What he means is that people do have sex — he is not in some form of bizarre denial — but there is no "relationship" because the "hands" never meet. The speaking body "only reproduces thanks to missing what it wants to say for what it wants to say, namely, its meaning is its effective jouissance" (Lacan 1998, 121). Recall that our drive feeds on our failure. Speaking beings fuck because they fail. They say what they want and then it is not that! So they have to keep at it. It is this constant failure that pushes us towards repetition and reproduction.

Fink (2002) insists on the importance of how in Lacanian thought this non-relationship is something that goes beyond the "couple situation" and represents a challenge to the classical view of the world and of knowledge. For Lacan, the fantasy that characterized the view of the world of antiquity was copulation (Lacan 1998, 76–82), an elaborate metaphor for harmonic or complementary relationships between the sexes. This classical view believed that there was a fundamental relationship between form and matter, active and passive, the male principle and the female principle. Such an idea was expressed as form penetrates or inseminates matter, form is active and matter is passive. All knowledge at the time participated, in Lacan's words,

> "in the fantasy of an inscription of the sexual link" (Lacan 1998, 76–82), in the fantasy that there is something as a sexual relationship, and that this link or relationship is verified all around us. The relation between knowledge and the world was consubstantial with the fantasy of copulation. [...] A fantasy that continues up to today that harmonious or complementary relationships between the sexes — or beings — must be possible. [...] Lacan eliminates such fantasy. (Fink 2002, 27–28)

When Lacan says that the sexual relationship does not exist, he is questioning the whole mythical fantasy structure of the way we have imagined the possibility of knowledge since the classical Greek tradition. The sexual encounters and imaginations of the

subjects are vampirical, repetitive, focused, narrow, and phantasmatic: bite, squeeze, enter, hold, push, and pull. The phallic is the fallible (Fink 2002, 37). There is no complementarity or fullness to be found. From this critique of the relationship between knowledge and the world, it is easy to jump to Lacan's theory of sexuation. In *Seminar XX,* Lacan expanded the two modalities of the phallic jouissance into the Other jouissance, and rethought the relationship between love and knowledge. But first, let me take another route.

Enjoy! Do Not Enjoy!

While in the phallic jouissance we can pretend to be or to have the object that the other desires, we can also sense our pretending, a knowing that we are not and have not, and imagine that someone else in the world possesses this phallus instead. Someone else will be in a position to fulfill the desire of our first "other" (the mother who is either too close or too absent), someone outside of our own theatrical or masking performance. This imaginary being who embodies the phallus that we can only wish to be or to have is, in symbolic terms, "the father." And, as mentioned earlier, this is the way Lacan reinterprets and transforms Sigmund Freud's Oedipus complex. "On the Symbolic side, the paternal figure represents the answer to the question, 'What does the maternal Other want?' 'the desire of the mother,'" (Johnston 2018). If the first stage of being gazed upon helps our process of subjectivation and inter- and trans-subjectivity, this process of imagining that "the other" is directing her desire elsewhere (to the third) integrates in the subject "the world," the law, the social order. All this is what the symbol of "the father" represents. This process is what Lacan sees as castration. Castration means that speaking beings surrender their access to jouissance upon entering language, and it is the impasses of language that create the experience of the unsayable (Copjec 2015, 216).

Our young woman is no longer a helpless being consisting of a mouth, eyes, and needs; instead, she has become a castrated subject. Through processes of separation and alienation, her mental structure comprises three different and overlapping orders: the imaginary of sensory images of self and others, her ego; the sym-

bolic order of the big Other, which includes language, culture, structure, and tradition; and, finally, the real, the body, jouissance, and the limitations of the symbolic and imaginary. The world of the big Other tells her: "I can enjoy something that you cannot," and "I have the 'secret' that can control the unpredictable desire of the other, the mother, the love you so desperately need." It commands her both to "enjoy as I do" and to "not enjoy as I do." Freud's original Oedipus complex sounded like the paradox of "want/do not want to have sex with your mother." In Lacan, this understanding is transformed to the command of "to be/have and not to be/have" what the other desires.

The "enjoy–do not enjoy" tension reminds us of the complex feelings of the child that both wants to be the object of desire of the mother (i.e., the father, the third), but cannot be that if she is to be herself. If the creation of the subject of desire is closely related to the formation of the ego during the mirror stage, then the entrance of the third is the opening of the psyche to the world of the "name of the father", which is the Lacanian concept that represents the symbolic social and cultural law. The Spanish poet Federico García Lorca provides a magnificent expression of the tension and unresolved drama of the desiring subject in his play *La casa de Bernarda Alba* (*The House of Bernarda Alba*). In this drama, the family mother, Bernarda, is the representative of the "name of the father," of the symbolic command. When asked about the reason behind her authority, she says, "I do not think. There are things that cannot and should not be thought. I command"[1] (Lorca 1990, 168). For Copjec (2015), this is where one of the main differences with Foucault's idea of desire lies. It is not that the law commands us to desire and that our desires are a manifestation of such commands. According to psychoanalysis, the law also demands us not to desire. The law of the father is a contradiction in terms, a paradox — this is true but another thing is also true — and a dialectic — this is first and then there is its opposite — that becomes interiorized at the core of the subject: "The law does not construct a subject who simply and unequivocally has a desire, but one who rejects its desire, wants

1 "No pienso. Hay cosas que no se pueden ni se deben pensar. Yo ordeno."

not to desire it" (Copjec 2015, 25). Being inscribed in the symbolic demands of us a simultaneous identification with authority (the law) and with those illicit desires that are beyond the law (Homer 2005, 59).

We Do Not Know: The Limits of Language

The third, the Other, gets interiorized in the construction of the subject as the external world of the symbolic ideals and demands. This is an alienating external world of possible and barred pleasures and enjoyment, which now constitutes one's very being, structuring one's unconscious. The big Other is also like a "foreign language that we are born into and must learn to speak if we are to articulate our own desire" (Homer 2005, 70). As expressed by Lacan,

> this Other is to be identified as the site of speech. This is not where speech is uttered [the body speaking at the moment one says "I feel ...," as the subject of enunciation] but where it takes on the value of speech, or in other words where it inaugurates the dimension of truth. (Lacan 2008a, 37)
>
> Not only is man born into language in precisely the way he is born into the world; he is born through language. (Lacan 2008a, 27)

And it is in this way that Lacan introduces the subject of the combinatory, a combination of opposing forces (Fink 2002, 22). The subject lasts because our idea of being knowing individuals in control fails. "It all fails, laughs and dreams." But most interestingly, "It only dreams, laughs and fails *in a perfectly articulated way"* (Lacan 2008a, 81, my emphasis). Lacan insists again and again on the radical importance of noticing how we dream, laugh, and make mistakes — those human expressions in which the unconscious manifests — in a perfectly articulated manner. "Open the books of dreams [by Freud] [...] and you will see that it talks about nothing but things to do with words" (Lacan 2008a, 27). And in a brilliant commentary on Goya's famous painting "El sueño de la razón produce monstruos" ("The

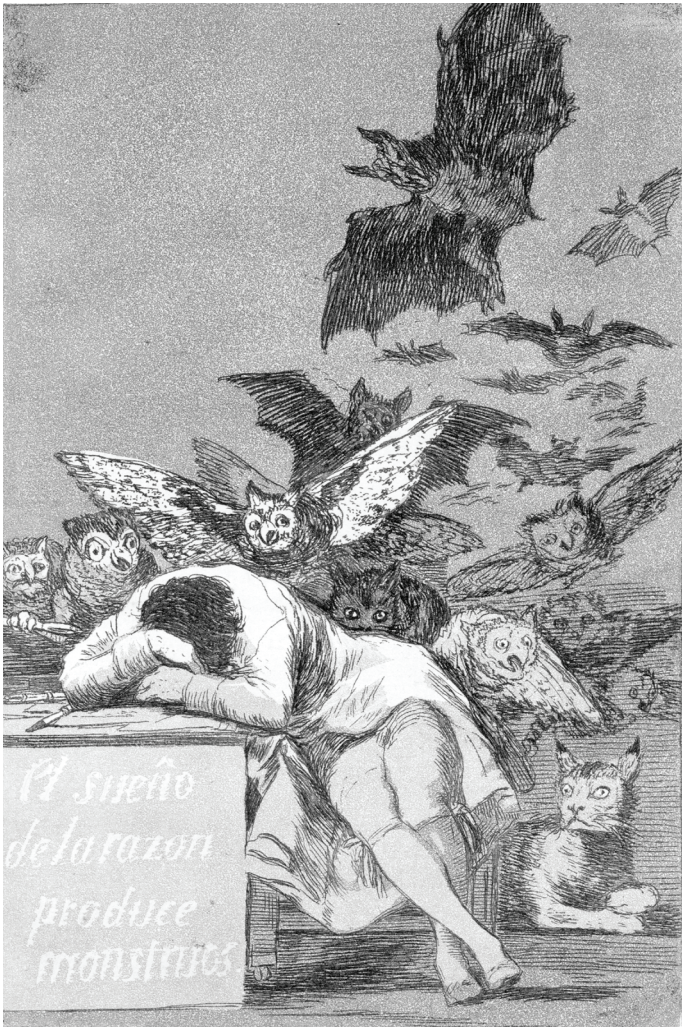


Fig. 2. Francisco de Goya y Lucientes, *Caprichos* image 43, "El sueño de la razón produce monstruos" ("The Dream of Reason Produces Monsters"), 1799. MET Open Access.

Dream of Reason Produces Monsters") (fig. 2), Lacan invites us to deconstruct the title of the painting. We do not need "the

monsters," but the dream of reason. Reason dreams! That's all we need to know.

A common misunderstanding of the Lacanian expression that "desire is the desire of the Other" (Lacan 1981, 235) is that the subject constructs itself in the image of the Other's desire, a form of structural determinism. But this is not what it means. Although our unconscious is related to historical and sociocultural conditions, Lacan's position is that "we have no image of the Other's desire (it remains indeterminate), and this very lack causes our desire. It is first of all an unsatisfied desire that initiates our own, one that is not filled up with meaning, or has no signified" (Copjec 2015, 55). In Lacan's own words:

> Let us set out from the conception of the Other as the locus of the signifier. Any statement of authority has no other guarantee than its very enunciation, and it is pointless for it to seek it in another signifier, which could not appear outside this locus anyway. Which is what I mean when I say that no metalanguage can be spoken, or, more aphoristically, that there is no Other of the Other. [...I]t is as desire of the Other that man's desire finds form, but it does so in the first instance by representing need only by means of a subjective opacity. (Lacan 2001, 344)

It is this opacity, the lack of satisfaction, and a form of vertigo and anxiety due to our dependency when we are babies that produce "the substance of desire" and the "phantom" that the Other is omnipotent (Lacan 2001, 344). However, instead of omnipotence, what we experience is that there is no Other that will fulfill and perfectly match our jouissance. When we try to express what we desire through words, we do not and cannot get it right, the meanings and their expressions do not match our singularity as "me"—I want this, but this was not what I wanted. Our phallic jouissance, once it has to be expressed through the symbolic, always escapes. Desire fails us because there is a gap between the desire of the Other—I desire through the Other, and I need to use the language that constitutes me to express what I want—and the embodied individual. This impossibility is a form of castration, which takes the form of a relationship to

a lost object. Desire, to Lacan, means that we are always asking the Other what they want. Rather than staying locked in that question, Lacan believed that one of the roles of psychoanalysis was to help us explore our own desire.

The subject suffers from the failures of the signifier and is affected by meanings that it never lives or experiences, which is why psychoanalysis does not believe that we can fully recreate historical experience (Copjec 2015, 68). Language is duplicity. This is why the phallic jouissance is the one that always fails and always disappoints. What keeps desire alive, then, is this form of castration, when we as subjects reach for this "something else," a lost object that will not fail us. Something situated outside language and beyond its duplicity, something extra-discursive, this indeterminate something that we cannot pinpoint in the symbolic order of the Other, is the *objet petit a*. Lacan impatiently critiques those who believe in the subject of knowledge and in a knowledgeable independent or autonomous individual,

> this idea of a subject of knowledge really is a load of nonsense [...]. It can mean only one thing: anything that is alive knows enough, just enough to survive. But there is nothing more to be said about it. That can be extended to the animal kingdom or — and why not? — to the vegetable kingdom. (Lacan 2008a, 79–80)

In short, Lacan invites us to do something that is quite difficult, and something that has concerned philosophy from its ancient beginnings: to put the not-knowing at the core of what the subject is. When we integrate language and knowledge in processes of subjectification, we become subjects that think and act with and through a knowledge that we do not know we have, which is historical, embodied, and unconscious. Or, in Copjec's words, "the subject is the product of history without being the fulfillment of a historical demand" (2015, 56). Copjec conveys the sense of history being us, reproducing and evolving through us, not the sense of a teleology of history, with direction and meaning.

For Lacan subjectivity is corporeal. This transformation occurs at the cellular level, at the level of mental synopsis and neuronal pathways, and is embodied. This is ontologically us.

Homer cites Lacan, "The vast majority of mental life and activity remains inaccessible to the conscious mind and what we can be certain of is 'the subject of the unconscious manifests itself, that it thinks before it attains certainty'" (2005, 67). The unconscious is never individual, nor is it purely collective. It is relational and is "the effect — the impact — upon the subject of the trans-individual symbolic order" (Homer 2005, 69), and of forces and factors which are "impossible to represent via the signifier-like ideational representations" (Johnston 2018). The subject of the signifier and the subject of jouissance are interlinked. For Lacan, besides the imaginary that allows the visible world of objects to appear, the constitution of the body depends on the symbolic containment of the void and the lack-in-being. Canceling out the real, language creates reality, the worlds that we can discuss and talk about. Instead, the real "ex-ists," a term that Lacan borrows from Martin Heidegger. Drive, libido, and jouissance belong to the order of the real, of the organic or material that cannot find expression in language. However, the real is not independent of language or our imaginary, our ego perception or our senses. Instead, it happens at the limit, and it manifests the limits of human "reality."

For Bruce Fink (1995) and for Charles Shepherdson (2008) the most common misunderstanding among critics of psychoanalysis is to conceive of the Lacanian real as a form of pre-symbolic reality unrelated to language, that is, how a newborn experiences. Rather, the real follows us throughout our entire human existence. It is the impasses and impossibilities of representation that are generated by the symbolic, a kernel which is excluded from the signifying chain. The real is what cannot be captured by this chain. It is what we encounter at the limits of language and therefore has a traumatic character. In late Lacan, the real is a gap in the symbolic order, something that escapes the symbolic law but emerges at the same time as the symbolic and imaginary orders (Shepherdson 2008). Rejecting those who accuse him of not considering materiality or "reality," Lacan insists that the human being is "the being of signifierness" but that "the reason for the being of signifierness [is] in jouissance, jouissance of the body" (Lacan 1998, 71).

The importance of the concept of the real as the limit to language and the symbolic construction becomes obvious when thinking of identity questions such as sex, sexuality, or race (Shepherdson 2008; George and Hook 2022):

> If psychoanalysis has taken on an increasing urgency today, it is precisely for this reason, for psychoanalysis has perhaps the clearest conception of the real of the body as a material dimension of the flesh that exceeds representation, yet does not automatically refer us to a "natural" domain of "preexisting reality." (Shepherdson 2008, 40)

In this way, the real is not a form of naïve realism, a return to biology, or an outside world untouched by language, it is rather an "intimate alterity" (Shepherdson 2008, 1). What is promising in psychoanalytical understanding is that structures are not to be located only, "among the relations that constitute our everyday reality; they belong, instead, to the order of the real" (Copjec 2015, 11).

The Lacanian tradition contributes to a radical transformation of the idea of subjectivity. Instead of a subjectivity grounded in the model of universal rationality, "the paradigmatic Enlightment subject is supplanted by a model of the human who is not only destabilized by conflicting and powerful drives, but by the contradictory exigencies of identity as such" (Berlant 2012, 64–65). And now it is easier to understand why Lacanians always talk about "lack." This idea could have been called crack, separation, or trauma. It is grounded in the emerging of the subject, the inability to know what the other desires in me and to express our desires through language. The Lacanian subject is limited, but it is this finite character that causes its desire to be limitless, unsatisfiable. "One thing comes to be substituted for another in an endless chain only because the subject is cut off from that essential thing that would complete it" (Copjec 2015, 61). To rephrase Jean-Paul Sartre, we could say that humans are condemned to desire, and, to paraphrase Socrates, the only thing we know is that we do not know.

The Third Beat of the Gaze

What is it that I am missing from this exceptional account of subject–object relations? Let me go back to where we started, with the organism that was fully dependent on others. From her third week or so, the baby not only craves and needs in her helplessness, but she can already smile. She smiles when looking at her mother's face, and dances to the beat of music, and her mother not only gazes, demands, and gives or does not give, but rejoices and is in awe of the baby. In Lacan's understanding of the relationship of the infant to the caretakers, what I miss is what Rabindranath Tagore (1913) expresses so outstandingly. At my family home there was a beautiful and unpractical edition of the complete works of authors who had received a Nobel Prize in literature. Tagore, an Indian poet and writer, was one of them and the first author of non-Western origin to receive the prize, I learned later. The pages of this thick volume with its purple-red cover were made of thin, transparent paper with very small letters and a golden border. I remember my mother reading this volume, and myself reading Tagore as a teenager in the evenings in my bedroom, feeling the heaviness of the book, a materiality of poetry that was made more for embellishing a dark wooden library than being in the hands of a teenage girl trying to find some solitude. This magnificently tender Indian poet conveys to us something that both Lacan and Freud relegate to the background of their views on the prematurity of humans and the emergence of subjectivity.

THE BEGINNING

"WHERE have I come from, where did you pick me up?" the baby asked its mother.

She answered half crying, half laughing, and clasping the baby to her breast—"You were hidden in my heart as its desire, my darling.

You were in the dolls of my childhood's games; and when with clay I made the image of my god every morning, I made and unmade you then.

You were enshrined with our household deity, in his worship I worshipped you.

In all my hopes and my loves, in my life, in the life of my mother you have lived.

In the lap of the deathless Spirit who rules our home you have been nursed for ages.

When in girlhood my heart was opening its petals, you hovered as a fragrance about it.

Your tender softness bloomed in my youthful limbs, like a glow in the sky before the sunrise.

Heaven's first darling, twin-born with the morning light, you have floated down the stream of the world's life, and at last you have stranded on my heart.

As I gaze on your face, mystery overwhelms me; you who belong to all have become mine.

For fear of losing you I hold you tight to my breast. What magic has snared the world's treasure in these slender arms of mine?"

WHEN AND WHY

WHEN I bring you coloured toys, my child, I understand why there is such a play of colours on clouds, on water, and why flowers are painted in tints — when I give coloured toys to you, my child.

When I sing to make you dance, I truly know why there is music in leaves, and why waves send their chorus of voices to the heart of the listening earth — when I sing to make you dance.

When I bring sweet things to your greedy hands, I know why there is honey in the cup of the flower, and why fruits are secretly filled with sweet juice — when I bring sweet things to your greedy hands.

When I kiss your face to make you smile, my darling, I surely understand what pleasure streams from the sky in morning light, and what delight the summer breeze brings to my body — when I kiss you to make you smile. (Tagore 2014)



Fig. 3. Asit Kumar Haldar, "The Beginning," in Tagore (1913: 15). Project Gutenberg.

These poems have perfect titles. They reflect, like a poetic mirror, some of the key issues and questions that Lacan tries to answer in his theory, the where, when, and why of the subject. They also have at their core the relationship of the child and the gaze of the mother (fig. 3). If the "where" in Lacan is a primordial biological discord of insufficiency and its negative affects, Tagore sees the "where" in another type of desire. A desire that originates not within the anxious feeling or experience of facing "demand" — that which would include the phallic desire and the *objet a* cause of desire — but as mystery and grace. A desire which is immanent in the relational and in being. This desire appears to me to go beyond the formula of desire in the early Lacan, but encounters the late Lacan of the 1970s and his understanding of love, sexuation, and the Other jouissance, what cannot be spoken, what Lacan will name "God's face" (something we

will examine in detail later). In Tagore, we sense a diversity of unity, of the unique being which is to be born, belongs to all, and comes from the stream of world's life. A form of connection that is not a return to that fantasy of antiquity of perfect understanding or union, but instead an encounter marked by awe and the unknown in the birth of the new.

And then there is the "When and Why." "When I sing to make you dance," "when I kiss you to make you smile." This "when" of the event is not the answer of a mother or caretaker to a need as an expression of demand. It is not the "when" of a Samaritan responding to a child who needs something (creating a dependency the child will be resentful of) or avoiding them (creating a feeling of abandonment the child will also be resentful of), or of a traumatic relationship of the mother as a cruel real. The cause is not a need like hunger, sleep, or warmth, but abundance, play, dance, sweets, kisses, and smiles. The "why" is the transformed understanding through the loving presence, touch, and gaze of the other. The other has engendered a different form of knowing, a novel cause to everything that exists or existed. This "why" fosters the transformation of the causal and of the personal, inter- and trans-subjective time. It is a form of love that is not grounded in the surplus of a subtraction of need from demand, the desire that leads to dissatisfaction. It is beyond need and beyond demand.

Tagore's poetic relationality is not an incorporation of oneness into sameness or a regression into the "all" as presubjective. Instead, there is a rejoicing in the difference — you are not me, I am not the leaf or the sea — which projects neither opacity nor anxiety. The gaze of the other subject is like the event that creates a new crack of meaning. It recreates everything in a new light because the cause of everything is found retroactively, in the mystery that overwhelms me when I gaze at your face. The nature of reality is now forever changed. This other gaze has the power to reshape imaginations of past and future. Love constantly pours out as re-creation. It is also the event of love, an advent, that redefines the signifieds of all signifiers. It is through *your* enjoyment (of toys, sweets, etc.) that I get to know, enjoy, and fully understand. Through love, I understand differently the meaning of color, food, light, wind, all natural elements, that is, all that is

categorized or named, all signifiers and all signification. This is a transformation of my imagined self and the others' selves, and the symbolic world.

What Tagore expresses in his poetry is not a permanent state, and it would be both naïve and false to imagine that such moments of awe and mystery could be obtained like forms of identity or more or less fixed states of being, a phantasy of permanent oneness, a (totalitarian?) utopia. Instead, this form of knowing and of experiencing grace and joy is a third beat that appears and disappears between the asphyxiating closeness or the threatening absence of the gaze of the Lacanian mother. It is another gaze and another presence that allow us to see that the relationality of the infant to the mother does not only go one way, the infant becoming subject, but the mother also becoming, the human always becoming. Her psychical structure is not closed, but open. Like in the photograph, gazing at and being with my baby, Karen (fig. 4). In a moment of abandonment while breastfeeding her, I can suddenly open with an overwhelming sense of being blessed, of receiving all grace, of beauty appearing in my life like a beam of light, transforming the ordinary, expanding the when and why and disappearing in the next instant.

The caretaker is not a caring subject that has a fixed and finished psychic structure that predetermines her relation to the infant as a dichotomy, or where the only possible metaphor is "gazing," for example gazing into the eyes of the other, looking too close or away. There is the *side-by-side:* being, walking, sleeping, many beautiful "besides." She is relationally transformed, and in her interaction with the infant, she is an ever-emerging other that cannot be fixed, not the embodiment of conflicting clichés. There is maybe an answer to the child's question, "What do you want?" and it is "here I am." This is an answer that moves away from the phallic. This is not an experience of an a priori or non-embodied unity (like these popular images of the human being cosmic stardust, etc.), but of warmth and flesh, a surrendering and falling into difference in a present and sensed moment. It is sensing the paradoxical in the exposition of all the universe in her infant, while aprehending her as a unique, irreplaceable being.



Fig. 4. The third beat of the gaze, Ana María and Karen, Palma de Mallorca, 2002. Photograph by Bjarke Møller.

I would like you to feel the company of Tagore's gazing while we go back to Lacan. Lacan's tone and direction are far from Tagore's, although he will eventually, in his *Seminar XX,* talk about the poetical and the mystical. The emphasis of his theory of the desiring subject gives priority to the anxious. For Lacan, the creation of the subject is a process of alienation. Individualization, what we tend to believe makes us a human being, is also what paradoxically divides us. Copjec (2015) men-

tions how, from a Lacanian perspective, we become individuals, not as another "one" but as a minus one. There is no autonomous individual. This break resembles a first traumatic separation at the very core of the origins of self.

Lacan and Lacanians like Slavoj Žižek, Joan Copjec, Derek Hook, and others possess a particular type of courage to look into the eyes of authoritarian tendencies, cruelty, racism, and sadism. They face fury and rage head on. What I love about them is that although they recognize the flawed in the human — how lost, mistaken, absurd, deluded, divided, and traumatized the human subject is — they still maintain a deep, compassionate gaze. Behind the misanthropic affectivity of some of Lacan's and of other Lacanians' writings lies a deep compassion that results from not hiding away, from not romanticizing or refantasizing, which is in itself a courageous form of love. They see that there is zero perfection (or less than zero, perhaps minus one), and they do not close their eyes to it, they listen. Psychoanalysis is an art of compassion, a practice of listening to all our delusions, of being there for the other and paying attention to what the other cannot say. The other may fail to say, but still "is." It is a kind of compassion that is not Samaritan aid or reasonable forgiveness, but grounded in the recognition of and reconciliation with the human drama. It is the ethical position of wanting the other to want, to respond to the call of "I must be," to stand in their desire.

There is an intense beauty in that call and in that form of knowing. But there is also something that I deeply miss. Let me explain. Lacan and Lacanians have their preferences, their "falling towards" tendencies. In their courage and insistence on the splitting and the lack, they pay little attention to the surplus: joy, awe, grace, and abundance. They know it exists, but it is not in focus. They pass through it quickly or as an afterthought, as Lacan did more and more towards the end of his life. This is why we need Tagore, a writer whose work is soaked in love. He, and others like him, can rest for hours in a gaze that loves him so fully without hiding from it: the love coming from the first light in the morning, the dancing of the waves, the touch of a hand. Because, as expressed by the poet Mary Oliver (2010) if you meet joy "don't hesitate. Give in to it. [...] We are not wise, and not

very often kind. And much can never be redeemed. Still, life has some possibility left."

Indeed, do not be afraid of abundance when it appears. Give in to it. We must recognize the *gaze of love,* which is the beating of a living heart, and incorporate it fully into the becoming of the subject, at the same level of authority as Lacan's gazes of the mother, which are too close or too distant, producing anxiety and lack. Love is a third beat in this relationship of becoming, and weaves into desire as gratuitous abundant excess, not only as what is left over from subtracting need from demand. A love gaze may not appear in the words, but in the joyful tone of the mother who is singing or in contemplation where the relationship to alterity manifests as something different from *objet a.* I read Lacan's late theory of love and sexuation as a revision of his early theory of desire (*Seminar VI*), and believe that it is possible to expand it using his own arguments, including his emphasis on the poetic. It is very courageous to stay and listen to suffering, delusion, repetition, neurosis, obsession, and hysteria, but it turns out that it is equally difficult to stay and listen to love and joy. This demands high doses of courage, too.

It is with gratitude that I wish to conclude this conversation with Lacan about the subject. While Lacan's understanding of the subject is a story of lack and of frustration, it is also surprisingly a challenge to traditional divisions between the subjective and the intersubjective, the individual and the social, the body and the mind, the individual and the world. All these are imaginary separations because the (re)creation of any one is knotted to the (re)creation of the other. There is no vantage point from which we can be "individuals" looking at the world from the outside; there is no outside for the speaking being, for that organism and the species to which that organism belongs. Everything is relational, and subjectivity is, too. Now is the time to go into depth with Lacan's *Seminar XX,* with sexuation, which is, for me, a fascinating part of his work. Subtitled *Encore* (give me more, again), *Seminar XX* is a polemic one, and it is also one in which Lacan changes and expands some of his views on desire, love, and sexuality.

3

Sexuation and "The Little Mermaid"

Jacques Lacan explained his theory of sexuation by using formulas in an attempt to establish a new way of understanding the unconscious. He placed big and small letters, symbols, the barred and non-barred, in a model of relationships, each one attached to a concept of his theory — his mathemes. The use of the letter, inspired by the Newtonian revolution and how Isaac Newton used letters in his formulas (Fink 2002, 32), was meant as a tool to break free from the grip that the imaginary has on our understanding and to pass that insight on to others as a technology of teaching and learning, a formalization untainted by the power of the words themselves. I took a photo of these formulas, including the "notes" I scribbled on them, so you can see an example (fig. 5).

Whilst I am sympathetic to how frustrating and impossible it feels to create new understandings from words that imprison us with their histories and meanings, I do not think that the use of formulas filled with strange letters and symbols works. It creates a series of degrees of separation and unnecessary complexity, and demands other Lacanian experts to open the door for the reader. It also speaks of a fascination with mathematical language and the sciences, an insistence on "scientification" that Sigmund Freud conveyed and Lacan seemed to have inherited, as well as an impatience or disdain for philosophical and humanistic traditions. If I were to be very critical, I would say that it resembles a masonic, imaginary tradition of secrecy, like a narrow door for a selected few to enter the fraternity of "secret knowing."

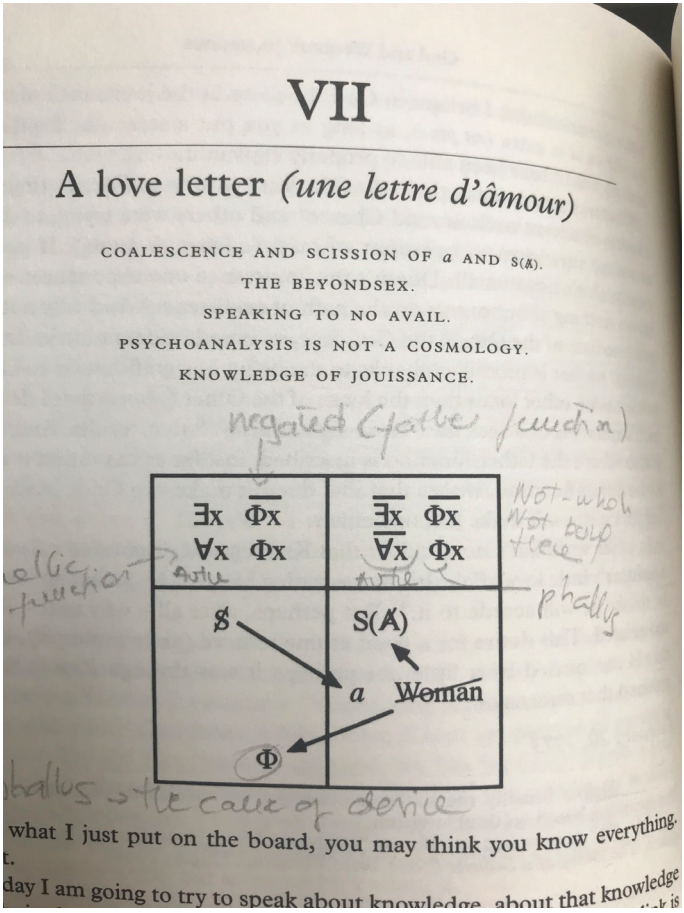


Fig. 5. Formulas of sexuation and notes by author. From Lacan (1998, 78).

At the end, what Lacan and other Lacanian experts who explain this to us do is transfer the formalized mathemes and their relationships to an argumentative story of relationships. We do not have an intuitive or easy approach to that pseudo-mathematized rhetorical expression. It is much easier for us to understand what they mean when explained simply as concepts in relation to each other. And that is also how we make sense of them: We learn

what they mean and actually put them into sentences as conceptual explanations. We relate them to each other and then, with some effort, we memorize their "mathematical" formalizations. We work backward, learn what they mean — through words that are already tainted — and then make sense of the formulas. If Lacan had simply explained himself rather than using these formulas, he could have avoided a lot of the misunderstanding of his sexuation theory among feminist, constructivist, or post-constructivist scholars. But when reading Lacan we get a sense that he enjoyed being misunderstood, that these mathemes also have an aesthetic and artistic quality (like relational landscapes), because what are they if not sense-perception? (Cutrofello 2002, 165). They helped create an aura of *enfant terrible* in his seminars, where he lashed out at those who did not get him or his formulas right; an affective formalization, which appears as a contradiction in terms. But Lacan's contribution to understanding the human psyche cannot be reduced to his formulas. We also need to read him. Reduction would have been possible if all knowledge had been contained in his mathemes and their relations, like Newton's laws had been contained in his formulas, which means that one does not need to read his books. Lacan's creativity in writing and expressing himself, using neologism, jokes, enigmas, evocations, etc., attests to a dual intention or strategy to make us think anew (Fink 2002, 33). And what irony when thinking about sexuation and gender. With the knowledge that we have today about the workings of implicit bias and prejudice (Banaji and Greenwald 2018), we can only imagine how differently the *enfant terrible* performance would have been judged if instead of an older white man, Lacan was a speaking subject with a different body.

The first thing that will help us understand Lacan's theory of sexuation is that it cannot reproduce the classic division of gender studies of, on the one hand, biological sex (body), gender identity (embodiment), gender as a form of social construction (gender expression, norms) and, on the other hand, sexuality as romantic and erotic libidinal attraction to the other, the same, both, or other sexes. There is no one-to-one equivalent. The boxes do not fit. So it is *not* that biological sex or sexuality are the real — as we have seen, the real is what is not captured by the

symbolic or imaginary, not the reality of the senses or how we see and perceive our body — nor are gender identity and embodiment the exact same as the imaginary, nor is gender structure the symbolic. The categories that come into play in psychoanalytic theory are drive, subject, desire, jouissance, phallus, the unconscious, imaginary, symbolic, and the real. The divisions and links between these categories, their interdependencies and what is inside and outside of their "boxes," are different. Lacan uses set theory as the tool for his formalization of sexuation, something that he hopes will move us out of an image-based understanding of the world and ourselves.

Lacan's title for the lecture on sexuation is "Une lettre d'âmour" ("A Love Letter") (Lacan 1998, 78) and it is an impressive effort to engage with difference through the lens of the subject of desire. This courageous invitation often gets lost in his jargon and translations of his formula. Therefore, instead of taking a point of departure from Lacan's formulas and mathemes (we will introduce them in due course), I want to embrace some of his *enfant terrible* attitude, to be disrespectful and admiring at the same time (admiring Lacan's creativity and rebelling against what I think is his unnecessary hurdle of pseudo-mathematization), and to explain his theory of sexuation as a story in conversation with the beautiful and impossible love of a little mermaid for a prince.

A Strange Child

Everything is already said in the first scene of "The Little Mermaid" (Andersen 2014), a premonition of what is already to come, a sense of predestination. The Little Mermaid is the youngest of the six daughters of the king of the sea. A maternal orphan, she has her father (a distant, mostly absent, but caring figure), her father's mother (a loving but demanding one), and her siblings, with their lovely and lively personalities. From the outset, Andersen tells us that she is strange. How? We learn that she is the most beautiful of all and she has the loveliest of all the voices in the sea. But hers is not a strangeness of looks or talent; it is a strangeness of desire:

> Each of the small princesses had her own little plot in the garden where she could dig and sow as she wanted; one gave her flower plot the form of a whale, another preferred hers to look like a little mermaid, but the youngest princess made hers completely round like the sun and only had flowers that shone red like it did.
>
> She was a strange child, quiet and thoughtful, and while the other sisters added the most remarkable things they had taken from stranded ships as decoration, all she wanted to have, apart from the rose-red flowers that resembled the sun high up above, was a beautiful marble statue, it was of a fine-looking lad, carved out of clear white stone and left on the sea-bed after a ship had foundered. At its base she planted a rose-red weeping willow, it grew splendidly and hung with its fresh branches over the statue, down towards the blue sea-bed, where its shadow appeared to be violet and in motion, just like the branches; it looked as if the tree-top and its roots played at kissing each other.[1] (Andersen 2014, 1)

The plots belonging to each princess were spaces where they could project their tastes and personalities, where they could be themselves, and where they could enjoy freedom and privacy outside the castle away from norms and traditions. But the Little Mermaid's garden was not filled with the desires that were typical for a mermaid. Her longing was the sun, which, from the

1 "Hver af de små prinsesser havde sin lille plet i haven, hvor hun kunne grave og plante, som hun selv ville; én gav sin blomsterplet skikkelse af en hvalfisk, en anden syntes bedre om, at hendes lignede en lille havfrue, men den yngste gjorde sin ganske rund ligesom solen, og havde kun blomster, der skinnede røde som den. Hun var et underligt barn, stille og eftertænksom, og når de andre søstre pyntede op med de forunderligste ting, de havde fået fra strandede skibe, ville hun kun, foruden de rosenrøde blomster, som lignede solen dér højt oppe, have en smuk marmorstøtte, en dejlig dreng var det, hugget ud af den hvide, klare sten og ved stranding kommet ned på havbunden. Hun plantede ved støtten en rosenrød grædepil, den voksede herligt, og hang med sine friske grene ud over den, ned mod den blå sandbund, hvor skyggen viste sig violet og var i bevægelse, ligesom grenene; det så ud, som om top og rødder legede at kysse hinanden" (Andersen 1992, 62–63).

depth of the ocean, she can only see as a red sphere. Even more worryingly, she wanted to have the statue of a young man. Why does she have this longing? She is strange because a foreign desire that does not belong to her world — her species, her society, her language, her culture, and family — has somehow made a home in her, inscribed. She expresses and fulfills this desire through her aesthetic choices in her garden. This strangeness takes root in her at quite an early age. Many years still have to pass before she turns fifteen, the age where she will be allowed to swim to the surface and see the outside world.

In addition to her aesthetic expression, the manifestation of her desire takes a second form in curiosity for knowledge. She shows deep curiosity for what her sisters see and experience on the surface, and what her old grandmother, a representation of the accumulated knowledge of her species, knows about the human world: "Nothing made her happier than to hear about the human world above them"[2] (Andersen 2014, 1). When her sisters are able to venture above the surface and relate their experiences, "Oh! how the youngest sister was all ears"[3] (Andersen 2014, 2). Why that curiosity? Where did the wanting to know come from? Why did she not have another type of curiosity and another type of wanting to know? This is the seed of the enjoyment that rests in speech, in hearing about what one desires, and in a form of knowing that is framed as part of the symbolic order: getting words, meanings, and ideas about the desired. It also links to the imaginary order of sensing our bodies in that form of jouissance. The expression of being "all ears" or being all eyes, all hands, should be taken literally: Our subject is an ear when listening, a mouth when talking, hands when touching and sensing, or eyes when longing, fantasizing and imagining their ego and personal identities, in relationship to the desired. The body in Lacan is a construct that is never fully complete (Copjec 2015, 63).

In the description of the creation of her garden and her curiosity, we witness the Little Mermaid emerging in front of our

2 "Ingen glæde var hende større, end at høre om menneskeverdenen derovenfor" (Andersen 1992, 63).

3 "O! hvor hørte ikke den yngste søster efter" (Andersen 1992, 63).

eyes as the subject of desire, but as a strange one. There is a discrepancy between her inscription in the symbolic order and her expression at the level of the imaginary. She has not properly interiorized the Other of her society, the law of the father. If she had, this would have inscribed in her the desire to have or to be what could fulfill the desire of her society and time, as well as the desire of other subjects under a similar structure of subjectification. If she had, her curiosity would reflect that, too, and she would act with a knowledge she did not know she had, accounting for why to wish for this or that other thing in one's garden, why to want to know more about this and not that. But, still, her acts and wishes would have matched the universe of expectations and meanings in her mermaid culture. In our ability to know about her wrongness (that she is strange), we discover as readers that we possess that knowledge too, that we have an expectation about the right inscription of the subject of desire for a mermaid. We encounter our own expectation of the big Other. Slavoj Žižek says it in this way:

> This is what the "big Other," the symbolic substance of our lives, is: a set of unwritten rules that effectively regulate our speech and acts, the ultimate guarantee of Truth to which we have to refer to even when lying or trying to deceive our partners in communication, precisely in order to be successful in our deceit. (2002, 57)

The Little Mermaid is not strange because she lacks a big Other. If she did not have a big Other of language and the symbolic, she would never have emerged as a subject of desire to begin with. What is strange is that she is already, with her half-fish figure, psychically inscribed into another big Other, that of another species and civilization, the symbolic order of humanity.

The fairytale of "The Little Mermaid" has all the core elements of psychoanalytical theory, but also links further away to the history of the humanities, to the story of mermaids and sirens, and to how these two different mythical figures representing beauty, seduction, doom, and death came to be merged into one imaginary being. The big Other of the mythical mermaid has a long and extensive history. In classical Greek mythology, the sirens,

half women and half bird, were secluded on an island from where they would lure sailors to their deadly fate with their irresistible voices, as portrayed in Homer's *Odyssey*. Mermaids, known for their beauty and long hair, half female human, half fish, appear in many different forms of sea myths and ancient stories across the world. During the Christian Middle Ages, these two mythical figures combine into one: the mermaid-siren, a female creature of the sea which possesses the beauty of the classical mermaids and the voice and dangerous allure of the sirens. Modern languages reveal this union. The English language mermaid is *havfrue* in Danish. A word that, like the English one, combines *hav* (sea, or *mer* in French) and *frue* (maid). In Latin languages, such as Spanish, Italian, and French, the translation of mermaid is *sirena* or *sirène*. Like an inverse Don Quixote, an actual noble gentleman who inscribes himself in the symbolic universe of chivalric romances, the Little Mermaid, a different mythological figure, inscribes herself in the big Other of the human. By doing so, like Don Quixote, she embeds and represents a form of madness, but also the incarnation of the impossible, that which revises and reimagines her own "original" and rejected big Other, forever transforming the understanding of what a mermaid can be. Both stories are a revelation of the language structure behind all worlds, humans, knights, and mermaids alike.

In her childlike, strange, and abnormal desire, we sense a premonition of danger, pleasure, and drama. We participate in the first jouissance and enjoyment of the aesthetic creation of her garden, despite it being inscribed in the wrong Other. How impossible is it to bring the sun to the bottom of the ocean? As impossible as it is to get the boy, as impossible as Don Quixote's wish to fight monsters and eradicate evil from the face of the Earth. We feel like shouting: Oh no, hurry up sweet little mermaid and change your desire! But, ah! the enjoyment of creating the rose-red blossoming circle, of gazing at the face of the boy, of gaining the knowledge that gives us such joy! Ah, Don Quixote's enjoyment of dreaming that he can save the world and get his Lady Dulcinea! We also sense that, too. Isn't it worth it? Another feeling arises from our hearts, a mixture of doubt, envy, and longing for that state of creating, out of the unconscious, a wanting of our very own aesthetic expression. We feel the free pursuit of

true curiosity and the first seeds of the phallic jouissance of naive anticipation in prepubescent and early teenage years. Like the verses of Henrik Nordbrandt, "I wished that it was never summer / so that summer would always be on its way"[4] (1999, 263). Expecting what we desire (waiting for summer) can feel more enjoyable than the actualized encounter with the desired (experiencing summer). The encounter dissapoints when compared with its anticipation. We sense the pleasure of not knowing one's own desire fully yet, but only intuiting it through aesthetic tendencies or the imagination of what may be.

We hoped that we could have stopped time here, before summer, in the early stage of the story before the phallic desire meets its disappointment. But we know that it is too late, that it cannot happen, that in our psychic inscriptions in the big Other we are not to decide and it is not up to our will. "We can only express our desire through the language we have and we must learn that language through others. It is through language that desire comes into being. Unconscious desire, therefore emerges in relation to the big Other" (Homer 2005, 70). This is the way the weight of history enters the subject of desire. The rose-red passion of the flowers and the weeping tree she plants by the statue know this already. The shadows and roots of the tree try to touch each other as if they are kissing, but we know they never will. The bitter sweetness of a weeping kiss could also have been the title of this fairytale.

Too often we pass through these beginnings in a hurry, like we do with much of our lives. As when culture banalizes early experiences of desire or in our urgency to preach about the disappointing end after a breakup, we tend to dismiss how precious the intuition and birth of desire are. Like a collective projection of our human obsession with warnings and fears, these warnings are prominent in the writings of Lacan and Lacanians and their Schopenhauerian tone of pessimism, the view that human desire always ends in disappointment if obtained and in frustration while searched for. Sure, disappointment will surely come when desiring in this way, that is, when desiring something, anything,

4 "Jeg ville ønske, det aldrig blev sommer / så sommeren altid var på vej" (Nordbrandt 1999, 263).

any-thing. No other and no object can make us full or whole. But I am not sure that fulfillment is necessarily desire's primary purpose or the most important one. This emphasis prioritizes the end point rather than the journey or beginning, clearly a reference to both the shadows of our individual death and the death drive. Let me question the belief that because something ends badly, it does not have immense beauty or meaning. The hands of desire do not meet, and their lack of meeting does not diminish the absolute joy of the moment that was in the sense and energy of reaching out. This moment was already perfect in its becoming and happening, without us needing to recreate the past or the future to judge it. Taking the "end" point as the point of value judgment is a deliberate decision, as though, when considering the drama of time, we decide to give the power to the last word, the last verses before the curtain falls on the story. This decision is not irreversible, nor are we bound to it. I wish, along with the poet Nordbrandt that the disappointment of the encounter does not come. But, even more than that, I wish to laugh at the knowledge of this disappointment-to-be, to gaze irreverently at the absurdity of evaluating everything by its outcomes or of judging our loves by the knowledge that all what we ever wanted will turn into dust in the split of a second. Sit with me instead for a moment, in silence, and watch the Little Mermaid among her red flowers, planting them on the deep lilac bottom of the sea, her hands caressing them, forming the round border, floating over her garden contemplating and smiling at her creation before disaster strikes. That smile captures the beauty of phallic desire, too. The end of a moment of desire or a love story does not take away the many smiles that came before it or the joy that was there.

This first emergence into the subject of desire with a "strange" inscription into the "wrong" symbolic order is what paves the way to the second moment: the arrival of the full-blown phallic jouissance, desire (not yet love) at first sight.

Desire at First Sight, Sexuation, and the Two Jouissances

The Little Mermaid had been waiting impatiently for this day, the day of her fifteenth birthday, when she will be allowed to

swim to the surface for the first time. The scene is beautiful: The sun had just set, painting the clouds in magnificent colors. The sea is calm, and a large ship is there. She swims close to the ship and sees him, the prince: "Oh, how handsome the young prince was, and he clasped people's hands, laughed and smiled, while the music rang out in the wonderful evening"[5] (Andersen 2014, 4). This is the day of her second "treason" to the law of the father of the mermaid identity. In a scene that reminds us of the all-time classic gaze of young lovers, Romeo and Juliet, the mermaid, who is supposed to seduce sailors, is instantly seduced.

She not only does not seduce the prince, but, after the wreckage of the ship, she saves him from a certain death, and she does so by risking her own life (the first time she did this, but not the last): "No, he could not be allowed to die; so she swam in among the beams and planks that drifted on the sea, completely forgot that they could have crushed her"[6] (Andersen 2014, 4). Can you sense another form of dissonance here also? What is the big Other archetype of humanity that this heroic act reminds you of? She is not inscribed in the symbolic-mermaid, but she is not easily inscribed in the traditional stereotypical "woman" of the human big Other either. She follows her desire fully and lacks the other part of the desire structure: the order to reject your desire, to not want it. It is like the symbolic has been wrongly inscribed in her, as if she was being pulled mostly by that part of the symbolic name of the "father" which knows no law, which is beyond the law and can enjoy without limitation (Enjoy!). As if she had a direct link to the real.

As images of a movie can reveal something that goes beyond the script, so can illustrations too. Edmund Dulac's illustrations of "The Little Mermaid" were published in 1911, and looking at them today we can notice that our Little Mermaid is the active one; gazing, risking, saving (fig. 6). Do you see this as "normal"

5 "O, hvor dog den unge prins var smuk, og han trykkede folkene i hånden, lo og smilte, mens musikken klang i den dejlige nat" (Andersen 1992, 66).

6 "Nej, dø, dét måtte han ikke; derfor swømmede hun hen mellem bjælker og planker, der drev på søen, glemte rent, at de kunne have knust hende" (Andersen 1992, 66).

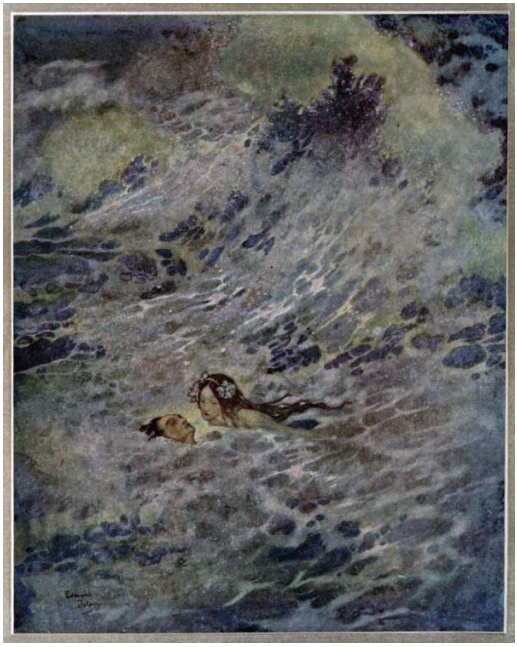


Fig. 6. Edmund Dulac, "The Little Mermaid in the Sea," 1911. Project Gutenberg.

behavior for a woman in 1837 or in 2020? Stereotypes are resilient. The Little Mermaid, by being a strange mermaid, does not only change the symbolic universe of the mermaid in a revolutionary manner, but she also modifies the symbolic universe of the human by becoming a *strange female* human, a girl romantic heroine who does not respond to the symbolic values of restrained feminine desire. She takes the position of the desiring subject and places the prince (the man) in the position of the silent object.

In a scene which turns the classic fairytale plot of redemptive kisses — from "Snow White" to "Sleeping Beauty" — upside down, the Little Mermaid kisses the unconscious man, her third act of transgression: "[H]is eyes remained closed; the mermaid kissed his lovely high forehead and stroked back his wet hair; to her he looked like the marble statue down in her little garden,

she kissed him again, and wished for him to be allowed to live"[7] (Andersen 2014, 4).

I don't think there is anything more important in romantic and erotic literature or cinema than the gaze that ignites the desire of the subject. If we take a detached look at what is going on here, we can only conclude that it is absurd. What love at first sight is to a lover is to everyone else who is not having the same experience, or who cannot remember ever having experienced it and thus cannot recognize it, a form of madness or ridiculousness. That anyone would become so important to another simply through a look or a special moment; that the very same person, who is a nobody or "just another human" to the majority of the population, would suddenly transform into an obsessive and insisting presence in someone's consciousness; and that, for the price of the requited gaze, one would risk their family, status, or power (the voice): This moment of fixation of the abstract desire of childhood into a determined subject is the blossoming of phallic jouissance, by which the mermaid identifies the other as the individual possessing the *objet petit a*.

What if we were to ask Romeo why he fell in love with Juliet, or the Little Mermaid why she fell in love with the prince, or you: Why did you fall in love with that specific person? Romeo and the Little Mermaid would tell us that they were beautiful and nice and x, y, z. Probably you could also make a list of all the attributes of your desired one. But still, how many other people in the world are beautiful and nice and x, y, z? How many have the same attributes as our desired ones? Why do we not fall in love with them? Neither Romeo nor the Little Mermaid can explain this "something more," the surplus that made them fall in love precisely with Juliet or the prince, and neither can we. This inexplicable extra is *objet petit a,* something that escapes our capacity to explain it in words and therefore links to the real (Homer 2005). Through fantasy we fix in the substitute what is incommensurable and immense, that which cannot be articulated.

7 "men øjnene blev lukkede; havfruen kyssede hans høje smukke pande og strøg hans våde hår tilbage; hun syntes, han lignede marmorstøtten nede i hendes lille have, hun kyssede ham igen og ønskede, at han dog måtte leve" (Andersen 1992, 66).

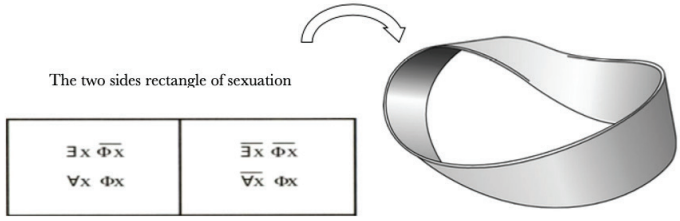


Fig. 7. The difference of sexuation visualized as a continuous Möbius strip. Image by author.

The real connected to this *objet petit a* appears in the crack, in a glimpse, in the gaze from the mermaid to the prince in Dulac's illustration. There is now a link between her earlier wanting and the prince, who has come to embody this wanting. She has fallen in love. The question now is where is the Little Mermaid situated in Lacan's structure of sexuation?

For Lacan, sexuation is divided into two parts. Do not imagine this as two completely different black and white boxes, but as a space that shows different ways in which our knowledge fails us (Copjec 2015, 212). Our sexed being results not from a biological command but from the demand of speech and this means that it fails us, that words fail us (Lacan 1998). How should we visualize this space? Lacan invites us to see it as a Möbius strip (fig. 7).

A Möbius strip is a three-dimensional figure that can be formed by taking a long rectangle of paper and twisting it once before joining its ends together. Take a look at the image of figure 7. Place your finger on the figure and imagine that you are drawing a line with a pen following one of the sides of the image. You will experience that although the strip seems to have two sides and that you are going to follow only one, when you traverse it the sides are, in fact, continuous. This image is one of Lacan's favorites. Otherwise, it is not very common and we are used to understanding space in a Euclidian way, as a plane, a cube, etc. This image subverts it. The formula that accompanies it has a man portion (the left side of the formula) and a woman portion (the right side); they are two different and continuous ways of

relating to the unconscious and desire, and, like a Möbius strip, they represent difference in continuation.

Lacan does not say that all those who identify as women situate themselves in this part and all those who identify as men situate themselves in the other part — as if humanity could be separated into two locker rooms. Rather, he importantly notes: *"Every speaking being* situates itself on one part of the other" (Lacan 1998, 79, my emphasis). Lacan gives us an example of a man who is situated on the woman side, "Saint John of the Cross because one is not obliged, when one is male to situate oneself on the side of ∀xΦx" (i.e., the man's sexuation) (Lacan 1998, 76) and then insists also that, "women are free to situate themselves there [on man's sexuation side] if it gives them pleasure to do so" (Lacan 1998, 67). It is clear from reading Lacan that what places our Little Mermaid on one side or the other is not her transformation into a female body, even though she grows legs and — we imagine she must also get but which remain unmentioned (taboo) in the fairytale — female sex organs (a vulva, a vagina, an uterus). However, her sexuation does not depend on being a "sexed being" (Lacan 1998, 6). Instead, it depends on her relationship to the *Other jouissance.* The Other jouissance is enjoyment that takes on different and ambiguous meanings, including the jouissance that the Other gets out of us, our enjoyment as the Other, or our enjoyment of the Other (Fink 2002, 38). Anatomical differences are not irrelevant to how cultural ideas of sex and gender are transmitted and reproduced, but they are not the foundation of sexuation as understood by Lacan; rather your specific relationship to the Other is, your way of desiring is. We will see that the story of "The Little Mermaid" is like a journey through the Möbius strip, a *travesía* (travel) through time from one type of sexuation to the next.

What are the patterns that sexuation can take? The first one is the phallic jouissance. Phallic jouissance is the form of enjoyment, a getting off, related to our socialization, and thereby to language and the symbolic. Human sexuality depends on forms of prohibition to touch or show bodily zones, specific erogenous zones. These prohibited zones are marked by the demands and morals of our parents and society. These requests institute a localizable and centered jouissance that gains in excitement thanks to these

prohibitions and their inscription in language. Related to forms of organ pleasure, this jouissance is discreet and can be counted. This is like when people enjoy talking about their potency or conquests, and quantity seems to boost their sense of self (Fink 2016, 98). Lacan hypothesizes that human sexuality becomes more significant due to this socialization. For Lacan, "The signifier is the cause of jouissance. Without the signifier, how could we even approach that part of the body? Without the signifier, how could we center that something that is the material cause of jouissance" (Lacan 1998, 24)?

All speaking beings desire through the structure of the phallic jouissance and objectivize the other by approaching the *objet a* (the object cause of desire) that they imagine the person has and that may hide the love they desire. However, the way in which we deal with and approach the constant failure of our phallic jouissance is different depending on whether we are on the "woman" side or on the "man" side of sexuation. These two sides represent two ways of relating to the Other jouissance. There are two ways for the affair, the sexual relationship, to misfire or fail (Lacan 1998, 56–57).

Fink provides in his essay on sexuation (2002, 34–36) an insightful explanation of the man's side of sexuation. Animals experience pleasure, and we, as animals, also experience pleasure. But beyond the pleasure we feel, we believe that there is a greater pleasure and a more perfect one to be had. This other pleasure is a standard, an ideal, something that we hope for but may never have experienced, or we have never experienced it as a constant, as something reliable. Why do we have this idea of "other pleasure" and animals don't? We have it because language allows us to create an imagination of an unfailing jouissance, an enjoyment that will never fail us and that will always hit the mark. This ability of language to create "the ideal" is constantly reproduced and amplified by sociocultural systems, such as Hollywood's view of sexual relationships. It is an attempt to deduce existence from essence, as though, if I can think of it as an ideal, it must exist. How does this Other jouissance manifest itself on the man side of sexuation? Fink says that it, "makes its claims felt with a certain insistence from the outside, as it were. Outside in the sense that it is not the wish, 'let's do *that* again!' but rather, 'Isn't there

something else you could do, something different you could try'" (Fink 2002, 35)? If I am ever to attain this Other jouissance, I must sacrifice and deny my present phallic jouissance. I cannot have both. One needs to sacrifice the desire for *objet a* — the specific person you are desiring right now — and discreet, localized, and countable forms of organ pleasure in order to obtain this Other (ideal) jouissance. This happens, for example, by talking about love instead of having sex (courtly love), or in Daoist sexual practices where organ pleasure is constantly deferred to obtain a greater pleasure.

On the man's side of sexuation, all beings in this group relate to the Other's jouissance as the exception that allows for the phallic jouissance to form itself and to have an identity: The particular negative is needed in order to generate the universal affirmative. In simple terms, it is like this: I can desire another (I see another as the object of my desire and believe that I am the other's object of desire, i.e., to have/be the phallus) only because there is an exception, an Other form of jouissance that by being different (ideal, outside my imaginary world and outside what my ego can be) allows me to remain as the subject of desire. On the man's side of sexuation, the rule that *all beings are conditioned by phallic jouissance* depends on at least *one of them escaping it* (Copjec 2015, 216). The one who escapes is the one who represents the Other's jouissance.

Therefore, the reading of the "man" portion of the sexuation formulas can be summarized as follows:

> The phallic jouissance formula $\forall x\, \Phi x$, (lower left): The jouissance of all beings in this sexuation ($\forall x$) is phallic jouissance (Φx).
>
> The Other jouissance formula, $\exists x\, \overline{\Phi x}$ (upper left) : There exists the belief that there is at least one ($\exists x$) who is not submitted to the phallic jouissance ($\overline{\Phi x}$) (an ideal, the exception).

The summary is: All beings in the man's sexuation are submitted to the phallic jouissance (are under desire and castration) except one, who has access to another form of jouissance.

In Lacan, the figure of the "all demanding" lady in the tradition of courtly love is a way in which to imagine or relate to this ideal other. "Courtly love is, for man [...] the only way to elegantly pull off the absence of the sexual relationship" (Lacan 1998, 69). This is the way human beings in this sexuation try to deal with the failure of the sexual relationship. Or in Žižek's words, this ideal other is, "the sacred, prohibited/unattainable agent who avoids castration and is thus able really to enjoy (the primordial Father, the Lady in courtly love)" (Žižek 1995).

If the Little Mermaid had this structure, her inner desire story would sound like this: I desire the prince and I believe that the prince can desire me. I am grasping after *objet a* (my object of phallic desire, the prince, in whom I have located the *objet petit a*). I imagine that if I could capture this *objet petit a* and look behind it, I would finally be able to reach this ideal Other jouissance. However, this is doomed to fail and to keep me asking for more (Lacan 1998). In order to manage this failure, if I am to achieve this Other jouissance, this higher good, I believe I need to sacrifice the pleasure I am getting from *objet a* (by desiring to have sex with him, to be his lover), and to become the exception (an ideal). The Little Mermaid has no intention of renouncing the prince, on the contrary she is sacrificing everything to obtain him — she is fully immersed in the phallic jouissance, not rejecting it. But let us look at another famous love relationship that takes the opposite direction. The one between the philosopher Søren Kierkegaard and Regine Olsen (fig. 8), where the philosopher renounces the phallic jouissance for what he believes to be the higher good. "It's by castrating himself [Kierkegaard], by giving up love, that he thinks he will accede to it [...to] a good that is not caused by a little a [a simple object of desire]" (Lacan 1998, 77). In this sexuation, the Other jouissance has a positive ideal identity, that is, it is a "good" that can be spoken, described, explained. The Other jouissance in man's sexuation *exists,* it is part of language and the symbolic, it is an ideal. And it is the dialectics between one's present phallic desire, like the desire of Kierkegaard for the beautiful Olsen, and this ideal form that defines it.

When reading Lacan's explanations of man's sexuation, I cannot avoid thinking of the classical Madonna/slut or good



Fig. 8. Emil Bærentzen, "Regine Olsen," 1840. Wikimedia Commons.

boy/bad boy symbolic divisions, which is one of the potential dramas of desire. The psychologist Esther Perel, in her analysis of relationships, love, and infidelity, accounts for the many cases in which the loss of desire results from an impossibility of sexually desiring when caring or loving (2006, 2017). The more one cares in a relationship for the wellbeing of the other — that is, the more the relationship resembles the mother-child caring configuration — the less one can desire in an erotic-sexually driven way. I can only be in contact with my own libido when I do not care (when I go for "it"), when I imagine the other as a bad boy or slut (object), and if I am to care when I imagine the other as a lovable good boy or Madonna (exception), I lose my desire and my jouissance. All of those good boys, bad boys, Madonnas, etc. are ideal imaginations which link to our cultural and mythical idealizations that is, to the double nature of the symbolic order in psychoanalysis. On the one hand it represents the law and on

the other that which is beyond the law and has access to all pleasure; enjoy – do not enjoy! In man's sexuation the locus of the phallic jouissance and the Other jouissance can not fall into the same human being, a pattern that corresponds to what Colette Soler names "the fetishistic form of love," where there is a splitting between love and desire (Soler 2002, 79). Like in the song by Joaquin Sabina, "Y sin embargo" (And yet). Here is a narrative interpretation of the first verses:

> Of course you know that you are the first for me and that I do not lie when I tell you that for you I would sacrifice my whole life, *and yet,* for a while, every single day, you see, I would be unfaithful to you with anyone, I would trade you with anyone. I confess. You, who have kissed so much and taught me so much. You would know that what gets deep inside your bones is only those kisses that you have not given, the lips of sin.[8]

In the theory of erotic capital, this pattern is also socioculturally different from, for example, some epochs and cultures where there is a strong link between motherhood and sexiness — think of the image of the "sexy mama" of Latin cultures as performed by Sophia Loren or Penélope Cruz in films on motherhood (fig. 9) — or the figure of "sexy caring dad." In some sociocultural contexts fertility and having healthy, beautiful children are seen as indicating increased erotic capital (Hakim 2010). In others, putting a child on top of a woman's body immediately diminishes the erotic appeal. This happens when there is an either/or between motherhood (pregnancy) and eroticism. The imaginary of idealized representations of "the exception" changes historically.

8 "De sobra sabes que eres la primera / Que no miento si juro que daría / Por ti la vida entera / Por ti la vida entera // Y sin embargo, un rato cada día / Ya ves / Te engañaría con cualquiera / Te cambiaría por cualquiera // Ni tan arrepentido, ni encantado / De haberme conocido, lo confieso/ Tú que tanto has besado / Tú que me has enseñado // Sabes mejor que yo / Que hasta los huesos / Solo calan los besos que no has dado / Los labios del pecado" (Sabina 1996).



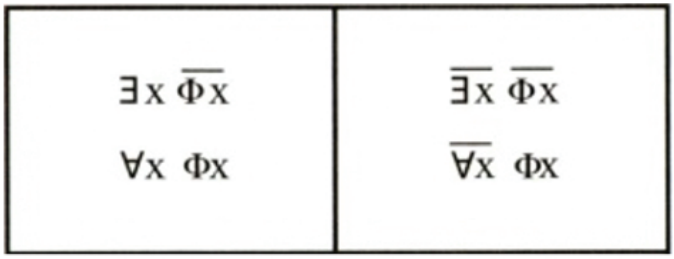
Fig. 9. Sophia Loren as mother in Vittorio De Sica's *La Ciociara* (*Two Women*), 1960. Wikimedia Commons.

What is the configuration of the relationship of the phallic jouissance and the Other jouissance on the woman's side of sexuation? What kind of speaking being is it whose jouissance is not limited to the "man" sexuation type (Copjec 2015, 216)? All beings in this group relate to the jouissance of the Other not as the exception (as the "on the other side") but as an addition, as Lacan calls it "supplementary" (Lacan 1998, 35) (i.e., not complementary). If on the man's side there was a dialectic (this in opposition to this), in this sexuation there is "this and this," "and" instead of "or." The Other jouissance, which Lacan considered to be feminine, appears to be outside language and thereby it is not so localizable in the erogenous zones or as object, or countable. A form of ecstasy, it may correspond to feelings of being transported outside of oneself, deep contemplation, and having lost track of time. Such ecstatic enjoyment, "may be profoundly unsettling and decentering, having no obvious or direct connection with either the woman's ego or the unconscious" (Fink 2016, 100).

A way to express the woman's sexuation is: I can desire an other (see another person as object of my desire and aspire to be the object of desire of the other, i.e., have/be the phallus) and also at the same time have an Other form of jouissance, which is the pleasure and enjoyment that I get through the Other, by identifying with the Other, by the enjoyment that the Other can get through me (by being decentered). For my relationship to the Other jouissance, I do not need an exception or an ideal, someone who is not under the influence of the phallic jouissance of desire, of castration. Here, the Other's jouissance is not a "positive" ideal that demands a sacrifice of my erotic desire for an *objet a,* but a form of emptiness beyond the symbolic. By emptying oneself, becoming absent as subject, one presences oneself and becomes the Other; mysticism, art, and poetry are ways in which this appears. What allows the relationship between the phallic jouissance (symbolic) and the Other jouissance (real) is love (Fink 2016, 101).

The woman side of sexuation calls for a dilution of unanimous group identity, as there is no exception upon which one can solidify the group, the universal category. There is no "One of universal fusion" because there is no positive exception, but instead a one-by-one of absolutely heterogeneous things set up as a plurality. This is a heterogeneity which Lacan will try to gather under a matheme, instead of a signifier, the letter functioning as the assemblage (Lacan 1998, 47–48). On the "woman" side of sexuation speaking beings are "not whole" and this allows them to have a supplementary enjoyment that is grounded in their absence as subjects, who are marked by the signifier (Lacan 1998, 35). "[B]eing not-whole, she has a supplementary jouissance compared to what the phallic function designates by way of jouissance" (Lacan 1998, 73).

On the "woman" side, Other jouissance never obtains a positive (i.e., spoken, described, explained) ideal identity; it is what cannot be spoken of, what is beyond language: I may experience it, but I do not know anything about it. Lacan's formulas for the female's sexuation read like this when combining Fink's (2002) and Copjec's (2015) explanations (fig. 10):



Men sexuation	Women sexuation
There exists the belief that there is at least one that is not submitted to the phallic jouissance. (the belief in an ideal joiussance, the exception) The jouissance of all beings in this sexuation is phallic jouissance	There *is not* (i.e. does not exists (∃), it can't be spoken about) any that is not phallic jouissance. There is the possibility of other jouissances that are not phallic, but they cannot exist because they cannot be spoken. *Not all* of the jouissance of speaking beings in this sexuation is phallic jouissance

Fig. 10. Meaning of the formulas of sexuation. Image by the author.

The lower line of the right quadrant: $\overline{\forall x}$ *not all* (not every) speaking beings are submitted to the phallic function. This means that not all the jouissance of speaking beings in this sexuation is phallic jouissance.

The upper line of the right quadrant: $\overline{\exists x}\ \overline{\Phi x}$ there is no one jouissance that is not submitted to the phallic function (there is no exception) or there *is not* (i.e., does not exist (∃), it can't be spoken about) any that is not phallic jouissance.

> There is the possibility of other jouissances that are not phallic, but because they cannot be spoken they cannot "exist" (only what Lacan expresses as *ex-ist*).

We should remember that although the theory of sexuation has two formations, this is not a simplistic dichotomous view of the human. The phallic jouissance can take on a myriad of different relationship patterns based on the "to have/be" of the phallic object of desire and the structure of fantasy — that is, fantasies of symbiosis, refusal, domination, or submission, and all possible particularizations of these four basic fantasy logics (Johnston 2018).

Understanding Lacan's sexuation is not easy. From first impression, each side seems to contradict each other. But it is not this; what they do is they express two different ways of including and excluding the Other jouissance, or of managing the failure of the sexual relationship, our fantasy subject–object relations. They are two ways of coping with our lack. Lacanian scholarship does not make it easier since not everyone insists on the "gender neutrality" of Johnston's (2018) or Fink's (2002) explanations. Other authors such as Geneviève Morel (2002) or Renata Salecl (2002), in their analyses of sexuation and *Seminar XX,* maintain a more traditional division of difference between men and women (e.g., by analyzing hysteria or frigidity), although they mention that women can never be treated as a totality. However, I have no doubt that Lacan did not refer to a biological or heterosexual duality. Copjec (2015) offers an excellent explanation to get behind this confusion. She says that the many modifications of a phenomenal reality (how we experience women or men, for example) still count as evidence of a reality only because they are not able to contain that reality in full (i.e., as a negative judgement). They cannot contain an independent reality that does not ever assume phenomenal form or is part of perception and is instead ungraspable (Copjec 2015, 234). There is no claim to positive sexual identity as no man or woman can boast that they embody femininity or masculinity, as "no single concept can be said to embody being" (Copjec 2015, 234). Lacan challenges the universal in both sexuations and in the sum of both sexuations. On the side of man as *prohibition* — one is out and will not allow

you — and on the other side as *impossibility*. Like Fink (2002) says, you cannot have both jouissances. In feminine sexuation there may be more but that "more" cannot be spoken or experienced as and through language, that is, as subject; so if it is, it is only as a possibility — the possibility of God, soul, freedom — but not as existence. Sexuation represents the impossibility and prohibition of any universalizing identity, more than its "neutrality." We can envision woman's sexuation as a different relationship to the symbolic order and the law, where the inscription into the symbolic is not a simultaneous "Enjoy! Do not enjoy!" and where a sense of community does not rely on the existence of the exception. In this way feminine sexuation has consequences for the understanding of identity and socio-political relations, in short, it is a form of enjoyment or jouissance that would represent the opposite of totalitarianism which always relies in the closing of the set or group identity vis-à-vis the exception.

We can now more easily understand why Lacan in his *Seminar XX* links sexuation to love and to knowledge; these two sexuations are also two different ways of approaching the limits of what is known and the possibilities of knowledge and love. The psychotherapist and mystic James Finley, reflecting on the work of another mystic, Thomas Merton, expresses one of the possible evolutions of the human psychic experience which I believe is exemplary of traversing from the man's side of sexuation to the woman's side over the course of one's life: "[T]he things I used to be certain of, I'm no longer certain of. The things that I used to be certain of that I am certain of, I'm no longer certain of in the way that I used to be certain of those things" (Finley 2020b, 3). In the same meditation, he explains that such (un)knowing is a form of self-knowledge based on the recognition of the extent to which the self can hide itself from itself (i.e., I have no idea where I am going although I may have opinions, facts, and routines), and on a sense of hope that appears in the "dark night," in an unforeseeable moment when everything appears to be lost, or through an unexpected grace or joy that moves us in a completely different direction than expected, although I know nothing about it and cannot say anything about it (Finley 2020b).

In woman's sexuation there continues to be fantasies and phallic jouissance (i.e., egoic jealousy, rage, etc.). One is not

spared from emotions or negative affect, but these are now supplemented by this other form of knowing, as explained by Finley. Here it is worth citing Žižek's question: What if our duty is, "being infinitely indebted to and responsible for the call of an Otherness that never acquires positive features but always remains withdrawn, the trace of its own absence" (Žižek 2002, 65)?

What we learn from this is that we cannot decide on which side the mermaid is placed if we only look at how the phallic jouissance has emerged in the mermaid and how she falls in love with the prince. At this point she could be placed both on the man's or on the woman's side, because the "desire at first sight" (the phallic jouissance) characterizes both. It is clear throughout the story that she enjoys the prince as *objet a,* his laughter, his looks, a voice and a face that turns her on, a "lovely high forehead" waiting to be kissed. However, Andersen prompts a major shift in our understanding of her desire for the prince when we learn about her relationship to the Other jouissance. This happens once the Little Mermaid has given up her voice to become human and can be united with her object of desire in his palace:

> The prince said that she was to be with him always, and she was allowed to sleep outside his door on a velvet cushion.[9] (Andersen 2014, 9)

> Day by day the prince became more dear to her, he was fond of her as one can be fond of a good, dear child, but it never occurred to him to make her his queen.[10] (Andersen 2014, 9)

The prince appreciates his "mermaid" not as his object of desire or as the Other on the "man" side of sexuation (i.e., the exception, the perfectly imagined Lady, the ideal pleasure that must be somewhere and to which we do not have access). At this stage of

9 "Prinsen sagde, at hun skulle alletider være hos ham, og hun fik lov at sove uden for hans dør på en fløjlspude" (Andersen 1992, 72).

10 "Dag for dag blev hun prinsen kærere, han holdt af hende, som man kan holde af et godt, kært barn, men at gøre hende til sin dronning, faldt ham slet ikke ind" (Andersen 1992, 73).

the fairytale, instead of being the phallus (object of desire), the mermaid acts as a "copy" of his original *objet a,* the girl from the beach. But she is not only that. In a fascinating way the prince obtains pleasure from seeing that she is able to love him unconditionally and that she can enjoy through him. He enjoys her happiness for him, he enjoys through her. What is this form of jouissance? Here we may be tempted to say that the prince has a narcissistic approach to this, but I do not believe that. His sexuation represents a complex evolution from one side to the other characterized by filial love. Let me explain this in more detail before we move on to look at the Little Mermaid.

4

Traversing towards the Other Jouissance

In his relationship with the Little Mermaid, the prince never doubts her love. He does not need to pretend with her that he has or is the phallus, and he does not need that because her love appears to be unconditional. But this also means that he does not desire her, there is no libido, no distance, no lack. She is not detached from him and he has no imagination that she has his *objet petit a,* the gaze, the voice, etc. In the phallic desire of the prince, his objet a is located in the image of the girl he first saw on the beach. In a facet of his relationship with the mermaid, he is attached to her because she is a look-alike. The Little Mermaid functions as the statue of the boy served for her, a phallic reminder of the real *objet a* that cannot be obtained. She is an "almost." If this was the only way the prince related to the mermaid, it would be a perfect example of the way the man side of sexuation can "love" (an either-or structure).

As we have seen on the man's side of sexuation, speaking beings desire someone who has the *objet petit a,* but eventually there is another imagination of an ideal "one," an exception, someone who will not fail me, someone who will love me for who I am without having to pretend to have the phallus — status, power, skills, looks (Žižek 2002). This works in both a Don Juan type (I keep replacing one lover after another, because I believe that the exceptional ideal will be hidden behind the next one, which allows me to place all these discarded lovers into one, unanimous group), in the melancholic or pragmatic lover type (I stay with

the "almost" because I believe in an ideal but that is unattainable, it is hidden in "a sacred temple" (Andersen 2014, 9), and the consolation rests in being with the pseudo *objet a* while platonically dreaming about the ideal lady), as well as in the narcissistic cynical type, like Dorian in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (Wilde 1994). Oscar Wilde describes the cruelty and lack of remorse of Dorian when he breaks up with his first love after having realized that she is not perfect (the ideal). Dorian feels deep shame, not for the suffering he is inflicting on his lover, but for ever having loved such an imperfect creature, for not having lived up to the ideal Other. He cannot risk such a failure so he cannot love anyone again. He is turned into the exceptional primal father, one who can enjoy without limit, one who never gets old or ugly. While Don Juan stays trapped in the phallic jouissance, Dorian stays trapped in the Other jouissance of man's sexuation.

What is complicated in the image of the prince is also what is so magnificent in H.C. Andersen's creativity. Notice the striking and so beautifully vulnerable honesty of this scene:

> "Aren't you fonder of me than all the rest!" the eyes of the little mermaid seemed to say when he took her in his arms and kissed her lovely forehead.
>
> "Yes, you are dearest of all to me," the prince said, "for you have the best heart of them all, you are the most devoted to me, and you resemble a young girl I once saw but will surely never find again. I was on a ship that was wrecked, the waves washed me ashore near a sacred temple where several young girls were in service, the youngest of them found me down on the shore and saved my life, I only saw her twice; she was the only one I could ever love in this world, but you resemble her, you almost replace her image in my soul."[1] (Andersen 2014, 9)

1 "'Holder du ikke mest af mig, blandt dem alle sammen!' syntes den lille havfrues øjne at sige, når han tog hende i sine arme og kyssede hendes smukke pande.

'Jo, du er mig kærest,' sagde prinsen, 'thi du har det bedste hjerte af dem alle, du er mig mest hengiven, og du ligner en ung pige jeg engang så, men vistnok aldrig mere finder. Jeg var på et skib, som strandede, bølgerne drev mig i land ved et helligt tempel, hvor flere unge piger

This sounds nothing like Don Juan, the brave prince of many classical fairytales, or Dorian. A Don Juan, even when incarnated in a female body, would say: I believe you are the one, until I realize that there is nothing behind *objet petit a,* and then I will move to the next *objet a* without any strings attached to the now discarded object. For Don Juan, each one is the exceptional one until he wakes up from his fantasy and realizes that they are not, the point at which they become part of the unanimous group of conquests (and also failures). Don Juan's jouissance is symbolic, centered in quantity and the constant slippage of desire. He moves from object to object: *a′, a″, a‴*. An almighty prince or a knight will not believe that anything is unattainable to him: Of course, I would be able to find and win the heart of the lady (the exception). And a Dorian will look at the mermaid up and down, smile cynically at all her imperfections, and spend the night with her, then with a prostitute, both or none, depending of his fancy, and forget all about them in the morning. But here, in "The Little Mermaid," we find another type of lover, one that is quite exceptional in fairytales, literature, or films as a male hero that is honest about his phallic failure: You are not her — my desired — but "you are dearest to me" (Andersen 2014, 9).

Still, despite this anti-heroic character of the prince, in the early stages of the story we find him inscribed on the man side of sexuation. Why? The prince is saying to the mermaid: You have all the attributes of my desired one (beauty, goodness), but you do not have my *objet petit a,* what can fill my lack is fixed elsewhere. The extraordinary thing here is that the mermaid has lost her link to the real, what she mythically represented, and to her voice, what is inexplicably irresistible and unexplainable. All of her other virtues would not be able to compensate for this loss, which is the loss of the embodiment of the drive. He has a phallic jouissance for an *objet a* (the girl of the beach) and takes the mermaid as a replacement of this (a copy of the girl of the beach) whilst dreaming of the Other jouissance (the unattainable per-

gjorde tjeneste, den yngste dér fandt mig ved strandbredden og reddede mit liv; jeg så hende kun to gange; hun var den eneste, jeg kunne elske i denne verden, men du ligner hende, du næsten fortrænger hendes billede i min sjæl'" (Andersen 1992, 74).

fect lady hidden in a holy temple). In a way, this is the same as dreaming to be the father who can enjoy what is not possible to enjoy or what is beyond the law; he believes this enjoyment is not possible, but it is still what he desires. He is not a Don Juan type nor a Dorian, but embodies the position of the pragmatic and melancholic lover.

The Little Mermaid is in a very different situation from the prince, but in the beginning she is also situated on the man's side of sexuation. After her wish of requited desire has proven to be impossible, her declaration is one of phallic jouissance: He is my *objet a,* I know that I am not his *objet a,* but I do not care. I am with him, I love him. Here, although she is sad that he does not have the same type of phallic desire for her, she still wants to be his phallus (his object of desire), and she still can focus on her own enjoyment, on the pleasure and jouissance that she gets by being close to him.

> The girl belongs to the sacred temple, he has told me, she will never come out into the world, they will not meet again, I am with him, I see him every day, I will take care of him, love him, sacrifice my life to him![2] (Andersen 2014, 9)

Because we like the mermaid and her courageous, sweet personality, we could feel tempted to look at her sacrificing her life to the prince as a kind of altruistic love, but this is far from what it is. The mermaid is experiencing the phallic enjoyment of the gaze, the voice, being beside and around her object of desire. We should never reduce phallic desire to accomplishing sexual intercourse or to the idea of requited desire. At this point, although she declares otherwise, she is not sacrificing anything, she is doing what she wants. She is the failed lover, taking whatever she can still get from her *objet a.* In short, this is the plot of "boy does not want girl, but girl still desires boy and decides to stay with him despite this knowledge." This is the story of *He's Just Not That Into You,* a tragicomedy directed by Ken Kwapis, also seen with

2 "Pigen hører det hellige tempel til, har han sagt, hun kommer aldrig ud i verden, de mødes ikke mere; Jeg er hos ham, ser ham hver dag, jeg vil pleje ham, elske ham, ofre ham mit liv!" (Andersen 1992, 74).

Laurie's unrequited (narcissistic?) love for Jo — I will keep trying and trying — in Louisa May Alcott's novel *Little Women* (1989). From playing the caretaker to best friend, this psychic pattern is replicated in dozens of literary and cinematic works.

The Little Mermaid wins all our sympathy and compassion here. What she is going through is such a common human experience. Think for a moment about your own life. Do you recall having an erotic crush on another who you knew did not desire you in the same way, but you would still do so much to be close to and around that person, to become "a friend" or "a confidant"? If these crushes are not particularly strong, more like fancying someone, it is easier to move away from the disappointment of unrequited desire, as if moving the *objet a* from one speaking being to another could happen without much psychic suffering. However, this is not the case if we are talking about the experience of desire as limerence as defined by the psychologist Dorothy Tennov (1999) and analyzed by the biological anthropologist Helen Fisher (2016), when the desire for the other has made an obsessive imprint on our own psyche and it is out of our own volition. This is then a "crush" or desire that becomes what we traditionally consider as "falling in love." In this case, the nonrequited love or the breakup of a relationship,

> signifies not only the lack of future for a passion, but is also a destructive form of disconnection, of dying while alive, the opposite of liveliness. There are different stages to this state. The first ones are characterized by deep obsession. The person will obsess about the loss, and their brain will have the same characteristics as a brain addicted to alcohol or cocaine. The tunnel vision will become even narrower. Compulsive thinking and acting will take place, a lack of energy, feelings of apathy or exasperation, anger and powerlessness [...]. The unreciprocated desire can be annihilating. (Munar and Hall 2019, 88–89)

This is what Mr. Darcy develops for Elizabeth in Jane Austen's novel *Pride and Prejudice* (1972), which he expresses in one of the most famous love declarations (and rejections) of all time: "In vain have I struggled. It will not do. My feelings will not be

repressed. You must allow me to tell you how ardently I admire and love you" (1972, 221). Marianne Dashwood had similar feelings for John Willoughby, and Colonel Brandon for Marianne, in Austen's *Sense and Sensibility* (1990). A drama of phallic jouissances is placed in a chain of wrong "objects." There is a reason why Jane Austen novels continue to be widely read two hundred years after their original publication. Verbs can be developed from her characters: "Wickhaming" is the psychic structure of speaking beings who seek to develop light crushes on others only to move on to the next ones, like the narcissitic and deceiving officer Wickham of *Pride and Prejudice.* When it is a much more serious affair that has a devastating effect on the unrequited lover, it is "Willoughbing," after John Willoughby's character in *Sense and Sensibility.* With her wit and insightful depiction of characters, Austen provides outstanding examples that match Lacan's complex psychoanalytical insights.

If we did not know that the prince was so fond of the mermaid and was happy to have her around, hers is also the psychic structure of a subject that can turn into a stalker or a harasser. Take notice of her pleasure of following him and gazing at him at a distance without him knowing, before she decides to sacrifice her voice and get her legs. Lovers who commit great sacrifices such as mutilating themselves can be extremely scary or threatening to the desired one. Again, we are reminded of the mermaid's historical link to the real and what goes beyond the law in her need to follow her desire without listening to the "Do Not Enjoy!" command of the law and the symbolic. Sacrifices for love are expression of the beautiful in its terrifying and fascinating qualities. "Why should I carry the burden of your self-sacrifice?" the prince could ask, and with good reason. This is the scary side of the phallic lover, a tendency which appears in all its drama in the film *Notes on a Scandal* (2006), directed by Richard Eyre. This film presents the relationship between a younger, attractive art teacher Sheba Hart, played by the actress Kate Blanchet, and the older teacher Barbara, played by Judi Dench. Despite knowing that the phallic desire of Sheba is for a fifteen-year-old student, Barbara still befriends her and pretends to protect her, until it all ends in a spiral of manipulation and psychic terror at the hands of Barbara. The opposite of the sexuation type of

desire and love is Sheba's older husband, Richard Hart, played by Bill Nighy, who still loves Sheba despite her infidelity and sentencing to prison due to her sexual affair with the student. While the Little Mermaid is far from being a threatening "Barbara" and the prince has feelings of care and friendship for her, her decision to stay with him despite knowing that he does not love her as his "queen," and despite her failure, is the drive speaking and circling around the *objet a* of desire. One of the core lessons of psychoanalysis appears here. She gets enjoyment there where she suffers.

Dancing with a Broken Heart

The dominance of the phallic jouissance in the Little Mermaid changes radically when the prince meets the princess of the neighboring kingdom and discovers that she is "the girl," his *objet a,* and that they can now marry. The "other girl" now loses her status as the lady (the imagined perfect Other jouissance) and the unattainable Other (the exception) in the man's sexuation. The Little Mermaid also loses her ability to be the *pseudo-objet a* as she is replaced by the real *objet a.* The mermaid falls away from the phallic desire of the subject. In this moment, Andersen transforms the story through the radical entrance of the Other jouissance, as understood on the woman's side of sexuation. But this entrance changes the position of both the mermaid and the prince. This event makes traversing to the other side possible. Both become located on the side of woman's sexuation, and they experience both jouissances simultaneously.

A short summary of this transformation, using the formalization of Lacan's formulas, would look like this: The prince has a phallic desire for his bride, where his *objet a* is located. At the same time he can enjoy the Other through the enjoyment of the other. He enjoys that the mermaid gains pleasure from being close to him. Now, the ideal Other as an exception (as the Other jouissance on the man's side of sexuation) has disappeared. However, although the prince situates himself on the woman's side of sexuation, as does the Little Mermaid, the way in which this is expressed in his story takes a different shape to that of erotic love. The prince's love, as inscribed in the Other jouissance, is that of

philia (friendship). In his *Seminar XX,* Lacan mentions *philia* stating the importance of this form of love. *Philia* is one of the forms that the Other jouissance can take on the woman's side of sexuation. It is also important to note that for the prince, eros and *philia* do not fall into the same individual. He feels eros for his bride and *philia* for the mermaid. We can imagine this division of philia and lover into two different "beloveds" as a psychic desire structure, where, although there is a surplus jouissance beyond the phallic, this does not necessarily integrate into one human being (e.g., having a lover who is also one's best friend, uniting desire and love). Instead, with one person (my bride) I can only feel phallic jouissance, with another (mermaid) I can feel the Other jouissance, in this case manifested as philia/friendship, and thereby enjoy through her. The prince's dilemma is that having both of these in one single person may not be possible, but this we cannot know. He may be able to love his bride deeply (phallic and Other jouissance as love), alongside being able to have feelings of philia for the mermaid. For him, it could be an "and, and, and" instead of an "and/or." The transformation of the story is that the "ideal exception" has now disappeared.

The Little Mermaid is inscribed on the woman's side of sexuation in a different way from the prince. It is the day of the wedding. This is a day of deep sorrow for our Little Mermaid: The prince is marrying his princess. The mermaid is now discarded and is going to die. She has lost her deal with the witch of the sea:

> "It's you!" the prince said [talking to the princess who happened to be the girl on the beach], "you who saved me when I lay like a corpse on the shore!" and he embraced his blushing bride. "Oh, I am far too fortunate!" he said to the little mermaid. "The best thing I could ever have hoped for has been fulfilled for me. You will rejoice in my good fortune, for you are more fond of me than all the others!" And the little mermaid kissed his hand, and she seemed to feel her heart break. His wedding morning would bring her death and turn her into foam on the sea.[3] (Andersen 2014, 10)

3 "'Det er dig!' sagde prinsen, 'dig, som har frelst mig, da jeg lå som et lig ved kysten!' og han trykkede sin rødmende brud i sine arme. 'O jeg

What a perfect imaginary example of the failed sexual relationship. The prince seeing a girl and believing: You! You must be my lady! My savior! Whilst overlooking the true savior who has no voice, no language that could be spoken, yet who has been beside him all the time. We can see this as an example that none of our *objets a* will ever bring us what we believe they will, that if we looked behind "it" we would find it to be a fake, a lie. And, more than that, it would be a lie that we told ourselves, because ours is the desire of others and the Other. Nobody lied to us, but, as is the case with Lacan's subject of desire, the prince simply did not know. Like Oedipus, he did not know to whom he was speaking. He believed that the girl in the temple was the one who saved him. He is the unknowing subject.

We are deeply suffering for the Little Mermaid at this point. "She kissed his hand and felt her heart break" (Andersen 2014, 10). She is caught between two jouissances: the phallic jouissance that makes her suffer deeply and the Other jouissance that makes her enjoy and be happy, because she can enjoy through him and what makes him happy also makes her happy. If she was located in the man's sexuation, she would not be able to experience both at the same time. She would have lost her enjoyment all together and only experience despair. Instead, she experiences joy and deep sorrow in a moving paradoxical moment. Andersen uses the scene of the wedding night to show us this:

> [N]ever had she danced so wonderfully; it felt like sharp knives in her fine small feet, but she did not notice it — it was nothing compared to the pain in her heart. She knew this would be the last evening she would see the man for whom she had abandoned her home and her family, given up her lovely voice and suffered endless torment every day, without him having any idea of this. This was the last night she would breathe the

er alt for lykkelig!' sagde han til den lille havfrue. 'Det bedste, det, jeg aldrig turde håbe, er blevet opfyldt for mig. Du vil glæde dig ved min lykke, thi du holder mest af mig blandt dem alle!' Og den lille havfrue kyssede hans hånd, og hun syntes alt at føle sit hjerte briste. Hans bryllupsmorgen ville jo give hende døden og forvandle hende til skum på søen" (Andersen 1992, 75).

> same air as he did, see the deep ocean and the star-studded sky, an eternal night without thought or dream awaited her, she who had no soul and would never be able to gain one.[4] (Andersen 2014, 10)

We imagine her in all her beauty, dancing so wonderfully (the Other jouissance, rejoicing for him), dancing with a broken heart (the phallic jouissance, losing the man she desires, *objet a*). All the dark premonitions we had intuited at the beginning of the story are now becoming a reality. The ultimate proof of the Other jouissance on the woman's side of sexuation: the sacrificial. However, this time is not like when she sacrifices her voice and risks her life because she believes that she can obtain her object of desire and be the object of desire of the other, that is the "sacrifice" of the man's side of sexuation. Instead, it is the sacrifice that comes once you know that you have lost your phallic jouissance, when the only thing that is left is surrendering to the Other jouissance. Not as an unattainable ideal, the lady, or as the beyond the law figure that can enjoy everything and all, the exception. But in two ways. First, like Slavoj Žižek, mentions, this surrender is seeing through and accepting the "filler of the inconsistency of the other" (1995) in all his fallibility, everything that is fake and a pretense in the phallus, being bound to the law and the rules that I cannot escape. It is this acceptance of the prince's imperfection, instead of daydreaming of perfection elsewhere, that creates a space for hope. Second, surrendering to the Other jouissance is a form of love, which is understood as wanting the other person to live and to live fully, and enjoying through the full life of the other.

4 "aldrig havde hun danset så herligt; det skar som skarpe knive i de fine fødder, men hun følte det ikke; det skar hende smerteligere i hjertet. Hun vidste, det var den sidste aften hun så ham, for hvem hun havde forladt sin slægt og sit hjem, givet sin dejlige stemme og daglig lidt uendelige kvaler, uden at han havde tanke derom. Det var den sidste nat, hun åndede den samme luft som han, så det dybe hav og den stjerneblå himmel; en evig nat uden tanke og drøm ventede hende, som ej havde sjæl, ej kunne vinde den" (Andersen 1992, 75–76).



Fig. 11. Hellen Stratton, illustration of the Little Mermaid visited by her sisters after they have sacrificed their hair, in *The Fairytales of Hans Christian Andersen* (c. 1899), 139. Internet Archive.

The Other jouissance breaks through in this tale when Andersen takes an untraditional turn. The Little Mermaid is preparing to die in the morning, but her sisters, grandmother, and father had gone to the witch of the sea and made a desperate final deal. This speaks of another form of love outside of the phallic *objet a,* a philial, parental, fraternal love, similar to the love of the prince for her.

The five mermaids have made another form of sacrifice, the second object that defines the big Other of the mermaid as a symbolic offering (fig. 11). The Little Mermaid gave her voice for the

prince, her sisters sacrifice their beauty (i.e., their hair) for their sister. In return, the witch has given them a knife:

> Before the sun rises, [say the mermaids to their sister] you must plunge it into the prince's heart, and when his warm blood splashes onto your feet, they will once more become a fish's tail and you will become a mermaid once again [...]. Hurry! Either he or you must die before the sun rises![5] (Andersen 2014, 11)

Imagine the Little Mermaid for a second, heartbroken and frightened. She enters the purple tent in the middle of the ship where her beloved lies side-by-side with his lover. The prince and the princess have just made love. It is their wedding night, they are beautiful and rest peacefully in each other's arms. She is standing by their bed, looking at them:

> [S]he saw the lovely bride sleeping with her head on the prince's breast, and she bent down, kissed him on his handsome forehead, looked up at the sky where the dawn grew stronger and stronger, looked down at the sharp knife and once more fixed her eyes on the prince, who named his bride by name in his dreams, she alone was in his thoughts, and the knife shook in the mermaid's hand.[6] (Andersen 2014, 11)

All her dreams of being his phallic jouissance or getting hers are gone. Her ego is absolutely shattered. We can feel our own heart sink because we know life has moments like this, that we

5 "Før sol står op, må du stikke den i prinsens hjerte, og når da hans varme blod stænker på dine fødder, da vokser de sammen til en fiskehale og du bliver en havfrue igen [...]. Skynd dig! Han eller du må dø, før sol står op!" (Andersen 1992, 76).

6 "hun så den dejlige brud sove med sit hoved ved prinsens bryst, og hun bøjede sig ned, kyssede ham på hans smukke pande, så på himlen, hvor morgenrøden lyste mere og mere, så på den skarpe kniv og fæstede igen øjnene på prinsen, der i drømme nævnede sin brud ved navn; hun kun var i hans tanker, og kniven sitrede i havfruens hand" (Andersen 1992, 76).

cannot protect our most beloved or ourselves from experiencing such levels of distress in our lives. We can only hope that we will never need to. This is when we think back to the garden and her inscription in the wrong Other and we hear the whisper of another fantasy: Ah, if you could just go back to before the desire ever emerged in you, before you were made subject, where all this unbearable hurt and isolation could not reach you. Now she has a chance to get back to the idealized symbolic mermaid, to become the seducer who kills the sailor. But we also know that this wish is not worthy of her. If she were to become a human subject, there would be no way she could escape the call of desire, the lack. The most important lesson from this is that having access to the Other jouissance, loving or enjoying through and as the other, does not protect you from the most unbearable experiences or from hurtful emotions like fear, rage, sadness, pain, frustration, or jealousy. But it gives you a surplus in addition to that, another "supplementary" (paradoxical?) river of jouissance that taps into another logic, so that while those emotions are still there, they are not the whole. To have access to the other's enjoyment does not provide perfection, but consolation.

What Andersen's creativity subverts here are the classic scenes of William Shakespeare's *Othello* before Othello kills Desdemona, of José and Carmen in Georges Bizet's *Carmen,* and the many other fictional or real-life horrors of domestic violence: the rage and fury of the failing sexual relationship. For example, in Shakespeare's drama Othello is looking at Desdemona sleeping, feeling the sense of betrayal and jealousy raising in him before killing her. But everything is different in Andersen's dramatic scene, where the Little Mermaid watches her beloved sleep. The scene ends with another form of sacrifice,

> she flung it [the knife] far out across the waves, which gleamed red when it fell, so it looked like drops of blood trickling up out of the water. Once more she gazed at the prince with half-glazed eyes, rushed off the ship down into the sea, and felt her body dissolve into foam.[7] (Andersen 2014, 11)

7 "kastede hun den langt ud i bølgerne, de skinnede røde, hvor den faldt, det så ud, som piblede der blodsdråber op af vandet. Endnu engang så

For years I believed this was the end of the story. The Little Mermaid died, or so I thought, and was transformed into nothingness. Foam. Little did I know that when turning to this fairytale as a way to understand desire, I would discover that my memory of this ending was rather mistaken. I do not believe that I am the only one to have imagined this. It is common to read critiques of Disney's version of the story by authors who point to the dramatic ending in Andersen's tale and to the death of the mermaid. To my own surprise, this was not Andersen's ending. If the story of the Little Mermaid begins with the birth of the subject and the phallic jouissance, the ending is the dissolution of the subject in the Other jouissance of the woman's side of sexuation. We have now traversed the Möbius Strip. We can read this story as a journey from the dominance of one jouissance to the other. But another take away from Lacan's seminar is the emphasis on mysticism. The mystics and poetic language provide an entry into a form of jouissance where we already always belong. The Little Mermaid does not die by turning into foam, but actually metamorphoses into a daughter of the air,

> the little mermaid did not feel death, she saw the bright sun, and up above her there floated hundreds of transparent, lovely creatures; through them she could see the ship's white sails and the sky's red clouds, their voice was a melody, but so spiritual that no human ear could hear it, just as no earthly eye could see them — without wings they floated in their own lightness through the air.[8] (Andersen 2014, 11)

hun med halvbrustne blik på prinsen, styrtede sig fra skibet ned i havet, og hun følte, hvor hendes legeme opløste sig i skum" (Andersen 1992, 76).

8 "den lille havfrue følte ikke til døden, hun så den klare sol, og oppe over hende svævede hundrede gennemsigtige, dejlige skabninger; hun kunne gennem dem se skibets hvide sejl og himlens røde skyer, deres stemme var melodi, men så åndig, at intet menneskeligt øre kunne høre den, ligesom intet jordisk øje kunne se dem; uden vinger svævede de ved deres egen lethed gennem luften" (Andersen 1992, 76).

Note the difference between the sisters of the air singing, which cannot be heard, and the singing of the mermaids, which cannot be avoided or blocked. These are two different sides of the real or the traumatic. In a scene that reminds us of the mystic face of God, the Little Mermaid,

> lifted her clear arms towards God's sun, and for the first time she felt tears. On board the ship there was noise and life once more, she saw the prince with his lovely bride searching for her, sadly they stared at the bubbling foam, as if they knew she had thrown herself into the waves. Unseen, she kissed the bride's forehead, smiled at him and rose with the other children of the air up onto the rosy cloud that sailed through the sky.[9] (Andersen 2014, 11)

The mermaid is now fully in the Other jouissance of woman's sexuation. There is something deeply moving about this final meeting between her and the prince and his bride. Notice who she kisses. Now the *objet a,* the prince as phallic, has changed again. She still loves him, but she loves her too. She kisses the bride as she kissed the unconscious prince. Another form of unconsciousness, as the kisses (unnoticed) we receive from those who are able to love us, not as mermaids (a symbolic myth) or as humans (phallic), but as air, which we cannot capture or describe.

Interpretations of what Lacan means by the Other jouissance on the woman's side of sexuation often differ. Some, like Bruce Fink (2002), question the use of the mystical approach as a form of promise that may be unattainable. Others, like Adrian Johnston (2018), seem irritated about this, as if the absence of the ideal and positive form of knowledge implies a regression to being an "organism" that moves away from suffering because it

9 "løftede sine klare arme op mod Guds sol, og for første gang følte hun tårer. - På skibet var igen støj og liv, hun så prinsen med sin smukke brud søge efter hende, vemodig stirrede de på det boblende skum, som om de vidste, hun havde styrtet sig i bølgerne. Usynlig kyssede hun brudens pande, smilede til ham og steg med de andre luftens børn op på den rosenrøde sky, som sejlede i luften" (Andersen 1992, 77).

regresses to the innocence of the "idiot." This view, as we saw in previous chapters, is highly contested by Charles Shepherdson (2008). Others, like Slavoj Žižek (2002), insist that we should steer away from imaginations of ideal mysticism in the work of Lacan and remember that the image he uses of the mystic Saint Teresa of Avila is a statue of her by the Italian sculptor Gian Lorenzo Bernini, where according to Lacan she appears to be having an orgasm (so much for that mysticism!).

How do I see it? I agree that there is a danger of imagining the mystic as another form of ideal exception, similar to the lady, an ideal, out of this world figure. The mystics themselves are the first to criticize this, a form of religious narcissism. The same could be said of the image of the poet, like in the Romantics, or of an idealization of the Little Mermaid now transformed into a sister of the air, which may be considered another closed identity. However, we can think of the Little Mermaid as the figure who belongs to and breaks all categorical sets, in her constant renouncing and metamorphosing from the inscription of one big Other to the next. She is a being that renounces capture in identity, morphing from sea to earth to air, while in none of those states is she close to perfection or the "all." The danger of the Other jouissance turning into just another ideal dissipates in deep engagement with the work of mystics or poets. Theirs is a jouissance and a knowing that steers away from logically reasoned argumentation and instead appears in silence and contemplation. As James Finley (2020a) expresses, our deepest human dignity is not reason, but to awaken to this love that is presenting itself in all that is, or for Thomas Merton, the highest ambition is to be what we already are. Mystics do not say, "to understand what I am," or "to attain an ideal state of being." They do not pretend to know what they are either. This is another sense of acceptance that reminds us of Adam Doering's (2016) question, how do we always already belong? In his brilliant analysis of freedom he reflects on the ideal free individual as portrayed in the movie *Up in the Air,* directed by Jason Reitman. Citing Jean-Luc Nancy, Doering invites to look at "the terrifying insufficiency of all various assurances of knowing, believing, and thinking, and the necessity of confronting the lasting failure of accomplish-

ment, the impossibility of ending, and even the responsibility of not ending" (Doering 2016, 129).

The jouissance suggested by mysticism is not the knowledge of a vegetative state that is idiotically happy about everything. Instead, it is a state of increased awareness, not achieved through logical reflection (e.g., through reflexive prayer or logical reason), but through presence and contemplation, in silence and slowness, which can take the form of a rapture, like in Bernini's statue of Saint Teresa. It can also take the form of not knowing where one is going, like in moments when one has received an unexpected transformative grace or suffering, in the dark night of the soul where, in the words of Saint John of the Cross, one is led down the road of contemplation, which belongs neither to imagination nor yet to reasoning. A darkness that, like in Rainer Maria Rilke's poem "You Darkness," challenges any categorical set and where one is already always more than enough:

> You darkness from which I come,
> I love you more than all the fires
> That fence out the world,
> For the fire makes a circle
> For everyone
> So that no one sees you anymore.
> But darkness holds it all:
> The shape and the flame,
> The animal and myself,
> How it holds them,
> All powers, all sight—
> And it is possible: its great strength
> Is breaking into my body.
> I have faith in the night. (Rilke 2017)

A Mermaid in Silence and the Drive

In our lives there are transformations that are about doing—gazing, saving, kissing—and transformations that are about not doing. This is maybe the most important one. She did not sing. Why didn't the Little Mermaid sing to enchant her desired prince? Why not, if she desired him so badly? When she saw him



Fig. 12. Odysseus strapped to the mast while he is tempted by the mermaids. Herbert James Draper,"Ulysses and The Sirens," c. 1909. Wikimedia Commons.

in the boat, she had not sacrificed her voice yet, so she must have known of the power of mermaids' singing. Here, we get another insight into the nature of the phallic jouissance and enjoyment. One that, as Renata Salecl (1998) exposes, was also envisioned by the classics and later reimagined by Franz Kafka.

In the classical version of Homer, Odysseus has to pass by the island where the sirens live. He knows that their singing will be irresistible and result in his and his sailors' deaths. Odysseus asks them to block their ears with wax, but he still wants to listen to the sirens' song. Therefore, he asks his men to tie him to the mast of the ship so that he will not follow the desire that falls upon him when listening and sail towards the rocks of the sirens' island (fig. 12). This way, Odysseus appears as the hero, the triumphant exception, the only sailor who had ever heard the beautiful and threatening singing and could survive it.

There are several possible interpretations of this story. A common understanding among theorists of Greek mythology is that the singing of the sirens represented "a danger to particular men's lives, while they also challenge the social order as such, specially the family structure" (Salecl 1998, 57). They represent a nature that is closer to the bestial, something that in psychoanalysis links to drive, and as such something that escapes symbolization, something that the subject does not want to remember and needs to avoid, tame, or repress. In Lacan, this type of knowledge is knowledge in the real. The real is a concept that gains more influence in Lacan's most recent works (Homer 2005). According to Žižek (2002) this is a sign that Lacan's concern for love increased over time. In his early works, the real was the brute reality that kept its place beyond the imaginary or the symbolic, for example, the place from which emerges the need that drives hunger in the infant. In the Lacan's work of the 1960s the real becomes more associated with the traumatic and what escapes symbolization (see Chapter 1). We are now in a position to understand why Žižek is able to link the real with love, because, as we have seen in women's sexuation, the Other jouissance is the one that cannot be symbolized or spoken of. It is the love of the Little Mermaid dancing in heartbreak, throwing away the knife, and of the prince's philia for the Little Mermaid, enjoying through her enjoyment, or of the mystics or poetry: what is already always here, what already always belongs, and contemplation. But the real has a paradoxical meaning in Lacan. On the one side, it is what supports social reality. The social world cannot exist without it, as it is what is around and beyond our human processes of symbolization and signification, but it is also what undermines that reality (Homer 2005, 81). Like the singing of the mermaids, the real is the kernel that resists symbolization and that appears in cracks shattering our human world of signification and meaning. For Žižek, the real appears in different ways in the three dimensions of Lacanian thought — the real in the imaginary, the real in the symbolic and the real in the real — as that which allows us to distance ourselves from ordinary reality. In the imaginary, the real appears as that which distorts the image, a subjectification of the image of objective reality, an anamorphic distortion. In the symbolic the real appears when one introduces to the set

an object that has no place in it, the exception to the group. And, finally, in the real, the real appears when one erases all objects of "reality" and what remains is the very space that these objects were filling (Žižek 2002).

The drive is connected to the real, but not the same. The drive is something that originates within the body and seeks expression in the psyche as representation, but because it cannot be satisfied it exerts constant pressure on our consciousness. The drive never achieves its aim. The core and only drive of the human psyche is, according to Lacan, the death drive. In popular speech, the death drive is often mistaken as our concern and fear of death, like it appears in the anxiety and angst of the existentialists, but its meaning, as understood and defined by Sigmund Freud, is nearly the opposite. The death drive is our movement towards, not against, death (Homer 2005, 89) and destruction, a tending towards our origins. In his work *Beyond the Pleasure Principle,* Freud (2003) explains that besides the sexual drive — Eros, the drive to reproduce and towards sex, creation — there must be another form of drive that justifies the pleasure that people get in suffering, in depriving themselves of what they want, in self-sacrificing, and in pain. It is this pressure that he calls the death drive, an impulse not to have been born, to go back to where we were without lack, an absolute regression characterized by a compulsion to repeat, an urge inherent in organic life to restore an earlier state (Freud 2003). Lacan draws inspiration from Freud, but he also modifies his understanding. For Lacan, there is only the death drive. This makes sense if we understand it from the perspective of his mirror stage theory, explained earlier. The subject becomes through a process of separation, which integrates the lack into the very core of subjectivity, and her desire towards what gives her pleasure (her jouissance) is not for reproduction, but to address a lack. Aiming at covering that lack is what causes the birth of desire in the subject, her reaching for the other, and inscription in the big Other. The death drive can be understood as the opposite of the biological marking of time in our bodies, as the constant tendency to go back to before the lack and before the subject, before submitting to the signifier and language and before the ego made a home in us, making us from within. In the

verses of "Singularity," by Marie Howe (2020), we get a poetic expression of this longing:

> Do you sometimes want to wake up to the Singularity
> we once were?
> [...]
> before we came to believe humans were so important
> before this awful loneliness.
> [...]
> No I, no We, no one. No was
> No verb no noun
> only a tiny tiny dot brimming with
>
> *is is is is*
>
> All everything home. (Popova 2020)

This *"is is is is,"* which is all and everything, is the same as the "not-be" subject. The death of the subject and of her desire and of language, before separation and feeling that you were you and that there was an other. Before you had to guess what the desire of the other and the Other was and if you could ever fulfill it. Before this need to cover a lack, before this "awful loneliness." Remember? No need to say that in singularity there is no phallic jouissance either, no alterity. Like Johnston (2018) mentions in a more nihilistic tone than Howe: "only through the powers of language can material being in itself be said to be 'missing' things, since, on its own, this dimension of being always is simply whatever it is in its dumb, idiotic presence as never more and never less than sheer, indifferent plenitude."

If a classical interpretation of the singing of the mermaid was a threat to men's plans and their determination, control, and family duty, in psychoanalytical terms, their singing, the jouissance and pleasure that we obtain from the voice and from the gaze, can be understood as the calling of the real. This call is the part of ourselves that we cannot talk about but that still pulls us to not be, to enjoy the dying of our "I." Now we can go back to our question: Why does our Little Mermaid not use the most beautiful voice of all to attract the object of her desire, the

prince who she can see from a distance? Why does she not use her power, the power of the real? Maybe she does not sing because she is "strange," not animalistic enough. She has been partially alienated and socialized through the human big Other and therefore is already the subject of desire. She wants, she is a castrated subject, an "I-me" separated from her wanted other. It is only from this humanlike position that she can desire the prince in the form of "love at first sight"—and what a misuse of terminology, it would have helped us all if we had historically referred to this human experience as "desire at first sight," leaving the love aside for a while, because that is exactly what it is.

Franz Kafka (2023) had imagined this possibility with his radical creativity in "Das Schweigen der Sirenen" ("The Silence of the Sirens"), originally published in German in 1931. In this story, Kafka provides a very different storyline from Homer's *Odyssey*. It is as if Kafka had taken the point of departure in Andersen's fairytale, published almost a hundred years before his own text, to reinterpret the Odyssey. In Kafka's version, Odysseus (i.e., Ulysses) is not the heroic figure who manages to hear the sirens' song and survive. Odysseus binds himself to the mast. However, this is not the reason why he does survive the sirens. It is not due to his planning or determination, but to the fact that they did not sing:

> And when Ulysses approached them *the potent songstresses actually did not sing,* whether because they thought that this enemy could be vanquished only by their silence, or because the look of bliss on the face of *Ulysses, who was thinking of nothing but his wax and his chains, made them forget their singing.*
>
> But Ulysses, if one may so express it, did not hear their silence; he thought they were singing and that he alone did not hear them. For a fleeting moment he saw their throats rising and falling, their breasts lifting, their eyes filled with tears, their lips half-parted, but believed that these were accompaniments to the airs which died unheard around him. Soon, however, all this faded from his sight as he fixed his gaze on the distance, the Sirens literally vanished before his resolu-

> tion, and at the very moment when they were nearest to him he knew of them no longer. (Kafka 2023, 98, my emphasis)

And the mermaids did not sing because, like the Little Mermaid, they were struck by his looks, they fell in love with him at first sight, and they sunk into desire when they saw his expression. Renata Salecl (2002) does not link Kafka's story to Andersen's, but provides the following insightful analysis. For her, Odysseus embodies the obsessional, the one who wants to be in charge of the situation and plans all activities in detail: "Ulysses, who was thinking of nothing but his wax and his chains, made them forget their singing" (Kafka 2023). The obsessive wants to master his desire in such a way that any possible encounter with the desired will be avoided or programmed and nothing unexpected can happen, the unexpected being the awakening of phallic jouissance. Planning, thinking, talking goes on even during sexual intercourse. Odysseus,

> performs a whole ritual to prevent a genuine encounter with the Sirens. It can even be said that he finds his jouissance precisely in this ritual of thinking and planning his escape from the Siren's lure [...]. He hopes that with the death of the desiring Other, who continually imposes obligations on him, he will be free to live. The obsessional is thus a special kind of living dead, since the rituals and prohibitions he imposes on himself make him a robot-like creature, apparently drained of desire. (Salecl 2002, 66)

Odysseus was not able to be present, so concern he was with matching his heroic and exceptional ideal: his plans, his control. The opposite happens to the Sirens. They lose their capacity to sing when they are confronted unexpectedly by his beauty, as illustrated in the painting by Herbert James Draper of *Ulysses and the Sirens* (1909) (fig. 12):

> But they — lovelier than ever — stretched their necks and turned, let their awesome hair flutter free in the wind, and freely stretched their claws on the rocks. They no longer had any desire to allure; *all that they wanted was to hold as long as*

> *they could the radiance that fell from Ulysses' great eyes.* (Kafka 2023, my emphasis)

Lacan tells us how in fantasy the subject fades when faced with the object of desire. Helen Fisher (2016) has studied the neurological changes that happen when we gaze upon a person we find attractive, a potential (phallic) object of desire. Our brain pumps out dopamine, resulting in a common experience that is exaggerated in the comedy *Bridget Jones' Diary* when Bridget is hilariously clumsy in the presence of her attractive boss; by the three students in *The Big Bang Theory,* stereotypical nerds, when they meet their attractive neighbor for the first time; or in the beautiful film *Call Me by Your Name,* a poetic and deeply moving portrayal of the deep passion between Elio, a seventeen-year-old student, and his father's twenty-four-year-old colleague Oliver. Faced with an irresistible song, allure, attraction, a person becomes fascinated, speechless or utterly awkward around the "object." A rush of dopamine is a pleasant experience, but it can also cause dizziness or lack of control. Whereas dopamine is what emerges when we gaze at something or someone that excites us, cortisol, the stress hormone, is released when we are feeling judged or if we believe that the person in our gaze has the capacity to gaze at us or judge us. For people who feel shamed or embarrassed by potentially not meeting (their own) expectations in this type of encounter — that is, they have a fantasy desire structure of having to be "more than" but believe that they are "less than" — then facing an object of desire who can "gaze" back can trigger cortisol or a fight-or-flight response. Ending up as the ridiculous (but vulnerable) protagonist of a comedy is the worst nightmare for an obsessive.

For Salecl, Odysseus's ability to escape the sirens is not his triumph, but his failure to confront and pursue his desire. But I disagree. Odysseus is not failing. He is choosing and opting for another form of jouissance. He represents the speaking subject situated on the masculine side of Lacan's structure of sexuation. According to Fink, what characterizes this side of sexuation is not that there is only one way to enjoy, but that there are two forms of jouissance that cannot co-exist: The phallic jouissance (represented by the sirens singing) and the jouissance of the

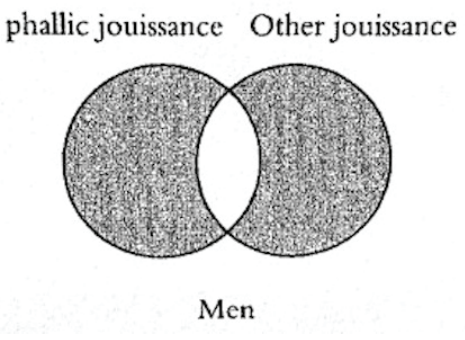


Fig. 13. Man's sexuation. Figure by Bruce Fink (2002, 41).

Other (his idealization; the pleasure of narrating his adventures and talking about the sirens to others). Odysseus cannot have his phallic jouissance and his jouissance of the Other. He is a mythical hero who responds to the man's sexuation structure (fig. 13).

What about the prince? Is he like Odysseus? The answer is obviously not, as we have seen that the prince is situated on the feminine side of sexuation. This is why he passes the test of meeting the mermaid, not as a "man-in-control" figure, but as a fake-dead. He passes it because he is unconscious of himself as a subject inscribed in desire. And maybe we could ask again, did the Little Mermaid sing? Maybe she did, and why would she not? She was not afraid to risk her life or ashamed to kiss an unconscious human. Can you see her singing to him between kisses whilst bringing him to the shore? That would suit her so well. She does not experience fight-or-flight when she sees him. She is enthralled, but also energized and clear in her focus and determination. Is Andersen suffering another form of ignorance, a different one than Odysseus, who thought that the sirens sang when they did not? Was Andersen unable to hear her singing? Maybe she did sing and that is why she could give her voice to the witch of the sea. She had already used its power only to discover that it could not bring her what she wanted. She did not want a dead lover, an object to have at the bottom of the sea, an object that could occupy the space of lack, but for the other to live and to live fully.

Why Is Sexuation a Love Letter?

The feminine sexuation and the possibility of having this supplementary jouissance are not a utopia of unanimous happiness. Mystics or poets suffer and suffer deeply, both for personal and collective reasons. Even an emotion such as fear does not spare them, but through a form of surrendering or trust, they do not fear the fear (Finley 2020a). This Other jouissance links to the real because it cannot be spoken, and therefore it does not "exist." If it were to exist, it would have to be able to be expressed or imagined through language or reflexive logic. Instead, Lacan says that it *ex-ists,* that is, it is lived but nothing can be said about it. This links to the love gaze of poets like Rabindranath Tagore. Žižek's interpretation of this is worth quoting in full:

> The claim [in Paulus's love letter to Corinthians, 13] that, even if I were to possess all knowledge, without love, I would be nothing, is not simply that with love, I am "something." For in love, I also am nothing, but as it were a Nothing humbly aware of itself, a Nothing paradoxically made rich through the very awareness of its lack. Only a lacking, vulnerable being is capable of love: the ultimative mystery of love is therefore that incompleteness is in a way higher than completion.
>
> On the one hand, only an imperfect, lacking being loves: we love because we do not know everything [like the prince]. On the other hand, even if we were to know everything, love would inexplicably still be higher than complete knowledge [like the mermaid]. Perhaps the true achievement of Christianity is to elevate a loving (imperfect) Being to the place of God, that is the place of the ultimate perfection. Lacan's extensive discussion of love in Seminar XX is thus to be read in the Paulinian sense, as opposed to the dialectic of the Law and its transgression. This latter dialectic is clearly "masculine" or phallic: it involves the tension between the All (the universal law) and its constitutive exception. Love, on the other hand, is "feminine": it involves the paradoxes of the non-All. (Žižek 2002, 60–61)

The two ways of relating to the Other in sexuation do not complement each other. There is nothing of two parts of an orange that makes a whole here, only two different ways in which "the subject may situate himself as a male or female being" (Barnard 2002, 10), and this different "situatedness" of humanity in two sides does not create unity or a complementarity of wholeness. In a similar manner to the hands that never reach each other and always miss each other (my phallic desire is your objectification, your desire is mine), the two types of sexuation never collapse into a totality. They are different but continued ways of situating oneself in being and nonbeing. These are, according to Žižek, "competing symbolizations/normativizations of sexual difference [...] far from constraining in advance the variety of sexual arrangements, the Real of the sexual difference is the traumatic cause that sets in motion their contingent proliferation" (2002, 72).

Stressing the importance of Lacan's sexuation theory is not at all the same as saying that the conceptual categories of gender, sex, sexuality, gender expression, gender identity, and so on, as used in other feminist philosophical traditions, are useless. Concepts matter. They are extremely valuable and helpful. But aiming at finding perfect equivalents in Lacan is an enterprise doomed to fail. Lacan's theoretical world is not one of equality or sameness with on the one side humanity as a whole and on the other independent individuals performing or constructing their existence in a myriad of ways. It is not a world with human beings separated into groups depending on their identity categorizations (gender, race, ethnicity, age, and so forth) and their multiple combinations (intersectionality). Nor is it one of biological or genetic determinism, meaning that those with those chromosomes and sex organs have these personality traits and these wishes, and those with other chromosomes and sex organs have others. There is a reason why he called his theory sexuation and not sex or sexuality.

For Lacan, biology, affect, and embodiment matter (the infant craves, feels, is helpless), but sexuation lies in the way our mental psyche is structured and the difference is hidden in the secret landscape of our jouissance and our relationship to the symbolic and language (the law of "Enjoy! Do not enjoy!"), and

to the real that cannot be spoken. How you desire and imagine being desired by others is not reducible to your bodily parts or your identity tags, or the way you dress, or which sex turns you on. This is what reflects your relationship to the absolute and to the real. Man's sexuation is "an illusion fomented by a prohibition: do not include everything in your all!" while the woman's sexuation is the impossibility of doing so (Copjec 2015, 235).

The idea of the real connects to both the impossibility and the prohibition, as explained by Copjec (2015). We need the symbolic to make our social coexistence bearable (Žižek 2002, 71), but the real is the kernel that resists symbolization, "that tension between some traumatic 'particular absolute' and the 'competing universalities' (to use Butler's appropriate term) that endeavor in vain to symbolize/normalize it" (Žižek 2002, 72). The real cannot be reduced to the presocial — like a myth of origins or in Howe's poem "Singularity," which is like the beat of the death drive — the real continues to be here, it is not in the past. The real is not a social effect either, something that can be reduced to the socioculturally constructed. Rather, "the point is that the Social itself is constituted by the exclusion of some traumatic Real. Behind the social we do not find an a priori norm or symbolic form but its negative founding gesture itself" (Žižek 2002, 73). The real is always lurking behind the mirror egoic image of our neighbor, of the one who looks like me, of the mother or the father, or of any sexual or gender identity concept (Copjec 2015).

Lacan lies miles away from any essentialist position (e.g., from the "men are from Mars and women are from Venus" view of popular self-help books to other current thinkers who claim to know the "true nature" of men and women). His is not a world where it is possible to find the exemplar of the man or the woman, or a world of harmony and complementarity. Lacan is persistently pointing to the cracks in the whole. And although his approach to the absolute or universal is different with respect to emancipation, Lacan, with his insistence on negative judgement and the limits to reason, has much more in common with (post-) constructivism than the many polemics between Lacanians and post-constructivists and historicists would let us believe. This difference is exaggerated, perhaps because Lacanians seem to have inherited their teacher's love of provocation and polemics.

5

Fairytales of Desire

At the exhibition Naked Water *I presented a photo called "The Veiled Man".* [...] *It is of a naked man covered by a veil that is fixed to his body by water or sweat and it is possible to discern a hand reflected by the shiny background, a red stain and stains of water ... It is the veiled man, but the other day I imagined another title, a much more suggestive one: "The Romanial Flower." This title is not descriptive, so it makes the photo even more mysterious. As I mentioned a while ago, "poetry begins there where mystery is born." The Romanial flower is the flower of the fairytale that has the same title.*

It was one of the preferred fairytales that my father read out loud to me during winter, by the fireplace.

The Romanial flower is an imagined flower, impossible, miraculous, because it can cure everything, it can even resurrect the dead.[1]

— Tony Catany (2020, np)

1 Toni Catany commenting on his 1995 photograph "The Veiled Man." In Catalan: "A l'expo 'Agua al desnudo' he presentat la foto *L'home velat.* [...] És un home nu cobert per un vel, que s'ha aferrat, amb l'aigua o la suor, al cos, i on s'endevinen una mà reflectida al fons brillant, una taca vermella i taques d'aigua ... És l'home velat, però l'altre dia se'm va ocórrer un altre títol, molt més suggerent: *La flor romanial.* Aquest títol no és descriptiu, fa tornar la foto encara més misteriosa. Com fa una estona he anotat, 'la poesia comença allí on neix el misteri.' La flor romanial és la flor de la rondalla del mateix títol. Era una de les rondalles preferides de les que em llegia el pare, a l'hivern, al costat del foc. La flor romanial és una flor imaginada, impossible, miraculosa,



Fig. 14. Toni Catany, "La Flor Romanial," 1995. © Fundació Toni Catany.

The photograph "The Veiled Man" or "The Romanial Flower" by Toni Catany (fig. 14) and his description touched me so deeply. Catany was a good friend of my father and was born in the same village in Mallorca, Llucmajor. He would attend the social events I remember as a child, our religious first Communions and those of children from other families among my father's group of friends. He was the photographer at my wedding. I remember him as humble, silent, elegant...almost invisible. He would take photos without the flash and without assistants. He would go unnoticed, ask us softly to place ourselves against the walls of the old houses, old Mediterranean walls of stone and sand that are like warm paintings of the passing of time. I don't recall when I discovered that Toni was gay. I don't remember the conversation because this was not something that was talked about. He was liked and appreciated by my parents, and my father's voice will always convey love and respect when mentioning him, but he was not like other friends of my parents. He lived in Barcelona and was not part of our families' gatherings. He would appear at major events with his camera and then leave. After some time, we would receive a beautiful album with photographs of my family transformed by his gaze, full of beauty. He was never in any of them. He died unexpectedly and too early in 2013, and was an internationally acclaimed artist at the time.

I remember that my parents had received an art calendar, published by his art foundation, I believe. The twelve photographs were from his collection of naked male bodies *Somniar Déus* (*Dreaming of gGds*). I remember my mother holding the calen-

perquè ho cura tot, fins i tot ressuscita els morts" (Catany 2020).

dar and turning to look at me with a sweet expression of half embarrassment and half amusement. Her gaze seemed to say: What am I going to do with this? I remember that I immediately wanted it. It had extreme tenderness and sensuality in its portrayal of men's bodies. It also felt anonymous, as if by focusing on parts of the bodies he could make a portrait of all men and of no one. I placed it in my luggage feeling that I could not display it either, that a window to erotic naked men's bodies was not part of my family home's interior decoration, but that I had someone I loved, a very dear friend to whom I wanted to give the calendar, like an offering across nations and generations from one male lover of the male body to another.

Toni Catany's commentary has the strength and softness of his photographs. He mixes in veiled desire, the awareness that what we desire never reveals itself completely but that it is fantasized about and imagined with the caring and tender memory of a father reading fairytales to his child by the fireplace. The fairytale of a magical flower that can heal everything; isn't that the door one needs to open, to reveal an impossible forbidden desire? For a child who grew up in a culture and society in which homosexuality was taboo or an "error," nothing other than a resurrection of the flesh would do. The photograph of "The Veiled Man" resembles a sacred sepulture with the darkness, emptiness, solitude, and stone-like quality of the man's surface, his face fully covered by the white sheet. And still, wet, and shiny, like a kiss, so distant from the deathly imaginary of dust and earth. Resurrections of desire are possible. Toni must have known that because despite a culture of condemnation of who you are, someone who loved you told you on a winter night by the fire that somewhere, waiting for you, was an exotic flower with a unique name that could resurrect anything.

Reading about Toni Catany's fairytale, "La flor romanial" ("The Romanial Flower") (2015), awakens another memory in me; an association. The only Mallorquin fairytale I can remember is "L'estel d'or" ("The Golden Star") (2014). This fairytale is the Mallorquin version of the globally known Cinderella, a tale whose origins go back two thousand years. There is a Chinese version, "Ye Xian," by Duan Chengshi, a German version, "Aschenputtel" by the Brothers Grimm, and "Cinderella," the

title of the French version by Charles Perrault in the 1600s. The story must have made a major impression on me as a child. We were not a family who read out loud by the fire in the evening, although my mother read nonstop. But somehow I must have heard it, and although I have forgotten who told it, I have never forgotten the moral of this particular story: You can not remove a donkey's tail from your forehead, but you can try to cover it up with a veil.

What I remember about "L'estel d'or" can be summarized as follows: There is a girl called Catalineta and a girl called Joanota. Catalineta is beautiful, sweet, accomplished, obedient, and humble, but is mistreated by her stepmother, who prefers her own daughter, Joanota. Joanota (can you guess what kind of a girl she is?) is ugly, loud, disrespectful, inept, conceited, and selfish. Catalineta is mistreated by both her stepmother and her stepsister and things look quite miserable for her until she meets an old woman who tells her: When you walk back home, you will hear the rooster crow and the donkey bray. Remember to turn your head when you hear the rooster and not to turn it when you hear the donkey. Catalineta did as she was told and immediately acquired a golden star on her forehead. The stepmother and Joanota were extremely jealous when they saw her. But no matter what Catalineta did, she could not take the star away. Instead, the star shone brighter, which made her look even more beautiful. In desperation, Joanota was sent to visit the same old woman, but the old woman did not like her and gave her opposite instructions. Joanota turned her head when she heard the donkey and subsequently a donkey's tail grew on her forehead. No matter how much she tried to pull or shave it off, the tail remained fixed and grew even stronger.

Even today I find this story extremely distressing and horrible. It took me time to understand why, forty years later, it still has a powerful effect on me. But first let me tell you about the connection with the other story, "Cinderella." Sometimes our views on a story remain the same, and other times they change dramatically. The latter is the case when it comes to my personal relationship with "Cinderella." I am a child of the Disney generation, and this story entered my imagination with the lovely, singing Cinderella who made her bed whilst being helped by the

birds and the mice. For years I pitied poor Cinderella, who was oppressed and mistreated, hated by her stepmother, orphaned, and condemned to live with her stupid and ugly stepsisters.

Drizella and Anastasia (the stepsisters' names in the Disney version) perfectly depict the role of the hysteric. They shout all the time and seem on the edge of a nervous breakdown, as the women in Pedro Almodóvar's film but without the compassionate gaze that the Spanish director always has for his characters. The stepsisters have money but bad taste and even worse manners, and they are born ugly. They are hysterical, and for good reason. Robbed of any attractive features and with zero chances of becoming objects of male desire, it must be impossible for them as women to approach, let alone fulfill, their own desire or even worse to fulfill the desire of their mother (the Other)—or so it seems.

I do not know when this transformation in my feelings occurred, but it was radical. Suddenly it was the stepsisters for whom I felt sorry. "Cinderella" was indeed oppressed, but she was also blessed with being perfect. She was admired by all of the natural powers of the universe, those of this world and of the darkness. Now we were only waiting for Cinderella to be seen, discovered, and thereby saved by a human power of the patriarchal kind, and for this power to confirm the natural order of things. There was no saving of the stepsisters. They were wrong. The more they were seen or discovered, the worse things went for them. They were not honored by the animal world. They were the embodiment of the animalistic and the grotesque. The greater cruelty, however, lies in their own self-reflection. Theirs is a story of internalized hate projected as arrogance and aggression. Doomed to become another if they are to get what they wish for, they have to conceal their personalities and their bodies. In the Catalan version, Joanota had to hide her lower, beast-like self behind veils and lies. In the Brothers Grimm version, the stepsisters mutilate themselves by cutting off their feet and toes. Their hysteria is the result of their awareness, knowing that they are essentially "wrong." It is easier to be good when you are right, when you are essentially "right"

For centuries in Europe and in Asia, feet were seen as a highly erotic and sensual body part, something that would resemble

the female breast today. This is a reminder of how the symbolic through our parents and society inscribes in our bodies the erotic. Those parts prohibited or veiled by our cultures promise access to higher excitement and jouissance. The feet of Drizella and Anastasia were deformed, ugly, and too large. Joanota was also deformed, ugly, and too large. They all tried so hard to pull, push, and fit into the slipper, but nothing would work. There was no redemption for them, no higher power that would see them and help them, and certainly no prince or king that would discover them. They were already always wrong. In fairytales with male protagonists, mutilation, self-sacrifice, and fighting for desire would be seen as courageous — the knight wants to redeem the castle and offers his sight to get it. But here, the stepsisters' desire is their sin and their doom. Because little girls are not meant to want.

There is also an upsetting message about motherhood in these tales. Mothers are dead and absent, and stepmothers are cruel and jealous. There is no comfort or solace to be gained from the female elders, no power or wisdom that can save you or show you the way to your desire. They have not satisfied theirs, and they will annihilate yours. Stepmothers are old hysterics, condemned to constant repetitive grasping and failure, now reenacting it through their own daughters. Female help and wisdom is not of this world but of the darkness in the form of old women living outside society (i.e., the witch version of this type of woman) or the old fairy (the sweeter version). Needless to say, neither the old woman nor the fairy have carnal desires of their own. They are also outside the sexual circuit. They have power over nature or connection to the eternal laws of the universe, the stars and the donkeys, and they can invoke them and pull them and call them into you. They can open the eyes of others to see you because they cannot be seen. If you are a little girl reading these stories, you will be taught the following lessons:

Invest in external beauty, because if it cannot be seen, it may not be there.

Female nature exists in a universe of scarcity and not of abundance.

Women need to compete and pray to be seen or discovered by others. Women can only understand and fulfill their desire through this external process of being seen by "the other," both by the other of a natural and mystical world and by the patriarchal order, which, despite some initial disharmonies with its capacity to reveal rightness, plays one and the same eternal symphony as the universe.

The natural universe knows of your female beast-like wrongness before language, a special version of the original sin linked not to entering language but to being.

If you are to be saved, you do that through obedience and respect and not through rebellion and pride.

Self-sacrifice pays off.

Your desire for the prince is a taken for granted desire (nobody thought that Cinderella would fall in love with Anastasia).

You are to be seen and selected by an eternal, mystical "him." He has the agency and you are to be thankful for it. It's either that or hysteria, your choice!

Patriarchy is a very small glass shoe and you better make it fit.

There is no sisterhood to enjoy among your equals, and you should learn to mistrust your own mothers, sisters, stepmothers, and stepsisters, because the lack of abundance trespasses generations and family bonds.

What a horrible role for women, for everybody to have. What would you like to be: Cinderella or Anastasia? Pest or cholera? Anarchists burned structures. I could burn archetypes. Oh, how I would love to hold a party for all the stepmothers and stepsisters of this world, one that would last until the morning, one celebrating wrongness where they could shout as loud, be as large, as unreasonable, as demanding as they liked, and wish to have as much of everything and everyone as they want. At this party

I would serve a drink, a special one made from "The Romanial Flower," the flower that can heal and resurrect. I would make a toast to awaken, celebrate, and free the desire in each and every woman.

You, girls of the world, repeat after me:
I want
I desire
I deserve
I am
You don't need shoes to dance!

Part II

Desire and Love

Love is what it is, identical and plural, in all its registers or in all its expositions, and it does not sublimate itself even when it is sublime. It is always the beating of an exposed heart.

—Jean-Luc Nancy (1991, 90)

Don't give me love without you
Give me you in love, love in you

Don't let desire desert me
I am saved by naming and being named
called to life

Language disappoints and fails us
naming never does.

Desire is a trajectory that begins as the subject looks for her enunciation

Finding "me" is only possible through the appearance of desire

Desire initiates a metonymic trajectory:

The subject facing towards the object of desire

moving horizontally, desire repeats and renews itself

Desire's energy and movement are a metonymic chain with a logic of association

this one, and this one, and this one (Andrea, Kris, Drew...).

It is the etc.

Sameness

This is $a - a'$, the many, multiple objects of desire placed on a timeline

The human is connected to her timeline with directionality because, as a being, she burns and dies because she burns

In the horizontal movement of desire there is a displacement in time between subject and object

The subject always being before or after the object in the chain, the object arriving too early (hysterical), or arriving too late (obsessive)

This is why desire feeds on novelty and on distance (seeing at a distance, yet to come, far away, approaching, never fully had)

that horizontal movement of endless displacement can stop in and through love

from finding "me" to being "me and all" and "all in you"

How?

The trajectory of horizontal repetition is changed into the vertical trajectory of love by the entry of the real

The real is eventual, out of time

The real is spatial

absence and presence

The presence, a crack of the inexplicable that links to the unconscious of the loss, of the first real of the love and primary *all* of mother and being, beyond language

The presence (the entering of all) transforms one in the set (one among many, an-other) to *the* one (you)

The one is now different, a no-thing, which is infused by the real, apprehended by the subject as if through a crack

for an instant out of the fantasy, symbolic, and imaginary relation of desire

This event — like a new birth, an epiphany — stops the horizontal repetition and moves the energy of libido, the life energy of eros, the energy of wanting to be me, of existing, of enunciating, in a different direction

First, vertically

The entry of the real displaces the movement of the horizontal and moves the drive of repetition to the vertical, and then

centripetally, spiraling in expansion

where an immensity of mysterious poetical connections is possible

It is the same life energy now in another container with another movement that does not displace in time (too early/too late). Love as metaphorical is out of linear time

Libido through love as metaphorical is entropy, not the variation of a closed set, one and one and one

It is one always as new, as plural

In the metaphorical there is no distance, but layering, the next includes and adds to the previous

It is metaphorical (dis)similarity

you you you you you

always a new you

Love, life, soul, sugar, treasure, heaven, and all the inexhaustible metaphors of the beloved

As a crack out of time and out of signifier structure of horizontal or vertical, metonymic or metaphorical, the real begins love

in what was the locus of desire and desire in what was the locus of love

Like a river (desire) entering the oceanic (love), the characteristics of the water carried by the river gets transported into the sea

Like the expansion of the universe

The centripetal energy of the metaphor of love is entropy

In entropy there is life and death, and not life or death

The one as entropy, the one of the *objet petit a* of love, is connected to death, horizontally to the center of the Earth and to the infinite sky

The beloved will become ashes and stars (up and down). The desired one will become another desired one (next and next)

Event-ually we live the desired in the loved and the loved in the desired

In the vertical metaphorical, traces of the original fantasy of desire are reproduced and modified

Moving vertically and centripetally, you repeat love

Love is metaphorical, this one which is sun, live, soul... and a thousand metaphors by which I call my beloved

The one is thereby transformed into *name*

Name and naming is out of the signifier system. Name and naming are the real in language. It is not linked to others through differentiation (as in Kris is different from Andrea). It is the naming as exposition, declaration, the repetition of the love name again and again as written in the notebook of a teenager (Kris, Kris, Kris, Kris)

The real is thereby exposed

That is pre-subjective, a link to the real where the name is a pure signifier before being incorporated in a chain as such, a link to the psychotic

That Luc Luc Luc has the same nature as the beating of a mother's heart for its fetus

be be be be be be

If the first object-cause of desire disappears, love disappears as in-love with and through (an)other. Then, love can be recovered only as love in the real, the love of the mystic

But if that happens, if the loved one loses the *objet a,* the beloved will fall out of the metaphorical line that was hanging by the locus of desire where the subject was facing the object

The vertical metaphorical love is, through its link to desire, object-related

The entrance into it, the change of trajectory, is when the non-object appears as presence, as if captured by an inexplicable object possessed by the beloved

Through the connection to the real, love appears as a door to the ontological in the imaginary and in the symbolic

There may be as many loves as there are many desires

Only that all those loves as far as they are the beloved

your children, your partner, your friends, your siblings...

are unique, metaphorical, out of time, and not related to each other or comparable to each other

Equality

They are

always already enough

each one of them in their plural singularity.

6

To Love Is to Give What You Do Not Have

> *In love, what "he gives is beyond anything he can give. What he gives, he gives by his presence and by his presence alone. What he gives is precisely that nothing that amounts to everything in the determination of presence versus absence."*
>
> —Jacques Lacan (2019, 113)

Lacan describes love as "to give what one does not have to someone who does not want it" (Lacan 2002, 165), an enigmatic sentence whose signification can be difficult to grasp, but we still sense its beauty and poetry. This is the sentence as art. It makes us stop and question, a poetic enigma that makes us wonder. The core meaning of this understanding of love is that love is not to be had or given in the way that we have or give objects or property. Love cannot be inventoried or exchanged. It is not something that you can own and put into a box, store, classify, or categorize. In that sense, love in all of its formations, as a noun, as a verb, is a special signifier that encompasses all of its possible meanings and metaphors. All of love belongs to love. It is a signifier that is interior-exterior to language. "In the name of love" is what is outside language, which we continue to try to express through language. In doing so, we do not say what it is. We do not have it, but we manifest it. This is also a warning, as it is only through language that we can approach an exploration of love, a mission that we know is going to fail from the start. But in that way love is the closest we will get to a metaphor of our own lives,

missions towards death, and yet despite this here we are reaching for wonders.

This sentence also means that we are not "things" to be had, not even by ourselves. What is it that you have that you could give? Take a look at yourself, what are you? This is exactly the journey explained in the first part of this book, you as subject. You are a speaking being embodied: flesh, needs, affects, language, an assemblage of becoming held together under an "I." You could give all this to another, all what appears to you to be "you," and still not give love. Some have tried this, suicidal declarations or sacrificial lambs, the bloody assemblage at an altar for the other. That is definitively giving, giving all that you had, but it is still not giving love.

What is it that we as speaking beings do not have? We have been given so much. We have been given language, and we become by and through language. We have flesh and organic life (only Providence or fate knows why I and not another), the primary and universal serendipity of all of us in our origins of being. And, still, that first fate only makes it to become a subject through the constant giving of care and time from others and from the world (as air, food, light). I am my unconscious, but I do not know that unconscious. Can you say that you have something of which you are not aware? I am a consciousness that flies away from me every second, uncatchable, always arriving later to me from myself. I am poor of me. How am I to give what is already always gone? What is there to give from all of my neediness if it is not the neediness itself, the state of "not having"?

It turns out that the core of what I am is not to be had by me. My body beats and breathes and needs without me having. It is only me being and struggling to become or stand each day in myself. Holding on to the knowing that I am because others reflect back to me and answer me as if I am, so I must be. As such, I could be taken away, as I was given, as reflected, without any respect to the property rights of me by me. Given without the need for my consent and taken away one day without being asked. All these dreams, ideas, sufferings, joys, heartbeats, hairs, teeth, flesh, blood, eyes, breasts, and hands — all of me — never had and ever already going, gone. I am only if as passing in me, through me, thanks to others and Others. Dido (2003) sings "Life

for Rent" and I used to listen to the album of the same name on repeat when writing my PhD thesis. I do that, put music transformed into mantras to write myself out in the world. And do you know if you can give away your rental? Maybe that is why we humans are so obsessed with property, with propping ourselves up with things to be had and to be given, because what is most precious to us, our own bodies, selves, and lives can't be owned nor can those of the ones we love. How understandable is that we delude ourselves in possessions of (much)otherness, why shouldn't we? It is a compassionate trip despite being quite catastrophic for the Earth, which has to bear the cost of the delusion.

This is a way to understand that when I love, when I give of myself, I give what I do not have. I give a no-thing, a non-property. This corrupted vessel, this messy combination of thoughts and feelings as a presence in the world and life of an other. How can this "me" who is not owned by me be given? Only by exposing it, without me having or knowing, maybe even without my consent — can you consent to that which you did not know you had? — like speaking by itself in and through language, overflowing. Jean-Luc Nancy expresses this so beautifully, poetically, and mysteriously in the essay "Shattered Love" (1991), and a quote from this essay introduces the second part of this book. Love is the exposition, the declaration of a beating heart. It is beyond the subject of the dialectic, of the subject of statement and enunciation of my subjectification, of becoming "I" and "me."

It is not something that is formed by the dialectic of the subject with the Other of structure, society, culture, and the language of history and the species. Nor is it something that is constituted by the dialectic of the subject with others through desire, in the imaginary as egos or individuals. These dialectics are structuring the becoming of the subject, but the becoming of love transcends and infuses those dialectics.

In his analysis of needs underlying desire, Lacan (2019) mentions how we begin the journey of being by sensing, giving relevance to the orifices through which we take in and expel nourishment (the oral and the anal), and later our erogenous zones, the skin, and the voice. In our very early development, our experiences of pleasure and sensations felt when interacting with another human being, often our mother, are regulated through

presence and absence, need and demand and others' responses to our needs. Our affectivity is always relational, embodied and "out there" as much as "in here." But Lacan reminds us that there is something else that connects us to the exterior world, which is not dependent on sensation or the other. It is there from the beginning, but we do not feel that "we breathe," that "our hearts beat." That breathing and beating is what makes us exposed as a presence in the world. It gives us a duty to be here until we are no more. It is this duty that speaks and gives itself in love.

The "I love" is this presence of giving myself away, of being given in each beat. Given away and taken by all an everything, taken by me, by the word, and by the world, the heat, the air, the sea, the skies, pulled downward in strings of light to the center of the earth with a line that crosses directly into my heart. It exposes this being, about which I know so little, and this other speaking being, the me, my many beings. The me that has been incarnated and rooted in this world of culture and society, and the me that is my unique enunciation, the melody of this voice which is mine and given, my movement while walking or awakening, the sleeping or smiling me, the aging and that baby me, all and everything. What James Finley expresses as,

> the thinking me and all that it thinks; the remembering me and all that it remembers; the desiring me and all that it desires; the emotion, feeling me and all that it feels; the somatic, bodily me and all my bodily sensations. It is experiential self-knowledge of the reality of myself. (Finley 2020b, 6)

Is the sum of this, of this unknown and known messiness, the final count of who I am and who I can give to the other? Or what the other can give to me? There is no sum or total of what we own to expose. All that is in the deepest, darkest parts of our bodies and history, it is to let that expose itself, appear. That presence is love. In all its mystery. How or when could we have ever believed that this is something we were supposed to "have"? How pathetic and hilariously arrogant. Even if I were more powerful than all the gods and had command over all the elements of the universe, of time and each and every nanoparticle, of the alignment of the planets and the faces of the moon, the "myself"

would still escape me. Worse still, the "yourself" would forever escape me. The skin deludes us as it is. We are hypnotized by our image with its contour and its form, by faces and shapes, trapped in this illusion of separation or memory.

The image, the imaginary, is so powerful. The image allows me to believe in the "having" of me and another. I see myself as something that could be put in a museum or a mausoleum, cataloged with an explanation, a date of birth, a CV — or should it be my social media profile? I work hard to preserve what is not to be had, shaping the dispossessed me, still beating. One day we should wake up without skin, in a diffused state that would allow us to imagine a thousand forms in all the colors and rhythms that cohabit us. A psychedelic trip into us and each other. I do not have any of this sum total and I am all of this, a no-thing, that is exposed right here only for a fraction of a second of universal time, given, gifted.

This is a beat that teaches us horror, an abyss, it, the real, but also wonder and love. The poets know this, some do. It is the love of a thousand blues changing in the sea granted to me each day, while I am writing this, a boundless generosity. I only need to look to the beauty that love is, that granted presence of what is not had, touching me with a shadow of inhumanity in its wings of wonder. I am not made for this, I think, and I am not. My "I" wasn't made for that home of infinity, but for a cave with a fire, walls and blankets, and someone to lie down with. Love would have to get through me and open me without me having to sign the contract, without me knowing how to do this active wondering, to catch me while I am busy making dinner. If I am to give love, I am to give as the sea gives its blues and its greens, here for you to take, let life be loving in and through me.

Nothing

If I was someone, if I was something, I could be had and given away by myself and by others. Anthropologists know everything about the symbolic economy and Levi Strauss considered that the grounding of patriarchal social structure, culture and kinship was the exchange of women as property and symbolic gifts. "Be a symbol" could be a self-help book or a dating app. But I do not

have me. I have the option to stop this "whatever I am the sum of, plus…" because I can commit suicide and stop breathing. But eradicating me is far from the same as having me. So what do I have? I have nothing of me, this body and its thoughts and feelings. They are fragmented and, in the breaks between me thinking or worrying, my consciousness groups them and declares: I am…I look…I think…I tell you this and this s…. I stand as if in this no-thing that I am and declare or not, act or not, that is what has been granted to me, a subject, but not me to me, as much as the ocean is not to be had but given. This is love as beat.

Love as no-thing, the one I talk about here, is love in the real. At times it can be the face of horror, the angst of an abyss that is endless and fractured, the collapsing of ontology into itself. And then, like changing movement in a symphony, right there, an immense joy, a happiness that is for you to be had, a celebration of all the stars and all the singing, like when gazing into the endless eyes of your newborn, holding with one hand the sheets of your bed so as not to fall into that everything and all, while expanding with the warmth of a thousand suns. Love is no different than that, and you will notice if you repeat it out loud.

> Love love love love love love love love love love love
> Like waves arriving at the shore
> This this this this this this this…beat
> Turning turning turning turning turning turning…ecstasy
>
> The beat of the light of dawn crossing the bay to get to you. Sunsets exploding in infinite galactic eccentricity, a feast that can't be kept but is given daily, a no-thing, an exposition of "cheers, here's to you!" where everything belongs.

I Love and I Love You

"I love" and "I love you" are not the same. A lot of the confusion we experience when trying to understand the relationship of love and desire is that we mix these two things up. "I love" is the being of you and all its metaphors, exposed, declared. A lot changes when the "you" enters. If the "you" is there, it can only do that as an object first. Sometimes instantly, I may be able

to receive the "you" as being given, as a no-thing, like moving from desire to love simultaneously. But that is far from certain. There is no entry of another in our lives that, if it is to become *the beloved,* can arrive without first entering through the door of the imaginary. The door is the specular or the form, like a vessel that contains a being and a self, like something that we can hold or be held by. It is only when the other has entered us as another, as object, that I can begin the movement towards "I love *you."* I cannot begin that by facing a you of diluted endless neediness. Give me your ego, a specular (spectacular?) form so I can have a point of fixation for a first "I love you" and pray. Pray that we will get exposed and crack open despite our desire, through our desire.

There is only one being that we loved, or love, who did not have this characteristic of object and ego in the "you," a first "I love you" that did not imply an object. This exception is our mother (caretaker) as the being of all in the first period of our life, before the subjective separation of infant and mother, and yet…is the beating of need love? Have you ever experienced the smile of your baby, the first smile when they see your face appearing, love exposed without will or wanting? An "I love you" without them knowing of you as a "you," the face of "I love." The third gaze, not the one of "too close" or "too far," but the one of the beat, is the presence I mentioned earlier in light of the poet Rabindranath Tagore.

Becoming subject is our call, our journey. We become an "I" and a "me" by making the others ego-subjects, by emerging simultaneously as exposed alterities. If I am to stand in language and in the world, in my flesh, as a speaking being of singularity, the one that tries to be and becomes through a calling of uniqueness, then the price to pay is to go through the process of turning myself and others into subjects-objects. Hiding away the oceanic in the other and in myself, as if fading it away, even further away from an unconscious that is full of images and signifiers, of you(s) and words. Therefore, it is in the established universe of desire, in the one of language where there are me(s) and you(s), that I find myself thrown. There I try to get my bearings to declare "I love you." And in that locus of enunciation (me), there is also the pulsation, need, and command of sexuality. A movement of

the life energy towards the other as you, an image and a form that allow a biological evolution in me, us, a rhythm taken from the species moving forward (or backwards?), a different and repetitive beat. When the "you" appears, what is revealed first is "I desire you," even if I call it "I love you." Desire is not love, but it enters love and can be entered by love. Sometimes. Other times where you love, you cannot desire and where you can desire, you cannot love (Fink 2016). And yet, at other times the enunciation "I love you" can be "I desire you," and "I desire you" can be "I love you." How?

The Combinatory of I, You, Love, and Desire

We enter into a relationship with the "you" as an ego. I do not think that we would be courageous enough to approach the all and the absolute in a straightforward manner. That we relate to others as another, as a you, is what allows us to enter into a relationship with the beloved as an image and at times as a symbol. This is a form of psychic help, a compassionate fate, so we will not be consumed or subsumed in immensity or incommensurability. If the beloved becomes absent, due to death or a break up, we get surprised, as in an ambush, suddenly realizing that what has disappeared is not a simple "you" but the all. The seas and skies died, and each simple beat of life across the universe was captured and taken away with that "you." The all of presence was disguised as an ego. Because that "you" was no-thing, it was not like the "I desire you" of endless substitution, but instead an "I love," an exposition of the all that gives itself away constantly and forever, and when absent it takes the all with it into infinite darkness. The death of love takes different forms. You can lose the other to madness, to death, to others, to work, and so forth. Sometimes the mourning of a beloved who is still present provokes immense suffering, anxiety, and sadness. The lover finds herself in a desolated universe.

Anyone who has experienced the death of love knows the extraordinary nature of such an experience. In my life, this arrived in the form of a phone call. Madrid, early October, close to my nineteeth birthday. I do not remember how I made it from the phone to my bedroom, I do not have a recollection of my

movements or thoughts after that event. It is blank, but in that emptiness there is an image. I see myself collapsed on my bed, in a fetal position, and I see something: I have my shoes on. A phone call announcing the absence of my beloved had transformed me from someone full of vitality, plans, and hopes, to someone who could not find the energy to take off her shoes. Afterwards that diluted I-me would survive this form of death, collect the pieces, restructure, and reimagine, thanks to the passing of time, the love of the world, and of others who were still there surrounding this absence that I had now become. Eventually, later, that love and my beloved returned, the same presence of all in the "you" now tainted by suffering: different, more vulnerable, more adult-like, and more tender.

Love appears and love leaves. And, oh, we need these many loves! Because of suffering and in spite of suffering. Don't hide from any of them, please, take them all, be greedy! The presence of love whenever it is offered to you by friends, family, lovers, partners, the sea, the sky, light… open up to it. So when one of your beloved leaves, and they will, taking the all with them, you will have the others holding the all for you, each capturing a piece of the whole of the universe, declaring it again and again, consoling what is inconsolable in you through each one of their beats. Opening to the many loves demands of us a patience that might be difficult to master. Once fascinated by another we rush to name what that early love, which is just sprouting, is — this is friendship love, or erotic love, or admiring love, or familial love, etc. — maybe as a way for us as subjects to regain control whilst fading into the face of mystery. But that urgency to tag and define what it is suffocates it, like shaping and pruning a little plant way too early in its development. If we could just stop ourselves from this urge to define, we name in order to control, and whenever we control, we relinquish the beautiful, terrifying mystery of being (Whyte 2015). In the prose poem under the word "Naming" in "Consolations," Whyte explores how we define to put our most meaningful human experiences into neat containers, creating a cabinet of "who matters" and "how do they matter":

> Most of our heartbreak comes from attempting to name who or what we love and the way we love, too early in the vulner-

> able journey of discovery. [...] When we demand a certain specific kind of reciprocation before the revelation has flowered completely we find ourselves disappointed and bereaved and in that grief may miss the particular form of love that is actually possible but that did not meet our initial and too specific expectations. (Whyte 2015)

Love begins as a meeting with another and as a journey of discovery of the other, of oneself. The imaginary, the symbolic, and the journey to become self are playing tricks on all of us, but they also enable us as subjects to stand towards the other. They give us a key to open a door to love. The imaginary is like the light that makes its entry by highlighting every contour, every detail. That form, that light and its colors, belong to the fantasy of desire. The show is on. It constitutes us as a subject in front of another-as-*objet-a*. The imaginary, the specular, is also how we see and apprehend desire first, that is, the wanting that has been spoken and described in thousands of stories, songs, and paintings. It is in the light of the specular where jouissance appears, where we get it off, and where it fails us. In the phantasmatic and imaginary we get a jouissance that will make us circle around that object. It will make us want the other; take the other as we would an apple, bite into, squeeze, or drink the other; and wonder whether we are the "it" of what the other wants to take. In the same way we might comprehend ourselves as that which desires and wants to be bitten, squeezed, taken, held, and held tight like you hold something that you possess. Who does not want to have when desiring? Or who does not want to be had when desiring? If you do not want to have, maybe you love, but do you also desire? I do not think so. But it is also in the specular, and in that special seeing of the other, that a declaration and exposition of presence, as love, can happen.

Although we do not have each other to give, and this is an undertaking doomed to failure, desire is such an amazing adventure. Like the light of day, full of color, aesthetically thrilling, exhilarating, because we are suspended in expectation by wanting. In this wanting, we are the most of what we can be as subject in our unique individualization and we are also fading as subject. Desire is paradoxical. There are few things, if any, that make us

more a unique "me" than when we declare and sense "I desire you," or when we experience being the "you" the other desires. There are few experiences in which we feel so intensely that we as subjects are out of control and that we cannot act as we know ourselves when in front of the desired, as if our own ego escapes when we need it most.

The Nothingness That Is Present, the Beloved as Desired

Desire is the experience of energy, focus, and wanting for another human being, with their unique characteristics and details, that we feel as revealing something in us, as a connection from a "me" to a "you" that we know will not be had or experienced by others. This is "I desire" when it relates to *objet a,* when there is an imagination of an all that can complete me in the "you." It is what we call the "I love you" of falling in love. This is the love at first sight of Romeo and Juliet. An event, a crack of the real entering the image upon which human desire is sustained, which, as in the case of the tragic lovers, is often tainted by seemingly psychotic tendencies of extreme idealization. It does not make sense to separate love and desire in such cases because they become fused in the eventual. Such an event has the ability to stop time, the metonymic chain. Other times, it is the love that appears once desire has manifested for a while. As time passes, the person who was an object is transformed into *objet a* (*the* object). Like Emma, the pretty, clever, and vain titular protagonist of the Jane Austen novel (2003). She discovers that she is in love with an old family friend, Mr. Knightley, at the very moment he has become the object of desire of another woman. A typical case where jealousy reveals the place of desire. In the classic *Little Women* by Louise May Alcott (1989), a movement in the other direction from love to desire takes place between Laurie, the neighbor, and Jo, who was "just" his friend. For Roland Barthes, "I-love-you" is not a sentence with a meaning, but a limit situation where "the subject is suspended in a specular relation to the other" (2018, 148). "I-love-you" is a holophrase, a proffering, a word-as-sentence which gets its meaning from being uttered, something that, like music, has no place in the realm of linguistics nor in that of semiology, as the uttering of itself, "released as an orgasm [...which]

is not spoken, but it speaks and says I-love-you" (Barthes 2018, 148–49). What Barthes is describing so eloquently is the point of connection between love and the desire for *objet a.*

For love to be linked to desire, there is always a moment of realization, an event when the "you" appears to be linked to the all. Sometimes this imagination of completeness expands sexual desire, other times it inhibits it. This depends on our unconscious relationship with that "first all," how we were constituted in the symbolic and how we manage to become subject while experiencing the process of separation from our caretakers. In all cases, such an event not only transforms the present, but also provides new understandings of the past, modified narratives of our biographical time and memory. Our life story transforms backwards through the event, and keeps becoming, as long as there is the possibility of future events that might transform us retroactively. If we are to understand the link between love and desire, we need to look at the subjective relation to the object. Desire thrives on distance and novelty, and there are multiple possible objects of desire. The desiring subject might repeat a pattern of fantasy with one object and then move on to the next. This is like the subject finding one person attractive, and then the next, and the next (i.e., I can desire Joe, Adrian, Jackie, and so on). They can be counted in a chain of association. In that way, desire is metonymic in nature. It moves horizontally until the chain of displacement stops or can be stopped at the doors of love.

Why does this stop? Fink (2016), in his analysis of Lacan's conceptualizations of love, explains that it stops when the subject meets the *objet a,* in the event that we traditionally call falling in love. However, the saying "falling in love" is often reserved for "couples" and tends to imply a sexual attraction. But this is not the only way the desired *objet a* appears. We can have the same experience in friendship for example. Some friendships are the most important occurrence of "falling in love" in a person's life. A friend can be the *objet a.* Some people are much more admiring, joyful, and jealous of their friend's attention and love than of their partner's. Friendships can have plenty of sensuality without reducing the sensual to sexual intercourse or wanting. There can be plenty of jouissance in seeing the friend, her ways of being and

expressing, her voice, and her closeness. Lacan says that talking is a request for love and intimate conversation, and the jouissance this brings is often a characteristic of passionate friendships. One of the most beautiful love relationships of all times comes to mind here, the love between the thirteenth-century poet and mystic Rumi and his friend Shams.

After falling in love, we look back at the narrative of our life and reinterpret our personal history on the basis of that unique encounter, which feels like fate. What is complicated to understand here is that such an event into love emerges exactly like desire and follows the same structure as fantasy (subject vis-à-vis object), but the result seems to be different. Something happens to the nature and directionality of the relationship. If desire seems to always want more and to move on to the next, in love there is an awakening of passion that repeats itself without moving to another object. It circles around the very same object and does not only repeat but expands, like a centripetal force. There is an intense sense of personal development to be experienced through the being and presence of the other in love, despite the craving and unsatisfaction of the phantasmatic relationship of desire that grounds it. What grounds this locus of desire is the repetitive circling of *objet petit a,* the jouissance and enjoyment of the drive. Falling in love with another as such can feel as if something has overpowered us and we cannot do anything about it. There we sense the real, a form of compulsion. It is the returning to and fascination about something — the object that takes the place of our lack-of-being — that we perceive as veiled, as masked. Repetition in desire is maintained because we imagine that if we could fully have the other and look behind and inside the form, then we might find this treasure, our certainty of the other having the all.

Desire and love are different from each other but are interlinked in life experience, in the phenomenological, in language and culture, in our psyche, and in our bodies. In terms of language, we could imagine this as love being the crack of the real stopping the metonymic movement of association, this one and this one and this one beside each other. Love trespasses the energy of libido and the life energy of eros towards a metaphorical trajectory which is expansive, centripetal, and timeless. Its

entropic energy seeks the same one and the same one and the same one, but always new. Vertically, downwards and upwards (to heaven and hell), and then circling, so that your beloved is always the same and always different, always new, always singular plural. Love manifests like a metaphor which is the same as the first signifier and at the same time brings something different, layering infinite meanings on top of each other. The metaphor of love is what stops the metonymy of desire, but the first signifier of the metaphor of love is desire itself. It is constitutive of it, and so much at the core. This is similar to how in Lacanian theory the Name-of-the-Father acts as the special signifier that launches the chain of signification of the subject of statement.

Desire and *objet a* incarnate love in the speaking being and launch the metaphorical expansive experience of loving. It is the location of this *objet a* in a person that might transform this person into someone incommensurate with all others, irreplaceable. Someone who cannot be counted, someone out of the set. Lacan invites us to imagine this objet a, the object-cause of desire, as a precious stone, the *agalma*[1] (2001, 356) which the lover fantasizes is located in a person. Wanting has a double meaning: to want something, to be actively pursuing a craving, and to be in wanting of something, to have a lack. Although there might be causes, we can never find the final reason for why *objet a* might be placed in one person and not another. Love and desire are without reason. There is no logical argumentation behind this. Today, there is as much speculation about "why do they not love me?" or "why do they not desire me?" when I love or desire them as there was thousands of years ago. The desired person is like a placeholder of knowledge and wanting that is inscribed and hidden in the desiring's unconscious, remaining oblivious to the subject itself.

1 The *agalma* was the hidden treasure which Alcibiades thought Socrates had, which Alcibiades believed was what made him deeply in love with Socrates. This story appears in Plato's *Symposium* and is analysed in detail by Lacan in his *Seminar VIII: Transference.*

Passionate Attachment, Aggressivity, and Hate

Although love is a key concept in Lacan, he does not have a coherent theory of love (Fink 2016). In this essay, I have focused on the love that Lacan's late writing emphasized, what he named "Thou art that," an ecstatic limit, that is, some expressions of love in the real or the Other jouissance of feminine sexuation. However, Lacan's early works emphasized the understanding of love as narcissism (Salecl 1998, 40). He theorized that forms of love are deeply interconnected to hate and aggressivity (Lacan 2001, 9–32). "True love gives way to hatred" (Lacan 1998, 146), this key teaching of Lacanian theory is also one of the most difficult to address, for how can love ever foster hate?

For Lacan, love can turn to aggression due to how subjectivity and the ego were formed in the imaginary (2001, 21–23). We can be most passionate with those closest to us. We identify with and rival our siblings. We want the presence of our caretakers. We love our siblings but we are also jealous or resentful because of our competitiveness, dependency, and lack. Lacan created two words for these conflictive feelings, *hainamoration,* a contraction of the words *enamoré* (enamored) and *haine* (hate) (Lacan 1998, 90), and *jealouissance,* a combination of jealousy and jouissance (Lacan 1998, 100). Our ego forms around ambivalent aggressivity and resentment (see Chapter 1). Our cultural imagination has many examples of the plot of the lovers-to-enemies or familial bonds that foster antagonism. Think of contemporary popular TV series and films such as *Succession, The War of Roses, Fatal Attraction,* and classical texts such as Hamlet's scene of loathing for his mother, or the biblical myth of Cain and Abel. Hollywood and romance literature tend to prefer the other plot, the enemies-to-lovers of many comedies. Think of examples such as *You've Got Mail, Moonstruck, The Sound of Music,* or *My Fair Lady.* Identification results in admiration that can turn into hate. Those who look most like us foster our highest appreciation and aversion; the closest competitor is the one we most admire and hate. Fink (2016) mentions how the emotion of disgust points to a possible repressed desire, whereas the absence of desire is closest to indifference. Love turned to hate in the imaginary may account for "crimes of passion," jealousy, stalking, the

passive-agressive silent treatment, stonewalling, and other similar examples explored in previous chapters.

Aggressivity manifests differently in the symbolic realm. The big Other and the symbolic is the order that creates the enemy (Asociación Psicoanalítica del Uruguay 2020). It is in the name of our most loved identities (categories, groups, etc.) that we turn to our outmost violence: war, persecution, and cruelty. The creation of the collective social or historical enemy as seen in the holocaust, genocides, or slavery belongs to the order of the symbolic,

> sentimental identification with suffering created by national, racial, economic, and religious privilege has long coexisted with laws that discriminate among particular forms of difference, privileging some against others (see laws against interracial, interreligious, or gay marriage for instance). (Berlant 2012, 110)

In these cases, the "beloved" *objet a* is not another, but a group, a class, an ideology, a race, with which we identify and that we have placed in the space of the symbolic law. Our horror is to realize that atrocities are committed in the "name of the beloved." Here, the formation of identity of a group depends on the existence of an exception: an ideal or an enemy that we imagine has a special access to more jouissance and enjoyment, as the father had a special access to the enjoyment of the mother. This is not love in the real as the "all," the Other jouissance of feminine sexuation. It is love turned into hate in the Other jouissance of man's sexuation. Group identification holds together due to an intense negative jouissance (Salecl 1998). When *objet a* is fixated on specific social identity categories and hierarchies, our passionate attachments and loves go hand in hand with our passionate hate. In that way, our "love," understood as idealization, and libidinal attachments (the real) that infuse the symbolic (signifiers) can foster exclusion and aggression. We see this in the rage and fury of the world.

Psychoanalysis and its clinical application are criticized for preserving a colonial and eurocentric gaze (Lau 2021, 279). Lacan did not specifically theorize classism, antisemitism, or racism. His emphasis was on psychic and sexual difference. However, Lacan

elucidated in a revolutionary manner the link between the subjective and the social collective (Tuhkanen 2009, 71–73). Frantz Fanon in his influential *Black Skin, White Masks* (2021) elaborates on the Lacanian mirror stage to assess how the racist gaze and the lack of the Other's positive confirmation destabilize the Black subject's own corporeality and ego formation. For Fanon, psychoanalysis helps us to understand the ways in which Black subjects internalize the racial prejudice of the symbolic order. Fanon's legacy continues to inform contemporary Lacanian psychoanalytical theory (Shepherdson 2008; Tuhkanen 2009; Stephens 2018; George and Hook 2022). These studies of race and racism emphasize the real, jouissance, and *objet a* to comprehend the individual unconscious and subjectification as an extension of the sociopolitical. Identity categories such as race (e.g., whiteness) do not act as simple signifiers that can be interchanged with other signifiers in a metonymic chain, a slippage of desired identity. Instead, the signifier of race, besides being made of the symbolic and imaginary register, also could come to represent *objet a,* as such something much more stable, repressed, and linked to the real, that which cannot be fully explained in language and instead acts in the place of the loss of non-being, the object of lack. As *objet a,* racial identification would be embedded with the libidinal energy of drive and would be constituted as a primary source of jouissance that can reside in the repressed unconscious. Racial identification would be the lack-in-being positivized with its promise of wholeness. It is such libidinal value that would explain why such identification can act as the "bonding agent" (Hook 2022, 39) through which subjects, individually and in groups, can get enjoyment of persistent repetitive patterns of unjust and irrational behavior (i.e., racism and its manifestations). And why, in addition to being a problem of lack of knowledge racism could be seen as a problem of jouissance.

Becoming a subject of jouissance has to do with passionate libidinal attachment and the repletion of the drive, and thereby is also at the core of excessive, irrational, and or unconscious emotional attachment to multiple forms of identity such as gender, race, nationality, religion, and so forth (George 2018). Identity libidinal attachments with their negative manifestations fueling racism, sexism, antisemitism, etc., become expressions

of this drive and compensatory forms of jouissance. Subjects "love" or have passionate attachments to their nations, class, ideologies, or even sport teams (think of the aggressivity of hooliganism). The subject does not only attach passionately to identity forms of knowledge and self-knowledge through what is determined in a specific society or culture, the ideas or images of what genders, sexualities, races, classes, religions, and so forth are said to be. Instead, the problem of how identity marks our love relationships is the problem of the corporeal subject feeling unconsciously and through jouissance, or loss or theft thereof. For example, in racism, what is "loved" is the *objet a* of race, and racial identification functions as a variant of wholeness (George 2022, 245–46).

Thereby, the manifestation of jouissance through identity gets tied to the loss-of-being through tendencies of loving passionate attachment, and also destruction and aggression as it can be seen in the irrational cruel enjoyment of a lynching mob. A libidinal energy that links to the imaginary level, as the jealousy and envy that an infant feels when seeing a sibling being loved by the mother, and to the symbolic order, discourses and actions of attachment or aggression in their historical and social manifestations (George and Hook 2022; George 2018). Love thereby *gives way* to hate. Attachment gives way to animosity. Passion gives way to aggression. While facing the human tragedy that this entails, it is important to remember that relation is not sameness: Love *is not* hate. There, where hate can be fostered, so can transformation. Love in the real, that which cannot be symbolized, by not being able to be subsumed in existing discourse or cultural determination, can push the subject out of the symbolic order, the law and its circuits. Such possibility opens both subjectively and collectively a space for change, another trajectory whose precise form is yet to come. It is in that space beyond the law, that love in the real manifests in the limits of language and links to the corporeality, eroticism, and relational ontologies of the ethics of postcolonial theory (Tuhkanen 2009, 73) and feminist theory (Lorde 2017; Diprose 2012) inviting us to envision possible futures.

Love Fantasies and Narcissism

Another different take on love is that which appears in the ideology of romance. Often it is difficult to distinguish love from a (temporary) narcissistic fantasy of seeing in the other the promise of what can complete me, another form of fictional property. Romantic love depends on the recognition of the narcissistic image. We position the beloved in the place of the ideal ego, that is, the imaginary role in which we find ourselves likable (Salecl 1998, 13). The subject's falling in love "is set in motion when some contingent, ultimately indifferent (libidinal) object finds itself occupying a pre-given fantasy place" (Žižek 1997). Because there is no universal formula that can guarantee harmony between lovers, there is a multiplicity of possible combinations and aspects to the fantasy relation of subject vis-à-vis object. Love as romance appears as fate or lottery where one fits or does not fit the formula, like in the traditional chance game "he loves me, he loves me not."

These many forms can be: The delusional imagination of the other being exactly like the desiring subject (narcissistic identification), the psychotic-like absolute idealization of the other as "out of this world" or "godlike" (i.e., a pure symbol, a signifier), the imagination of the other as "master" (putting the beloved in the place of the ego ideal), the manic certainty of "she is mine," the neurotic doubt and constant questioning of the object, the falling for someone who can provide care and safety like our caretakers (anaclitic), or the feeling of being the object desired by the big Other itself (i.e., the core characteristic of fetishism).

It is the dilemmas of narcissistic love and romance ideology that are widely explored by Berlant in her book *Desire/Love* (2012). These passionate forms of desire are named "love" in novels, films, poetry: romantic love, passionate love, falling in love, and so on. Despite its deluding, narcissistic, or extravagant character, does not all love belong to love? However, I wonder if we could get some clarity by calling most of these love types desires. These forms of love in the imaginary are the metonymic displacement of desire, circling for a while thanks to the energy of the drive, which infuses the object with passionate attachment (as in the phallic jouissance). But desire wants to desire and has no

problem in eventually changing the beloved-object for the next and the next, circling for one, and then for another in a series. *Objet a* comes to mediate this impossible connection between the slippage of desire and jouissance. This is love manifesting itself in the phallic jouissance.

In these multiple and at times eccentric forms of passionate desire, we also do not give what we have, as who has ever owned *objet a,* which is our lack of being? As beloved, we can pretend to have it or mask having it. As lovers we can fantasize and feel intensely that our beloved has what will fulfill our lack. However, do we ever meet the "you" when we desire *objet a*? Can we meet alterity when what we are aiming at is our own *objet a,* our own lack? Lacan's answer is that we cannot. This is why he provocatively says that there is no "sexual relationship" between subjects. We meet as objects for each other:

> There's no such thing as a sexual relationship because one's jouissance of the Other taken as a body is always inadequate — perverse, on the one hand, insofar as the Other is reduced to object a, and crazy and enigmatic, on the other, I would say .... Regarding one's partner, love can only actualize what, in a sort of poetic flight [...] I called courage — courage with respect to this fatal destiny [...]. There is an impossibility therein. It is also that nothing can speak it — there is no existence of the sexual relationship in the act of speaking. (Lacan 1998, 144)

As far as love is manifested in sexual relations, love through *objet a* connects to the real, it cannot be spoken (it ex-ists). Love relationships through desire (in phallic jouissance) are our subjective lacks finding, enjoying, and failing through forms of temporary "fulfillment." Libidinal passionate desire constitutes some of the most important relationships and memories of our lives. How can we then affirm that those relationships that most matter to us are not relationships? Is not that judgement a form of (Lacanian) arrogance? Maybe the exposure and presence of our lacks, that opening to each other and to life, are relation. Just not relation understood as the encounter of "knowing" individuals because the individual and autonomous self (i.e., the speaking being as

property) is in itself a fantasy. Giving our lack is giving what we do not have, that is love. So, we might not have "a relationship" but still have love (?). Love is in the space of non-sensical lack, in the cracks and bursts of the eventual and the grace and awe that characterizes some moments of passionate relationships. But love is not only desire and cannot be subsumed by desire.

Love as Boundless Generosity

The generosity of the lover who has decided to stop playing desire games and expose himself as loving appears in Joan Manuel Serrat's beautiful song "La mujer que yo quiero" ("The Woman I Love), a tribute to love as exposure:

> The woman I love, doesn't need to
> bathe each night in holy water
> She has many flaws, says my mother,
> and too many bones, says my father
> But she is more true than bread and earth
> My love is a love from before the war
> In order to know it
> the woman I love, doesn't need to
> pull the petals of a daisy every night
> The woman I love is a succulent fruit
> rooted in my soul just like anything else
> My friends want her to cheat on me
> and my enemies' lives are embittered
> because, without intention, her lullaby envelopes you
> and through her warmth, pride and shame
> are lost
> The woman I love is a succulent fruit
> happily ripening, sweet, and conceited.[2]

2 "La mujer que yo quiero, no necesita / Bañarse cada noche en agua bendita / Tiene muchos defectos, dice mi madre / Y demasiados huesos, dice mi padre /Pero, ella es más verdad que el pan y la tierra / Mi amor es un amor de antes de la Guerra / Para saberlo / La mujer que yo quiero, no necesita / Deshojar cada noche una margarita / La mujer que yo quiero es fruta jugosa / Prendida en mi alma como si

"The woman I love, doesn't need to pull the petals of a daisy every night," sings Serrat. This verse refers also to the love game "he loves me, he loves me not" that we mentioned earlier. Doubt and anxiety about being or having the other's object of desire are intrinsic to the fantasy structure of the desiring relationship. Love stops this with its exposure and boundless generosity. It counteracts the constant questioning of the subject with its beat, its music of being, and its presence. In the beautiful lyrics of Serrat we see a mixture of desire and love: She is like a fruit I want and I am fascinated by her, but also all shame and pride are lost in the face of love, and abandonment of the ego ideal is possible. This cohabitation is not always easy, and when they cannot coexist, it is not necessarily love that we prefer. Lacan exemplifies this dilemma with a commentary on "women" who aim to be the "object of love." Women here can be understood as the psychic position of anyone who has ever had that ambition:

> For in the end, it is obvious that in real life, *love and desire are two different things.* We should speak clearly and say that we can love someone a great deal and desire someone else. [...] [Subjects in so far as they want to be the beloved] know the value of desire full well. They know that beyond all of love's sublimations, desire has a relationship to being, even in its most limited, restricted, fetishistic, and, in short, its stupidest form — that is, even in the marginal form in which fantasy the subject, qua blinded, is literally nothing more than a prop and a sign, the sign of little *a* as the signifying reminder of relations with the Other. Nevertheless, in the final analysis, women view little *a* as ultimate proof that the Other is verily and truly addressing them.
>
> A man can truly love a woman with all the affection and devotion we can imagine, but the fact remains that if he desires another woman — even if the first woman knows that

cualquier cosa / Con ella quieren dármela mis amigos / Y se amargan la vida mis enemigos / Porque, sin querer tú, te envuelve su arrullo / Y, contra su calor, se pierde el orgullo / Y la vergüenza / La mujer que yo quiero, es fruta jugosa / Madurando feliz, dulce y vanidosa" (Serrat 1971).

> what he desires in this other woman is her shoe, the hem of her dress, or the makeup she wears on her face — his homage to being thus go to the other woman. (Lacan 2019, 450, my emphasis)

Desire is a "homage to being." However, this is always tragic because as we saw, we either are not or do not have the object of desire (the phallus). This is another form in which we wish to give what we do not have. Fink (2016) mentions that sometimes when we desire we do not love, and when we love we cannot desire. It seems that for sexual desire to ignite whilst face-to-face with *objet petit a* in another, there has to have been a debasement of our primary caretaker, a process by which the mother as the primary all stops being idealized. Idealization may be a good way to start "quick love." It may even be necessary for that *objet petit a* to be instituted in another subject, but it is not automatically good for arousal, specifically in cultures where the pursuit of sexual pleasure has been socialized as shameful. We do not want our desired others to bathe in "holy water." Sexual wanting demands entitlement to have and to give, and a level of objectification to be had and to be given. The desired as fruit, ourselves as fruit. This includes objectification of both oneself and the other in the moment of the most extreme exposure of "me" wanting.

7

Love and Objectification

Objectification is often portrayed as that process women go through to be desired by men. Francisco de Goya painted "La maja vestida" ("The Clothed Maja") and "La maja desnuda" ("The Naked Maja") in 1800. The originality of Goya's paintings is not related to the revealing of a woman's body, but to the double-play (dressed, undressed), the gaze of lightheartedness and desire in the eyes and half smile of the model, and to the story behind the painting. The mythical rumor surrounding the painting of "La maja desnuda" (fig. 15) was that the face and the body did not correspond to the same person. The body was said to be the Duchess of Alba, the most famous and powerful woman of the Spanish nobility at the time, who had a love affair with the painter. The idealized pattern of the good girl (princess, queen) turned bad girl to become the object of desire is equally relevant today.

This classical dichotomy appears in Maria Kapajeva's art installation "Or other," where she plays with the powerful signifiers of mother-whore-other (fig. 16). And who can forget the transformation of Sandy, the female protagonist of the movie *Grease,* teaching generation after generation how to become "a turn on" after starting out as the respected and beloved good girl? It is no wonder that the first song in the musical is titled "Love Is a Many Splendored Thing," and when she is "transformed" we hear "You're the One That I Want" (I need a man / Who can keep me satisfied) (Travolta and Newton-John, 1978), one of the bestselling singles in history.



Fig. 15. Francisco José de Goya y Lucientes, "La maja desnuda" ("The Naked Maja"), 1795–1800. Museo del Prado, Madrid. Wikimedia Commons.

Grease could have been called "Love Is Overrated," or "Girls Want to Be Desired," which is also what Lacan thought. Or is it "What Boys Need Girls to Want"? It would seem that debasement (from Madonna or good girl to bad girl) has to happen when it is the "woman" that is the loved and desired one. When it is the man, it is surprising how in psychoanalytic literature he does not need to go through the same process. Powerful, admired men could be loved and desired without having to be debased, such as idealization of the prince or king. Women want to be *objet a,* says Lacan (2019, 450). They know the value of desire beyond that of love. Isn't it about time that men knew that too? The idea that women do not need to debase their desired or beloved is of course a cultural myth, powerful and deceitful, mostly because women were seldom asked what they desired, or they were implied to desire what was considered by society (and patriarchy) as appropriate. The idealized prince happens to be quite boring after ten p.m., and the wolf (the bad boy) has as much currency in feminine sexual desire as in the masculine one. The gaze of insolence and lust and the gaze of objectification also work for women as a tool to displace the ideal "all," the ideal of the (m)other and of themselves (fig. 16), and forget it, if only for a while.

Objectification puts love and death (motherhood and fatherhood) in brackets for a while so that sex and orgasmic enjoy-



Fig. 16. Maria Kapajeva, "Or Other," 2020. © Maria Kapajeva.

ment can take place. Not all sensual pleasure is of this order or demands objectification, but sexual relationships do. Sometimes this objectification is achieved by the dismembering of the other into parts, as if the whole of the other is too much to take. And indeed it is too much, as that other is the locus where love manifests and exposes and therefore is an immensity. Jouissance can be had by focusing or playing as if being with a part: a back, a breast, a hand, a vulva, a penis, and so on. Like the partial-poetic male nudes in Toni Catany's photographic collection, *Somniar déus* (*Dreaming of gods*) (fig. 17). In Catany's collection of intimate black and white photographs we are never shown the face or identity of the models. Instead the gaze of desire focuses on details of the male anatomy. In order to dream gods, take them bit by bit. Is there a better example of the metonymic nature of desire than this? Desire demands taking the crown for the king.

Our dreams are full of this imaginary, and surrealism made an art of it. We "make love" thanks to our ability to focus and imagine the reduction of the other into crowns. Other times the beloved is replaced in the imagination of the sexually desiring by association, a simile, a debased other, roles played on occasion, or



Fig. 17. Toni Catany, "Somniar déus 113," 1987. © Fundació Toni Catany.

an imaginary taken from films or pornography, or from the next door neighbor; an "object" one can focus on by association when having sex with a beloved that one needs to transform into an object, as if being linked to some thing even if only for a second in one's imagination. And while *Playboy* and the like have a history of catering to a masculine imaginary, it is good to remember that Barbara Cartland, an author of fantasy if there ever was one, has sold millions of copies of her romances and there are dozens of Cartlands keeping that genre alive.

Objectification is simultaneous to the fading of the subject, like a subject being captured by the image. Lacan has this insightful reflection about the role the disappearing of the subject plays in desire, which is always a relationship of fantasy vis-à-vis the object:

> Aphanisis, disappearance or fading, can serve us regarding fantasy [...]. It is not the aphanisis of desire, but an aphanisis of the subject occurs at the height of desire. Where it speaks in the unconscious chain, the subject cannot situate himself in this place or articulate himself as an I. He can only indicate himself qua disappearing from his position as a subject. (Lacan 2019, 424)

Desire is both the fading of the subject (me) when I am vis-à-vis the object (an other) that I desire, and the disappearing of the subject (you) into an object in the imagination of the one desiring. In a phantasmatic desiring relationship I am faded away and you are objectified. The tendencies of idealization and of debasement both objectivize. One makes the human god-like, a thing from heaven, and the other makes the human thing-like, a thing from the soil. Perfection and degradation are the Janus faces of objectification in desire. They are also the face of neurosis. "Too good, too bad" runs in parallel with "too late, too early" of the encounter with the object of desire. By comparison, love is the declaration of the human as enough and incommensurable. Incommensurability is not perfection. Enough is not resignation or debasement.

Although the debasement of the feminine is a common trope in culture, there are also classic examples of how masculine debasement links to passion, such as desired bad boys like Heathcliff in Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* (1870), Willoughby in Jane Austen's *Sense and Sensibility* (1990), or Wickham in Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* (1972), who inspired the character of Bridget Jones's philanderer boss in the popular film based on the Helen Fielding novel. A common plot is that the good boy (Mr. Darcy) or the good girl (Elizabeth Bennet) need to do something "bad" to allow for desire to manifest. Elizabeth, for example, needs to discover that all of her judgement was wrong. Her self-debasement allows her desire for the other to appear and for her to become the object of desire and a faded subject. Cultures of perfectionism are not only dangerously stressful or shameful, but also fuel obsessiveness. Obsessives respond to the call of desire by creating a variety of obstacles and control mechanisms, eventually turning their ability to reach the other into an impos-

sible mission. They make the jouissance of desire impossible for themselves and equally avoid debasement by keeping themselves high on the pedestal, as we saw in the story of Odysseus and the sirens. Similarly, in the process of our becoming, we need to take our parents down from their initial pedestals while maintaining our love for them after their fall. At the end, the call of desire, the call to stand and face your desire, is a call for compassion, but compassion only appears after the recognition of the fall, the delusion.

It is interesting that Bridget Jones, the contemporary version of Elizabeth Bennet, appears as a different neurotic type. Bridget is the contemporary personification of debasement with her self-deprecating daily diary entries. She despises herself because of her weight, her feigning of control and competence, her bouts of alcohol numbness, and her paranoid strategizing when it comes to her love life. Her cathartic trip allows the rest of us to join in and celebrate our collective need to be debased and thereby, if we're lucky, to be had or taken by another, and to park our contemporary god-like aspirations for a while. Of course, alcohol cultures can be excuses for debasement. Drunkenness allows our contemporary perfectionistic beings to be debased without hurting our ideal egos, which can be a temporary relief from our exhausting positions on the pedestal. It also helps to stay, even if momentarily, in our wanting. Bridget Jones is the personification of that form of magnified alcohol culture and a reminder that the drama of desire is often comical for those not affected by it. Bridget's reactions are not obsessive but hysterical. Things always happen too early for her and she constantly feels overwhelmed and underprepared for what life throws at her, including her meeting with *objet a*. As Esther Perel (2006, 2017) mentions in her books about erotic intelligence, desire, and infidelity, the fact that women are not allowed to want or to stray does not mean that they do not want or stray. Guilt and, in some countries, the death penalty or collective shaming, are effective anaphrodisiacs. In desire, women often do want and don't want at once. And so do people of all genders. Wanting and non-wanting is desiring.

The feminist confessional novel *I Love Dick* by Chris Kraus (2015) relates a magnificent all-consuming infatuation and the birth of a fiery desire for another, Dick — a sociologist and intel-

lectual who is a colleague of Chris's husband. Chris experiences a crush at first sight. She first shares her experience and feelings of desire with her husband, as they have an open marriage and desire structure that allows for love triangles. However, this time it is different for Chris and her husband. Chris's new infatuation is an unusual one. Dick is not an object (an other) they can share to kick off their own sexual enjoyment. Chris's obession is spiraling out of control because the desired — Dick — is *objet a*. He is not just another "one," but their meeting is an event: The real has cracked her open, the metonymic has been crossed by the metaphorical. This desire structure has the intensity of "the one," thus displacing the *objet a* from the husband, Sylvère, to Dick, whom she idealizes and objectivizes — even though this is unreciprocated. She is not *objet a* for Dick, she is just one among many.

Kraus's novel is a creative exploration of desire intertwined with the reflexivity of a subject inscribed into the big Other of feminism. It is also a journey into the unpredictability of desire structures when met with the eventual, a form of the becoming of desire. The eventual refers to how a life event is given meaning retroactively. It is looking back that we realize how a random encounter, occurrence, or decision radically changed how we understand our lives. Although it might look as though Chris is being controlled by fate, desire and blind erotic wanting, the entrance of the eventual, because it allows a break in her life trajectory (the taken for granted, the routine), is also experienced as freedom: My life is not what I thought it was, and new imaginations of the future are opening up. The wanting of her desire implies for the protagonist a double movement. She wants to be her own subject of desire and to go for it, and at the same time she faces the acceptance of her own debasement, of wanting to be the object of the other and traveling full speed towards objectification. The climax of this debasement is when she finally asks Dick for a sexual encounter and he accepts. The whole scene of the sexual act comprises Chris asking Dick to allow her to perform as if she was his dog. This animalesque scene is a specific form of debasement. He is far from being aroused by such a proposition — not all debasements work for everyone — but eventually concedes. This sex scene turns the climax of "getting what you

want" into a bittersweet, exhilarating, and at times pitiful experience, the failing of the phallic jouissance.

Through this self-inflicted objectification, the novel *I Love Dick* appears to be the sublimation of a feminist paradox. Societies are so used to the objectivization of women that we hardly notice anymore. In this case, it is Dick who is objectivized in the narration. He is the one to be owned, imagined, desired, used as muse and inspiration, and infatuated about. It is less important that this is done through a self-destructive trip, as long as Chris is the one in charge of the destruction. This book is a mirroring of what male artists and their artistic imagination have done to female bodies over centuries, and its story feels and is radical and feminist because of that. *I Love Dick* reads like a post-modern *Wuthering Heights,* but that's not the only thing. There is a moment where the protagonist asks if a heterosexual woman can ever feel or declare pride as we have seen in LGBTQ2SIA+ movements. There is something about women's liberation projects that is messy and paradoxical when it is entangled with the desire of heterosexual women for the man and male bodies. Where is pride in deep desire if not lost and forgotten?

There is a strange freedom in what appears as destiny: the willingness to want one's desire even if such desire implies submission and dependency (the lack). Chris mirrors the character Bess in Lars von Trier's film *Breaking the Waves* (1996). Bess has sex with other men, prostituting herself, so that she can tell her husband Jan about these sexual encounters. Jan has been paralyzed after an accident and his jouissance and sexual enjoyment has become linked to Bess being able to have sex elsewhere and tell him about this. At first, it appears as if Bess knows nothing about her desire. It is as if her own desire had been cannibalized by her husband's. And in a way, it has, because what we witness in the film is the unfolding of the Other's desire, but there is also another way to express what is happening here. Bess enjoys through the other when seeing and perceiving the other enjoying. She gets off by seeing her husband getting off. The other's jouissance is the locus of her jouissance. There is something motherly in Beth's self-offering of her body, as a contact with the Other jouissance where she gives herself away becoming the vehicle for someone elses vitality. At the same time, there is something pro-

foundly distressing in her disappearance from herself, a form of jouissance related to self-harm and the death of the subject, as if through her actions she was regressing her own *me* into the *all*. Bess enjoys *as if* she is the other. Instead, Jan is an exemplary structure of perversion. He enjoys as a voyeur, imagining that Beth is enjoying herself in those sexual encounters, which she is not, she is only enjoying when he is enjoying. Theirs is a phantasmatic relation. This is so Lacanian, the image of two hands in desire reaching out but never meeting. The hands do not meet in *I Love Dick* either. Chris is the woman as obsessive, which is traditionally commonly perceived as a masculine desire structure. She is obsessing constantly about controlling her encounter with the desired, and only able to enjoy when the sexual encounter follows her own script. Unlike Bess, she is not enjoying as if the other. In Chris's desire structure, there is a form of breaking the stereotypical feminine which is often related to wanting to be the object, the self-offering, and the hysterical. *I Love Dick* is feminist desire as transgression of gender and sexual normativity. Are Bess and Chris's sexual relationships love? These are two desire structures with psychotic and obsessive tendencies and forms. Love is not in the perverse, psychotic, or obsessive encounter, desire is. Rather, love can be elsewhere in these films and novels, and indeed it is. Love presences itself in the beyond of those encounters, in the failure of these encounters, in the tenderness and compassion of the human drama, the delusion.

I Love Dick is also a reminder that if you ever become the *objet a* of someone with strong neurotic tendencies, like Dick became for Chris—run for your life! Often we hear of the drama of those who want to be the beloved only to discover that they are one of many, a single link in the chain of metonymy. But an equal tragedy is being treated as if you have the key to the universe, the agalmata, when you want the other to leave you alone, to treat you as an acquaintance, a colleague, a flirt, or simply to disappear from your life. To become the unwanted *objet a* of someone you do not desire or love can be a horrible experience. Despite efforts to move that relationship out of the realm of desire, one may still be idealized, hated, stalked, excluded, and punished in a similar way as a mother who abandons her child in need is punished. "Do not desire me" is as urgent a request as "desire me," but it

is less popular in dramatic plots. In the best case scenario, this structure of unrequited desire can turn into an inconvenience for the "object." In the worst case, it can turn into a true nightmare, from stalking to violence. How much of a nightmare will depend on the neurotic tendencies towards compulsion and the degree of power they have over the unwilling desired.

Desire, love, objectification, and debasement are also at the core of Lisa Taddeo's book *Three Women* (2019). This book is based on the "real-life" experiences of three women, as shared with the author. Taddeo interviewed many people and studied desire for years before publishing this work. She argues that, "Talking to these people made me remember how little I'd asked of my own mother. [...W]ho she was after my father died." (Taddeo 2019, 264) After talking to hundreds of people about their experiences of desire, Taddeo "found that mothers are the wildest, most affecting forces in many of our lives. [...] With most of the women I spoke with, it was the influence of the mother that weighted the most heavily in their life decisions" (Taddeo 2019, 262). This reminds us of Hamlet's dialogue with his mother, the Queen, at the climax of the classical play. As Lacan (2019) so brilliantly makes us notice in his seminar on the interpretation of desire, Hamlet's interpellation to his mother on her love affair can be parodied as follows: But what do you want, woman? Where is your shame? And at your age! How can you have such a disgraceful desire? I am outraged and disgusted by your lust. Here, it is good to remember that in psychoanalysis feelings of disgust point towards desire. Is it because Hamlet himself wants to be the object of his mother's passion that he can feel such repulsion?

Hamlet feels entitled by the law and by all of what he believes to be right to shame his mother, and yet he gives up. As if faced with something no one can control, he changes his position: So be it, go mother, go to the bed of my uncle, the assassin, to be taken, to take. There is nothing I can do or understand about your wanting. What did my mother want? This is the question that, according to Lacan, launches the process of the subject of enunciation and of desire. Do you know what your mother wants? Hamlet's problem, compared to those of his lost desire, the young maid Ophelia, is not that he has not debased his

mother, it is that he has not debased his father, an idealized image that was compared to a god. The King was so good and perfect, and the Queen was so weak and depraved. This is also such a classic and tragic structure of desire and love: The perfect parent versus the fallen parent. Hamlet needs to debase both so that he can humanize both of them and love them in their fall. He needs to separate himself from the desire of his mother, into which he is trapped by hate and disgust, and from the desire of his father for revenge, the command to follow his father's wanting and the law, to be able to stand and want on his own.

"My mother never spoke about what she wanted. About what turned her on or off," Taddeo (2019, 7) shares with us in the author's note to *Three Women.* In her nonfiction narration, we follow three women who, like Hamlet, also fight to stand and recover their wanting. We witness their explorations of sexual desire, infatuation, and obsession, as if we are participating in their psychoanalytical journeys. The paradoxical combination of idealization and debasement of oneself and others is central to the plot of this book and to sexual enjoyment. After being sexually assaulted by three classmates as a teenager, Lina married a serious and cold man. She appears as the prototype of the woman and mother, suffering the erotic indifference of the good husband. She engages in an affair with an old high school flame, who she knows does not love her or prioritize her, but from whom she can get jouissance and a sense of being alive after her traumatic assault and years of being starved of affection. Maggie is a high school girl who engages in a relationship with her attractive married teacher, who turns out not to love her, a case that ends in court and scars her psychologically for life. In both of these cases, there are examples of extreme degrees of humiliation caused by wanting the other. Maggie and Lina circle obsessively around their desired, debasing themselves to be wanted by their lovers, which they clearly perceive as having their *objet a.* Their fiery behavior continues despite (or maybe because of) knowing that they are not loved by the other. Maggie and Lina are constantly questioning what the other's desire is. What does the other want? "To make the other into an insoluble riddle on which my life depends is to consecrate the other as god" (Barthes 2018, 135). Along with their personal suffering, Maggie and Lina's

stories are also marked by high peaks of sexual enjoyment and affirmation, of erotic and life energy.

The third protagonist, Sloane, has another desire structure. This elegant and successful entrepreneur engages in an affair with a man whom she neither admires nor deeply desires. This lover is not her *objet a,* as was the case for Lina and Maggie. Sloane has been in a quite satisfying marriage where there has been both love and desire, albeit often involving a threesome structure. Her problem, though, is that her husband enjoys seeing her making love with other men. In those sexual encounters, Sloane is not able to feel herself, she is not in her desire. As the story progresses, she engages in sexual relations on a self-destructive trip to feel something, anything, and to provoke through the gazes and the extreme feelings of others the appearance of her own wanting. It is as if what Sloane was searching for all along was the imaginary coherence of her own ego, her "me." What is common to the three women, Taddeo tells us, is that, due to their passion and risk-taking, they had been judged by others in their communities: "they were 'other.' When really everyone is 'other' to everyone else" (Taddeo 2019, 262).

Sloane and her husband's relationship helps us to see the importance of the third person in some structures of desire. The combination of three is, according to Fink (2016), linked to imaginary and symbolic structures, where one can desire the lover or partner because of the introduction of a third, as in the case of the jealous woman, who maintains her desire thanks to the imagination of her husband desiring another woman. This type of woman ends with her imitating the third, the rival, who keeps desire alive for the subject. Similarly, there is the man who maintains his desire for a woman because he imagines her already being taken by someone else. The rival is often someone admired or father-like, such as the magnificent John Malkovich as Vicomte de Valmont in *Dangerous Liaisons.* In this type of desire, the obsessive seems to be desiring the very impossibility of his desire. What is relevant here is that in many cases the image of a third enters as a pointer that allows another to become the beloved. It is this third, often anchored in a symbolic idealization — the rival is imagined as more beautiful, wise, powerful, etc. than oneself — that allows libidinal energy towards the

object. This structure reminds us of the case of falling for a girl your best friend has just declared that he desires, as if our desire was without direction until it was helped. If these lovers were to finally obtain their object and the threat of the other woman or the rival disappeared, their desire would also tend to disappear (Fink 2016).

Although these structures of desire can feel hopeless in questions of debasement, the most exasperating are the characters in Jonathan Franzen's novel *Freedom* (2010), another classic love triangle. My sense of frustration when engaging with these characters is partly related to the stereotypical nature of these types of desire structures, but maybe that is also why it is relevant to share them here. This novel is an exploration of freedom in desire, where we follow three friends who have unreciprocated desires. Patty is married to the good and trustworthy Walter, but falls in love with and desires, for years and years, the troubled and impossible guy, her husband's friend Richard. Richard is an immature and troubled musician. Insecure despite his high sexual appeal and helpless in his dealings with fame, Richard is an attractive type who desires only metonymically, and has an honest, friendly love for Walter. While Patty knows her desire is a form of masochistic enjoyment combined with self-pity, she is equally unable to claim it, neither before nor after having finally had sex with Richard, a supposed forbidden and imagined life climax which turns out to be an anticlimax. This precipitates Walter starting an affair with a younger woman, whom he does not love and only partially desires, a reaction that is a combination of revenge and self-pity. Patty seems permanently torn between her locus of love and her locus of desire. This time it is not the image of motherhood that dissolves desire, but fatherhood or male domesticity.

The life of the three protagonists unfolds as nothing but the dream of American liberty, as if each one were playing the wrong character in the life of the other. What is going on here? Part of it is the nonsensical in desire, the sense that the real manifests as a form of fate that chooses our *objet a* for us. But *Freedom* also shows us how the bad guy or the bad girl, the debased ones, are not only those who fit the stereotype of the Don Juan and vamp. Instead we can feel an irresistible attraction to those who appear

lost to themselves or in need. Subjects of desire can more easily disguise their deep dependency on the other if this relationship can be veiled as help, and thereby regain some of the power of a fading subject. An object of desire as the poor and helpless other allows us to maintain some appearance of control even if only in the face of our own egos. It may be easier to reveal and feel our lack when the other appears to be an incarnation of "lacking." In this sense, we do not love what they have, but what they do not have:

> Isn't it often the case that although we may be fascinated or captivated by someone who appears to have only good qualities, we only begin to love him or her from the moment we suspect that he or she is somewhat (if not deeply) unhappy, quite clueless about something, rather awkward, clumsy, or helpless? Isn't it in his or her nonmastery or incompleteness that we see a possible place for ourselves in his or her affections[?] (Fink, 2016, 41)

As in the cases of Patty, Richard, and Walter, the "lost ones" are much more easily desired as objects than the more perfect ones, who could be sleeping right beside oneself. However, a fantasy of perfection and admiration might have been what kicked off the more narcissistic or ideal-ego oriented relationships of desire to start with.

In perversion, objectification has a different texture than in neurosis. An exhibitionist or a voyeur gets jouissance from being part of the unconscious enjoyment that he imagines in the other. Examples include the surprised other, like the young girl being surprised by the erect penis of an exhibitionist in a park, or the observed other, a neighbor showering being spied upon by the voyeur. That a large majority of social media users are lurkers should tell us something about how these technologies enable Lacanian perversion, in the sense of getting jouissance from voyeurism and exhibitionism. Being the object of desire, the total identification of the subject with the object as a representation of the big Other's desire, is what characterizes perversion in a Lacanian understanding of this term. The fetish and fetishism are the most extreme cases of objectification, as the desired is

reduced to a material or physical object. An original and moving example of fetishism is Haruki Murakami's short story "Confessions of a Shinagawa Monkey" (2020). The monkey in this story can speak, and he desires and loves women. But, being a monkey, the only way he can satisfy his desire is by stealing their names and turning them into objects:

> "And the names you steal are only those of the women you love or sexually desire. Do I have that right?"
>
> "Exactly. I don't randomly steal just anybody's name."
>
> [...]
>
> "So you use that object with the woman's name on it, along with your will power, to steal a name?"
>
> "Precisely. I stare at the name that's written there for a long time, focusing my emotions, absorbing the name of the person I love. It takes a lot of time and is mentally and physically exhausting. I get completely engrossed in it, and somehow a part of the woman becomes a part of me. And my affection and my desire, which until then had no outlet, are safely satisfied."
>
> "So there's nothing physical involved?"
>
> The monkey nodded sharply. "I know I'm just a lowly monkey, but I never do anything unseemly. I make the name of the woman I love a part of me — that's plenty for me. I agree it's a bit perverted, but it's also a completely pure, platonic act. I simply possess a great love for that name inside me, secretly. Like a gentle breeze wafting over a meadow." (Murakami 2020)

In this sweet and moving story, Murakami's creativity makes us sense the materiality of the signifier of the name. Names are something that can be stolen, kept, revered. Seven women are turned into objects of desire by their name, reduced to a group of letters that can capture a being. And then, at the same time, we sense how once the name is the name of the beloved, the object loses its materiality and enters the realm of the real, of love, of the material and immaterial as incommensurable, like the breeze touches a meadow. Is her revered name "she"? This fluidity of movement between the desired objectification and a sudden turn

into love reminds us of the name not as object, but as invocation, naming the other as presencing the other in the world. A lucky monkey is able to desire and love in the same space, the space of the letter.

Perversion is simultaneously idealization and objectification of the other. We sense in perversion and in stories of voyeurs, exhibitionists, and fetishists how the subject feels like the monkey who is not worthy of the object of desire, like being on the edge of immensity and knowing one is not up to the task but still feeling hypnotized by it. They might try to catch it in a little something that they can carry around in their pocket, hide it in a drawer or in their mind. The fetish occurs because there is first an idealization which is captured by objectification. The object is a prop that helps the self to hold on tightly at the edge of the abyss. The tension between the dominion of the ideal and submission of the object is also at play in other forms of perversion, such as sadomasochism.

At times, that process of objectification and idealization is not made by the subject that desires but by the one that knows of being desired. Like responding to Lacan's comment on women wanting to be desired more than loved (Lacan 2019), or Perel's (2006) insight on women's desire being turned on by them being the turn on. One of my favorite poems by Margaret Atwood, "Ava Gardner Reincarnated as a Magnolia," portrays the dilemma of objectification and how history does not reward being an object of desire, the want for careless enjoyment, but rather celebrates the heroic sacrificial quest:

> What would have given
> me weight? Substance? For them.
> Long canines? Vengeance?
> A stiletto hidden in my skirt,
> a greyish rainbow of fate
> like an aureole of rancid lard —
> or better: dress up in armor,
> ride across the steppes, leading a horde
> of armed murderers. That gets you a statue,
> copper or stone, with a solemn frown,
> — jaw clenched as if chewing —



Fig. 18. Ava Gardner. Flickr.

like those erected by the sober
citizens, years later,
for all the sad destroyers.
Well, to hell with them. I'd rather
be a flower, even this one, so much like
a toilet-paper decoration
at a high school dance. (Atwood 1995, 30–32)

This poem is magnificent in how it portrays desire as the weapon and how it reclaims the flesh, the joy, the instant, as a cure against the delusion of historized eternity, war, and fame. It is a poem celebrating the antiheroine, the objectivized woman, the object of desire. Desire, that "ancient ploy / and vital puzzle, water- / of-life cliché that keeps things going, tawdry and priceless" (Atwood, 1995, 32), that space of careless love, laughter, and

drinks. Part of why this poem has stayed with me for years is because of the actress Ava Gardner (fig. 18).

My grandmother, who is still a beauty even now at 98 years of age, was said to look like her. I do not remember when I heard the story of their likeness or from whom, but I must have sensed the truth of this saying even if I had only seen Gardner a few times in old movies. I would sit in the living room of my grandmother's house on a sofa, right under a large portrait of my grandmother in her thirties, and think how she looked like Ava Gardner. The portrait exuded contained sexiness and one could not look at it too long or too attentively without feeling a sense of trespassing. My grandmother is portrayed in an elegant white and deep green silk party dress with bare shoulders, as seen from the back, and a long neck, short dark hair, and a perfect profile. It was an odd and fabulous painting in a traditional and religious household, hanging there, mixed with her many family photos and images of saints. "I did not want the painter to paint me with bare shoulders, but he would not do otherwise," she told me recently, "and I confessed for this." Even at 98 she was shy when seeing me, her granddaughter, examining the painting. I smiled, trying to make that intimate, vulnerable moment stay forever in my mind. Like when you know that you have just received a precious gift. She knew also how that portrait invites desire. And her hesitation makes sense, that painting is so much her, my grandmother, an explosion of wanting life, of being alive. It is not easy to put so much erotic energy into the mold of decency. It flows overboard, calling for trouble as soon as one single shoulder is revealed, "in / the flesh, the flesh" (Atwood 1995, 32). I am so thankful to that painter, whose name I do not know, and I stand with him, carpe diem, because how many times are you allowed to paint the spirit of an Ava Gardner?

However, not all tensions between objectification and idealization serve to foster or maintain desire. Virginia Woolf's irony helps us to see how there are parodic debasements of the other through the aggrandizing of the other in her novel *To the Lighthouse* (2017). The constant need for attention and deferential treatment that the father demands of the mother, his constant worry about status and comparison with others, and his neediness to appear as an admirable man is a constant turn

off. We can sense that the libidinal energy of his wife is being consumed. This beloved is not the idealized hero or the bad boy, but the spoiled child, a debasement position that will turn most women, even the most desired ones, into a mother and not a lover. Fink (2016) mentions the tendency of so many men to eventually treat their wives as something more like their mothers, and how in his psychoanalytical practice the most common slip of the tongue is the use of "mother" when the analysand means "wife." This change seems to be quite lethal for sexual desire. However, it is seldom that psychoanalitical theory focuses on the woman position in this structure. To be treated as if a mother is in itself deadly for the phallic desire of the woman. What we feel in the mother in *To the Lighthouse* is her constant languishing, like a life exhausted by being soaked in the demands of others for care and affirmation. When providing that demanded admiration to the spoiled partner, the woman must pretend to be inferior to the man, all the while knowing that she is the adult who gives the "child" what he needs. This does not and cannot foster erotic desire. On the contrary, in the best of cases, it can lead to tenderness and in the worst case (secretly held?) spite.

Entitlement and objectification may be easier to get when facing the many others, objects in a metonymic chain, than when facing the other, the beloved. This is most surely why Lacan (1998) in his seminar on sexuation differentiates between having intercourse and making love. If love is to be made, there is an exposure of us to each other through presence and being incommensurable to each other. There is therefore a dance to be learned or to hope for between seeing the other as sea — reverence, exposure, declaration — and seeing the other as bread — nourishment, need, wanting, having, taking. But if we are to find our bearings as a subject of enunciation, as a me, there is no choice but to face the object: "the object fascinates the subject, but that is not its major function. This object is what stops the subject from having his pure and simple existence wiped out" (Lacan 2019, 378). Wiped out by what? By the all of the real in its chaotic meaningless, and by the big Other of society, culture, and history. In the same way, we are never as much a subject as when we desire, but we are nevertheless fading as a subject at one and the same time. Nothing expresses our inner self as much as our

inner desire for the other, but, equally, as soon as the other takes its place vis-à-vis us, our own ego fades and turns, like the moon rotates around the earth.

The Declaration of Dependency

We are fascinated by the myth of declarations of independence: dreams of freedom, new lands and new futures, a promise of beginnings and utopias. Depending on others and others depending on you does not bring the same level of fascination, far from it. *To give what you do not have* is, when looked at from the position of the other, the receiver, a declaration of dependency. The one who loves gives his presence, and, as Lacan says, that presence amounts to everything for the one who gives it. But what does this mean when seen from the receiving end of love, the beloved? I receive everything through the presence of the other who exposes and declares himself to me by being, by existing. I can either receive and be open to that everything or I can be closed to it. I can call for it to be given (please love me) or I can reject it (please do not love me). To be open to be loved and to receive that love is as complicated or difficult as to love. Both positions demand forms of agency, and the passive versus active stereotype dissolves. To take the exposure of the other, the one who is declaring and exposing himself, also demands an opening of the vulnerability of the nothingness or lack. Not because loving or being loved will in any way fulfill that lack or make us whole (we wish!), but because it will reveal what we already always know when touched by love, that we have opened, been overflowed, and crossed over.

Both Fink (2016) and Barthes (2018) tend to agree that the exposition of lack and vulnerability resembles a process of feminization, as if the stereotype and prejudice of the masculine looked down on the declaration of dependency and demanded a performance of independence. Simply put, declaring "I need you" would belong to the universal feminine in the human (men, women, and others all have and relate to the feminine). This feminine jouissance is explained in Lacan's theory of sexuation (1998) (see Chapter 3). For Barthes, being in love demands a fierce wanting to possess (he is clearly referring to the desire for

objet a here), but also to give actively. A love gives, with that generosity of exposition. This is for him a dialectic, which can only be mastered as long as the mad lover "feminizes himself, joins the class of Grandes Amoureuses, of women who love enough to be kind" (Barthes 2018, 126). In "any man who utters the other's absence something feminine is declared: this man who waits and who suffers from this waiting is miraculously femininized" (Barthes 2018, 14). And yet, as bell hooks indicates, while socialization might encourage love and care in women this does not necessarily mean that they "are more emotionally equipped to do the work of love than our male counterparts. Afraid of love, many of us focus more on finding a partner" (hooks 2000, 154).

The way in which wanting to possess madly and wanting to give madly is a double movement in love is conveyed in "I Wanna Be Yours" by punk poet John Cooper Clarke:

> I wanna be your raincoat
> For those frequent rainy days
> I wanna be your dreamboat
> When you want to sail away
> Let me be your teddy bear
> Take me with you anywhere
> I don't care
> I wanna be yours. (Clarke 1982)

This poem is like the mirror image of the song "You're the One That I Want" from the movie *Grease,* which began this chapter. "I Wanna Be Yours" is not saying "you have the phallus, you are my object, and I am declaring my desire." Instead, it is saying "I would like to be any thing and no-thing, to be had by you, to be you and still not to be you, like your raincoat is you and is not you. I want to be your helper but also your freedom — the dreamboat to sail away." Clarke's poem is witty and tender, such an amazingly rare combination. And it is first and foremost a courageous and bold declaration of dependency: "I don't care," "you call the shots / I want to be yours." (Clarke 1982)What is it that the poet does not care about? All those reservations, all that keeping a façade of independence, all that pretense or need to appear to be on top of things, in control: I don't care, I just need

to tell you that I love you. Full of humanity in all its materiality, "I Wanna Be Yours" reminds us that our bodily borders dilute in the materialities and surroundings that are the multiple selves of our daily life; that the energy and mystery of self and subject appear transferred to those materials, as saints were believed to have passed on their holiness to the relics, or the young girl lover in *The Museum of Innocence,* the novel by Orhan Pamuk (2009), is believed to have transferred her being to the pencil she used to write her high school homework. The raincoat is the ocean. The ocean is the raincoat. The pencil is sacred. Sacredness is the pencil. There is no distance, only presence in the metaphorical: if I could just be had by you for a moment, just as you hold that cup, as you are that cup. When this happens, it is not the subject made an object of the fantasy of desire, but a contrary move, the object made part of the all infused by love. The object helps us not to be completely diluted when encountering the all. To be triumphant when conquered.

To be open to the possibility of receiving love and loving in return is to be open to a declaration of dependency of the most extreme kind, to say yes to the possibility of receiving the all, but also to lack everything in the absence of that presence. Because while love is not of the dialectic of the subjectification (i.e., it is not determined by the relationships between the subject of statement and the Other, or between the subject of enunciation and the others as egos), it is indeed marked by the logic of absence and presence of the other affecting our symbolic and imaginary worlds.

When I Love You Is "The You Is Love"

That we are in the presence of love and not only desire is what we experience when reading the novel *Inseparables,* by Simone de Beauvoir (2021), which portrays the deep love and friendship between de Beauvoir (Sylvie) and her school friend Elisabeth Lacoin (Andrée). If anything, this novel, situated between the autobiographical and the fictional, is the contrary of objectification. We are offered the becoming of the girl, Andrée, in all her complexity, fragility, immense beauty, and mystery. Like in a communion we get to see through de Beauvoir's love the

thousand greens and blues of her beloved, the other as an oceanic immensity of being. Andrée is the familiar, a school friend, and is also paradoxically always new, a familiarity that is always open to difference. We follow de Beauvoir's intense desperation when Elisabeth dies, way too early at 21, and cannot but bow to that absolute loss. Love as presence of the other, Andrée, is the embodied *fragile absolute* entering a school class after the summer holidays; the incommensurable right now and here among us: "I suddenly understood, with astonishment and joy, that the emptiness in my heart my gloomy feeling of recent days, had only one cause: *The absence* of Andrée. Living without her was no longer living" (de Beauvoir 2021, 16, my emphasis).

This love is the absolute as exposed in the most concrete form of the other. The love depicted in this novel is in the writing as much as in the meaning. Sweetness, joy, and suffering drop from its pages. In the loving gaze that is always there, constantly witnessing her friend, a gaze that reveals all her details in a light not of perfection or debasement (Andrée's personality and decisions are often troubled), but of uniqueness and of being fully human, so far away from any caricature or any "part" of the whole. Andrée's way of walking; the contour of her neck; her laughter; her doubts, fears, and apprehensions; her beauty unfolds as a unique embodied sacredness, the opposite of glamour or fashion. We witness how she is being given to her friend each day as a blessing, thanks to her existence, her being in the world. But she is not aware of giving or being given. The "you" that appears in the "I love you" of this novel is a beat, a light that is forever had. The gaze does not need to turn the beloved into a heroine or an object. It is not a case of too much and too little, too close, too far. Andrée does not contain *objet a;* there is nothing to find behind the veil, no diamond and no *agalma*. She simply is. Always already enough. We fall into and expand through the love of Sylvie for Andrée.

The symbolism at the heart of the novel is the red roses that Sylvie throws into Andrée's grave, a drop of passion that contrasts the innocence and erotic repression represented by the family's white roses. She is love as those roses are love, that metaphorical movement of presence and beauty giving from itself.

As expressed in the verses of Mary Oliver's poem "Poppies," of course nothing stops death, and loss is the great lesson, and yet:

> Inside the bright fields,
> touched by their rough and spongy gold,
> I am washed and washed
> in the river
> of earthly delight
> and what are you going to do
> what can you do
> about it
> deep, blue night? (Oliver 1992, 39)

Andrée, the beloved, a red rose, a poppy…all. This is the magic and the power of metaphor. When we call our beloved life, bread, light, sun, joy, it is not poetic form, but the poetic making the real home in reality. That person is felt and lived, being these things and then taking them away when leaving. In that presence and absence, you had one world and wake up one day to discover that you are in another world, but other people cannot see how all the planets in your universe have been rearranged. Perception is different, and all decisions have to be different. It does not make sense to try to explain it, you could just as well try to explain why there are two moons. And now you have a new knowledge that feels both impossible and true. I have come to think that there are many ways in which the world becomes a new world. Through terrible loss such as losing a child. Through the amazing grace of receiving a child. Through love and desire. And what can you do about it, deep, blue night?

George dreams of kissing his dead lover, Jim. This is the way Tom Ford's film *A Single Man* (2009) begins. George awakens to a rearranged world after the sudden loss of the "you" that he loved. He has decided to commit suicide that day. The film is the journey of this day in which he reemerges into meaning after having been separated from love, the metaphor of a lifetime after our primary separation from the all. It is an encounter with life, through desire, like a beating heart that has stopped and is now receiving electric shock treatment. The first electric shock is caused by the surprising beauty he sees in the body of another, an

attractive man at a gas station who is leaning on a car. Then there are more: the eyes of desire and erotic interest of George's young student who makes a pass at him; the drunken embrace of his dearest female friend, Charley, who wants him. The many shocks of desire pull him out of the absolute presence of love and into himself, sensing his wanting, being wanted, recovering himself as a me, right after staring into the abyss of nothing. This is desire creating the necessary distance, a fixation point in your ego, to be able to remain in love's presence. To take it, want it, and be. Defibrillation desire therapy might reopen the possibility of "I love" and take the invitation of happiness from the world whose beauty is pouring itself out, the "earthy delight" despite knowing that there is nothing that doesn't "sooner or later drown / in the indigos of darkness" (Oliver 1992, 39).

Love, like Simone's love for her friend Elisabeth and George's love for his partner Jim, is the contrary of objectification as debasement. It is the no-thing presencing itself and it is us as the presence of the giving of no-thing. Desire is us as facing and wanting "the" thing in another, and hoping to have or to be the thing of another. Both have different trajectories and they do not always meet, but they are often doors to each other, and are weaved in such a way that we will never be able to comprehend or capture completely, and for this, we can be grateful.

8

Fragments and Expositions

Moon Loves

Gazing at the moon one feels the immediate need to be hugging someone, like gazing at it from within an embrace, protected, so as not to fall into infinite darkness.

Gazing at the sun is the opposite. One feels like expanding. One's body, jumping, dancing towards it or standing tall, closing one's eyes and facing it, feeling its heat under the eyelids.

Gazing at the sun is in itself like being inside a warm embrace. The sun brings exposure out from within us, so naturally and welcoming; with the moon there is a warning.

Are there desires of sun and desires of moon, like two different types of othering, two different types of exposure? Are there sun loves and moon loves? Some loves are exposed only within, the hidden loves. How many loves are there around the world that are or were hidden, and where do they go when they are never spoken about. Are they also declared within? Presence happens in a caved interiority, being there for the other, contemplating love without the other knowing of that presence, love pouring out of beats and breaths. Words, says John O'Donohue (1997), speak outwards and inwards. Each time one of them is spoken, our mind, which he describes as the senses of our interior being, also declares what is inside the dark night of our bodies. An interior declaration is a declaration of moon love, and it is lonely with a threatening shadow cast over its magical beauty. Moon loves demand an exterior embrace to compensate for the loneli-

ness of a love that is never externally declared. Maybe when we hug others, we hug for the unspoken loves of humanity.

Once there is nothing more to say about a moon love, one that is never declared, the room inside the night of our bodies remains but is now closed and vacant. Like the bedrooms of children who have left home that still contain their memories, but not their liveliness or their scent. When we gaze at the moon we sense all of those loves that were never declared or were perhaps never born. Like the shivering silver reflection of the moonlight over the sea, she illuminates our interior's fleshy, wet, dark nights, there where the sun never reaches. We sing to her so that they, the moon loves, will hear a voice through our poems and our lyrics. We say what was never said back to her.

The moon is a love longing.

The Body as Instrument

In postmodernism there is a recovering of the body through a diluting of the body, fading flesh-structure into liquid which can then be poured into different vessels and forms, like a thousand colorful cocktails. This aesthetic of fluid is a tool to existentially address a claustrophobic essentialism that cages you at birth based on the determination of your sex organs. First with an X written on a template at the hospital, then a name and gender that will determine the relationship of others towards you and of you with yourself from your inception. Liquidity promises liberation, yet leaves us deserted like after a heavy storm has passed. The storm helps us clean the air, but the water leaves the landscape purified without meaning, like the landscape of our bodies.

There are other ways to transcend the essentialization of gender identity and of our gendered and sexualized bodies. Joan Miró's sculptures "Maternité" ("Maternity") (fig. 19) and "Femme et oiseau" ("Woman and Bird") (fig. 20) allow for a different transcendence of sexual and gender identity through an aesthetic of the immense and of the centrality of the vaginal as no-thing. By giving us its simplest form and expanding it, Miró gives us the woman's body as signifier. A signifier that is different from an essence or a determined nature. His aesthetic of exagger-



Figure 19. Joan Miró, "Femme et oiseau" ("Woman and Bird"), 1962. Fundació Pilar i Joan Miró a Mallorca. Photo by the author.

ation links the form of the flesh to the real and the symbolic, the body appearing like an archaic universal instrument. The body is brought as a form of symbolic DNA of the species. Women's bodies of all ages are vases, vessels of sounds, air, liquid. Miró's womanhood reminds me of Jean-Luc Nancy's (1991) reflection on how love trespasses identity and sexual identity. An imagination of our bodies, not as cuts or as something to be entered, and



Fig. 20. Joan Miró, "Maternité" ("Maternity"), 1973. Fundació Pilar i Joan Miró a Mallorca. Photo by the author.

our being freed from the imaginary of penetration or complementarity. Bodies as instruments, something to be played as one would play a guitar, bodies as joy. The contemplation of Miró's sculptures provokes a meditation of time, of being and of the transcendence of my own body. Seeing myself in both sculptures, the one of maternity and the one of the woman with bird, is like seeing my body anew, as an archaic vessel, a sounding instrument of oceanic taste, like seashells turned into music instruments by the ancient inhabitants of the Mediterranean.

Something similar happens in the universe of Haruki Murakami's novel *1Q84* (2011). This novel presents a multiplicity of views on the phallic. There is a connection to the phallus like Lacan's object of desire, but it is not only this, because in this case it is not an imagined desire of the other that can be occupied by an imaginary object of desire. Here, the phallus is represented and embodied by the male sexual organ, the penis. In its contemplation of the male sexual organ, the novel provokes a similar transcendence of essentialism or simple basic or descriptive naturalism. Through a stream of magical-realistic sexual, erotic, and romantic scenes, the penis is described, held, examined, caressed,

reimagined, symbolized, and dreamt about. It is a bodily part transformed into something immense and sacred, a threshold between light and darkness, a fetish, or a tool for the creation of new worlds. It is owned by the individual, a subjective organ, and a door to the strangeness of oneself, an organ as a stranger that can be adored, looked at from the outside, or taken by others, against one's will.

Like in Miró's sculptures, in Murakami's *1Q84* universe there is a different, but similar, aesthetic of immensity. The bodily does not dilute into a liquid universal nothingness from which to create one's own personal art project of a body. Instead, the sexual body is exposed under a powerful light projector. It is in this contemplation of the man's penis that straight women readers find ourselves in a space of impossible feelings: laughing, moved, aroused, surprised, and threatened. The grotesqueness and tenderness of the humane is also a way of going beyond essentializing views of our bodies and ourselves. The powerful light transforms the penis into a black and white symbol, very much like a letter, a symbolic three-dimensional tattoo of the phallic letter (maybe like an "a") inscribed on a man's body as an intrinsic exteriority. Sexuality is suspended between the "I" and the "me" of Lacanian subjectivity, with its flesh roots and multiple meanings situated outside itself. The constant reference and contemplation of the phallic and the bodily organ of the penis disrupts the essential or any form of permanent meaning on the male body. It also holds it in a different time, going back to the darkness when language appeared, the time of the species. The bodies of *1Q84's* protagonist, a male writer named Tengo, and the other men in the story become holders of liquids and sounds, another form of clay vase, another instrument. Theirs is a masculinity of comical strangeness where their male organ allows different relationships to others, to women and to themselves.

Is there a space for in-betweeness if we put the woman of Miró and the phallic man of Murakami side by side? A space for someone not to be woman or man, beyond the postmodern metaphorical world of liquidity? I think there is. There is an enunciating element in saying "I am woman," or "I am man," that is not related to the vessel. Instead, it is associated with what "woman" or "man" has come to signify in a specific time and cul-

ture, and how it is incorporated in the becoming of "me." To say that "I am not that signifier" with those meanings attached to it is not the same as saying that "I am not a vessel." Our gender and sexuality link to forms of immensity, subjectivity, and strangeness that go beyond anything we can remember or any written word that becomes the incarnation of the word. Paradoxically, immensity and minimalism go hand-in-hand. By expanding, we get closer to the basics. The metaphorical expansion begins in what is most particular. The question could be put in this way: What form would, in its utmost simplicity, represent being? A vessel with marks, no more, no less. Those simple elements become everything and therefore immense. It is the aesthetic of immensity that brings with it a different form of minimalism that speaks back to the imprisonment of language. By taking a single element of the body and condensing it in its most simple form, and then expanding that form to constitute the core of the subject, there is a recovery of structuralism but also a sublimation of it.

Barthes (2018) reminds us that I-love-you as statement is beyond language and resembles music. Bodies, like instruments, do not get out of the form, but are constituted by a form that is immensity. Singing instead of arguing, passing instead of owning, exposing instead of capturing. Although the immense appears in the first case through the exaggeration and centrality of the form (Miró) and in the second by projecting the light of immense multiplicity (Murakami), these surrealistic universes remind us of Lacan. The sexual organ is there but the desire is more and beyond and across the organ. "The body being (*l'être du corps*) is of course sexed (*sexué*), but it is secondary [to love], as they say. And as experience shows, the body jouissance, insofar as that body symbolizes the Other, does not depend on those traces" (Lacan 1998, 5). The organ does not determine the type of desire, but it links to desire and is also a door to strangeness or to the outside of oneself, the outside as humanity. We need the third space if we look at sexual desire in relation to the norm of heterosexuality, but not when we find ourselves in a fantastic symbolic universe like the one in *1Q84,* where these categories are broken open, where the one is touched by another, and expres-

sions of love and desire are always already paradoxical, multiple and singular.

In the novel we follow the female protagonist Aomame's discovery of others' bodies, loving in and across the categories of erotic or filial love whilst being deeply in love with one man, Tengo. Aomame's love for Tengo is portrayed as something that includes, but also transcends, the sexed being or sexuality. *1Q84* is a reminder of the power of the minimal, the singular: one touch, one kiss, one squeezing of the hand, the one banal moment (the cliché) that is transformed and infused by the real. Our being as vases and clay, sexual organs as immense and minimal, the presence and possibility of multiple sounds and liquids, touches and expressions, of forms and spirits crossing them. Bodies as multiplicity and immensity, beyond two.

Making the Signifier Bleed

If we are the locus of language and we are spoken into being, how to dismantle a structure that renders some lives and relations impossible? What is to be done about the differentiations and inscriptions of bodies? How to change how we come to recognize what is a viable life (Butler and Athanasiou, 2013)? One relevant response proposes the everlasting multiplicity of signifiers, the diluting of identity and categorization into a fluid spectrum of beingness manifested as fragmentation. This is for example what is suggested by the + sign of the LGBTQ2SIA+ movement. Also named multicultural universalism, Lacanian and other theorists (Salecl 1998; Butler and Athanasiou, 2013; Bhabha 2015) see this position as the appropriation of diversity by liberalists and capitalism. There is no doubt that recognizing the dignity and rights of diverse sexual identities is one of the most important and necessary social fights, an ethical duty. It is deeply distressing that we are still so far away from achieving equal opportunities and freedom for all in relation to gender and sexual identity. So how can the + sign be seen in a different light? The idea of identity as a simple multiplication may imply ignorance of difference and foster the creation of an ever expanding marketplace of signifiers of identity. "Do you want more signifiers attached to more identity doors? No problem I can give you infinite doors to be desired,"

capitalism seems to say. This is the logic of multiplicity reduced to a single value; paradoxically this diversity ends in a universal equalizer. Such strategy reformulates ideas of justice and inclusion into a pick-your-identity-marketplace. At the same time, it diverts and ignores suffering based on identity difference — that is, due to racism, xenophobia, antisemitism, homophobia, colonialism, and so on — and social demands against the expropriation of livelihood and labor as experienced by refugees, migrants and temporary workers, and Indigenous communities.

A different ethical position aims at the deconstruction of the signifier by the artistic and the erotic. Poetry, Audre Lorde tells us, is the vital necessity of existence because it informs the light of hopes and dreams, of change and survival "first made into language, then into idea, then into more tangible action" (Lorde 2017, 8). Desire to be intelligible or viable needs to address the power of the signifier:

> We share a commitment to language and to the power of language, and to the reclaiming of that language which has been made to work against us. [...] For those of us who write, it is necessary to scrutinize not only the truth of what we speak, but the truth of that language by which we speak it. (Lorde 2017, 5)

Lacan tells us that when we scrutinize the truth of language there is no foundational truth to be found, there is no Other of the Other. It is in that limit and impossibility that we are asked to find our courage (Lacan 1998). In these verses, Ocean Vuong shows us the power of the signifier and how poetry can illuminate our ways of living with each other:

> Once, at a party set on a rooftop in Brookling for an "artsy vibe," a young woman said, sipping her drink, *You're so lucky. You're gay plus you get to write about war and stuff. I am just white.* [Pause] *I got nothing.* [Laughter, glasses clinking]
>
> Because everyone knows yellow pain, pressed into American letters, turns to gold.
>
> Our sorrow Midas touched. Napalm with a rainbow afterglow. (Vuong 2022, 35–36)

These verses of the poem "Not Even" reveal how the speech of a young woman turns human suffering (sorrow, Napalm) into privilege (gold, Midas, rainbow afterglow), and the privileged (whiteness) into worthlessness (nothing). As if lives and grief were objects to be traded at a fancy artistic marketplace. We sense the sophisticated cruelty of this party scene where the identity signifiers of gay and Vietnamese (war and stuff), are used as violent materiality.

Lorde and Vuong insist on naming themselves and naming difference in a world that would rather have them and their desires silenced and invisible. In their poetry the signifier — man, woman, Black, white, American, Vietnamese, heterosexual, homosexual, mother, son — is not an essence, rather it is corporeally transformed into the place where the change of the symbolic order and the law can happen. They do not suppress desire into a neutral non-subjectivity, or into a multiplicity of sameness, a +. Instead they touch a different form of universality through a subjectivity that breaks our hearts open. They recreate and claim a desire that has traversed the law: "I am done talking, officer. I am dancing / in the rain with a wedding dress & it makes sense" (Vuong 2022, 13). I am done talking, I am beingness, I am eros. Lorde and Vuong help reconfigure the contours of what is our own intelligible presence without falling into "possessive and privative individualism" (Butler and Athanasiou 2013, 15). Rosalyn Diprose names this ethical act "writing in blood," while reminding us of the limits to structuralism, or the idea that language structure is all that we are:

> [T]he word, spoken or written (scientific or sociological) is not *on* or *about* its matter, as if separate from it. The word does come from a particular body, but not to shape it simply into a seamless socially recognised whole (which would be idealism or what some call "social constructionism" — where the body would be a "somatic fact created by a cultural effect"); and the word does come after a particular body, but not to describe its truth in commonly accepted terms (which would be realism or empiricism — where the word would be a "cultural fact created by a somatic effect"). Rather, the word is also always *of* a body, written in blood, sweat and tears. (Diprose 2002, 279)

Audre Lorde and Ocean Vuong make the signifier bleed. This is courageous and ethical *action.*

Coffee Love

The subject, I, is an interior exteriority and an exterior interiority, says Lacan. What is out there, the world, the other, language, is in here, in our most intimate constitution of the I, in the being and becoming of my subject, and in the dark sacredness of myself and its exposition to others. And coffee? What does all this have to do with coffee? Coffee is an interior exteriority and an exterior interiority. A form of liquid that melts into the subject and a form of love; one of the many voices of love. We may learn something from thinking with and through coffee that we may not see in the classical divisions of the many loves: parental, filial, marital, erotic, etc.

Coffee was one of the doors from childhood to adulthood in my life. A more beautiful, warm, and welcoming one than alcohol. As a child, there was something mysterious about coffee, about the ritual. But not on all occasions. School day mornings were too busy and hurried to notice whether there was coffee around. We would always be late, running to catch the school bus, trying not to forget to put the right books into our school bags. Coffee belonged to Sundays. On Sunday we would visit my grandparents at their house in the mountains. I often spent the whole weekend with them, but Sunday lunches were special. The whole family would come and my grandmother Ketty would prepare an abundant lunch. Those Sundays belonged to autumn, winter, or early spring, but not Mallorca's long summer months.

After lunch, a special form of tiredness and relaxation would fall over us, the after-effect of a generous meal and of being in a heated room with too many people. Like the second movement of a dance, one of the adults would say: "Let's sit by the fireplace." The women of the family, my grandmother, my mother and sometimes my aunts, would stand up and leave the large lunch table. It takes a while for everybody to find a seat on the velvet sofas and the deep purple leather armchairs, but then, there by the fireplace, coffee would be served, without hunger

and without rush. It was a liquid of total abundance and luxury. It did not respond to a need, it responded to a dark, hot desire. The tray would be placed on the small, black marble table and the coffee would be poured into small cups. The size of the cups was important, I learned. The larger ones were to be used for breakfast. My grandmother would serve. There was nothing left to improvisation in the coffee dance. They knew how to ask, how to pour, how to hold, how to give.

When I turned twelve or thirteen years old, I also got to drink the coffee. I understood that I was being invited to join one of the first conversations of adulthood. I was served in one of the small cups made of glazed clay hot milk, a drop of coffee and one or two spoons of sugar, so I would get used to the taste of coffee slowly, from the sweet to the bitter. Now I was one of them, my mom, my grandma, me, and the faded others. While smelling the liquid I would listen to the adults' conversation: daily and family gossip mixed with laughter. The abundance was not only in the liquid but in the slowness and the generosity of a conversation that did not need to go anywhere or do anything. The art of conversing is an art in itself. There would be love and generational love in the passing of those cups, the pouring of the coffee, the laughter, the slow drinking, in my grandmother allowing me to serve and looking directly in my eyes, saying "just a half, then it will stay warmer. I can have more later." She likes her liquids by the extremes, either very hot or very cold. And that is love, the intimacy of knowing what she likes, the intimacy of sharing that knowledge with ones' grandchild.

Where does that coffee go? The looking, smelling, sipping, drinking, sensing, and repeating, that is a communion, a communion of words. On the many Sundays spent towards entering adulthood, there is a lot of listening and not much saying. The large amount of milk and sugar in your cup reminds you that adulthood is a bit more than a drop away, and you are still "milky." As the years passed, those coffee conversations after Sunday's lunch turned my coffee into something darker. Now I could serve the others with grace and nonchalance, no instructions needed. I would be the one saying to my grandmother: "Only half, right, grandma?" And she would smile in recognition and all the love of the world between a grandmother and her oldest

granddaughter would be captured in that smile. The coffee color of her cup and mine looking so much alike. And like the color darkness my voice enters, giving opinions and examples, voicing a self, emerging as self in the warmth of a fireplace. Nothing bad could happen in that space of belonging, where one could begin to open. First as repetition of what one has listened to, beliefs and opinions that now would appear as one's own, with ones' tone of voice and enunciation, one's music expressed, a concert of voices of before and after and past and now. A space where individuality would appear inside the warmth of an embrace.

This moment would not last long. Its end would be announced by the beginning of the sunset, the softening of the light, and the arrival of the melancholy of Sundays, which is still as present today as it was then. The coffee would eventually be drunk, the rest would get cold, the cups would be taken back to the kitchen to be cleaned. The magic would be interrupted and daily life, with all its duties and demands, would resume, a reminder of the homework that still needed to be done, the coldness of the car on our way home. The circle of coffee sharing would turn into a line of dates and duties, me and you, goodbyes and urgencies.

Love is coffee, coffee is love. I was born through that circle. Where does coffee begin and end in me? Where does myself begin and end? Coffee is communion, an exterior interiority of love entering one's body, an incarnation of me and us, a becoming. Coffee does not rank, it is just there, exposed, declared, and shared in all its generosity. I am writing these words in a notebook whilst sitting in a café in Copenhagen, so far away from the place where I grew up. My favorite writing places are cafés. I am at home there because I have a cup of coffee in front of me, reminding me that I am welcomed in life, that I am talked to, listened to, that there is no rush, that there is abundance. Coffee whispers that I am allowed to be without being in need. It is reminder that there is a fireplace burning somewhere, the desire of a fulfilled desire, the beyond desire.

Hysteric Truth

The hysteric feels that erotic desire comes too early to her. She faces a wanting that she is never ready for.

The hysteric is right. The hysteric is truth.

If you know the pain of giving birth to another human being, you will also know this: How unprepared you are, and were, and will be. How fostering and giving life came too early and went too early, and that you were there, unprepared, all along.

I can't, I can't, I can't, I can't, ta–tam, ta–tam, ta–tam, ta–taaaaaaaah!

Shout to the heavens, for that unpreparedness is you hysterically.

And then, later, exhausted, lie in the sun, smile, let go.

Tree

Teach me falling

Teach me
damned soft fall

To let go with such grace
of everything I once nurtured
the fruits of my efforts
my protection
and pride

Teach me
graceful nakedness
to stand tall after the abandonment
of all my meanings

Teach me
how to be
a skeleton
holding nothing
but concentrated lines of darkness
writing in immensity

Petit

Petit Drama
The one falls in love with the other,
the other doesn't love the one.

Petit Comedy
The one desires the other because she has it
she doesn't believe she has it

She desires the one because the one has it
The one doesn't believe they have it

Petit Obsessive Pseudo-drama in Eight Bullet Points
- The one is surprisingly attracted to the other. It makes him feel alive.
- But the other destabilizes the one and he can't take this.
- The one pushes the other away with weird avoidance strategies.
- The other calls the one out on this and the one is too bright not to feel embarrassed.
- Now when the one sees the other, the one feels shame.
- There will soon come a point when the one will not want to see the other at all in order to not feel this way.
- And, most importantly, the other will also avoid the one, which means that the one does not need to avoid the other after all.
- Also, how could the one ever have been attracted to the cold, distant person that the other has now become and probably always was?

Petit Perfect Storm of Dysfunctional Co-dependency
The one: Let's not mention this so it won't be a problem
The other: Let's mention this so it won't be a problem

Love Map

A love map is a psychological tool that is meant to help people have healthy love relationships. You make a love map by asking

your lover or friend about their lives, their likes and dislikes, by gathering a list of information and data that you can only know by being intimate.

The more I think about this idea, the more troubled I get. I see these maps emerging in people's lives like the map of the London Underground, expanding with new lines and new stops, enormous and cold, giving you the impression that it is bringing you somewhere. A document as proof of love. And yet, information is not love. If you have to make a map with and out of another, let it be the map of Neverland: swim with sirens, spend time with the capricious fairies, fight together passionately against the dangerous pirates, and, for god's sake, make sure never to find the hidden treasure!

Love Residuals

I need to create new names for the lost loves who fall away from categories, for the friendships that were intimate, deep, and loving, and then stopped, sometimes slowly and other times suddenly, and for those loves that were only a promise or an abortion. Love residuals. Because everything belongs.

Warning Never Belongs to Love

When people tell you that they are warning you because they love you, do not believe them. Warning is not advice. Advice points to what is good and makes you see that. Warning makes salient that which is wrong or can cause suffering. Warning is a curse.

Oil

Wouldn't you say that oil is a liquid, even if it could never mix with water or become water?

Then desire is love.

Tough Love

I don't do tough love.

Like playing hard to get. Or getting people to do what you want them to do by refusing them kindness or respect or love, by creating a need, by making others jealous on purpose. I don't believe in tough love. Do you?

I also have an allergic reaction to this sentence: "For their own good." If one thinks something would be good or better for the other, then just say what it is, but it's such a delusion to believe that we know what's for others' own good.

Tough love may work in desire, though. The logic of desire and its fantasies are much closer to this type of love. Maybe tough love should be called tough desire: wanting something from another and using their needing us to get there. Or is that a tautology? Because desire is already always tough.

The Blood Orange

The blood orange has a flesh that is red and resembles blood. All oranges can become blood oranges if they grow in places where there are low temperatures at night, like in the fields of Valencia in Spain. The cold activates an organic pigment in the flesh of the fruit that otherwise remains dormant. At night, under the right conditions, anyone can become the object of desire of another and wake up as a bleeding orange.

Desire Matter

The universe is made of energy and space. Earlier we believed it also was matter, but we lost that belief when it was discovered that matter was energy. Oops… there went a third of the universe. Desire rebels against this real(ity) of two. Desire insists on not wanting matter to be energy by holding, fixing, memorizing, repeating, biting, and taking *it.* Love is amused by all that wanting and craving. Love knew all along that matter was energy and that in this question it would have the last word.

Yous

You can be plural
The you(s) of your life. Your yous

The yous are never he or she, they

That's the difference
between love and everything else

That's all there is
Of ones in multiplicity — the you(s)
Or many in oneness — the he/she/they

The S isn't visible because the you has already incorporated the possibility of its plurality in its core

But that's not good enough
Not today

Sometimes we need the comfort
to have the power to make the invisible visible
to mark that signifier with its being

Like a crazy (spoiled) goddess, I feel like doing exactly that this morning
Giving the S to You
Forever

I am
Yous are

Free Love from Its History

I read many books about love
its history

Books falling from my hands

The western recipe of love
Classic love
Christian love
Courtly love
Romantic love

Repressed love
Free love
Realistic love

I've traveled page after page through their many diagnoses

Love is ontological rootedness
Love is a stair towards the absolute
Love is of friendship and not of flesh
Love is of neighbor
Love or die
Love is inconvenient
Love is political
Love is all you need
Love is conformism
Love is practice

Reading long books of recipes
without being able to taste the food

The history of love is interestingly boring
The analysis of love is interestingly boring
I might as well confess this here, in a book about love
Love is so seldom in those pages
And I am not sure in these…

Analyzing love kills love

There were exceptions
Of course, of course…

Jean-Luc Nancy's magnificent "Shattered Love"
Jacques Lacan's rebellious enigmatic love appearing here and there in his seminars
Love is in the spirit of the philosophy of many, mainly when they do not talk about love

And then there were

the writers, novelists, the magnificent ones: Atwood, Austen,
Márquez, Munro, Woolf…
and the poets, the mystics, the prophets…so many

Love blossoming all around in literature and poetry
freed from its history

Writing is love
I abandon myself there, breathing love in

The Forgetful

They may not be there
They may not be there when you are in pain
or alone and lonely
suffering
unable and unstable and useless

You wish they had deserted you
but they had forgotten you, trapped in a memory hole
between their passions and joys,
between ecstasy and extravagance.

That's not love
Some say
"They forgot you
in your aloneness
and suffering"

The others will
They, the others
Those who feel they have to
honor their duty
Family sometimes
Others who like you best in your neediness
They will remember you
Stay
Give you company
Visit

That's love
Some say
"We are staying by your side
in your dumbness and ugliness
in your uselessness"

And
I say
No, no,
Pity is not love
Duty is not love
Remedies against loneliness are not a cure for dread

Let me have the forgetful
with their offerings
fleeting joys
laughter
a dance
a gaze
a now

Let me be forgotten
Let me swap an eternal life of company
for a touch of fleeting love

This is one possible experience of love, being touched by it and leaving. It is not unconditional or tender love, nor is a parental kind of love or a surrendering. Surrendering love is so different from the forgetful. But forgetful love is so important for those who cannot take being pitied. And the problem with tenderness is that it can seem like pity, and pity is sometimes dressed up as tenderness or humility. It is pity if there is no vulnerability. Tenderness is more vulnerable.

Love exposes itself through cracks. Those are not contracts. They do not have to be paid back later to be a good in themselves. But then, what about company over time, or living together over time or family over time? Love remains in those spaces and relationships as long as the crack is open. It does not have the same character anymore, because cracking something open has a spe-

cial intensity to it, a traumatic intensity. The relationality in the moment of "now" is different, but that cracking open can leave you open. It continues to give from that day onwards, but only if it stays open, then it can flood into everything, also service and duty. There will be service and duty , but underneath there will be light and lightness. Only then being visited or helped feels like love.

It can be helping one's child with a task or homework, and suddenly stopping for a second and seeing again, really seeing the beauty of that child in all their glory. The crack opens right there at the kitchen table and the same happens with one's partner or friend. It is a memory within one's gaze that gets actualized and presences itself again and again because tenderness allows the crack to remain open.

We can live long lives surrounded by many. Powerful people, for example, might never be abandoned, but they may never have experienced love or a gaze of love either. If the crack ever gets closed, and the gaze of the other over you is never of sacredness, then no, then please let me have the forgetful over the dutiful.

Gender Friendship Love

Friendships can be gendered, I realized as I talked to a beloved friend this morning, and so much so. How is a man to experience the girl-to-girl friendship experience? Can he? Can he only do that as long as it is identified by the other (by her) and by himself as a her (a feminine type, the gay friend)?

What is the girl-to-girl friendship experience? It is deep intimacy, long walks, even longer talks, holding hands and walking arm-in-arm. It is sharing a hotel room, a bathroom when one is putting make up on and the other is showering, crying in each other's arms on a sofa after drinks, doing each other's hair, trying on clothes in the same fitting room and saying what looks better. It is knowing what makes her shine, putting sunscreen on each other's backs, gossiping and whispering close to each other at a party, dancing together, also the slow ones or a salsa, sitting on each other's laps when there is no chair left or when squeezed in the back seat of a car, complimenting the other about her physical traits: how fabulous she is, how beautiful. Saying to each

other: "love you!" Sending hearts hearts hearts in a thousand colors. Staring at each other long and deeply. Knowing that very few things in the world can match this level of joy, fun, or closeness. There is body and embodiment all around: touch, intimacy, and a familiarity, feeling at home in the same space. How seldom it is to read about this type of relationship or see it in films, when it does not involve a lesbian sex scene or a rivalry over "the man." And what is the sexual when it is not orgasmic or craving or possessive or dissolving or reproductive? What is that, the sensual? Can a boy experience the girl-to-girl friendship? Or something similar? Is that pattern of friendship possible in a he-she combination? In a he-he or he-they or other combination?

If you have a girl-to-girl friendship and you are a man, are you leading her on? And to what… dissatisfaction, disappointment? And if you have a boy-to-girl romantic sexual relationship without deep intimacy, are you leading her on? And to what… emptiness, objectification? Awakening the desire to live, is that a lead-on? I think it is, it is leading a life away from death. If you awaken someone's desire to live, how could you ever imagine to be able to determine their level of desire, the shape of their desire, or the fantasy of their dreams? How could you? Why would you? When we know that desire can be ignited and overflow all and everything by a simple gaze, a summer morning, in three seconds, or slowly without warning, like drops becoming a tsunami. Is the awakening of desire in the other narcissistic? Sometimes, but not all the time, and perhaps not often at all. Many times it is true wonder about the magic of being in the other, a true amazement, a true care.

Is any form of border in a loving relationship a "lead-on" to something, to a fantasy territory, be it sexual or intimate or romantic or intellectual or habitual, as in a daily life promise? Can love not stay within borders or do people's borders need to be identical, like two identical maps of needs, wishes, and desires? Can love not hold if it is not that one is "one above others," hierarchical, in a ranking register of some sort?

If you give your all and full presence for an hour, don't you give your all forever? At the end, doesn't everything stand or fall with this question: Who would you cry for? Intimacy and love are such a gift, aren't they perfect in themselves without the

"then," "plus," "ever after," "first," and "all"? Without the whatever "extra" of fulfillment?

I do not have close male friends. Friends with whom I share intimacy, friends whose houses I feel I could go to and stay for a weekend. Or do I? Gay friends (two of them) and a couple of "historical" and complicated straight friends, friendships that managed to survive after crises, are the exceptions. I am a complete failure (failed, failing?) at girl–boy woman–man friendships. My little sister has declared to me several times that it is impossible. She can't do it either, it seems. My body fails me. I am told that I smile too much. I have too much energy and too much passion. I am a "too much type." I emit too many vibes of an unmanageable character.

One of my best female friends is amazing at this. She has long, beautiful, and lasting friendships with men and with women. But who wouldn't want to friends with her? I love her and she is the living example of my little sister being wrong. I try to copy her, to learn from her, and I fail miserably every time. Instead, I have exhausting problematic experiences or jealousy crises. When I visit her for a conference, she does not allow me to walk alone in her city in the evening, not even for a few hundred meters. She explains this to her husband as a matter of fact: "She can't, not when she looks the way she does." I do not know what she is talking about. Is it really true that if you can't walk alone for a few meters in a city you can't have a boy-girl friendship?

Enunciation Exhaustion

It is easy for me to get bored, but what happens when it is people you get bored of?

It is cruel, a form of death, the death of the other as an object of desire or love in your life. You know you are the executioner of a killing, but you do not know what the weapon of mass destruction was. You can pretend not to be bored, but you still are, and then you come to hate the pretence you have become in order not to be cruel.

You know that there is something wrong if you are not seeing that the other is a world, that anyone is a world, and that would be enough to never be bored, and for anyone to be worthy of

your desire, of your love. But still, so few are, and so I am easily bored, or I fear that I am easily going to be bored of another. I can sense that shadow of seeing my self, my being, as boredom. I am on guard. Is that the ultimate fear, not the boredom with others but with oneself, the shadow of the exhaustion to have to state "this is me," the exhaustion of enunciation?

Love and desire, Lacan's Other jouissance and phallic jouissance, are interdependent in a way that I believe is different to just being parallel. They act as doors to each other; like the ignition button that launches a process that happens with another chemistry, into another order. Love launches desire, and desire launches love. Love that is larger and inexplicable launches a craving for a "you," and the contemplation and existence of a "you" launches exposure and immersion in love.

I also dread love without desire. That is non-incarnated love, non-personalized love, love of world and humanity and all. Why is the non-embodiment of it into the singular a problem? The love of all is so close to a nothing as "thing." There is a reason why even the mystics use the metaphors of carnal love to explain mystical love. It is not random. Desire is what anchors love in the flesh.

Desire needs space and distance to survive. That is why familiarity is such a dangerous place for desire. Boredom is when we cannot maintain a novel gaze and feeling towards the familiar, the daily. We have forgotten their mysteries. It is a numbing to what is sacredness around us. A poetic being is never bored although they can feel deep anxiety. Boredom is also a sign, a thermometer of not being in love with *being,* with being alive. When it is about others, then it is a gaze that utilizes the other as object, not as the cause or the spark for the sublime. "Alertness is the hidden discipline of familiarity," says David Whyte (2016) in his poem "Everything Is Waiting For You." This poem speaks to me with such power that I have it in my kitchen and on the door of my office, a call to awaken to joy. I always thought that attention was that form of alertness. But recently I heard a beautiful conversation between the poet Mary Oliver and the journalist and writer Krista Tippet (Oliver 2015). Oliver reminds us that attention without feeling is only a report and yet attention is the beginning of devotion.

If there is something at the core of desire it is attention, a focus and intensity of feeling. We know this because a space is completely changed when whoever or whatever we desire enters. Even if it is the space on a page where we can read their name or when seeing their face or body in a photo.

Boredom is when life becomes a report. I think that when I say "It is easy for me to get bored," I mean that it is easy for me to see the danger in boredom, and am aware of those moments and circumstances where I live my existence as report, without enunciation. It is easy for me to see when my being is experiencing numbness, like in the ubiquitous Zoom meetings and zombie online conferences in which nobody listens. Other times it appears as a matter of chance or luck that I am still being able to open to devotion. It could well be the case that one day I will wake as a living dead, so I hold on to my desire to desire. Maybe you are not bored if you are not conscious that you are. Is it my alertness to boredom that makes the sentence "it's easy for me to get bored" truthful?

On the contrary, boredom has nothing to do with what people often imagine when saying "I easily get bored." It has nothing to do with being impatient or not being able to have long-term commitments or loyalty. Being tuned in to boredom is not the flaneur, always searching for the new, and it is not Dorian Gray, constantly chasing exhilarating aesthetic experiences. Dorian does not see that he is bored, which is why he continues chasing and moving on to the next one instead of feeling or having empathy for the present one. Dorian's search is life as a report when the report is a glamour magazine. There is one, but major, antidote to boredom besides desire: the beloved.

The beloved is the incarnated absence of boredom.

Fear

The hardest fear to face is not that of not being desirable
It is the one of not being able to desire

The hardest fear to face is not that of not being lovable
It is the one of not being able to love

Incarnation

There are the ones, the many, that will tell you that it is better not to desire another, but to love them. I do not believe them, but I do not answer. My silence may appear as an acquiescence, but it is not, silence is the answer to a truth that cannot be explained.

Love without desire, they tell you. This is when love becomes an equalizer, like death, but in reverse. The "other" is always enough, but it loses its individualization. It then exists in a form of communion with everything and all, past, present, and future. Soaked into the universal sacred, instead of the sacred being resurrected in the "you," if even in fragments. I want extreme individualization. That is what desire fosters in love. I want to sense the excruciating joy that is incarnated in the absolutely unique hands or the eyes of my beloved, in that tone of voice, which not all the songs of angels or birds could ever match. I want extreme subjectification. It is "you," not everything and all, that is preserved in the desire to be found in love. It is that which I cannot miss, not for the consolations of the love of galaxies and universes, of nirvanas and heavens.

It is you as an event.

It is calling you by your name.

It is you who I want to meet and embrace at the doors of heaven or hell.

It is not the nameless, speechless love of a generic humanity, and it is not the love that Lacan tells us cannot be described with words, like a trauma, the love of the mystics and god.

This one cannot be described with words either, but it is a word, a name. A presence. Real.

It is declared, enunciated, invoked, sung, written on tree trunks and in graffiti. It is when language is lost to the word and when the word transcends itself, a metamorphosis of the caterpillar into a butterfly, that is "your name." A name, now lost and disconnected from the differentiation structure of language. It is not word as identity or meaning, but a word that inserts desire into love. Word as beat.

Don't give me love without you
Give me you in love
Don't let desire desert me

I am saved by naming and being named
Called to life

Language disappoints and fails us, as in the phallic jouissance, but naming never does. Naming as declamation of the beloved liberates us, expands us. Saint Teresa, the Spanish mystic of the fifteenth century, shares a story about her life where she and her brother made themselves enter into ecstasy by constantly repeating one word: *Libertad* (freedom). The signifier detached, deconstructed, made bit and sound, lifting them up into the heavens. Any noun becoming a name. That is what lovers do, they repeat the name of their beloved ad infinitum.

Ecstasy is the repetition of a name.

The poet of love, Pablo Neruda, says "you are like nobody since I love you."[1] I believe this sentence can also work in other ways, such as "you are like everybody since I do not love you," "you are like the all since I love you," and without desiring "you are like nobody when I love you."

Is this why I desire to desire, to keep being open to the world of the other as absolute embodied uniqueness? Do not give me absolutes without bodies, please.

Visitation

Would you like to be visited by an angel?
Angels are Beauty
Wonder and threat

It's easier to speak to the dead
They were always one of us
We visit tombs of beloved ones and tell them what we are up to
The stone angels, we hope they are not listening

They always speak, the angels
When they visit
We are left without words
and someone needs to do the talking

1 "a nadie te pareces desde que yo te amo" (Neruda 1997, 25).

try to dilute the awkwardness of the impossible
Like when the English say, would you like a cup of tea, darling?
A strategy for surviving chaos of all sorts

They are polite, the angels
They remember your name
speak your language
Always say hi to begin with
Hi…

A visitation from an angel
cracks you open
your life forever changed
Then they leave
and leave you to it

Foreign Desires

In a thousand ancient languages
I am spoken.
Bittersweet whispering
warms me.

By a thousand foreigners
for a thousand years
I am travelled.
Their restless, estranged
DNA revived and electroshocked
by banal events that can kill
or bite a piece of your heart.

If I could make sense of it
the beat of their song,
heavy,
between my lips
and my breathing.

If I had received the dictionary of wishes

together with my hands
and my sex.
Somewhere where to look.
Something with bold capital letters,
where I would read about me, you, man, and maybe,
and rest in revelation
holding words as truth.

But this can't be, my child

You will learn to be travelled by these ancient wishes,
stop asking questions,
comfort them with tea and the bread that your father brought home this morning,
and they will not ask for sacrifices,
cut your insides out of exhaustion.

You will understand, my love.
They are tired of these long roads.
Lend them your bed,
kiss them softly,
hold them tight,
and they will fill you with the fire of a thousand passions for a thousand winter nights.

No Loss Is Possible

I could lose this immediately
all connection
and I will be fine
good, actually
and at the same time, I have an explosion of joy inside me
because of knowing and seeing the other

This is new
that my joy does not depend on the other's reaction
but on the other's existence
them being in the world
and because they have been

they are then in eternity

All loss is possible
probable even

No loss is possible
when all is already had
in this instant

Just Here

I am moved
stricken at the center of my chest
by an expansion of warmth
that makes me laugh because it takes me by surprise

I place my right hand there where it expands

an early morning heat wave
provoked by an image
the sound of a voice
this is how love must feel
at the center of my everything
between my collarbone and my breast

that I can feel this!
Not planned
Not ordered
Not prayed for
No future

If I jump of joy, will I look crazy?
How do I explain my smile of unreasonable reason?
Can they see that my chest is now a red sunset?

I stay still
and place my right hand there where it sweetly hurts
to contain the infinite

right here

Epilogue

Are there places you return to? I return to the Little Mermaid. I walk through the park with its military fortifications, pass the fountain of the powerful goddess Gefion and leave behind the cherry trees. This cold November afternoon, I notice their dark empty branches, and then I see her, alone at the end of the promenade. The first time I visited her, I was eighteen years old and had traveled from Spain to Copenhagen to be with my Danish then-boyfriend. I approached the Little Mermaid with the quickening of attention of being in a foreign environment. Because of her fame, I was expecting a statue that would impress me, like other renowned sculptures that I had seen in Spain and Italy. Instead, there she was, only 1.25 meters in size, you could easily miss her if you were not looking for her. Made of loneliness and melancholy, looking away into the horizon, she feels oblivious to the masses of people taking her photo, unaware of her existence in travel websites and souvenir shops. The opposite of grandiosity, she rests unconscious of our voyeuristic hunger (fig. 21).

In Copenhagen, the Little Mermaid is not only a story but a place, a work of art, a myth, and an icon. My relationship to her was not a crush. It was an affair that grew softly into love, weaved like a thread through three decades of my life. A small beck silently pouring into my veins, the Little Mermaid nurtured other passions, its impact manifesting in unexpected ways through connections that are difficult or impossible to trace back. Visiting the Little Mermaid became my secular ritual. I contemplated her little body, her legs/fishtail, and fell into silence, like one enters a special room in one's heart. Her sadness matches the



Fig. 21. Edvard Eriksen's statue of the Little Mermaid, 1913. Copenhagen, Denmark. Photo by the author.

cold ice of the winter sea, and her solitude hurts against the thousand blues of summer. Why did I have this desire to return? Why was I never tired or bored by that encounter? I would gaze at her without expectation, not-knowing, not-saying, letting her form and beauty do their secret work inside me. This artwork was part of my daily life, but also a door to mystery, to soft slow wonder, to that which in our common humanity cannot be categorized, named, or explained. The same wonder that pours out of any

simple being when paid attention to, a leaf, a wave, light through a window, the hand of a child.

Time passed. I changed from young girl, to adulthood, to motherhood. I would take my kids to pay her a visit. "Mira," look, I would say smiling, making them notice her beauty, her tenderness, and her helplessness. Gratitude says the Benedictine monk David Steindl-Rast has a very simple method: stop, look, go. The Little Mermaid is a stop sign. What do you notice, what pulls you from what you see? Do you sense in the birth of attention the sparkle of desire opening here and now?

My children grew up and left home and I did not know how to mourn the loss of their daily laughter and lively closeness. Nothing prepared me for the impossible combination of pride and longing, lack and liberation brought by that separation. There are different ways in which we can win or lose our voice. My adult kids were turning towards their desires, like the mermaid leaving the sea for the land: Look, go! I felt silent, dismembered, invisibly bleeding, looking at a horizon that was more in the past than in the present, revisiting a mermaid that suddenly felt so young. Myths do not age as we do. She continued to gaze forward while I experienced my own gaze wandering restlessly. It was only after that loss that I felt a different call of the wild, a call to turn towards my mother.

Lacan tells us of the importance for the infant to hypothesize about what our caretakers want. This question and the lack of definitive answers begin subjectification and the journey of our own desire. Lately, I have wondered when do we stop asking, when do we believe that we know, when are we too afraid or too careless to ask? Our caretakers' desire can cannibalize us. We need to cut and separate to sense the libidinal energy of our own lives. This task is never completed, we are always the desire of the Other, interlinked to our societies and symbolic orders, influenced by our caretakers and loved ones in particular ways. Separation never ends, but it changes. Eroticism, sex, and sexuality are foreign lands impossible to map and to master. When those lands are our parents, we might not want to know anything about them. The ambivalence of attraction and repulsion points to desire, says Lacan, and it is not always that we can be open to

what disgusts us. Maybe it takes to have experienced heartbreak, ecstasy, and death to want to return to that primary question.

These past years I have found myself increasingly asking — what do you want mamá? My questions range from basic daily things like what food, what movie, what dress, what type of coffee do you desire? To existential questions — Why did you breakup with your first fiancé? Why did you fall in love with dad? What did you want to study? Why couldn't you? I have only recently opened to those conversations, stories of longing and suffering, hope and joy, faith and doubt, sacrifice and determination. In the voice of my mother, I hear myself and I hear the Little Mermaid. Stories are made of small details, like a look or the absence of a kiss. In desire there is not a whole to be had, only fragments, images, parts of narrations, memories inscribed in the flesh as a collage. We do not desire in absolutes but the line of a nose, the movement of a hand, the smell of a neck, the sound of a murmur. We also dislike, despite, or reject by pieces. My mother broke up with her fiancé over what appeared to be a simple discussion on interior decorating. Sometimes fantasies erode slowly, other times a sudden insight can make them collapse. That conversation revealed an undercurrent of masculine frigidity and sophisticated humiliation. How is that for the soundtrack of a future life? Instead, my father idealized my mother and had kept an old photograph of her in his wallet since his teen years. They lived far away, my mother in the Basque Country and my father in Mallorca. After my mother's breakup, they met by coincidence at a friends' wedding and were married in less than a year. While falling in love with my father was a sudden event for my mother, my father had kept the seed of that desire alive for years. My siblings and I are the result of that sudden breakup and of that secretly held desire. My mother never spoke to us of that first boyfriend, as if that experience did not belong to our family lives. All letters of that relationship were returned and no photos kept. This was the custom at the time, a form of prudence, but also a way of maintaining the fantasy that love, if it is to be real love, can only be with "the one." In the purity culture of conservative patriarchal Catholicism, the idea of having had several boyfriends could be seen as a stain, if not a loss of virginity something close to it. So much has changed since my parents' youth,

and yet we all have silences that our sociocultural heritage births in us, we all have our pact with the witches of the sea. What do you know of the silences of your mother? What do you know of your own silences?

It is the impossibility of obtaining definitive answers from another that launches our own personal search in life. I find myself loving my mother more because of her opaqueness and not less. Loving her tenderly in the solitude of her breakup and in her secrecy. I found myself wondering what it must have been to be her at twenty? Patriarchy or culture will impose what is to be shared and what is to be secret in people's lives, from menstrual bleeding to abortions, to orgasms and organs. The inscriptions of longing and desire are to be revealed and hidden according to specific historical classifications. My own love story was one of uncontrollable passion and desire, one for which I left my country, culture, and religious norms. A passion that felt all-consuming and irrational, the opposite of frigidity. I was eighteen years old, romantic and adventurous, the child of a Franco dictatorship turned into a young Spanish democracy. That passion could have gone completely wrong. It didn't. I wonder if we revenge or relive the secret stories of desire of our ancestors. I wonder how much of what we do not know that we know are re-inscriptions of a palimpsest. I wonder why these objects of desire and not others, why these fantasies. I wonder what is "our own," if anything. I wonder if the Little Mermaid fell in love with the prince because, finally, she was going to avenge thousands of years of desire for Odysseus. I wonder how much her desire is the inscription of the secret desire of her species, like the secret desires of our mothers. I wonder how much we know without asking, how much we can sense of the stories that are never spoken. When something is not said, it finds another way to be there.

H.C. Andersen's story "The Little Mermaid" became the core of this book on the nature of desire. Like if the statue had been waiting inside me to bloom differently in the writing of a new season in my life. "Ana," she told me, "you see that this longing of my being, the strange one, the outsider from another species, is the longing of each human being too, of the animal banned from its being through consciousness. You see the boundless oceanic

search for a fulfillment that would never happen." The mermaid rejected the trajectory of her species and what are we, speaking beings, if not that? We are metamorphosis and a mutation of bios, of beings destined to singularity and thereby also death.

These past years I sat still and let the mermaid guide me in my conversation with Lacan's understanding of desire. I preferred to meet her in the darkness as one would go and meet a goddess in an old chapel. Can one pray to a mermaid? How absurd or woohoo does this sound? If not insane, at least an eccentric devotion. Anne Lammot says that prayer is awe, thanks, and help. Prayer is relation to another as sacred. I am and have been touched by this fragile statue over the course of my life. The sculpture of the little Mermaid was made by the artist Edvard Eriksen (1913) on the model of his young wife, Eline Eriksen, for the body, and Ellen Price, a famous ballet dancer, for the face. As if born of two mothers, she has an added messiness to the hybridity of woman and fish. We, too, have different parts belonging to different people in our biographies and biology. Our objects of desire and our bodies are a collage. Fragments of you become place and flesh in the desire's histories of others. Like her, we are unaware of the libidinal attachments behind our desires, why this or that longing. She lacks legs, or this is what she thinks. What do we think we lack? We sense our ontological lack in our longings — "if I just had this, or could this…" — in our sacrifices to have or to get. A forever stranger in this land, I moved from the Mediterranean to the North Sea because of desire. She is the recognition of my lack of autonomy, my lack of self-sufficiency, being always already dependent and in need. The Little Mermaid captures the failing of humanity's desire for identity and belonging, as if it could embrace the misfit of my own identity as emigrant, as woman, as an academic without discipline, as unorthodox Christian, as feminist, as European, as mother, as lover…. I find myself consoled by her impossible wish of belonging.

A reader of this book asked me, after this long journey of desire, where is the mermaid? "Here," I thought reading this question, "always here with me, again and again." But no relation stays ever the same if it is to stay alive. After writing this book, my gaze was no longer hypnotized by the Little Mermaid's melancholic face; instead it lingered in the invisible line that was

parting her tender body, the fine wavy cut dividing/touching skin to scale, scale to skin. We come from sea creatures. A long journey which is still always with us. I look at my navel, its knotted skin, and I see the umbilical cord and the placenta, the lack, the lost organ which is both a loss for my mother and for me. I touch my navel and I sense the sea, our lost fishiness. What is that impossible metamorphosis, that primordial cut that comes before even the wanting of the mermaid to be human, that singularity of everything that is? It is that impossible metamorphosis of a cut that never becomes positivity itself, it never gets fully resolved, it never turns into wholeness, oneness, or sameness. The skin-scale of the mermaid is like a rim, a Möbius strip. It manifests as a mark of what is missing and of what is present. The cut as our navel is the mark, our ancestry, life layered upon life, knotted. This cut is the drive infusing the desire of the gaze, the wanting of the mouth, the tremor of a hand. Like the germ cells of the fetus that we once were, dividing and fostering relation. No touch without division, no proximity or intimacy possible without scansion, no life without loss. But what is this loss that is forever already had?

Through ancient times, we changed our singing for our language, we got legs that give us new life and cut us from being as the waves are. Our pain is interior-exterior, and it follows us as it follows the mermaid when walking. We also sell part of our being to the witches of the sea, to the powers of ideologies, beliefs, and demands of our times. We also mutilate and force into being and cut and sell out and fight for. How not to pray when there is so much longing? If we could taste that limit of flesh and ocean, that is the skin-scale of the mermaid so different to the limit of the horizon of desire where the objects appear and disappear as the sun rises and settles.

Then we will notice salt, cell, and fluid. We will touch *what is* and remember a primordial cry. The one that opens with our first breath and our first hunger, the song of the sirens, unnamed and unnamable. Because we did not lose that cry in our metamorphosis into subjectivity. Nothing can be lost in metamorphosis only transformed and maintained, now as secret, memory, trace, or silence.

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